

Destinations By Josh Kim

"So, what's your name?"

"Steven," I said.

"Steven what?"

"Steven Stevenson."

"Bullshit."

"I'm serious."

"Fuck you, man. You expect me to believe that?" I pull out my driver's license. His reaction was not uncommon.

"No fucking way. So where are you headed, Steven?"

"Friend's party on the southside."

"Us too, maybe we'll see you around."

"Yeah, maybe." I get off the bus and head north. Yes, there is a party, and yes, my friend is throwing it, but something about the night has struck me, and it tells me to walk north.

I make my way toward wherever it is I'm going, wondering why I just took a forty-minute bus ride in to the city, only to runaway from the reason I came. A cool, fall breeze blows and a light mist washes over my skin; it's raining, but barely. I walk the people filled streets. Everyone seems to be heading the opposite direction. Maybe I should go to this party after all. No, it's not even an important one, like a birthday - just a drunken orgy of drumbeats override with bass and sweaty bodies, huddled against each other like cows in their slaughter pens. I'm not missing much, and it's not like my friends will remember if I was there or not anyway.

The rain is falling a little harder now. It's not quite enough to require an umbrella, but it certainly makes me want one. I'm far enough away from the center of the city to notice a significant decline in the volume of people. I like the way the sheen of wetness makes the black asphalt of the road shine; it's almost like a river: deep, mysterious, tantalizing, tempting me to test its depths. I dip my left foot in the street. Still pavement. But for a moment, I believed. I suddenly feel the urge to cross to the other side of the deserted road, now armed with the knowledge that the street won't sweep me away. No cars are coming from either direction, but I go over to the crosswalk and wait for the bright, red hand to change anyway.

On my way across the street, I splash in a little puddle that's collected and pretend I'm a duckling. What would it be like to be a duck? Would a duck have gone to the party? Probably not. But that would be a riot, wouldn't it? If I were a duck, and had I gone to the party, I probably would've been the talk of the night. But I'm not, and I didn't, so here I am. I reach the curb and light a cigarette: a Marlboro red. Two left. I should buy more. I hope there's a liquor store around here somewhere.

It's been a while since I've seen another person. It's lonely out here. My hand makes its way inside my pocket and caresses my phone, ever so gently. Maybe I should call and tell them I'm going to be late. No, I don't want to lie. And if I say I'm going to be late, I'll have to turn around and go. Maybe I should call and tell them I'm not coming. No, then they'll try to convince me. But I really should tell them. I take out my phone and dial the number, leaving fingerprints on the greasy touchpad

display. The phone rings five times and then goes to voicemail. That was much easier than I thought I was going to be. It's still a little lonely out here, but I like the solitude. In this vast, dark metropolis, with only the electric glow of neon signs and barely luminescent street lamps lighting my way, I feel all-powerful; I might as well own the city. I turn the corner and hope to see a liquor store, or a 7/11, or anywhere that would sell me a pack of cigarettes. No dice. All there is an old-timey diner. A milkshake will have to do.

A homely girl named Pam seats me. She's probably 19, but looks like a 29 year old in bad shape. She's had at least a few kids and an abusive boyfriend or two. Her lipstick is bright carmine and doesn't match anything she's wearing. She seems tired, but she's sweet; her demeanor is cheerful. She goes back to fetch me the complimentary water and silverware. The place is exactly what you'd expect a diner to be: a little dirty; frightening, bearded men in the corner booths wearing trucker hats and drinking coffee; once white walls now marred with all manner of crayon, egg, and God knows what else. Pam sets my water down on the table and slides napkin-wrapped utensils toward me.

"What can I get you?" she asks. I should be staring at the menu, but I can't look at anything other than the bags under her eyes.

"What kind of milkshakes you got?" I finally ask.

"They're all on the back of the menu." I flip the menu. The list is staggering; the sheer number of options that lay before me take up the entire back side. How the fuck do you make a pistachio milkshake?

"Why don't I give you a few minutes to decide?" says Pam, sensing my indecisiveness. I must've been making a face.

"Sure. That'd be great. Thanks." She leaves as I stare at the battered old tri-fold menu with the scratched, grimy plastic protecting its precious contents. I take a sip of my water; it tastes like a vitamin. I prefer the rain. I push the glass to the other side of the table, and a little bit of water sloshes up over the rim. Oh well, that's what napkins are for, I guess. I give up on the milkshakes for a moment and instead check out the food. It's standard diner fare: eggs, omelets, pancakes, corn beef hash. I'm not impressed. I go back to the milkshake page. Fuck, Pam's coming back and I still don't know what I want.

"Is the root beer milkshake like a root beer float?" I ask.

"No, it's a milkshake that tastes just like root beer."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"Is it fizzy?"

"No. It's a milkshake."

"If it's not fizzy, then it can't taste like root beer."

"Well, it does. I don't know how they do it." She's getting annoyed with me, I think.

"I'll have the pumpkin milkshake."

"We're out of pumpkin."

Dammit. I ask for the pecan pie one instead.

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Just the milkshake."

"Alright. It'll be just a few minutes." She walks off with my order and I see her hand it to the cook. I don't like pecan pie, but I'm curious how this is going to work. I pull another red out of my pocket and light up. I don't see a no-smoking sign anywhere, but I suck it down fast, just in case I've neglected one somewhere and Pam has to come make me put it out. I check my phone to make sure I haven't missed any calls. Nope. Nothing. I wonder how the party's going. I wonder if that guy from the bus and his friends really were going to the same place. I wonder anyone notices I'm not there. A bit of graffiti on the wall catches my eye. *You're all a bunch of sheep.* Someone else has drawn a giant penis around the quote in blue ink that looks like someone tried to wash it away, half-heartedly. As I ponder the erect member and the wisdom it envelops, Pam brings me my milkshake.

"Enjoy."

"Thanks." I take a sip. It tastes just like pecan pie. Jesus, how in the world do they do that? The taste of the tobacco lingers on my tongue and in between my teeth, on my gums. It mingles with the sticky sweetness and caramelized crunch of the mysterious dairy treat. God, I hate pecan pie. I finish half my drink and ask for the check. The total comes to \$3.29. I set a ten on the table and leave. I feel bad for Pam, for her life that I'd imagined for her, but also for giving her such a hard time about the root beer.

It's pouring now. I run around the still empty streets, looking for a bus shelter. I'm tired and I want to go home. No luck, no matter what street I turn down. I go left; I go right; I have no idea where I am. The only thing I see are streetlights are buildings with dark interiors. I turn left at the next corner and run down a few more blocks. A neon glow two streets to my right catches my eye, and I follow it. Goddammit, I'm back at the diner. How did that happen? I enter the place, soaking wet. Pam greets me at the door. I hope she doesn't say anything about the tip.

"Where would the nearest bus stop be?" I ask.

"Walk two blocks straight ahead, take a right, and then keep going for another three blocks or so."

"Thanks." I start to leave, but she stops me.

"You forgot your change." Why would she do that? Is it not obvious that I was doing her a kindness? Desperate people aren't supposed to be this honest.

"Thanks," I echo myself, and take the change. She goes back behind the counter and busies herself with whatever it is waitresses do behind counters. I leave two dollars on the nearest table and run. She should've take my tip the first time.

The bus stop is just where Pam said it would be. And wouldn't you know it, it's right in front of a convenience store. I want to go in to buy another pack, but the route map on the outside of the shelter says my bus will be coming any minute.

"STEVEN STEVENSON!" I hear in the distance. It's the same assholes from the bus. I can't believe my luck, whether good or bad. They come up to me and wait in the shelter. "HOW WAS THAT PARTY, MAN? KILLER, WASN'T IT?" I can smell his last drink on his breath.

"Yeah, crazy shit." I take the last cigarette out of my pocket and light it.

"Lots of fine ladies, eh?"

"I hadn't noticed."

“Pssh, what, you blind or something?”

“Yeah, that must be it.” He laughs. “You’re funny, you know that?” I was unaware. I give him a nod and a fake smile as my bus pulls up.

“Hey man, you’re completely soaked.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“There you go again, being funny.” This is bad luck after all. The bus pulls up to the stop, and I’m surprised I’m the only one boarding. He motions to say goodbye, but it’s too late, I’m on the bus, the doors have closed, and I’m paying my fare.

“Good evening,” the bus driver greets me. The words strike my ear funny; I can’t decide if what she’s said is true or not. As the diesel-fueled behemoth carries me off into the night, I can’t help but think maybe I should’ve gone to the party after all.