

Magnetic Fields

The morning siren is deafening. At his workstation, Michael pushes in earplugs. He flexes his hands into a fist to fit in his new double thick leather gloves. He looks across the room for Cary. There he is, face stoic and focused on the machine in front of him. Cary's serious.

Reaching down, Michael grabs the first round bent oily aluminum tube from the sixty on the rolling rack to his right. It has an open end. He places the round tube with an open end in a slot in the center of the machine in front of him. As he steps on a foot pedal, air hisses releasing a top section that slams down locking the tube's open ends together at the seam. Michael hits the second peddle. Sparks fly around the joint. He steps off the pedal, more hissing air. He pulls the metal tube out. It's sealed—the hot singed bluish seam reeking of sulfur. Michael tosses it his right to cool and be counted. He is to seal one tube a minute. Sixty per hour. He has seven hours and fifty-nine minutes to go. That's four hundred and eighty a day. Each tube will become a part of something bigger, a chair or a stool sold all over the world. That's it, that's the job, banal—endless.

Over to Michael's right, a man approaches waving.

"You better be careful, kid" the man yells, grinning, nodding towards the machine. He thrusts the bare palm of his hand forward, three fingers wag.

"I lost this one—right there," he says.

He pushes on the stump of his gone middle finger. Michael stares. The man puts his hands down, turns abruptly, and strides off into the warehouse. Other men stare at them both then go back to their jobs here in National Metalworks.

The factory is in a vast warehouse in a dank industrial area in west Aurora, Illinois—the last stop on the local rail line that runs west out of Chicago. It's a grey crummy city with an old stony downtown cut in half by the Fox River one way and scarred by rail lines the other. No one famous comes from here. Even the city's prohibition era gangsters were all second rate.

When Michael and his friend Cary got off the bus this morning on their way to their new job, the clouds were foggy low and heavy. Overhead thick buzzing electronic cable loped across the city on towers high above like monster aliens. The sounds made Michael's brain hurt.

The two crossed through a wide park on the way into the factory. Walked by old picnic tables scarred with splintering profanity. The ground crunchy with early fall frost. Mounds of yellow and deep carmine-colored leaves shivered in the breeze. A legion of sparrows rushed from the ground to complain from the branches of an oak. Michael noticed skittering large ants on a mass of leafy decay, dismembering the remains of a jelly donut, oozing red. Michael stood still. He knelled mesmerized. His Uncle Patrick had told him survival meant to pay close attention to the smallest of animals. That was long ago, high up in the mountains of western Colorado where his uncle lived, and Michael went for summers. Back when things seemed possible.

Michael looked up—Cary was far ahead. Cary didn't want to be late. Michael ran. He didn't want to go to work here. He didn't want to go anywhere but couldn't admit it, not even to himself.

Michael and Cary applied to National Metalworks just last week. They had been working somedays at Manpower, where the winos and junkies get work for a day. Manpower doesn't ask questions and pays in cash—less than minimum wage of course. Cary wants to make real money now, regular. He is tired of bad temp jobs, idiot friends, the bad drugs everywhere now, street life. They need to pay the rent, buy food. Cary has hope.

They share a second-floor apartment in a rickety old house on a bad block of Bonner Avenue. These days they lay low, avoiding trouble. They stay home, get high and talk all night playing music up in the attic. Cary reads a lot of books, science fiction. He has a room full, most from the library. Not Michael. He likes comics. The Silver Surfer is his favorite—a loner, all shiny flying forever through space serving Galactis to save his home from consumption. The Silver Surfer never falls in love.

When they applied last week, both were hired on the spot.

“When can you start? Can you come in Monday?” said the short man in the HR office, puffing on endless Pall Malls, ash falling across his houndstooth coat. There were family pictures all over his paper-cluttered desk, kids galore and a big silver haired busty wife. There was a pot of fake flowers on the floor, climbing the wall, some leaves melted away by proximity to a noisy heater. The place reeks of pine sol.

“OK. Yeah, sure,” Cary said quick. The HR guy rubbed his fat hands together, lifted his small glasses off his nose.

“You got potential,” HR guy said nodding.

“What does that mean,” Cary said, snapping back, a hold over from battles with teachers.

“Hell, you’re young, strong. You seem, well, clear headed,” the HR guy said.

Cary and Michael looked at each other. Michael put his arms up, like a circus strongman and stared into the man’s eyes.

“Fill out these forms. W2s for taxes. You get insurance after two months. Overtime after eight hours, from the get-go. Half hour lunch, two breaks. This is a good place. Work hard, we treat you right. As good as any union place.”

“Riiiiight,” Michael said. He felt like he was in a movie, a sad one with bleeding technicolor. He put his hand by his face and chewed on the cuff of his jean jacket, just for a moment. It felt good, he breathed in the wet smell. He hoped no one noticed. He used to get whacked in the back of the head for doing stuff like that.

Other factories in town—the big ones are all union. Those are the coveted jobs. You need to know somebody. Need a referral from a family member already in just to get an interview. It’s like the Mafia. National Metalworks is the place for beginners and enders, idiot no-connect young guys like Michael and Cary, malcontents and old derelicts fired from everywhere else. It is hard to get fired when you’re union in this town.

Michael sometimes thinks maybe he is meant for other things, like surfing in California He has never been there, but the songs on the radio makes it sound nice. Or maybe working with dolphins at SeaWorld in Florida. He hasn’t been there either but read an article about it. Anything to do with water would be great. This landlocked town is littered with folks who think they can do better somewhere else. Go to any small corner bar on the weekend and you will hear the stories on repeat, backed up by the same greatest hits stuck in every jukebox in town.

The hopeful suburbs of Michael and Cary’s freshly middle-class parents didn’t fit them right. The local school boards and cops made them the new enemies. Michael left home at 16 and came to this city four years ago to escape the trouble. His father

gave him twenty bucks and told to call home again, when he quite looking like a girl. It was the 1969, when the Summer of Love hit the Midwest, two years late. The parks were full of fresh-faced teenagers, mimicking what they heard in the music saw in the films. Dope and parties everywhere. That first year was good. You could crash anywhere, people got along. Then it went bad. Michael accidently had two kids— fast. He is twenty now.

His ex, Dina, is his height, with boney hips and thick black hair to her waist. Silver bracelets rattle up and down her thin wrists. A black bead necklace with multiple crosses hangs from her neck. She sews all her own clothes, fixes up her tight worn-out dark jeans just right, the flares studded with rhinestones. She's an artist, makes all kinds of jewelry created from boxes of cast-off trinkets and collected gems. She bends wires into shapes layered together with small plyers. Dina finds stuff everywhere. She's a magpie magician. She sells the stuff to people she knows and some small shops in town carry it too. She named her line *Proud Mary*. Mary is her great grandmother's name. Mary raised Dina and her sister after the girl's mother died when Dina was ten. Alcohol people say. Mary never talks about it. Dina never talks about it. Dina never talks about much. She doesn't have to. Her glittery tie-dye crop tops are everywhere, sexing up the entire town a notch in her image. Once she sold one to singer Minnie Riperton after a concert she went to, some earrings too.

Michael met Dina at Wagner's, a dank local music club downtown a block up from the Fox river. That night local boys were playing on a rickety small stage. Dina was quiet, hardly a word— just listened to Michael's yammer. Watched close. Her eyes are the blue green of Lake Michigan near the Chicago shore in summer. Her brother-in law Gary says Dina put a spell on Michael— hypnotized him.

Gary is a *real* union man. Works at Caterpillar as a specialty machinist, top quality, top dollar. He is set. Everyone says so. Gary was there that night with Dina's sister and later he drove them all around in his tricked-out van. Dina and Michael laid in the back of the van all night on thick red carpet, doors open with big speakers going, listening to music from Detroit, any kind. Just before the sun came up, without a word Dina rolled over onto Michael and slowly slipped her mouth onto his. Michael felt her breath enter his lungs icy and perfect. He imagines some remains.

Their first, a girl, was born soon after when Michael was just 17, Dina was 20. A plump little thing they named Indigo Moon. The second came a year later. Dina said she had a plan and Michael signed on. Dina wanted another girl. They named her Lily Ann. Michael washed dishes at an old hotel downtown to pay bills and get insurance. He did double shifts. He sometimes pumped gas at Purple Martin. Dina stayed home, doing her work, watching the kids. He was happy. He didn't know they were just *playing* house.

She left him eight months ago for a big inked-up biker named Blotter who used to claim he was Michael's new best friend. Michael came in one afternoon and found them, the kids locked in their room, a record skipping on repeat. He should have let Blotter just leave but then he said what he said. Blotter left Michael on the kitchen floor more than bloody. The cops locked Blotter up for a while but didn't keep him. No one is quite sure how he keeps getting out. Dina promised not to see him again. Michael agreed to try once more, to pretend it didn't happen. Then Blotter came back the night he was released and out she went. She came back and took the kids the next day. Michael gave up, left everything behind. He quit work and started getting black out drunk and more every night. When she handed him the papers two months later, he didn't read them, just signed. He didn't go to the divorce proceedings.

Now, he waits for a bad accident to happen on that long slick highway out of town Blotter likes to race through so fast, weaving. Michael imagines them both gone, beneath an eighteen-wheeler, the headline across the Aurora Beacon News.

Michael's not alone though. He hangs out some with Petra, an X-Ray technician at the local hospital. They met at McCartney Park. Michael sees no future for him in her strong prowl face, fierce eyes rimmed in black liner. Maybe that is why he likes being around her. She likes him just enough to hang out. His sadness is familiar to her. Petra is even taller than Dina. Way tougher too. Her face is broad, handsome. She is solid and devoutly wild. Her family came here from Belarus when she was eight. She still has an accent and is proud of it. Everyone in her family is expected to work, take classes, do better, not complain.

Last week Petra came over with a few bottles of good wine— she knows about that kind of thing. She wore a waist length tight red leather jacket and a low-slung small print dress paired with her father's old black army boots. Michael put on The Doors *L.A*

Woman and opened a beer, that sprayed slightly into his face. In the right music, Michael can lose himself. Jim Morrison's wounded voice sounds like he might be a guy who could understand things right now. Peta stretched out on the couch, laid her head back on Michael's lap and stared up into the darkening room for a long time silent. She listened to the dark bleat of the organ and slippery lines of guitar. Michael put his hand on Petra's belly. She pushed it away. Something was brewing, inside, bubbling. She was not close to being in love with Michael, but she feels he deserves more, and needs a push.

Petra pursed her bright red lips, shut her eyes, opened them, blinked, and sat up some.

"This place is soooo f-u-c-k-i-n-g boring," she said.

He laughed.

"Boring? It's that for sure...and more. What you just notice?" he said.

"Listen to me I'm going get out for real. I am not going to end up here," she said, looking out the window past Michael. She could see her reflection and beyond that a blinking tower in the distance. She spoke to the reflected image of herself like she did at home with mirrors, imagining an older her.

"I'm going to be something, somebody."

"What?"

"A doctor," she said, resolute. She smiled. "A traveling doctor. A healer."

"Doesn't that take a long time...in school I mean?" Michael said. He wondered what it was like to be a doctor. To care enough about anyone else, to dedicate your life to it. To cut people open, then sew them up. Make so much money you can just buy a house anywhere in town, hell, anywhere. He didn't have any friends who went to college. That's not what kids do here. He did have a friend whose father was a doctor. Janie. But he was banned from her house for stealing prescriptions. All his friends were.

"I'm sick of my job. Being bossed around. My grandfather was a doctor in the war back home. A brave man. A real man. A hero. That's what it takes to really live. There are no real men here just little boys. You have no idea about the world."

"What about me?"

"Come on Michael, listen...you act like a boy. Cute maybe—some, but a boy."

“Fair enough,” he said. He knew she was right. Besides having two children what qualified him as a man?

“Also, why be poor. Boy? You can do anything. Anything. It takes work. You can’t just listen to records and drink,” she said waving her hand out into the room.

“I can’t just do anything. I am terrible at spelling and math, well unsure of that as I left school so early. Like what? I have no idea,” he said.

“Exactly, you don’t even think about it,” she said. “Everyone has choices. You could do anything, or at least try and it leads to something new and interesting. I know I can be a doctor and doctors go where they want,” she said.

“Seriously...for me what do you think? Maybe fix electronics?” he said.

“My god, no wonder she left you. Decide for yourself. Take some initiative. Think bigger. Be a man. Me, I want to live in the city. I want to own a house. I don’t want any kids. No kids. That’s how men control you. No one controls me. I take birth control pills. Did you know that? You never even asked about it. Idiot.”

“I didn’t know, no...”

She cut him off abruptly, his ignorance was tiring.

“I want to travel, to be free. Maybe go back home someday. I still have much family there,” Peta said.

“I believe in you, I do, really.” He went to push her hair back out of her face. She knocked his hand away. She looked a little stern but then smiled slightly.

“OK. OK. I don’t need you to, but fine.”

“Will you still come see me, though. At least call or write someday. You won’t forget me?” Michael said. He imagined Petra in a big house wearing a long doctor’s coat drinking from a fancy glass, cats swirling at her feet. She loves cats. He can see her surrounded by cats, and a housekeeper—maybe a cook, giving parties near a fireplace like those people on *American Family*. He is not in the picture—not at all. He knows that. It’s alright.

“Maybe,” said Petra, “If you get out somehow. If you listen. If you don’t, listen...if you don’t, you will probably be stuck here with tons more kids you can’t feed, and some old bossy cow woman who hates you. I don’t even want to know you if

you are that person.” Petra got up and pulled him out the door and down the stairs. Outside she breathed in the crisp air, spun once, and ran ahead to her car.

They drank the wine as they drove her ragged lime green Gremlin with the broken side window all the way deep into Wisconsin to her friend’s parents summer place. There they spent the night outside near a gorgeous lake surrounded by a bunch of late in the game stoned hippy twenty-somethings who irritated her. Early in the morning, near a simmering bon fire, a now bootless Petra quick lifted her dress over her head and waded slow to her waist in the ink night water pulling skinny naked Michael behind her. She turned close to him and bent her fingers around the back of his neck digging her pink fingernails in just so and quick pulled him backwards under the water. They came up sputtering entwined.

“You’re healed!” she said slapping her hand hard on his forehead.

It nears hour two at work, tick, tick, tick. Michael has completed all of the first batch of aluminum circles. One rack done, another wheeled up.

“I have the rhythm down,” he notes to himself.

The movements are set in his head. He runs the pattern of work over and over and imagines drawing simple figures of each stage for an instruction manual. He doesn’t notice the guys near him are talking, gathering, then they go back to work. All except for one.

“Hey.”

Michael doesn’t hear him. He has earplugs in, and the machine sounds like a car crashing every minute.

“HEY.” It is someone behind Michael, yelling now.

Michael jumps, pulls his hands back, drops a tube he was about to place in.

“What?”

The guy is big, burnt dark red from sun. He has a wide nose, big sideburns. His muscled agitated arms are folded beneath a steely chest, he has thick lips and slit lizard eyes beneath big dark eyebrows.

“I’m Billy, from Hungarian Hill.”

That is Dina’s old neighborhood. That’s where lots of people live who came to this town a generation ago from Eastern Europe during the Second World War. Old

churches all around, some streets are still brick. Folks from there always tell you where they are from. They don't leave the neighborhood much and they all know who's who.

"You a friend of Blotter's?" Michael asks expecting the worst. Maybe payback of some sort. He has been talking shit about Blotter. He looks around fast. No one, not even the boss is looking at them.

"Who? Fuck no. I don't know who that is. Just...sloooow it down, or else," Billy says.

"What?" Michael says, confused.

"Slow the fuck down, motherfucker. You are working too fast man. It makes it bad for everybody."

"I have a quota," Michael says with a casual kid shrug.

Michael looks over towards Cary, to see if he notices. Cary is lost in his job. Michael is sweating beneath the yellow plastic hard hat and tastes salt in his mouth. His thick blue jean shirt is burnt everywhere, full of tiny holes from errant embers. He notices a slight tremor in his hands, steadies himself. His mother had severe shakes from all the medications she had to take to keep the breakdowns at bay. Michael looks away, breaks eye contact—looks up into the grey ceiling above them. It's a corrugated metal cathedral, all constructed of aluminum. He gets lost in the grey mottled ripples, an endless sea of small perfect waves. He catches sight of the big clock at the front. A minute less than seven hours to go.

"No, you don't. You work like that and we all gotta work faster. Slow it the fuck down," Billy says, stares, "You hear me. Slow it the fuck down, or else I'll be back, right back." He glances down at his side. Michael notices an iron pipe in his right hand after he lifts it just enough.

Before Michael can answer Billy is gone.

Michael waves his hand for a break and walks slowly to the men's room. It's filthy, the toilet has a big turd laying up the side of the bowl smooshy like a dead fish rotting. Toilet paper fills a rank urinal. He pisses, gags, goes for the doo—its paint is peeling. He steps outside to get a drink from the water fountain. It barely works, tastes rancid. He swishes the dank water in his mouth, then spits. He looks over and sees Cary in the distance working a roller machine, bending tubes, intense. Cary is so into it he

doesn't see Michael, doesn't see anyone. His face is all concentration, head down. Is he smiling? Michael sees Cary is never leaving, he will be here forever.

Michael goes back to his station quick. He looks at the clock again, thinks of Dina, the kids. Thinks of last Christmas, and all the presents— of all the glittering metal tinsel they tossed over the tree, how it stayed there like shiny rain until they hauled it off to the dump. He remembers the little glass cardinal ornament he bought for the girls. How it fell off the tree once but didn't break. He thinks of the Schwinn bikes he promised them both for next year. Dina is probably sitting over her beloved sewing machine right now, surrounded by boxes of glitter, stone, fabric, and lace— making something out of nothing. He thinks of Petra, driving in her ratty but always so clean Gremlin planning. He can see her in the hospital biding her time, holding the hand of an old woman, comforting her as an X-ray flashes across the woman's broken hip. Michael can feel Petra's solid hand slapping his forehead right now, again and again. He can feel her surrounding him as he hears her voice, with a clarity that cuts through all the damn noise this place can conjure up.

Michael comes back to the present, plunges into hour two. His jeans are dirty prickly with metal grit shavings, his apron dripping with warm lubricant. Everything in here is covered with gross oil. He reaches for the next piece, slips it into place, punches the machine, drop, punch, weld, up and its done. He places it on the pole. Michael cut his time in half. The game is on. Another 30 seconds and done. He tosses it on the pole.

Fifteen minutes goes by. He goes double pace. Michael wants to win for once. He has never won at anything. His arms hurt, but the pain is right. He goes faster. He is out to break the record. His hands move across the slippery pipe rapidly. Boom, boom. Boom goes the machine. Pipe locked into a circle each time. Tossed aside. Grab another one. Everything is slowed down yet speeded up. He doesn't look at anyone. He doesn't care right now. He imagines telling this story to Dina. He can see her listening rapt, her eyes locked into his again, if only for a few minutes. He can see him looking away, him leaving her this time this time. She'll be sorry. He grabs another oily tube. His hands slip back as he puts it into place. He steps on the pedal, down it slams, nearly hitting hand. Sparks galore. He lifts his hands and stretches out his fingers, nothing gone. He turns. The second set of sixty is finished. He is at the half-hour mark. He did it. Double-

time. Another set of sixty tubes are wheeled into place. He looks up, Billy is heading back, eyes locked. Michaels happy smiling big. He is ready. He picks up a big wrench, grabs a sharp screwdriver. He will hit first—go for the head, then stick the driver in Billy's ribs on repeat.

He hears an odd noise overhead.

High above, fluttering across the industrial racket a big pigeon is flying around inside the building. It goes from cross beam to cross beam, landing then launching back and forth, panicked. Back and forth, back and forth. Everyone looks up. Just watches. Billy stops. Cary stops. Missing finger man stops. Boss stops. Michael stops completely and stands still, froze like he used to at church, long ago. The pigeon lands awkward, then flies again, flaps up towards the ceiling then across and crashes into a side wall. *Jesus*, someone says. Back it swoops then crashes into the same wall again, and then again. The bird all frantic now slams into a side beam and drops down spiraling. Michael can see the shiny green of its neck reflective, sees its so round tiny black eyes. Suddenly the pigeon catches the air just right, picks up speed, hooks left. Up it goes, rising graceful. It arcs clear across the warehouse staying midair, soaring right over Michael's head, forward. Flaps its wings just twice and then straight it disappears out a small broken window high up through a cross section of glass bricks near the front—gone. Michael drops everything and heads towards the front door hands held out as he disappears into the light.