

Small Town Strange
Michael Bettendorf

I shove my hand deep into the bowl of ice and take a seat on the other side of the bar.

“Bet you won’t do that again,” my boss says and pours me a drink. A shot of bourbon. “You can clock out for the day.”

“Thanks,” I say.

It’s barely noon, but I take the drink anyway.

I sip my bourbon neat, my brother’s favorite. The burn in my throat not potent enough to distract me from the burn on my hand. A steam burn from the espresso machine. How I managed to burn my hand is less important than why, though both are simple explanations. Pressurized steam from the steam wand burnt the shit out of my right hand while I was frothing milk for a double latte to-go. No flavors. Whole milk. My kind of drink.

Distraction, explains why.

A girl is hunkered down behind a pile of books in the corner of the café. She’s been there for hours. Came in an hour after I opened the café. One latte. A double. Two-percent milk. We don’t carry two-percent, but she was polite and tipped, so I mixed skim and whole milk. That was four hours, a latte, and one drip coffee plus a refill ago.

I was staring at her, not paying attention, when I burned my hand. My fault, but I can’t shake the feeling that I know her. One of those strange small town kind of things. I’ve been trying to place her face all morning. I deduced it wasn’t from college, though I couldn’t be positive. The memory ran deeper, though, that I am positive about.

She paid in cash, so I wasn’t able to glance at a name on a credit card. She’s average height. Glasses. Wears a natural dirty blonde haircut. An adult style. Mature, my mom would say. No wedding ring. Nails clean and shiny, but not polished.

“Ask her out already,” my boss says.

I rub the condensation that’s formed on the outside of stainless-steel bowl and toss back the rest of my bourbon.

“Nah,” I say. “You’ve been staring at her all day, man,” he says. “The heart knows what it wants.”

I roll my eyes.

“It’s not like that,” I say. “I recognize her, but I don’t remember from where. It’s driving me crazy.”

“You could, you know, ask her.”

“Nah,” I say. “She’s got headphones in. A pile of books. People come to coffee shops for dates, not to find one.”

“Whatever, man,” he says.

I don’t ask, but he pours me another bourbon.

Two bourbons, a drip coffee, a water, and a banana muffin later I remember.

Seventh grade social studies, seventh period.

But I still can’t remember her name. It was something French sounding. La-something, I think or Le-something. We were studying the geography of Southeast Asia. The class was easy. Our teacher split our map tests in half. We didn’t have to remember all of Africa at once. All of Asia at once. All of Europe at once.

An administrator came in during our work time. He walked over to the girl, knelt down and said something behind cupped hands, into her ear. She sat at the far end of the classroom. Four rows to the left of my seat, one seat up. The conversation was out of earshot, but I knew by that evening. Everyone knew by that evening. She left the room with the administrator, her face splotchy and red, tears and snot all over. I remember she was wearing a big knit sweater. I wondered if she still had it.

Her mother was killed in a bank shooting hours before the administrator showed up. It was one of the deadliest bank shootings in United States history. Made national news. A rare occurrence for our Midwest town. That was the last time I saw her.

I want to say something, but I can’t think of anything that would make any sort of difference. Any impression to be made was already done so years ago.

She orders another refill and I catch her glancing at me. Our eyes meet, briefly, before I turn my attention to the fourth bourbon my boss places in front of me. It’s almost six now. A cortado, another muffin, more bourbon, and a couple more waters since I pulled her from my memory bank to the forefront of my brain. No longer a wisp of unreliable recollection, but a solid, concrete cognizance.

I consider mentioning I used to mow around the memorial that was built after the bank was torn down. My uncle owned the property. I picked up litter and mowed and weed-whacked summer after summer. Beer bottles. Trash. Dandelions. All sat among the vases of flowers and photos left by loved ones.

I consider mentioning that I understand. That my older brother was a teller at the bank. He called in sick that day. Wasn't sick.

I consider mentioning that it ate him up day after day, night after night, until he couldn't find a way to reconcile with himself any longer, no matter how often he went out of his way to do good deeds. No matter how often he saw his therapist. No matter how often his dose of anti-depressants was adjusted.

I consider mentioning that I was the one that found him.

But I don't.

I drink another bourbon because my boss is handing them to me and I have Uber and now that my mind is on this particular brainwave, nothing but a blackout will reset the frequency. A hangover spent sifting through the static until I find the right band again. Maybe I should tell her that the shooting affected the whole town, on some level anyway, after she moved away. It won't help. Maybe I should tell her the three shooters were given the death penalty and though they outlived both of our loved ones, they still ended up in the ground, just the same. But it won't help. Not that it matters. She picks up her books, pulls the headphones from her ears and leaves.

I lounge for another hour and decide if I ever see her again, then I'll say something. Justify it as one of those fate or coincidence kind of things.

Another latte. More water. More ice for my burnt hand.

Two-finger's worth of bourbon sits in front of me, but I leave it alone.

I tell my boss I'll see him in the morning, "Going to call an Uber."

"It's on me," he says. "I'm the one that got you drunk."

After a while, his phone dings.

"Lealia is here in a white Toyota Prius," he says.

"Sounds French," I say and walk out the door, wishing I had the rest of the bourbon. Maybe then I'd keep my mouth shut. But I know I won't.

Michael Bettendorf earned an English degree from the University of Nebraska—Lincoln in 2012. He currently mentors children in Language Arts for the Lincoln Public School district. He's busy juggling a couple of novels and a podcast he'll record one day. He lives in Lincoln with his wife, where he tries to convince the world that Nebraska is too strange to be a flyover state.