

The Hardest Science

by Michelle Reed

I met Drew at an art show I catered for the students he taught at the university. He asked me out, and I said yes because he seemed grounded, which I assumed made him a terrible artist, and because it had been a long time between offers. I said yes because I was over thirty in a town that recycled 19-year-olds. I was single with a café and no children, and so I said yes to breakfast in the afternoon. We met at my café, and he drank black coffee and didn't salt his eggs.

When his student died that summer, I clung to Drew. I held his hand at the funeral of the 20 year old who lost a game of chicken with a lightpost on his way home from a bar. Everyone cried and dressed in black and spoke of the tragedy of kids dying before their time. At home, we drank wine on my porch, sheltered behind the wooden frame of my fence. *There's definitely a moral here*, Drew said, letting the smoke from his cigarette fill the space between us.

There's definitely a moral here, I say to myself now, five years later, one year after he's died, but I'm still not sure what it is.

When I let myself wonder, I wonder if it was this place. Ruston. I wonder if it was that year, that summer, when so many kids were careless—a rash of binge drinking and drunk driving. When we were so careful. We buckled our seatbelts and practiced sobriety in moderation. We read our horoscopes. We prayed. We locked our doors. We ate tomatoes and carrots and everything green. We did everything we knew to do to keep ourselves alive.

Drew and I lasted a year. The next summer he was offered a position at an art institute in Scotland. He told me about it five days before he left, because, he said, he didn't want to make things harder than they had to be. I drove him to the airport and waited for him to ask me to go with him. On my way home, I bought a pack of Camel Lights. I'd never smoked before, but for the first five months he was gone, I smoked a cigarette each night before going to bed. I'd fill my mouth with smoke and let his taste seep into my tongue.

Some nights I dream that I am five again and starting over, from the beginning. Doing it right the second time. These nights I wake up happy and laughing at something that happened in my dream—my father leading the chicken dance at my brother's t-ball game or my mother making snow angels the year we spent Christmas in Colorado. I see my father's lanky body, his hands stuffed under his arms, elbows and knees flying up and out as he marches a group of seven-year-olds around a ball field, each mimicking his awkward movements. I feel the cold earth against my back through the layers of clothes my mother wrapped me in as I kick snow from beneath my legs, arms flying overhead, smiling at the frozen sky. I wake up laughing, which echoes foreign and inappropriate.

I hadn't seen Drew in two years when I opened my door and found him sitting on my porch swing smoking a cigarette. He didn't ask to come in. He just sat there smoking and digging the tip of his shoe into a small hole in one of the boards. "Drew," I said, because it was all I knew to say. I waited for my heart to stop, for a lump to form in my throat, to feel the things that I had felt. But nothing came except the nervous awkwardness of seeing someone I once knew.

"Hi," I said.

He didn't answer, so I sat down beside him. It had been a long time, and neither of us was prepared for what was about to happen. He looked smaller somehow, and older, but that's what time will do. He never came inside. Instead, he placed a hand on the back of my neck—one hand on my neck, the other covering my knee, as if to both hold me up and prevent me from running away. When he spoke, I stared at the space between his fingers where my skin showed through. My legs were freckled, spotted by the sun.

I didn't cry that day. I stood up, walked inside, and locked the door behind me. I could feel his fingers burning into my neck, branding my body. I tried to rub them off. His touch had soaked into the nerves of my neck and knees, and I could smell him all over me. I took a shower, let the hot water sting my skin and soaped and scrubbed his prints from my body. I grew red and raw from the washcloth, but he rose up with the steam and filled in the cells that I had scratched away.

I'm rotting and I'm scared, but I'm well and it doesn't make sense to me. I remember the way Drew's skin felt before he died—cool and soft as an oyster. I remember the trapped look in his eyes, the way they rolled up to the ceiling and side-to-side as if he were searching for something in the tile that could pull him out from the body that died around him. I wake up in the middle of the night and feel my arms becoming soft and weak. I wipe the sweat from my body and remind myself that my count is high. *It's high*, I say and read medical reports by lamplight until my body remembers.

I once read someone describe it as living near a war. That nearby there are battles being fought, lives being lost. And while you can't hear the guns fire or the bombs going off, you know the front lines are drawing closer. I was there when the battle finally got close enough for Drew to hear. I watched his eyes bounce with the sound of mortar fire and his body shake from the explosions. But he had already given up. Drew never knew how to fight, never was any good at it, and so I sat by his side night after night and touched his clammy skin and watched what was left of him fade away.

To be honest, though, I wasn't there for him. I watched him and touched his hand so I could see what my dying would feel like.

I have been angry.

I have thrown a pot of spaghetti across a room. Hours later, I have pried dry noodles from the walls and floor, scrubbing the crusted stains clean. I have screamed his name from my back porch, into the dry night air. I have thrown darts at his pictures attached to my walls. I have filled them with holes then burnt them in a skillet on my stove. I have done all the things I cannot undo.

Now, I watch the families file into my café on Sunday mornings. I watch the kids, the girls, dressed in their purples and pinks, laugh at each other across the table. I watch the mothers cut chicken nuggets into pieces. I watch them blow on the food, touching each piece to their tongue before dropping it back down onto the plate. I watch the fathers take their wives' hands and bow their heads and give thanks to the God they believe in. The God who has plans for them.

Now, I go to work in the mornings, make food for people who do not know who I am. I wear gloves and let other people chop my vegetables. I am careful. I cater their baby showers and their weddings. I no longer think of my own.

Some nights, in the low light of bars one town away, I touch cold glass to my lips and let the imported beer numb all the things that I do not want to feel.

Last night I dreamed Drew's death again. I sat by his bed while he slept and played poker with death, who preferred to be called Tim. *I'll see your ten and raise you five more*, I said, opening the box labeled "M" and dumping the pills onto the center of the table. Tim laughed and pushed three of the capsules back across the table to my pile of pink and blue pills and the small stack of Flintstones vitamins I had garnered from him. He was handsome. His eyes were the color of camouflage, brown with specks of green and gold, and his long legs stretched out under the table and rested near my chair. I sat with my legs crossed under me, Indian-style, while he sang Johnny Horton songs and drummed his knuckles on the table. Tim folded the first hand, even though we both knew I was bluffing. *I'm not much of a gambler*, he said, dealing me a jack to complete my full house.

The Drew from the hospital is not the Drew that haunts me. I don't think about the voice that rattled in his throat, never rising above a whisper, or the red splotches that swallowed his skin, or the bruises that circled the needles plugged into his veins. Instead, I remember the Drew I met at an art show during the summer, the one who didn't salt his eggs. I remember the freshness of his laugh and the calm that fell from it onto those close enough to hear. I try to love him. I try to remember the things that I'd felt, the things that I'd only imagined. I try to remember anything that would make it worth it.

I remember the night in August that changed the rest of my nights, the night he used me as a canvas, brushing paint onto my back. I can still feel the chill of the paint on my skin and the heat

from his hand on my hip, the two mixing together and warming, the wet bristles moving in circles. I remember the drop cloth, no longer white, stained with blues and reds and yellows, the lines blurred, the symmetry broken.

I remember sitting up until three a.m. during the summer we first met and playing cards because we were either too scared or too grown-up to go anywhere else. We had survived our youth and were happy with that. We were moving on. So we played cards and I collected hundreds of paper promises that were supposed to last a lifetime.

Sometimes I remember the airport before he left, the soft buzz in the background, as I waited for him to produce a second ticket or a ring or even a promise. I remember the conversation five days earlier. That he was moving to Scotland. That he couldn't pass it up. That he loved me. That he wasn't ready yet for the things that I wanted. That he had never been more frightened than when I thought I was pregnant. That he had picked up three tests that day, in case the first one was positive. That he almost laughed when it wasn't. That he didn't laugh because he knew how I felt and what I wanted. That he was sorry. That he wasn't ready. That I would find someone else, someone better, to give me all the things that I deserved.

Sometimes I remember the Drew from two years later. The smaller, older man who smoked the same cigarettes that I brought to bed with me for the first five months he was gone. The man who dug his toe into a hole in my porch as he searched for a way to explain the things that have no reason.

Mostly I remember the week that made Drew so afraid. I remember waiting each day for blood stains on my panties, hoping against them, thinking myself sick. I remember Drew showing up with a paper bag full of tests and seeing his smile, not knowing then what it meant. I remember sitting with my legs stretched across the hallway, Drew watching me from the other side.

And I remember praying every day for the next year, longer, that I would trade anything, do anything, to feel that hope for one more minute.

When I sleep, I dream of Tim. In my dreams, I have filled his body with needles. His face is bloated but still handsome. There's a rash forming all over his body. It starts at his neck and creeps down over his chest and thighs. I have one of his long legs in my hands and I am trying to break it in two. It is stiff and won't snap.

Then I am surrounded by policemen. They pull me from him and clasp my hands behind my back. *But do you know who that is?* I yell at their badges. Their red lights flash over Tim's face, and I see that he is smiling. *Do you know who that is?*

There's a moral here, Drew said, so I search for it in the science of it all. I take my pills and remind myself that my count is high. I play solitaire by candlelight and practice sobriety in moderation. I don't look in the mirror. I lock my doors.