

Bright Lights

My youth was a pretty little time. Filled with light, laughter and Leon. I grew up in the countryside of Michigan, daughter of a farmer, and was educated in St Babel's school for 'only good girls'. This was, of course, according to my father, who began to remind me of this fact on a daily basis after my tenth punishment for unexplained absenteeism. More like my tenth punishment for an inability to draw myself away from a fifteen-year-old boy. He was beautiful, was Leon. Above all, the endless appeal lay in his eyes, which promised me every hope for the future. They were eyes that drew me up to his alert little nose and pert mouth, and that whispered of all the other girls who dreamt of loving him but never could.

The years when Leon and I were swift, yet so intense and vivid that each scent and taste catches at the back of my throat as if it were yesterday. The apples of my father's orchard that fell at the end of a hot, lazy summer; cool as we bit into them knowing they prefigured the crisp winter ahead. The hay we could collect and jump in together, which would tickle Leon's nose and force an immense sneeze, throwing up a puff of sawdust that settled down on his ruffled hair. The endless fields, which seemed to stretch in every direction — to me, they represented a vast expanse of timeless freedom, but to Leon, each direction represented another world, and each a world without me.

'The chickens in for the night?' Father's token question — not a night without it even though I've *never* forgotten to put the squawking little puff balls away in their huts. It's possibly his effort to convince himself he is still very much in touch with his nineteen year old daughter. He sits down beside me and tells me how nice it is to see me properly — how nice it is for me to choose an evening in for a change. I remind him how I always come home for tea, and how I always come back in time to put the chickens away, but he simply nods in his absent manner, with a faraway smile on his lips.

He's been like this ever since Mother died, over eleven years ago. To me her sun-kissed face is now faded, but to him it lives on, ever flickering in the back of his weary mind. There is a knock at the door which wakes me from my thoughts and Leon enters, his dark hair gleaming and dishevelled. Yet in his bright eyes there is something that makes me stall, and search his familiar face for hints or clues. He detaches himself from my gaze and turns to my father; 'Evening, Mister Turner'.

Father nods his old head gracefully and stands up from the table to leave the room. Usually I would have insisted on his staying, but something in Leon's demeanour is making me feel uneasy, and eager to talk to him alone. As soon as father closes the door I move to Leon and he steps away from me muttering something. When he opens his mouth again it is to tell me things that I already know; his age, where in the countryside he lives, what his relatives work as... I stop his increasingly incoherent speech by grabbing his shaking hands and putting my finger on his quivering lips.

He takes a breath and tells me he is going to Chicago. He tells me he is moving to Chicago to work there and that he loves me and that he knows I can't come because of

my father but that he needs to go. He tells me not to try and stop him because I won't be able to and that he will write to me and that when he makes enough money Father and I can go and join him and we'll be together again.
All I can feel is my head nodding.

When at last the numbness subsides, late into the night, I am left with an acute bitterness which bites into my very being, and a feeling of betrayal which painfully crushes my senses. I want that city to take him in, to take him in and envelop him with the security of its streets and the pulse of its people. I want it to dazzle him with the lights of its buzzing bars and clubs and theatres. I want it to make him feel loved by the preened parks and neat gardens. Then, I want that city to spit him out, to punish him, to break his choking ambitions and lead him crawling back to me. Lead him back to the place where my arms will always be open and ready to envelope him, love him. Lead him back to the place where he knows he cannot be spat out or punished — and where there are no ambitions to be broken. Only then will I truly have Leon for myself.

Leon left at the end of that scorching summer as soon as the winds started to blow — they blew so hard that two of the apple trees were uprooted and thirty of the hay bales disappeared, as though they had melted back into the endless fields. The inability to be without Leon, for which I had been punished as a neat little school girl, seemed to stay with me, and I was to be continually punished for that weakness. Although at first he wrote all the time, the flow of his letters gradually thinned and soon I found myself completely alone — and overwhelmingly betrayed. Do not be fooled into thinking time heals the pain of being second choice. It does not. And as time goes on I wonder how many pretty girls that city offered my boy, and whether they ever saw that same light in his eyes that I still see.

Or perhaps they only use the bright lights of the city to see.