Winesburg, Indiana: Emmalene's Backery and Bait Shop

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Abstract
Catman's truck eases past the gleaming shop window, the boat trailing behind like a ghost in the cautious, blue night. A blip and it's gone. Like a heart monitor. Like a nocturnal creature out on the chase. My imagination, maybe, but this early in the morning anything can happen.

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nocturnal creature out on the chase. My imagination, maybe, but this early in the
morning anything can happen.

Sometimes, in the middle of this middleground before the sun rises, a feeling washes
over me that I am this town. There’s nothing between. It encompasses me. I am
irreparable. I am exquisite.


Have some food is what I say. Catch some fish.

This week I walk the streets to work in the wee hours. My car broke down and Allison
Transmission is taking me to the cleaners. I think about me and Winesburg—the two of
us like lovers who’ve quarreled too much—while my shoes tap-tap-tap on the asphalt.

The Dairymart glows green like a bible. The Dollar General is closed shut like a map.
The Hot Spot buzzes its neon: a crazy blue cowboy loop, loop, looping his lasso out
front. The girls wear shorts with heels now, I notice. Guys have these jeans down low.
The bar thump, thumps. Everyone’s still drinking beer.

As I stroll past, my own form of invisible, I hear the distinct clack-clack of pool balls as they break and scatter. Smokers huddle by the front door where lanky weeds sprout up along the cracked sidewalk.

These days when I’m out and about I keep to the periphery, slide into doorways. I stay unseen so I can remain a wily observer. In the past I was down in there, part of Winesburg’s middle. But I’m over all that.

Jamie comes to mind as I turn the corner near the bridge, wait for a semi-truck to roll by spouting diesel exhaust before I can cross. Still makes me hum to think about him. Down there by the river, the two of us. Down in parts of each other all the time. Groaning like a machine we were, those days. We sputtered and spilled ourselves out like most young lovers do. Picking at the seams while we tried to stitch something together.

That passion for tracking down and cuddling with the dark and unknown wanes within me each year. Now, I just like to know what I know. It’s enough. But a few weeks ago I Googled Jamie to see if I could find him out there in the world. Blank, blank, blank. Blinking cursor. It helps me keep things straight—from now to then. I can’t add anything. It stops when I stop remembering. And that’s painful.

As I walk through the sneaking-in fog, I think about how if maybe I opened my mouth wide the town itself could crawl in and take up all the space it’s yet to have. I’d just let it. That’s how I feel, and I know it’s a little off. Like my car, nearly done-for, waiting out there on the hill at Allison Transmission. My big beautiful Buick, bathed in moonlight like last rites. Loyal like a dog.

Walking to work, past the Hot Spot and its thumping thump, down into the little part of town that looks like a town—down the side streets by myself, I put my arms out straight and open my mouth wide. Waiting.

It feels good.

Jamie loved me, I’m sure of that. What I did back to him I’m not certain. Back then when I didn’t slump around thinking big thoughts, I felt a kind of feral compunction. I needed to move around inside and outside everything at once. Jamie just sat still and beautiful on his front porch with the wild flowers popping up here and there, announcing what was what. Jamie all droopy cigarette and muscled arms. All flannel shirt and boots. Jamie with a perfect smile. Humming. He scratched his head, right
above his left ear and he said, “Emmalene, all I know is I love you. I can’t help it.” Then he looked out over me to the flat, fat skyline. He squinted like he wished he could erase it all, including me, knowing though that he couldn’t, which I thanked God for.

I remember feeling strong and right. I remember smiling, basking in the kind of love he had for me. I remember a rumbling bumble bee nudging each and every flower in sight just once each. I remember nudging Jamie’s boot, holding his hand. I remember looking good but feeling like trouble. And I couldn’t finish that story. I couldn’t give it the ending he wanted. I needed to know he was there for me, and I needed to know I could do what I wanted.

Eventually I scratched at the screen to his basement bedroom window. He let me in. And there in that cozy light, standing beside his bed, I wrapped my arms around his neck and told him it was over. He didn’t believe me even though I told him by tomorrow I would be off with someone else, Frank or Paul or Catman himself—can’t remember which one it was. Jamie and I swayed then, there, to the soft music he had playing on his cassette player. I hummed into his neck for a while. I looked him right in the eye, pretending to be brave, watching his heart break. He asked, “Will I ever see you again, Emmalene?”

It was the meanest thing ever done, his arms hanging empty. The answer was never. Never. But I didn’t say that.

My bakery is a blink on a side street. Some people forget about me for months and months, and then they crave an apple muffin and know where to come. Or maybe they want to take the grandkids fishing. They know. I tie flies while the bread rises soft and firm, like a sleeping pillow.

Tonight, I creak open the door. Step inside. I get hit full-on with that earthy-yeasty smell. Worms and bread. That scent travels with me wherever I go. I stumble here alone each morning to renew it, to sink inside this place I call home. I brew coffee, start in on mixing and waiting and tying. The steam rises up from my cup like a notion, Catman’s ghost sailing on by.

Sherrie Flick is the author of the flash fiction chapbook *I Call This Flirting* (Flume) and the novel *Reconsidering Happiness* (University of Nebraska Press), a semi-finalist for the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award. Her flash fiction appears in many journals and anthologies including *Norton’s Flash Fiction Forward* and *New Sudden Fiction*. She lives in Pittsburgh, where she teaches in Chatham University’s MFA program.