

Blessed are the Lonely

"Please don't leave me here."

Her light blue eyes bloodshot and half closed. But there's no sadness in her voice. It's a joke: her slight grin, childlike, innocent. We're sitting at the bar.

"Tommy, please don't let them leave me here." Her head drifts on her shoulders, a ball on the drunken ocean floating over wave after wave. "I don't know how to get home."

"Karen, have we ever left you anywhere? No," I tell her. "We're staying in your apartment. How could we leave you?"

Everett, Karen, and I have been downing our ritual tequila shots, something we started when we first met her. She was bartending at Tiki Fala, a hole in the wall in Dumfries. We played two sets that night. Karen was wearing a short skintight skirt, something that makes men want to put their money in that glass tip jar. She caught the attention of our drummer, Jay, who had a rustic charm that seemed to work well in dives. Before the night was over we had free tequila shots and a place to stay anytime we were in town.

But even that first night Karen had to be carried to the van, her arms and head hanging at awkward angles, one breast slowly sliding out of her top. She recreated that scene every

time we played in Northern Virginia. The names of the bars changed; the pool tables were rearranged; the stage was scarred with gray duct tape in new places- but Karen never changed. She always tried to find that complete state of numbness that reaches to the core. But there was never any sadness or anger. It was like watching a child play, trying to make the pieces fit. I lost count of how many times I spent the night on the floor of her apartment, waking to the sound of kitchen cabinets closing, the hum of an open refrigerator. Once I woke to her roommate's two boys chasing each other around me with survival knives. The eight-year-old was calling the four-year-old a faggot. The four-year-old was screaming and running for his life.

Karen's roommate would cuss the kids and send them outside. Everyone would stagger from their corners with sleep in their eyes and congregate around the couch. Karen was easy to talk to from the beginning. There was a genuine kindness about her and she loved to laugh, her blond hair dancing. We would spend the day talking, watching MTV. We might run to the store for food. We made fun of her trashy roommate. We were always laughing.

Karen dreamed of having her own bar, something she could name. She dreamed of true love, something from the fairy tales little girls hear when they're little. She dreamed of Jay staying, maybe one day telling her he needs her, that she means

something. She hoped that one day she would exist in his mind even after we left for the next town. Until then she would tend bar and flirt with the drunk old men as long as the tips were good. She tried to fit the pieces together.

Tonight, here in Nick's, the carpet pocked with cigarette burns, the air thick with smoke and perfume— it all settles on the skin. The songs of mediocre bands mingle with the curses and the laughs. Karen stares straight ahead, religiously, as if the slightest movement might break her neck. I've been told you have to be hungry to make it in the music business. You have to pay your dues in places like this.

Karen gets up and goes to the bathroom. This is her secret ritual, the one we don't talk about, powders and pills, bloody tissues in the trashcans at her apartment. She slides through the crowd, a pale grinning ghost, feet hardly moving. I expect her to turn into fog and fade away, white on white. And no one notices her because she's just one ghost among many. I save her seat at the bar.

She returns without a word, scanning the faces, hoping to find Jay, but he's off playing pool with some locals. It doesn't matter. He's not here, and at this moment she does not exist to him. She stills holds her grin, her eyes sleepy and quiet. Kurt Cobain is on the T.V. hanging over the bartender's head,

the sound turned off. His face has that same innocent expression. He is screaming holes in his intestines, smashing his head through the speakers of his amplifier. His expression never changes- no anger, just the blankness of a child at play.

The last band has played and is loading their equipment into their van. The bar is clearing. Some of these ghosts have found someone to haunt for the night. Most leave alone. I sit with Karen. I wonder how I always end up keeping her company, but I wouldn't feel right leaving her here by herself. She is not talking, and I know this is a sign that it is almost time. I see her stomach convulse, her cheeks swell slightly, her lips tight. She swallows it back down. Her expression never changes, eyes closed, head down.

"Karen, it's time to go," I say. I touch her arm. She is warm. Her eyes barely open; the lids must weigh tons.

"Where's Jay?" She asks, gravel in her throat. She grins, "Don't leave me here."

A year later, the band had lost its appetite. All of us felt we had paid our fair share of dues and received nothing in return but strange memories. I guess we weren't hungry enough. I took a job in the clubhouse of a golf course simply because it paid well and the winter months were slow, leaving time for me to write songs. The faces and names of the people we had met

existed, in my mind, the same way they did before, as if they were part of a TV series I simply stopped watching.

Karen continued to tend bar at Tiki Fala. She continued to dream of her own place and of fairy tale love, numbing herself. I saw her every now and then. She would drive down to visit Jay, hoping her devotion would change something. I kept her company sometimes when he worked late. We walked down to the basketball courts, and I made her laugh with my ridiculous hook shot and sports-announcer voice. I never let on that I knew her secret. There was no need. She would go back north, back to work.

One weekend she planned on staying with a friend in Richmond and doing some shopping. She left from work and drove down interstate 95 in the early morning hours. Those dark hours when the wheels of the car sing, calling you to sleep. The lines glow in the headlights and it feels like a dream. Karen closed her tired eyes, quiet, innocent.

Jay received a call the next night from her roommate. Karen had wrecked her car. He went to see her one last time. One last time she existed in his mind. He said she didn't look like herself; they put too much make-up on her. The preacher spoke some words, blessed are the lonely. And they put her in the ground.