Amanda Huggins

This One-Trick Town

Annie arrives at The Anchor just as Seth is unlocking the door. She unwinds her scarf and stamps on the doormat to dislodge the snow from her boots. […]

'Jake coming down?' asks Seth, as though he's read her mind. […]

'Pretty sure him and Art are on the early shift this week. He'll no doubt be in as soon as he's had his tea. I envy that lad – his mam's cooking is the best in Elmwick Bay[1].' He grins. 'S'pose that's not so good for you though, pet – how will you ever drag him away from home?'

Annie rolls her eyes and looks up at the muted TV, watches some chinless Tory MP[2], his mouth moving, his head nodding and shaking, his smug smile. He reminds her of Jake's da. […]

She remembers how his da winked at her when she offered him a light, held her wrist a little too long as he leant into the flame. Something about the way he looked at her made her shiver.

She turns away and picks up the local newspaper from the bar top, scans the front page headlines. 'Have you read this? It says there's a chance of seeing the Northern Lights tonight.' […]

She thinks about later on, wonders if she can persuade Jake to go up to Blackfoot Hill for a better chance of seeing the aurora. The last time she went up to the Roman road[3] was to watch a meteor shower with her da. It was summer, nearly eighteen months ago now, the week before he left for good. They took an old tent and two sleeping bags, a handful of chocolate bars and a bottle of cheap Prosecco[4] stolen from her mam's not-so-secret stash. They lay down in the heather and looked up at the wide sky, watched shooting stars arcing bright across the black, threading the sky with promises. He told Annie he'd brought her mam to this exact same place just after they'd met, that this was where he first knew for sure that he loved her. He said it was the place where he could see more clearly – where the landscape was nine-tenths sky, where you could always find the light.

There was a far-off shimmer to the north, and Da told her it was the glow of Newcastle[5], luring the unwary with her swagger and shine. Annie knew he'd made it up, that you wouldn't be able to see the city lights from so far away, but she went along with it unquestioningly, as though she believed every word.

Then he confirmed what she'd been dreading, that he was leaving her and Mam. He said he would always love her, but sometimes love wasn't enough. When he got in his car on the morning he left, he wound down the window and told Annie to take care of herself, to always follow the light.

She knew she should think of the moors as a sad place now, the place where everything started to fall apart. Yet she didn't. That night had been so special, an epiphany, one of those moments of startling clarity where you suddenly understood life would be good and worth the wait. She lay awake in her sleeping bag

[1] *Elmwick Bay*: town in England
[2] *Tory MP*: member of parliament for the Conservative Party
[3] *Roman road*: network of roads in England built by the Roman Empire
[4] Italian bubbly wine
[5] city in England

with that knowledge held tight to her chest, the sky still visible through the open tent flaps. She listened to the murmuring sea, to Da's quiet breathing, to the unseen creatures: the cries and howls of a far-off fox, a rustling in the gorse, the thump of hooves as two ewes stumbled across the path. The sky was darker and the stars were brighter than she'd ever remembered them being before.

And now she thinks it would be a great place to see the Northern Lights: the shimmering greens and purples, the orange, the neon pink, the wide velvet sky stretching out and up and on forever. And it would be a good place to tell Jake her news, to find out how he feels about their future. She isn't sure how he'll react, and she wants to tell him when they're on their own up on the moor, where everything always feels clearer and sharper, where there'll be nothing save for clean, cold snow, far from the smell of diesel and fish guts. […]

***

It's almost seven when Jake walks in with Art. […]

The jukebox speakers crackle into life as Seth flicks the switch behind the bar, and Bruce Springsteen[6] sings about hitchhiking his way across America.

'It's your man, Annie!' shouts Seth. 'Especially for you.' She turns and gives him the thumbs up. Oh to be across the Atlantic, to be with the boardwalk girls and the corner boys, with the loners and the lost, kicking up the dirt with the toe of her cowboy boot. She allows herself to imagine some New Jersey[7] bar, tequila shots lined up on the counter, Bruce Springsteen sat next to her on a tall stool, the sleeves of his denim shirt rolled up, the warmth of his arm pressed against hers.

'Annie, are you deaf? You're on!'

Jake is waving his pool cue at her, the balls are set up on the table, dust is whirling in slow motion in the day's final stripes of sunlight. When she stands up she realises the Springsteen track has ended. […]

Girl, we gotta leave this one-trick town,

pack up our dreams before they tear them down…

Annie shivers.

Babe, we gotta go, follow those, the city lights,

leave all this pain behind, oh girl you know I'm right,

we'll take nothing with us, we'll start again brand new,

and 'til we find that special place, we'll just be passing through…

She looks across at the bar. 'Seth – what's this you're playing?'

'Like it?'

'Yeah, it's good.'

'Some new Springsteen wannabe – Ged Bradshaw. Minty recommended the album to me.'

---

[6] *Bruce Springsteen*: American rock musician (b.1949)

[7] *New Jersey*: home state of Bruce Springsteen

Art laughs at her. ‘Why do you like all this old-timer music? It’s the same crap my da listens to.’

She shrugs. ‘They tell real stories, they sing about stuff that matters. They show me the light… I dunno…’ She falters, blushes, leans clumsily across the pool table and takes her next shot. Misses.

She doesn’t explain it’s because of her da, that these songs bind her to him, make her hope that wherever he is right now he might be listening to the same Bruce song on the radio. Bruce is like a connecting beam of light, a thread running between them, something she can reel in, something which still cleaves them together, something to make her feel she isn’t alone in the world. Alone in the world with a mam who’s always working or out with her new bloke, with a boyfriend who never tells her where he is or what he’s doing from one day to the next, without the best friend who ghosted[8] her as soon as Charlie Secker put a cheap diamond chip on her finger.

And what is there left for her in this town now? Her crap job in the corner shop, a few shifts in this rundown end-of-days pub, the stink of the harbour, the lights of the steelworks glittering along the shore at night, the echo of the tannoy across the bay. The place where everyone is tied to the sea or to the factory, trading their feet for fins or squandering their lives in the heat and roar. If she left Elmwick and moved to Newcastle then she could get a job in a bookshop, or better still, the secondhand vinyl shop she went to with Da that one time. And then she could save up, fly to New York, get to meet Bruce Springsteen. Annie knows where he lives, has seen it in a documentary, is sure it would be pretty easy to find his ranch. Maybe she could get a job looking after horses. […]

So it’s decided then, that’s what she’ll do. And maybe Jake will want to come with her. She knows he’s a good guy – when Art’s not around and when he isn’t hanging on to his mam’s every word – and she loves him, she really does, has loved him since school. They could rent a clapboard house on the Jersey shore for a couple of months and Jake could get some experience mending boats. Then maybe one day he’ll have that boatbuilding business he’s always dreamed about. […]

She laughs to herself – she knows all that Bruce stuff is just a dream, but Newcastle could be a reality. Then she remembers her news. Her news makes it all the more immediate, her news means they should go right away.

***

They leave the pub just after eleven. […] Jake takes her hand, asks if she wants to go back to his house. ‘Mam and Da are out for Uncle Jack’s birthday and they’re staying over. And there’s a fire in. We can get cosy down on the rug.’ He laughs self-consciously, watches her look up at the sky. It’s still clear, and there are faint stars overhead.

‘Can we drive up to Blackfoot instead? They say there’s a chance of seeing the Northern Lights tonight.’ She points up at the constellations. ‘It’s the perfect night.’

He laughs. ’Yeah, it’s a beautiful night if you like snow and cold – but haven’t we got enough lights already, what with the steelworks and the stars and the full moon?’ […]

‘I wouldn’t be able to relax at yours, I’d be worried about your parents changing their minds and coming back.’

[8] suddenly stopped communicating

He shrugs. 'Okay, if that's what you really want.' They walk down the street to his parents' house. Those perfect parents: his mam, the obedient wife, the brilliant cook, who thinks no one is good enough for her sons; his da, a foreman at the steelworks respected by the whole town, yet silently feared by the girls in the works office. […]

At the summit the sky opens up around them, an endless expanse of black, woven through with a million tiny stars. Jake gasps, but Annie hardly notices how beautiful it is at first: there is no green or purple, no dancing light, no aurora borealis. She wraps her arms around him and tucks her hands in his coat pockets, looking up again at the resolute velvet black of that wide nine-tenths sky.

'I have something to tell you,' she says. 'Some bad news.'

'Oh, Annie, you're not frigging pregnant are you?'

'Pregnant? No, no, God no, nothing like that.'

'What then?'

'Mam is moving to Ravengrove[9] – that is, Mam and I are moving to Ravengrove. She's got a job there. And she's found us a place to rent, with her new fella. Bob.'

'Well you could stay here, couldn't you?'

'Stay? Stay where? I can't afford to rent anywhere on my wage.'

'Oh, yeah, I guess not… Well Ravengrove's only thirty minutes or so in the car. It'll be fine, Annie. Nothing need change.'

'But I don't want to live in crappy Ravengrove – it's even worse than here. We could get a place together?' She's testing him, she already knows the answer.

'But my mam, she… well she probably wouldn't be keen on that.'

'She wouldn't be keen or you wouldn't be keen? Perhaps there are too many home comforts anchoring you down?'

'No, it's not like that, Annie. I just…'

'You just what?'

'I–'

'Don't bother, Jake, I can see where this is going. You want nothing to change. At least not at your end. But I've decided to leave.'

'Leave what? To go where? How?'

'You, that's what. Newcastle, that's where. And easily, that's how.' She lets go of him and steps back, then holds out her hand, willing him to take it, wanting to give him one last chance. 'Come with me.'

He shakes his head. 'I can't, Annie. I don't want to. My life's here. What would we do in Newcastle?'

[9] town in England

‘What would we do? We’d do everything. We’d get to live our lives as they should be lived. Go to gigs and stuff. […] It’s a great city.’ […]

‘I don’t know what you mean about lives as they should be lived. Our lives are here – jobs, families, friends…’

‘Well I have two crap jobs, no friends, and soon I’ll have no family. There’s nothing to keep me in this one-trick town, or you either. We can get better jobs, save up, travel the world.’

‘The world? I reckon there’s nowt much in the rest of the world that you can’t find here. And I have a good job – not many pay as good as the steelworks.’

‘But it doesn’t pay well enough for you to break free from home and get a place with me?’

‘I… well I didn’t say that exactly.’

Annie turns away from him, starts to walk back down the path.

‘Wait!’

She ignores him, speeds up, running recklessly through the snow. When she reaches the trees she crouches down behind the thickest trunk, waits until she hears him stumbling past, no longer shouting her name. After a few minutes she hears the slam of a door, an engine starting, sees the sweep of the headlamps as Jake reverses the car and turns around, then the red tail lights moving slowly away.

She can’t believe he’s left her there on the moor, didn’t try to find her or wait even a fleeting five minutes to see if she would come back.

Annie watches until the car disappears around the bend, and when she looks up again she sees a faint line of pink and green on the horizon. Further up the coast, the glow is even brighter, and she knows that Da was right: it is the beckoning shine of the city. A calm energy runs through her as she heads down the farm track in the certain knowledge that these are her northern lights.

When she rounds the bend she sees the rear lights of Jake’s car again, parked up by one of the gates. He’s waited for her after all. His window is wound down, she can see the cloud of his breath, and his arm rests confidently on the sill. There’s music drifting out, turned down low. She suddenly remembers the words of that new song Seth played on the jukebox, and as she draws level with the car she speeds up and keeps right on going.

(2023)