

## D isplaced People

Stacy rides her bike toward me. The parking lot behind her is hot and black like the warped insides of a split tire. Loose pavement pushes up at the edges where the blackness leaves off and the grass begins. The still sounds of the afternoon feed themselves in the easy squeak of the bike, all of it coming up through the spokes in sure, complete cycles. Like dry, tumbling leaves. The front wheel of her bike turns slightly to the left. The handlebars to the right. With Stacy leaning forward becoming a bobbing cork against the blue background of sky. She sets and resets the long weight of her thighs with each slow return of the pedals. Her eyes have a glazy look of faith as if they could control all the motions of her body. But she's wrong. Chum said to me once, 'Nothing is ever in complete control of itself.' He died with his hands on the metal rail of a hospital bed. A deacon from our church was waiting in the hall as I left the room, the man wearing a suit that was a dull brown and matched the worn cover of the Bible he carried, and while he leaned against the metal trim of a window opposite the nurse's station, his entire body relaxed into itself, his lips moving up and down. Like his tongue was chalk. When the red light above the elevator blinked, my hands shook and the deacon's shoulders drew up into his face until he had no neck, only eyes and a rounded chin. Stacy rides onto the sidewalk. The curb so high I'm afraid she'll wreck. I know she'll fall but she doesn't. The parking lot lies behind her like a field. Stacy still rides her bike toward me even though she's now on concrete. On the sidewalk. The bike's white frame making her knees dark. For a minute I can smell evening. "I thought you were going home," I say. It worries me that she's here. We've been going out for six, seven weeks. Maybe she just told me that she was going home. She didn't want to see me after all. And I need a reason for being here. Like when I saw Chum's fingers gripping the rail and the bruised voices rising around me with an air-conditioner behind me clicking on and off.

"I don't believe this!" Her voice high and sweet, urgent like it needs to be heard or something in it will spoil.

"What? what is it?" Her eyes like wet marbles with the parking lot nearly full of cars, not a single opening, and she keeps riding up the sidewalk, coming toward me, only stopping when the bike's front tire is the length of her arm away. Her whole face in motion, everything except....

"You won't believe this! I think my car's been stolen." Her mouth becoming a perfect oval when she speaks, her teeth round and white.

"Your car's been stolen!" I laugh. We're in Indianapolis. At Butler. This doesn't happen at a small college, car's just aren't stolen off this campus. I shouldn't 've done it but I did. Her eyes stop. As if noticing the outline my shoulders make against the pale stone of the dorm, finding just where it begins and the distance I am from it. The way I'd sometimes look at my father's shadow when he'd cross the kitchen and didn't know I was watching him and the night was late with the moon a thin jut of smoke in the window above the sink. And Stacy seems to watch me through that same window, but she never comes any closer to me, and I wonder if its her own father she's looking for and not me at all. My grandfather also said, 'You can tell a lot about a person by the way they stand.' But then she looks back at the parking lot and back at the building and back at me. Stacy does it all in the quick, easy motion with which she sits there, still and reverent as though she's waiting for something to appear that really isn't here or never will be and the day is like that too. For a minute I want it to happen too, but then I want to be more like a man. Tiny lines draw themselves into her forehead and around the corners of her lips. I stop laughing, but it's too late and she won't say anything about it and all the while the afternoon lays about us with its dry heat.

"John I don't know what to do. I guess I should call safety, No maybe I shouldn't. I mean its probably not stolen."

I stand and listen while her eyes become more blue. Like they are being repainted as I watch.

"Well, if it is stolen, I mean if I haven't forgotten where I parked it then I should call."

We're behind her dorm. I look back at the parking lot. The cars settled into neat, unplowed rows. A red truck passes us with a white and gold license. On the bumper is a faded sticker with a slogan for Top Hat Beer, "Buy some" it reads.

"I'll wait here if you want to go in and call," I say softly to her, gently, I want to make up for laughing but everything is awkward now.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'll just wait here, you go ahead and call."

When she comes back out a dark blue Ford waits by the curb. Its rear tires sitting right where she rode her bike. The passenger door has narrow white letters which read "Burn's Security." Stacy was gone about ten minutes and the driver, wearing a shirt that

matched the color of the car's hood, has gone through two cigarettes. He ashes into a pink and white floral cup which he raises and lowers with his left hand, all the while clenching the cup like he's throwing a baseball and chewing greedily with his jaw. The motion of his arm appearing and disappearing in quick jerks like the dimples in his cheeks. I wondered if Stacy was coming back, but just then she did and walked by me and over to the car. All around me is the low, steady sound of the Ford's engine. The man stares at her. She bends down to talk to him through the space left by the unrolled window, her face framing itself in the door opposite him, hair hanging down over the ends of each shoulder like sticky threads wanting to be brushed aside. A bee flies up from beneath the door handle, circles her twice and flies away. Stacy doesn't notice, and neither does



the man. Her hair smells fresh but angry like hay being loaded onto a truck. I smelled it as she passed. When she finishes talking, she turns back to me. Her nose lightly sun-burned.

"Here, take my keys." She walks toward me. "Wait for me in my room. I'll be back, we're going to go look for my car."

"Do you want me to go along?" She holds out her hand. The sun is warm on my neck.

"No I need to go with him."

"OK, I'll wait." And I take the keys, my fingers touching her palm. Then the hand is gone. Stacy goes back to the car and gets in beside the man. But I realize, She doesn't have another key to the dorm and all the floors are locked. "How can you get in?" I yell but it's too late, and I am left watching them drive off before going inside.

From the second floor the parking lot looks the same except smaller, and it's thirty minutes or more before she gets back. Stacy gets out of the car. Her hair looks pale through the dusty glass. When she turns toward the building the sun whitens her cheeks. Knowing I must let her in before she gets to the stairs and remembers she's given me her keys.

The outside door feels still. Stacy is crying as I open it and we don't say anything walking back up the stairs until we're back in her room. I want to do something. I want to say, "I won't leave you like your father did," but I can't. And I sit down on her roommate's

bed and she stands in the doorway. But she's so far away now I don't think she'd recognize the sound of my voice, and her eyes become quiet and strong like written accusations; as if I've done this to her before I was born, when I lived in the body of another man.

"Did you find it?"

"No. We drove around for thirty minutes. The guy I was with just thinks I forgot where I left it at. John, I know its stolen." She closes the door and walks over to me and I stand up. I can feel her breath.

"Your mom called, she was worried," I say. Stacy turns and reaches for the phone. She picks it up and begins to dial.

Click.

Click. Click.

Click. Click. Click.

Click.

"Damn, the lines busy." Her voice is tight and Stacy sinks onto her bed. She rests her forearms on her knees with her hands held up like the pre-bent arms of a manikin and her hair sways forward so completely her face disappears. The air in here is so dry. Her shoulders are shaking and I stand, watching. Through the window behind her the aging afternoon draws dirty yellow marks across her back and I stand there thinking Chum was right. But I stand where I am and the afternoon goes on in its slow way and I think, Tomorrow she'll find her car parked across campus next to my truck and that's the way we are.

**John Strott**