

Jill Talbot
*I Imagine My Daughter Remembering Me at
Sundown*

She went looking for him. Said the brooding rock face at sundown brought him back. Every night.

Just as the horizon caught fire, she'd walk across the empty dirt yard in her gray t-shirt and those cream cords she wore and climb into the truck he left behind. I'd stand at the window, hear the truck door whine shut. Then I'd watch her toss her arm across the scratch of the seat and throw it in reverse. Edge out to the road. Idle for a minute, as if daring herself not to go.

I'd shift to the screen door, sharpen my grip on the frame as if my hold had any hold on her when she got that way. Tires would fight gravel. And as that truck faded into the orange-shadowed dust, I could feel the grit between my teeth.

Whether she was here or there, she was always there. She never took me with her, but I knew enough to know where she was headed and why. The problem was, she couldn't begin to tell herself.

He'd be there in a flannel shirt, in that wooden bar, in the shadows. I never met him, not even a picture. But this is how I saw him. The shoulders of a man who never turned around. "Please Come to Boston" on the jukebox.

When she sat on the couch, the distance inside her felt like the train that rattled behind our house. She'd look right at me, and I could see it. The traveling. She had a flat highway inside her, a sign that told her she was 381 miles from some no-account town. And I knew the minute she passed the limits she'd be lost again. It did no good to call her name or wave across the yawn of her far-offness.

Maybe she didn't want to find the town.

Maybe she didn't even want to find him.

Maybe all she wanted was caught between where she was and where she'd been with him.

I'm telling you, she drove that unpaved road so many times she carved ruts. She'd mumble to herself, *I just need to get to sundown*. As if it were a town. Maybe it was. The way she said it.

Some nights, hours past my bedtime, I'd fall asleep on the couch beside her, knowing the moment I closed my eyes she'd open the door as if this would be the night he'd be standing on the sidewalk. Maybe she didn't do this. Maybe I just dreamed him there.

Years later, she explained the long drives to me, the crossing hours, the jukebox in the bar of that mountain town. She told me about his shadow across a river, and I swear—it wasn't that I could see it but that I could remember it. There's a difference.

She once drove that truck all the way to some New Mexico road and pulled over at a gas station to wonder why the pay phone she once called him from had been ripped out, holes where there had once been bolts rusted dark. Wind in the distance.

Long before I came along, he took her to some used bookstore in a desert town. Glare of mid-July, a fan humming in every room. When I hold the book she bought there, my hands sweat.

She knew she'd taken a wrong turn. The way she'd stand in the middle of the living room as if confused on the curb of some corner—her directions smeared by the rain. Street lights no more than gauze.

She liked drought.

She liked deluge.

October was her saddest month.

She'd sing songs I could tell had been playing in a room they shared on a night of frozen roads, just a snow-ring of a moon. When she'd get to that line in "Please Come To Boston," her voice would tremble like thundersnow. Then she'd sigh, run water over the breakfast plates and stare into sink as if she'd seen a photograph she didn't mean to find.

I found her on the front porch one morning. She'd been daring the frail of a rope bridge all night—trying to ignore the rock-bed river inside her. While she slept, I found the truck keys in a pile of red-brown leaves. She'd thrown them there sometime in her night. I'd seen her do it before. Maybe it was the only way she could lock out her longing.

Let me explain. My mother was always gone, but she never went anywhere. Or maybe she never went anywhere without him. Her missing him was like an oversized map spread out across the floor.

We never had a truck.

She never drove off.

She sat in the living room. Every night. Opened a bottle of wine as the sun went down. And then she'd trade one glass for another until bottles rolled across linoleum.

I'm telling you how she struggled to stay in the room. And when she couldn't, she'd tip back the apple-gold. Walk across the yard of her emptiness and turn the key.



Jill Talbot's *The Way We Weren't: A Memoir* is now out from Soft Skull Press. Her work has appeared in *Brevity*, *DIAGRAM*, *Ecotone*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *The Normal School*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *Passages North*, *The Rumpus*, and more.