

# Sean Prentiss

Sean Prentiss grew up (as a boy) in Bangor, Pennsylvania. He currently lives (2,542 miles from Bangor's quarries and river) in the perpetual rain and snow of northern Idaho where he teaches at the University of Idaho. Though Sean has published essays and poems before, this is his first published story. He (and his characters) can be reached at seanprentiss@gmail.com.

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## *fiction*

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### When a Boy Likes a Girl in Bangor, PA

#### I.

When a boy likes a girl in Bangor, Pennsylvania, this boy can't bring that girl roses or offer to take her to the local Italian restaurant (that'll go out of business in two years). Instead, this boy has to say to that girl, *Come with me to the quarry* because this boy knows that the quarry water will be cold and the July night will cast down a shale blackness.

At the edge of the quarry, this boy will strip off his clothes (leaving them scattered like autumn leaves on right angle rocks) and dive into water so blue-black that it looks like a two day old bruise.

That girl, awkward and afraid (she's never skinny dipped before) will slowly peel off her shirt and tan bra, set them on neatly folded jeans and her new white panties.

Then that girl is running toward the water's edge and transforms from a shy, exposed teenager into an ash-white angel. And she is jumping (leaping, really leaping). And this boy watches that angel try to fly, to fly.

As this boy watches that angel, he knows (even though that girl, herself, has no idea) that she is trying to fly over and away from this dark town (and its 238 years of prayers gone wrong), over the quarries

(where men, maybe hundreds, once cut slate), even over the outstretched arms of this boy (who will grab for that girl in moments).

Then there is a splash. Rippling circles inside circles inside circles as that girl folds into this boy's arms to escape the cold quarry water (and everything that is her seventeen-year-old life).

When a girl likes a boy in Bangor, Pennsylvania, she can't ask this boy on a date. Instead, that girl has to wait for this boy to ask her out (with stammering questions). Then she'll say, detachedly, *Yeah, I'll go to the prom* because she knows the moment she shows any interest (even as light as a summer breeze) this boy (with dirty blond hair and a scarecrow-slender build) will flee because that's what boys do when they grow up in a town built on brittle rock.

After slow dancing and, later, the crowning of some other girl as queen, this boy will lean in close enough that that girl can smell this boy's breathe and cheap cologne. And that girl (knowing boys from Bangor) will kiss this boy hard and with a wild, searching tongue (though it's a first date) because all that boys from here talk about is that mechanics job in Jersey with benefits and how after a year this boy can buy that '87 Mustang with the V-8

engine. And that girl wants nothing more than to ride shotgun, so she (soft in all the right spots and with long, hair-sprayed bangs cascading over a green sequined dress) lets this boy's tongue wander her mouth.

#### II.

When a boy likes a girl in Bangor, Pennsylvania, he can't tell her she looks beautiful with her thin neck and hazel eyes. Instead, this boy says, *Come to my cabin* because he knows there will be a fridge full of his uncle's Pabst and maybe, if this boy knows the right friends (Dwight or Steve), joints to roll.

Standing on this boy's cabin's porch after the prom, that girl (so drunk and stoned as to nearly float away) hears the river gurgle-gurgle-gurgling thirty feet away (full of dying shad running a hundred miles to the Atlantic). *Another world*, that girl thinks as she watches the river flow south. *Down the shore*. That girl tries but cannot image what it all looks like (the ocean lap-lap-lapping against soft sand, the long shore stretching forever away, kids building sand castles on the beach or kids drunk and making out in the boardwalk arcades).

And all of it (the leaning cabin, the empty aluminums strewn across the red linoleum floor, the rough lung pot smoke hovering like river

fog, the dying fish streaming some place farther than that girl can imagine) will be romantic enough (if that girl is fucked up enough) to convince that girl that this boy's bed is the bed that will take her places she's never been, places she'll never go (not even if she lives eighty-seven years in this town like her alcoholic grandmother).

When a girl likes a boy in Bangor, Pennsylvania, she doesn't say, *Call me tomorrow*. Instead, that girl says, *Take me for a ride* because she knows the back roads will be dew-wet black on this new moon night and she will be away from her parents who always warn her of the things boys do.

That girl and this boy drive past Bangor's elevated public pool (the oldest in America and almost ready to collapse) that was built during the Depression (by her grandfather and the WPA). That girl knows none of these things. She only remembers swimming there as a child.

As this boy and that girl head to the far edges of town, they drive past one of many back-road bars (the Oak and Maple) with their cold Yuenglings in frosted mugs that her father drinks religiously (as though he breathes through the longnecks).

As the wind hum-hum-hums through the open window, this boy's hand is now on that girl's soft thigh (clutching and grabbing and clutching and grabbing to the acceleration of his station wagon). This boy slides his hand down.

And if that girl understood metaphors, she'd realize that this boy might just be a metaphor for a slate miner (like both his grandfathers),

digging deeper into her quarry. And maybe that girl is just a metaphor for slate (worth something today but nothing tomorrow).

That girl thinks this boy ought to keep his hands to the wheel as he rounds sharp corners near her grandfather's grave (he died, her mother always says, *Of everything—heart and liver and kidney and lungs all at once*).

That girl wants to say, *No or Careful or Slower*.

But like all girls from Bangor, that girl says nothing. She has learned to stare at some far off distance only Bangor girls can see.

### III.

“Rippling circles inside circles inside circles  
as that girl folds into this boy's arms to  
escape the cold quarry water...”

And when a boy likes a girl, he's got to talk to that girl just right—as if this boy is too cool for his three-room cabin, the midnight quarry, that girl. As if this boy's too cool even for Bangor, Pennsylvania with its paint-peeling row homes, run down groceries, and burned out streetlights.

This boy has to talk as if he's heading (maybe not tomorrow but definitely by next year) to someplace farther than the Crayola crayon factory in Wind Gap or (for god's sake) Belvidere with its pharmaceutical plant.

This boy has to talk as if he is going farther than Hackettstown's candy-sweet smelling Mars and Mars factory where that girl will get a second shift job in seventeen years, when she turns thirty-four.

And this boy has to talk as if he

going farther than a life burned up insides of Pennsylvania Power and Light (like the boy's father) where this boy will (in a year or two) shovel coal into furnaces that produce a toxic smoke that ribbons from our long and tall and ominous smokestacks all the way to heaven (at least that's what this boy's mother always told this boy before sleep).

When a girl likes a boy in Bangor, Pennsylvania, she never says, *Goodnight boy* as this boy pulls into that girl's driveway. Instead, that girl exits the boy's Chevy Monza (which from above—with its doors wide open—looks like a lit bird in flight). That girl walks around the front of the car (feeling the warmth of the hood and hearing the engine gently tick-tick-tick itself to sleep).

That girl kneels in the gravel (her knees sore and cut from pressing on rocks). And because that girl knows boys, she unzips this boy's jeans, slides them below the steering wheel and (as that girl dreams of this boy leading her somewhere far away, maybe even as far as the gum-stained sidewalks of Bethlehem) that girl takes this boy into the warmth and safety of her mouth.

### IV.

When a girl likes a boy, she's got to talk just right. As if this boy is just a metaphor for the ancient elevated pool that's just waiting to be torn down the first chance this town gets its hands on money (which everyone knows will never happen). As if that girl cares for this boy as little as she cares for this town's dark and busy taverns

(the Red Geranium, Five Points, the Richmond Hotel) and its boys (turning to men) who look exactly like her father (they punch in every morning to work and punch out every night from the bar).

That girl speaks as if she's leaving the first chance she gets (maybe not tomorrow but definitely next year) (with or without this boy) though she knows (as if taught from first grade on or maybe just somewhere in the red marrow of her bones) that she's not going anywhere unless you consider ten miles to Pen Argyl and Majestic Garments Factory someplace (and people here do).

But Majestic, where that girl's wide-hipped mother has worked since '87, has never been remotely regal.

And god, that girl prays (her teeth are clenched), that girl prays.

She closes her eyes and sees (this time she really sees) this boy driving south from Bangor and later navigating the thin roads of Flicksville (watching carefully for stop signs and turning cars).

That girl (her eyes shut so tightly) imagines this boy's hands grasping the steering wheel so hard (his knuckles small white hills) because this boy is terrified that if he even thinks of letting the wheel go, the car will turn around all on its own and take them both back to Ott Street in Bangor. If they turn around this time (even though it's just a dream), this boy and that girl (they both know) will never get another chance to escape.

Our girl (so afraid that the rest of her life will be as dark as the quarry's water) imagines her hand latched to this boy's warm (almost sweaty) thigh so forcefully that our girl fears (or hopes and prays to our slate skies) that she is leaving a deep and lasting bruise.

And when a boy likes a girl, it's almost like our boy has to whisper to the blue-black night because that girl is no longer even there (she's not even close). But that girl is not gone like the river (currenting to someplace better). She's more a metaphor for the quarry or the shad (abandoned and slowly dying).