**There Aren’t Any Sunsets in Ohio**

They cook dinner a little earlier nowadays, towards the end of the afternoon. It used to be that Max and Ellie would sit on the patio sipping wine, watching their daughter Cindy play with the girl next door. They would wait there until the colors of the sun began to deepen and bleed across the sky. Once the warm air of the afternoon had thickened into evening, and drowsy fireflies had begun to flicker by the woodshed, then it would be time to eat. Mike would fire up the grill, Ellie would set the table and call Cindy in from play. The smell of cooked meat would mix and mingle with the scent of freshly cut Ohio grass, and Cindy would want to play for five more minutes, and Ellie would carry her make her wash her hands. They ate outside, and then Cindy would run off to play again. Max and Ellie would each have a little more wine and watch as the sun dipped behind the steeple of the old protestant church, and then the horizon.

Now Max makes the table while the meat is on the grill, and it comes off a little bit too black in the middle. He doesn’t need to call Cindy back inside, she’s upstairs in her room. The girl next door asks Cindy why she doesn’t come out and play anymore, and Cindy says that she doesn’t have the time, that she has to finish her homework before dinner. Cindy’s grades have been going down in school. Her teachers tell Max that they understand, really, that eventually she’ll go back to the way she was before. They tell him to be patient. Max smiles with the corners of his mouth and says thank you. I’ll try.

While the meat – chicken, tonight –cools on the plates next to a few pieces of uncooked broccoli and some rice, Max walks over to the stairs. He looks up at Cindy’s closed door. “Cindy! Time for dinner!” Then he turns around and walks back to the table, sits down and opens a beer. A few minutes late Cindy slips down the stairs and into her seat. They eat quickly, quietly. Neither of them say anything about the singed chicken. Max takes frequent glances at the sun, checking his watch in between. School was good today. Did you finish your homework? Yes. Good. That’s good. Max peeks up at the sun again. It looks a little lower than it should. Hurry up Cindy, we don’t want to miss it. Okay dad.

They don’t say much else as they finish dinner. Cindy keeps her eyes down on her food. Her braid dips down, hovers a few inches above her plate. She eats precisely, carefully, wasting no time between bites. Max is sloppier, the scrape of his knife across his plate mingles audibly with the crickets in the yard. He finishes first, and begins to clear the table. Cindy is done quickly after, Max grabs her plate and carries it to the sink. He leaves the dishes in a crooked pile to be done later. In the hallway, Max helps Cindy put on her coat and boots. It isn’t cold yet, but it will be before they get back. Out at the truck, Max moves to give Cindy a hand up into the front seat but she hops up on her own, wordlessly. A few minutes later they’re on I-71 headed south.

When the sunsets first disappeared, almost a year before, the highways were packed every day in both directions around now. Lots of people went south, like Max and Cindy did, but even more went north. They were two different camps, passing each other at sixty miles per hour. The south-bound drivers were called quitters, but they thought of themselves as realists. Pessimism and pragmatism often swim in the same conversations. Those headed north were the optimists, the hopeful searchers. They bustled off into the woods, into the cornfields, into a new direction every day. The sunsets are still out there somewhere, they thought. I’ll find one. If I just keep looking, I’ll find one.

Hope is a powerful motivator, but it is also fickle. The problem with hope is that it feeds off of negativity. It is resilient in its defiance, strong in the face of an adversary. When hope surrounds itself with more hope it becomes impatient. Who is there to prove wrong? Nobody. Who is there to point a finger at, aside from ourselves. Hope is strongest when it is shouted into the cacophony, swallowed by the shouts of the others. When hope is met with silence instead of fire, it echoes. Our own words come back to us, but we don’t recognize them. We say, who made that sound, that angry, hateful sound? Was it me?

Eventually the tide of the highway began to turn. More cars left the hills and the valleys and started going south to Kentucky. There is something that is much easier in this action, the acceptance. There is no expectation in south, except that which is certain to be fulfilled. They grumbled as they turned their cars south and crossed the bridge. It isn’t our sunset, they said. Max never understood this idea. He wanted to say to them, who told you it was your sunset? If it was your sunset, then it would still be here. This is exactly the problem. This is why they left us. Because we had the audacity to think that they couldn’t.

So they muttered angrily, about fairness, and faith, and other ideas that people made up so that the world would look the way that they wanted it to. They muttered, and they drove south. Back then more people were coming into Ohio than leaving it. People refused to believe the news, wanted to see it for themselves. They came from all over the world to see the state without a sunset. Every last one of them left soon after, confused and unsatisfied. They would get back on their planes and fly away, muttering to each other, It’s unsettling, isn’t it. It’s just queer. None of them could place their finger on it, name the hand that poked them, hard, in the soft space at the bottom of their skulls. They couldn’t stand another day that didn’t end with a laconic, luxurious stretch into night.

Curiosity faded quickly for those interested souls. Then, the most normal, most probable thing of all happened. Everyone just got used to it. It took some time, sure, after all people decide to give up at their own rates. Eventually though, after some months had passed, acceptance became the easiest choice. Soon, most people didn’t bother to go outside at all. No more was required than a cursory glance out the window, a pessimistic gaze into the sky, and then a shake of the head. Another day, they would say, another night.

It became a stale topic at the water cooler. Nothing new was to be said about it. The sunsets were gone, and if they were coming back, well, it wasn’t on account of us.

There aren’t many people on the roads now. Max lets the car sit in the middle lane of the highway, fast enough to pass the speed-limit drivers, but not fast enough to make Cindy feel unsafe. Cindy isn’t watching the road anyways. Her eyes are fixed out the window up at the sun. She figures if she keeps it in her sight the whole time then it can’t disappear. Eventually this tactic always fails. The sun is too bright for her to keep looking at, even in the corner of her eye. At some point her eyes begin to water, and she’ll blink and rub them and when she looks again it will be gone.

The radio plays a country song that Max knows and he hums a little without meaning to. Music has always had a way of sneaking up on him like that. Even when he doesn’t want to enjoy it, when he wants to feel sad or brooding, he finds himself humming along or tapping his fingers. It bothers Max that he can’t control this impulse. It makes him feel that his emotions are cheap, easily persuaded. It’s a little battle that he is constantly losing.

The skyline of Cincinnati proper eventually pops up over the horizon. The buildings still glint and gleam in the light of the afternoon sun, but that won’t last much longer. Max knows he has only a few minutes before the sunset starts. He shifts into the left lane, pushes the accelerator down and tightens his grip on the steering wheel. After a few weaving turns they’re headed onto the bridge over the Ohio river and into Kentucky.

That’s where it happens, at the foot of the bridge. Max doesn’t notice on his own, his eyes are fixed on the road. He only knows that the sun had gone because suddenly Cindy is gripping his arm with a trembling, ferocious strength. She doesn’t make any noises, or cry the way that she used to. The silence is almost worse for Max. It implies a more mysterious pain. He feels helpless in front of it. He drives faster.

After ten tense, long second the little hand on his arm relaxes. Max hears Cindy begin to breathe again, shuddering slightly. He wipes a little sweat from his brow, looks over at her and smiles. She’s still looking out the window, but peacefully now. This is Max’s favorite part of the day. For a just a little while, when she doesn’t think he’s watching her, Cindy looks the way she did before. Happier. Max waits to take a look at the sunset himself, keeps his eyes on the road instead. It’s better if you wait for it, let it hit you all at once.

They stop just past the river at one of the old lookouts. The old man selling tickets to the lot is listening to the Reds play on the radio. He barely looks at Max during the exchange, just glances quickly at his money and then buzzes them through. There’s only a smattering of other cars in the lot today. Most of the families and older folks don’t bother to make the drive down any more. These days the lot is mainly populated by teenagers looking for a convenient excuse to make out with each other. Many of the other cars in the lot are empty, people park here for the low price and then walk down to the levee. Max finds some space near the guardrail.

Now, finally, Max allows himself to raise his eyes up to the sky. Cindy reclines her seat a little. They don’t say anything, just watch the colors drift across the horizon.

Eventually Max reaches back for Cindy’s backpack.

“Do you want to draw this one?”

Cindy nods. She flips through hundreds of sunsets until she gets to a clean white page. Max closes his eyes and listens to the sound of Cindy’s pencil moving across the page. When he’s here in front of the sunset all of his urgency vanishes. He isn’t worried about when the sunset will fade. The time stretches out for as long as he wants now.

“When do you think they’ll come back, dad?”

Max opens his eyes and turns towards Cindy. She’s looking back up at him now, her mouth a taut, thin line. The pencil quivers slightly as it hovers above the unfinished page.

He answers slowly, “I don’t know, Cindy. There are a lot of really smart people working on it though, they’ll figure it out.”

It isn’t the answer she wants. She already knows this, they’ve talked about them before, the teams scouring the corners of the state, the scientists locked in clean white rooms discussing the impossible phenomenon. Cindy’s young enough to believe that her dad can still perform miracles. She still hopes that he might reach into his pocket, pull out a sunset and say, I have one right here, Cindy. All you had to do was ask.

“They are coming back though, right?”

She almost keeps her voice from shaking. Only on the last word does the faintest tremble break through. Max rubs his eyes with hands that fell suddenly too heavy for his arms. The word yes sticks in his throat. Instead he just gathers her into his arms and holds her there, saying nothing. Her little hands clutch him back and Max wonders who is holding on tighter.

The sunset is almost over by the time they let go. Cindy wipes her eyes and finishes her drawing, ignoring the little wet spots on the paper. The light is just barely clinging to the tops of the trees by the time that Cindy’s drawing is finished. She hesitates as she puts the sketchbook and colored pencils back into the bag.

“Dad, I want to show you something, but you have to promise not to be mad.”

The bag sits open in front of her seat. Cindy chews gently on the tip of her thumb, then reaches in and pulls out a small mason jar. Littered around the bottom rim of the jar are almost thirty lifeless fireflies. She holds it to her chest with both hands, and the words tumble out of her one over another.

“I was going to show you! Really, I was, I just… I didn’t know that they would die. I was going to show you when the jar was full, and I didn’t think about what lightning bugs eat, and then this morning they weren’t moving anymore. I don’t know what to do…”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Max says reaching out his hands, “here, let me see them.”

Cindy shoves the jar into his hands, happy to pass the problem on. Max opens it and looks inside. None of the lightning bugs move, they clearly suffocated a while ago.

“Cindy,” Max says, screwing the lid back in place, “what were you planning on doing with these?”

Cindy swallows and tugs on the end of her braid, pulls the hairs at the tip apart and pushes them back together again.

“I just thought that if I had enough of them, then I could put them all together and they would be bright enough, and–”

Cindy can’t finish what she’s trying to say, she chokes on the last few words. Max strokes the top of her head and makes shh noises, and says It’s alright, I understand. Don’t worry about a thing, I’ll take care of it.

They wait until dark to cross back over the river into Ohio. Max puts the jar into the cup-holder on his side of the door, and takes it inside with him when they get home. He tucks Cindy into bed, kisses her on the brow and walks back out to the patio. The paint on the woodshed is peeling. He makes a mental note to touch it up, then pulls out the jar. The lightning bugs rattle around the bottom, still. Max unscrews the lid and walks out into the small garden in the corner of the yard. Ellie had liked to grow her own tomatoes here, and Max had tried to keep the plants alive but he didn’t have the touch for it. Now the stalks were withered and bare, wilting from the top down back into the ground they came out of. Max scoops aside some dirt and makes a shallow hole in the ground then shakes the lightning bugs into it. He slides the dirt back on top of them, pats it down and walks away.

Inside, Max thinks about having a glass of whiskey before bed. It helps, usually. He rests his fingers on the knob, imagines the sound of the ice cracking as the liquor pours over it. Not tonight. His fingers slip from the knob, he turns and walks up the stairs past Cindy’s room to his bed. He’s still carrying the jar with him. He takes it over to his desk, opens up the bottom drawer with the key that he keeps on a chain around his neck. He scoots aside some old photographs, a diamond ring and a paper plane and slides the jar in next to them.

After he locks the drawer and puts the key back around his neck, he stares out of his window for a while. The moon stares back at him balefully. Max closes his eyes and breathes deeply for a while, letting in all of the stillness. After some time passes he gets undressed, and gets under the covers. He goes to sleep slowly, thinking about how tomorrow will be so much like today.