

Kyle Mellen

Killing Me

The phone rings and pulls me out of a dream that I already can't remember and I look out the window and everything is still a dark dark blue. I go into the kitchen and pick the phone off the wall and it's Mom calling from Massachusetts.

"You missed my birthday," she says.

I put my head to the side and hold the phone with no hands. It's cold in the kitchen. I hug myself but my hands are cold so I make fists with them.

"Your birthday is in July," I say. "Mom, did you take your medicine?"

She says, "As if I don't know when my own birthday is. What do you take me for? You think I'm an imbecile? You think your own mother is an imbecile."

"It's February," I say. "Mom, it's winter."

"When you were eight you said I was the most beautiful woman in the world."

I don't know what to say to this. I don't know eight years old from a hole in the wall. I reach over to the counter and lift off the ashtray. There's a half-smoked butt in there and I light it with the matches also on the counter. The phone's still between my head and my shoulder and my neck's starting to cramp.

"Mom," I say then. "It's five o'clock. It's early. Can we talk about this another time?"

I hear something through the line like she's banging pots. Her time it's nine and I hope what I'm hearing is her making breakfast. Except that I know she doesn't eat breakfast. She doesn't eat anything except microwaved white fish.

"You'd like it if I just keeled over and died," she says. "Wouldn't you. That would be so convenient for you. Can you imagine? One son and he wants you to just fall over and die so he can take a shower. I have to tell Ginny."

I'm awake by this point and about to tell her that Ginny has been dead for three years but instead I put the cigarette out in the ashtray I'm still holding and I say,

"That's not it, Mom. You better not die on me," I say. "You've got years left. Tell me a story."

She starts to. She gets as far as, "When your father was still with us he used to commute to work with a thermos—"

But then she starts coughing. And it sounds like she's laughing, too. I stand there in the middle of the kitchen listening to it for as long as I can. It gets worse and worse and then it gets so bad I have to hang up.

Outside the windows the sky is starting to lighten, but it's still all shades of blue out there. The scrub spruce stand out darker than the rest, a different black-blue. It's wonderful to be awake at this time of day. I stand there for another minute. I go into the shower to wash up and get ready for Dwayne.

"You look seven different shades of shit," says Dwayne when I open the door to his truck and pull myself in. He's already going. His eyes are showing thin red veins and they're leaking at the corners. He wipes his nose and wrenches around to look out the rear as he backs out.

"Didn't sleep much," I say.

He gets the truck onto the road and grinds gears getting it back into first. I watch the muscles in his neck going and he has to clear his throat about every three seconds. He threatens spit and then swallows it.

"Here," he says and takes a small plastic bag from the front of his coat. Dwayne throws it at me and it lands between my legs. I go digging for it. "Don't talk to me," Dwayne says. "I need a few minutes. Just don't talk to me."

I open the little bag and touch my finger to the white powder inside. I touch my finger to it and hold it up in front of my face before putting it on my gums. It's bitter. My jaws clench helplessly. It tastes like what I imagine drywall tastes like.

"More of Karla's shit?" I say.

"Didn't I just say don't talk to me?"

Karla's the dancer Dwayne's been dating for three months. She's a good girl, actually. But she has friends who deal the shit we're currently doing. And that's it exactly. It's bad cocaine but it's February in the middle of Alaska and sometimes you just have to saddle up and deal with what you can get.

I take out my keys and put the short key to the shed's masterlock into the bag and get as much as I can onto the end of it. It's difficult with the road as broken and busted up as it is. Snow's been falling like crazy this winter and every time the plows come through they chunk up another hole or dozen. I time it, knowing the holes and the way Dwayne drives them, and I manage to get the key to my nose without losing too much. It burns.

"I forgot my mom's birthday," I say when it's all down.

"That's unforgivable," Dwayne says.

"Where we going?"

Dwayne looks at me. "You forget?"

"Enlighten me," I say.

"Quest."

"Right," I say.

"You serious?"

"You seen Charlotte?"

"Give me a cigarette," Dwayne says.

We sit there smoking and clearing our throats and watching the blues of the landscape shift and melt. More colors rise out of the liquid blue. We drive through Chatanika and up over what passes for mountains in this part and down the other side. Dwayne's truck slides on the bends on the way down. There are a few times I expect to go right through the drifts and the guards underneath but he straightens it and wipes at his eyes and we're back on the road.

The sun starts as a hollow in the sky, the emptiest blue imaginable. Soon it begins to pass into yellow and eventually orange as it rises up over the black ridge of spruce on the horizon. It's like an ember there on the edge, the tip of a stick pulled from a fire. I've forgotten how profound a sunrise can seem.

"What time is it," Dwayne says because his truck doesn't have a radio.

I check. "Seven-thirty."

"Bingo," he says.

The teams are due in by eight and where we are it should be no longer than twenty minutes to downtown and the river. Bingo means we've timed it perfectly.

I ask Dwayne if he wants another hit, but he's looking for cops.

"Keep it down," he says and so I bend my head down below the window to put the masterlock key first to one nostril and then the other.

I'm probably doing too much this early. That occurs to me. My head feels a bit swollen and I realize that I'm sweating. I twitch my nose around, light another cigarette, and crank the window. The smoke trails out through the break. The cold air feels good. I take off my hat and rest my head against the glass. I close my eyes.

I don't see Charlotte. We're standing on the frozen Chena and I can feel the cold coming right up through my boots. The chill comes up through the foot-deep ice, through the rubber soles of my boots, through the bottoms of my feet. It's thirty below.

"Where's Charlotte?" I say to Dwayne, who's a few feet away looking upriver.

It begins to snow. The flakes come down small and tight and dry like pieces of ice. It is ice, not really snow at all. The wind picks up. Even though we're dressed for it with long johns and heavy socks and the good boots, the cold comes just the same. I stamp my feet and flex my toes. I look upriver like Dwayne. I shift my weight from side to side. I bury my hands farther into my pockets. The pinky on my left hand starts to throb. I take it out and pull the glove off and breathe on it. I light a cigarette.

"How long," I say.

Dwayne checks his wrist. "Two," he says. "Just."

I grind my teeth. "I'ma need another hit soon," I say because we've been there for two hours and there's still no sign of the leaders. Dwayne doesn't say a thing.

"Dwayne."

Dwayne looks at me through a beard of white. He looks funny like that except that I'm beginning to jones. I'm beginning to feel the ache inside. It's not just the cold. I know I'm not going to last.

"I need something, Dwayne," I say. "I mean, seriously. Dwayne."

He looks away for a second over to the other riverbank where town stands frozen and mute. It's hidden behind the falling veil of ice.

"There's coffee in the truck," he says. "Thermos behind the seat."

I want to tell Dwayne the rest of the story. I've heard it before, haven't I? A thermos full of Two Hammers Canadian and 7-Up? He'd drink half on the way to work and the rest on the way home. He hit a car once or so I imagine. I think I've heard this before. My mother has a black eye and she's smoking a cigarette in a bathrobe seated on the old brown couch with the buttons torn out. It was a parked car and no one was injured. But my father cried about that for years. Later when he finally quit drinking he still carried the thermos with him commuting. He worked that job for

forty-three years. He needed the thermos on the seat beside him. Even when there was nothing in it.

I say all right and start to crunch down the river. I feel a hand on my shoulder. Dwayne says be cool and pushes his hand into the pocket of my coat. I will make it then.

I hurry. My feet are not attached to the rest of me. They're like dead tree stumps. They take me past the yellow banner of the finish line where the workers are lined up in their orange vests running cables to the speakers along the river, and then over to the embankment which is steep and buried except for a narrow path where others have fallen down the hill. It's almost impassable but I grab onto some willow trunks and manage to pull myself up. My feet are even colder now, somehow. I don't know how but they are.

In the parking lot overlooking the river children are throwing snowballs at each other. It takes them some time packing the snowballs. The snow is dry. It's ice and doesn't form. I stand there watching them. There's three girls and a boy all in heavy clothes for sledding and they dip their mittened hands into the drifts and come out with loose dry flakes that they try to form. When they have a hard little heart they hurl it at one of the others, whoever's closest. The girls squeal and dash around. They are nine, ten.

I'm watching them through the windshield of Dwayne's truck, rubbing my hands together for feeling. My fingers are red and stiff. I can't hold anything with them and I blow the warmest breath I can onto them and rub them some more. Keys would be impossible like this. So I push my dead hand into my coat pocket and touch the bag there. I get my finger inside and can barely wait to put it between my lips, sucking the bitterness off. I do it again and again. I will be cool in a minute but first I need this. Too much too early, I know that, I can see that, but it doesn't make any difference to me.

I lean my head back against the seat and get a cigarette lit. The warm smoke fills the cab in whorls. The kids are still at it. There is nothing in the world like this. I open Dwayne's door and step out.

"Ten-to-one," I say to them and spread my arms wide like Jesus on the cross.

The kids don't pay any attention except for one of them. It's this little girl wearing a bright red parka with her hood up. She is the one. Her black hair spills around the edges of her face and she looks at me with black eyes without depth. She's holding a packed ball of ice. Her cheeks are smooth and empty. I want to put the backs of my fingers against those cheeks. I know the electricity I'd find there.

I feel the tremendous pain again. I open my eyes. I am in the driver's seat of Dwayne's truck and the little girl is sitting there with me on the other side. She still has the ice in her hands. I lick the drugs from my cuticle.

"What's your name," I say.

She sits looking down into her lap and playing with the ice. The windows are blocked with frost. If I had the keys I would start the truck and get the heat moving. I would melt her little ball.

"What's your name," I say.

"Lettie," she says. She moves the ice from one hand to the other.

I reach behind the seat and get the thermos. It sloshes and already I'm feeling better. My throat is dry. The hardness at the corners of my eyes is starting to thaw. I can barely get the top unscrewed. I pour a cup of black into the cap and wait for the steam to rise, but there's nothing. The coffee's cold. I sip it anyway. I even blow on it. It sounds ridiculous, but I do.

"Sometimes coffee tastes like paint," I tell Lettie. "And you know what?"

"What," Lettie says.

"When it tastes like paint? You better drink it."

Her cheeks remain smooth and unpaired. She does not understand. The ball of ice shrinks and leaves beads on her gloves. The windows are fogged with us now. Lettie's hood is still up.

"I want to see your hair," I say.

Her hand moves and I want to clamp it down.

"Don't," I say. "I won't hurt you. Come here."

I put the big thermos cap on the dashboard and open my arms wide again. The little girl climbs into them. I take her hood down. Her black hair falls against my face. It is a little oily and smells like a shoulder. It's disgusting. I don't stop. I can't. I take a handful of her hair and rub it over my lips, under my nose. She sits on my lap and lets me.

Lettie is the one who needs me. Her face is above mine. Her eyes are depthless. Her cheeks are there. I reach a hand up for them.

Except Lettie is now Dwayne and he's holding my throat and saying, "What the fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck?"

The door on the other side of the truck is open. The cold air blows in.

"Give me a hit," I say. "Dwayne," I say. "Please, I just need a hit."

We don't see the leaders come in. We hear them, though. The church bells ring monotone when the first of them cross the finish line. And it's just as well. Who wants to see twelve dogs pull a man across a line in the snow?

Instead Dwayne and I adjust our elbows on the bar. We're as far away from the door as we can manage. We order another round, and one for the bar. The leaders are in, after all. The race is over. Very faintly we can hear the announcer on the loudspeaker saying things like "method" and "approach" and "wow."

The shots warm my insides as if someone's lit a bulb in my belly. But the cold stays there in my surfaces. It will be there for at least the night. Liquor can't truly thaw it and I know Dwayne feels the same though he won't admit it. So we both try and help ourselves. It's pointless. I order another round. Dwayne and I are drinking cans of Black Label.

"You want another one," says Darlene from behind the bar with her arms across her wide and enormous bosom, "you've got to eat something. That's it."

"Eat something," I say. I look at Dwayne and he shakes his head. He won't look at me. "What would I eat?"

"I don't care what," she says, "but you'd better eat something. You're killing me looking at you."

It's the most profound thing I've ever heard. She's convinced me, although the idea of eating anything turns my stomach. I want to please her.

I say, "Have you got a butter and jam sandwich." It's the first thing I think of.

"What kind of jam," Darlene says. She's taken a little pad out of somewhere, I don't know where, and there's a pen in her hand. Darlene rocks back on her heels and watches me.

"Dwayne," I say. "Help me out."

"Strawberry," says Dwayne.

When the sandwich comes I take a single bite and chew for minutes before I can swallow. I vomit into my mouth. I spit it under the bar between my feet and push the plate away.

"Thanks," I say. Darlene's at the other end of the bar leaning into two military guys, resting her chest on the top of the bar. My throat clenches again. I fight it down.

Dwayne's pissed. Little red chili pepper lights are strung along the wall where it meets the ceiling. I feel as though I'm inside a heart looking out.

"I don't see any dogs," I say. I want Dwayne to talk to me. He won't. "You'd think," I say. "I mean, here we are. And no dogs."

Someone puts on Christmas music and as the bells start to ring high and shrill my head tightens. My shoulders clench and I double over. I'm afraid my spine will snap.

"Let's get out of here," I say. "Dwayne, let's go."

In the parking lot Dwayne turns to me. His face is lit up yellow and waxlike in the light cast down from the street lamps. I think for a minute that his eyes are gone. There are only brown hollows where they should be. But he steps toward me and the light catches them.

"That was stupid," he says. "What the hell was that? She was eight years old."

"No," I say. "You're wrong, Dwayne."

There's no way she's eight. But I can't explain it, not to Dwayne, not to anyone. I can't make it into a story that a person could get.

I feel empty and scooped out and bloody. Dwayne lights a cigarette and sucks on it. He looks ridiculous.

"It's killing me looking at you," I say.

Dwayne frowns and is about to take a swing at me, but he spits into the snow and stomps off to the truck. I follow him.

Darlene comes out the door then in a hurry, looking in all directions. I wonder what she is looking for. She sees our truck and me through the window. Darlene waves a hand, holding something, stepping off the curb into the lot and starting for us. The pack is six inches thick there and no one's laid any sand or gravel in weeks. Darlene slips off her feet and lies on her side on the ice.

"Dwayne," I say.

"I see her," he says, winding the wheel one-handed, lighting another cigarette from the butt of the last.

I watch Darlene on her side there, the blue pack shining up at the lamps. Her face contorts, she looks up at me, and I can hear her say something as we pull past her and onto the road. I crank the window down as far as it'll go.

Dwayne says, "Shut the window," but I lean my head on the edge. The cold air blows on my face. Ice builds in my nose. "Hey," Dwayne says. I feel the truck stop.

In the side mirror through the darkness I see a mirage of red and blue lights coming closer. Tomorrow I'll find Charlotte. I close my eyes. I've been waiting for this. The lights get brighter. They turn on themselves again and again. Red to blue to red to blue to white.