

To John Donne By Brandon Aldrich

Her eyes were bright blue, and her nightgown floated over the path -a halo in the darkness of midnight. This land belonged to Jim's Father. He walked it so many times in his fourteen years of living, but never after dark: Father wouldn't like that.

Bumbling hesitantly behind her, Jim uttered affirmatives as she whispered, "You'll care, Jim. I know you will." He mumbled another "yes" and tried to see the black path through the glimpses of moonlight through the trees. All around, he could see the nocturnal animals staring wide eyed through the bushes- through the dense foliage. He thought, we are intruders, they probably won't like this. Neither would his Father.

The humid air of August made them sweat, even in such a late hour. She glistened while he used his white t-shirt as a towel to dab at his face. Jim wondered if he trusted this sixteen year old neighbor too much, and had a hunch to turn back. It's too late. She has her grip around you. Remember, she kissed you last night. A sixteen year old kissed your inexperienced fourteen year old lips. Don't tell anyone. She wouldn't like that. And of course, Father wouldn't like that either.

They rounded a familiar bend. A familiar bend because Jim knew this bend led downhill to the river. He had walked this path many times in the morning light with his fishing rod. The same hands were now grappling out into the darkness, hoping that he would not fall victim to a stray branch, or a coyote. He used her nightgown as a beacon, a guide.

They had reached the river. She stopped short of the bank and the open moonlight in the trees flooded her nightgown in an impressive glow. Jim could see the shadow of her body

through the nightgown in the illumination, and sat wide eyed in the humid embrace of the summer night. A newcomer. A witness.

“Look,” she said. About a quarter mile up the river, the island that Jim’s friends called “moonshine” island, was flooded with a soft light. The trees radiated as the gentle late summer breeze led their leaves in a forbidden tango. She turned around and looked him in the face.

“Layla, “ he said to her. “What is that?”

“Isn’t it beautiful,” she said, rocking back and forth on her bare feet in excitement. She turned around and kissed him for the second time. His body tingled in a rush of forbidden brilliance. She had kissed him again. This time, he didn’t sit in the astonishment of the act because he turned quickly back to the glowing island.

A cold, blue light reflected off of the black water. He thought he could make out shapes of something (human? animal?) on the island. He heard his Father’s stern voice in his mind saying, this is a mistake. Nothing good can come of this, Jim. The path isn’t safe. You will drown in the river. That Layla Swanson is no good for you. Older girls, up to no good. Stay away from her. Her father is a drunken fool. However, at this moment, he could no longer think of the warnings. Squinting, he could see two strange shadows moving on the island. They floated along the beach, in and out of the trees.

“Jim. Get in,” Layla said. He whirled his eyes back to her. A strange, and ancient looking boat bobbed in the river in front of Layla and Jim felt like it had been there the whole time. He didn’t see it when he got here, did he? He could hear the rush of the river lapping up against it’s wooden sides, and heard the dull drop in depth as Layla stepped into the eerie vessel. She grabbed hold of the oars, and he cautiously stepped into the boat.

She sat in front of him, rowing slowly. He wanted to try and catch a glimpse of her expression as she neared the island, but feared what he would find. Something had changed.

When they were about two boat lengths away from shore, the wind that had been rushing through the trees stopped. The stop was sudden. Jim could tell the abruptness because the leaves shifted a bit stronger in the passing wind, and then shuttered into the stillness. “Layla,” he whispered in a hoarse cry, “what is going on?”

“You’ll see,” she said.

She continued to row. A dirge of dipping into the rushing river, pushing against the southward current. They beached on the island. “You can get out now, Jim,” Layla said in a confident tone. He had known her since they were toddlers, but he didn’t think he had ever heard that tone before. His Father shifted from his mind, and he felt a rush of relief. She stepped out into the blackness. From deep within the woods, he could still see the unnamed light.

“Look.” She said. She turned around to face back to the bank where they had paddled away. While he struggled to get out of the boat, he noticed that they were engulfed in the same blackness that had led them to the island. The unnamed light in the dense woods of the island had gone out. He looked at her face, trying to catch a glimpse of her intentions. Her expression was cut off in the shadows the trees placed on her face in the moonlight. She stuck her finger out in an odd pointing motion. It reminded Jim of the spectral directions of the Ghost of Christmas yet to come. A Dickensian symbol which struck fear into his vitals. He did not want to turn and see what she was beckoning toward, but he knew he didn’t have a choice. *You’ll like it, Jim. I know you will. Isn’t it beautiful?*

Like a clumsy ballerina, Jim pivoted his feet to face the bank. He stood in front of Layla and he heard her arm slowly go down and brush against her nightgown, signaling the return. His eyes widened. Looking back towards the bank, and the path they had ventured down, he saw a boy. It looked to be a boy about his age. He was not quite sure. The summer wind picked up again, and with it, an understanding of what he was seeing. An understanding, but not a complete comprehension. It was Jim. In the same white nightshirt and forest distressed pajama pants. It was a spiritual feeling, making eye contact with yourself across the river.

Now he didn't want to go back. He wanted to stay on this island. Turning around to face Layla, and tell her of his decision, he noticed she was no longer there. No trace. Not even a footprint. He meant to shout her name into the island forest, but hesitated. Something caught his periphery. In the same slow dance, he turned his head and body back towards the bank. The light he had seen from the island now shone through the forest of the bank from where he traversed. He? Hadn't Layla made the trip too? Didn't she lead him? He couldn't remember. Was that light from his house? Were his parents awake? Were they looking for him? No. He was too far into the woods and too close to the river to see the light from his parents house. It was the unnamed again, sifting through the leaves, finding its path to catch the curious eye. And there he was. Across the bank. And on the island. Waving to himself. Jim smiled. He was alone.