

*Kristina McHaddad*

## **Red**

Dana has watched a streetlight burn out every night for a month now. Every night.

Each time the blue-white light shoots quickly into fire bright light and then fades slowly down into the black night.

She is beginning to worry.

Usually she is driving alone late at night. It is the sudden break of bright light as the bulb bursts that catches her eye just quickly enough to watch the lamp burn out.

Occasionally she is driving with someone else and she starts at the sight and calls out Did you see? but they never do (not even Laine).

It is not that she doubts herself or what she is seeing. But she wonders all the same. She fights an urge to track down each individual light the next night to see whether it has been replaced.

Laine is a poet. She writes of James Dean, of smoking in bathtubs, of catching houses on fire. Dana still writes of sunsets and oceans, but she's working on it.

Both Dana and Laine think that they are in love with their writing professor but they talk about it with one another as though they are not. They only admire her greatly, want to write like her, look like her, have her life although they have no idea of what her life might be, to be her.

Laine writes a poem and shows it to the professor, a poem describing two women who are bound together by the length of a telephone wire, two lives mirroring and echoing one another, talking each other through something. The teacher knows and Dana knows.

Dana too writes a poem. She shows it to her instructor only with an explanation that the words have no meaning, that this woman is only a catalyst for the words. Dana's teacher says, "It is fine that you write poems about me, but you are not to fall in love with me and do not send the poems in Valentine's Day cards."

So much for the disclaimer, Dana thinks.

Dana takes the glasses from her small face and cleans them against the white t-shirt, pulled from the waist of her Levi's. She waits for class to start. She slips the glasses back to her pale eyes and holds her short blond hair up with one hand away from the back of her neck and heat of the room.

She has been wearing glasses now for about three months off and on. Not prescription glasses. Actually the lenses are only clear plastic set into clear plastic frames. She wears them because they so significantly alter her physical appearance. She feels quite different from herself when she wears them.

But lately she has begun to worry about her eyesight, fearing that imperfections in the lenses might damage her eyes. She finds it difficult to remember to keep the lenses clean, thinking that the spots and blurriness are on her eyes rather than the plastic. And she's not sure whether she exists more with the glasses or without them.

Laine walks into the classroom only a minute after the instructor enters, but enough to be noticed. She slides into the seat next to Dana and acknowledges her through dark shoulder-length hair which falls into her brown eyes. She drops her books onto the floor at her feet and stretches her legs out onto the seat of the desk in front of her.

Laine spends much of the hour sketching in her books—boys' faces, strange scenes, self-portraits.

And Dana, shifting uncomfortably in her seat, watches Laine. Dana feels the desk growing smaller around her. The air is unreasonably hot, unbearably humid. The room is stuffy and too brightly lit by overhead florescent lights in parallel rows. Open windows high up on the walls pull in cooler air from outside only to have the room warm it and weigh it down.

Dana looks up to find Laine watching her.

Laine points to Dana's white tennis shoes and then to her own red high-top sneakers. "Maybe if we take them off," she suggests

in a whisper and a grin.

And so they do, but it doesn't help much.

Laine leaves class early.

It might have been Laine who first told Dana that the way to cut yourself was along the vein rather than across it; but Dana doesn't think so. Dana's known this fact forever and they haven't known each other long enough.

But it was Laine who told her that often times suicides begin to smoke cigarettes right before they kill themselves, sometimes even before they consciously decide to do it. She says that it is possible to trace the last movements of a suicide by tracking a trail of cigarette butts, the place of death marked by a pile of butts and ashes.

Laine, who smokes all the time, says people should begin to worry when she stops smoking.

It is Valentine's Day and the assignment is a writing exercise, a free association with the word red. Dana thinks, not roses, not hearts, not clowns. She looks down and sees Laine's shoes. Red. Red fingernail polish on short, bitten-down nails, a red pro-choice button, a Laurie Anderson t-shirt. And so from shoes to nails to lipstick to blood to. Stop.

She can't read it aloud, can't turn in the assignment at all.

It is late. She needs to be at work in five minutes and it will take twenty minutes to get there from here. She is standing in the stairwell between classes talking with Laine. Talking with Laine about what. Sometimes, even during their conversations, she is not sure what they are talking about. And she is deathly afraid to admit that she does not know a great deal of what she is sure that Laine thinks she knows.

Later, on her way to work, Dana listens back and hears Laine put into words things Dana was only partially thought, considered in unorganized bits and pieces. She thinks she does not know but they are really Dana's own thoughts all along.

They're walking that telephone wire.

It is hot and stifling in her room tonight. Her window is open as far as possible. Blankets and sheets from the bed mound on the

floor. Her body twists against her clothing.

It is all so real. The face is blue and swollen and so very still. She sees it first, before anyone else. She is inside a small dark room and thinks that it must be light outside.

Dana jerks awake, sweating and chilled, drenched cloth sticking to her cold skin. Three o'clock in the morning. She fights not to dial Laine's number.

It's only a dream. Remember.

The next day she sees Laine and she's still smoking.

Dana thinks, powerlessness is not when your own life is beyond your control; it's when you can't save someone else.

Laine pulls a thick manuscript from her backpack, white pages bound between two blue covers.

"Here," she says. "This is the final project for my screenwriting class. I want you to read it. I want to see what you think."

Me? "Sure, I'd love to." Doesn't she know I still don't know?

"Call me after finals and we'll get together for coffee, okay?"

"Yeah." Haven't they done that before, coffee or something? Seems like there must have been something; but, no, there is only this.

At first, Dana is too eager to read the script. She keeps it close by the side of her bed, waits for the perfect time to give it her undivided attention, the pages and Laine.

They see each other a couple of weeks later at a reading where their poetry professor is performing. They talk for a moment in passing, other people to attend to. They discuss how their teacher has remained remarkable but has somehow lost her immortality over the last month. Perspective (either way) is gained by distance.

Dana apologizes for not having called. Laine understands. They say goodbye and promise.

Dana knows that it will be a year later and much too late. Laine will have probably moved (Dana already has). Laine will probably not remember giving Dana the script. Probably won't remember. Probably won't.

Dana will have misplaced the manuscript anyway.