

Liquid Air

by Inna Effress

In the pickup, Kris pulled down the visor, tousled her sandy hair, and reapplied the Carmex. Sharkey had instructed her to stop off at the sign shop to collect a repair—a giant flashing arrow—to be placed high on a post visible from the road. It would be her second time meeting the sign-maker. Why was she so concerned with her looks? *Just habit*, she thought.

At Wild River Paper Mill, she turned, and tires crunched against gravel. The Mill was a sprawling brick building. Its stink hung like rotten cabbage over the Neches River, the unmistakable odor of sulfur from the chemical pulping of wood chips, what locals termed “the smell of money.” On the top floor, the dark windows seemed liquid, in each of them a rising moon reflected a coin floating in melted mercury.

The parking lot was empty besides a hauling truck, and on the far side, in shadows, the sign-maker’s van. His bumper sticker read, “The beginning is in small things.”

On the stroke of eight, a fizzing sputtered from up high. Lights flickered, then strobed. Up on top of the industrial building beamed Vegas Vic, the sign-maker's most famous restoration job, forty feet of cowboy looming over the roof's lip. His ten-gallon hat grazed the sky, blazing red. Eyebrows, thick and fiery, a comic strip version of wisdom, the red-embered tip of his cigarette dangling from his lips for a touch of mystery. Years ago, the mill owner had unearthed Vic at a neon boneyard in Nevada, but to Kris, the sign was a misfit, an alien, condemned for life to flash its loneliness and deformity, like an immigrant imprisoned in his crumbling memory – his mind's snapshots of a dacha paneled with driftwood along the Volga River, of mushroom-picking in rubber boots in the darkness before a fleeting dawn, the river lapping at the bank, where the only inkling of a road was two tracks of dirt though long, grasping grass.

With a timid knock, Kris let herself in the shop where the van was parked.

"Hello?" she said, and a muffled voice responded, "Be right with you."

The shop had been one of those old shotgun houses, the kind inhabited by logging camp gypsies who vanished with the final thud of the last tree standing.

It was dark. On the far side, orange flames flared. She pivoted and blinked. Parts and valves, machinery and cables crowded every shelf and surface, along with giant sketches of reverse lettering like looking at one's tattoo in a reflection, as long as the tattoo said Bar, Espresso or Pawn.

"Hi, it's Kris Church?" she couldn't recall the man's name. It was something exotic. "I was here last week. The order for the Roadhouse?"

Her sight adjusted. He sat on a stool behind a metal table littered with four-foot glass tubes. Some of them were already bent, so the pile looked like a den of glass snakes. A live hand torch like a wishbone roared ice blue in his one hand, while he manipulated a melting glass tube with the fingertips of the other. No protective gloves.

One end of a skinny yellow hose dangled from his mouth, as from a hookah. It slung around the back of his neck, coiled down and attached to glass he was warping. For a moment he stopped blowing, the hose still drooping from his lip, so his consonants were distorted when he spoke.

“Have a seat.”

A scowl formed behind his goggles, probably directed at her.

“OK, um, will you be a while?”

No answer. Whatever it was she’d felt coming here was snuffed out, though not quenched, by his obvious indifference.

When he looked up, the glass in his grip began to buckle and he quickly resumed blowing, his thumb alarmingly close to the torch. At his elbow, a burner labeled “crossfire” stood ignited, a series of brass nozzles streaming blue flames, all of them aimed at the same point from two sides, like six lasers meeting at an optical center and refracting.

Kris pushed aside some clutter on a dusty loveseat, and settled into a clearing by a copy of *Signs of the Times Magazine*, addressed to Tertullio Ramone. No wonder she couldn’t remember.

What was she doing here again, in this backwards place of her childhood? Sometimes it didn't feel anything like civilization. She pictured her husband, with his glazed expression, his enigmatic condition, holed up in the barn, confiding in his dolls, dressing them, grooming them and giving each one a story of her own. I wish I'd never seen what was out there, she thought. At least then this life would be more bearable.

"Your sign's not ready yet. Electrode problem. You can wait here or come back tomorrow evening."

With the hose out of his mouth, his speech had a trace of an accent, sharp and unexpected, like hail on a sunny day.

"It's not for me. It's for my boss – Sharkey."

"Like I said – it's your call."

He placed his goggles on his hair, so black it looked blue. The lines on his wide forehead deepened and for the first time, he directed an unflinching gaze at her. Kris swallowed. His eyes were the consistency of tar, dissecting and remaking her, the eyes of any cannibal or Picasso, himself. Her mouth was dry. It was as though she were ensnared in quicksand, trying to avoid any frantic movements that might suction her further and swallow her whole.

"Listen, Tertullio? Did I say that right? I'll be back tomorrow."

He shrugged and replaced the protective glasses. As she pushed the screen door, he said, "Come earlier. I'll show you how it's done."

Kris tilted her head in a question mark, but he was already intent on angling the twelve converging flames of the crossfire to a particularly tricky twist.

Out on the asphalt, sulfur particles chafed her throat. Vegas Vic's waving arm reminded Kris of the way her widowed mother would pull on the slot machine, her torso slumped, driving the lever again and again in a mindless void of feeling, those fruit reels spinning and flashing her into a numbness, deeper and deeper.

It was just after ten when she got home. A mist hung low over the patchy lawn, a molten wax globule in a lava lamp, and it descended over the small blackjack oaks fanned out in the soil, their bark cracked into black rectangles with orange fissures. Droplets clung to the peeling shutters of her childhood house. Inside, she set her bottle opener key ring on the kitchen table and listened. Opaque silence. From the window, she could see light shining from the open barn door below. Kris stepped onto the stone path and broke into a trot, welcoming the pain of small acorns stabbing at her bare heels. Inside, her husband had his back to the door, still in his pajama bottoms, and nothing else. He was whispering to the two dolls he called the Blackwood sisters.

"Women don't know when they look their best," he was saying as he teased an auburn wig with a comb.

The remaining seventy-eight dolls were posed around the room, in various stages of dress, like contestants in a child beauty pageant. Some wore cardboard signs displaying a name or anecdote. The walnut faces of the sisters were lacquered with smoky eyes and dripping red lips, and the short corduroy dresses that he had hand-stitched himself, were unbuttoned down to the navel, the lewdness of their exposed bodies incongruous with cultured pearl chokers. All the dolls were forty-

nine inches tall, the height of an eight-year-old girl, eyes cast sideways for the effect of sullen loneliness, with lashes so thick and drooping, it was impossible to make contact. Their breasts were fully formed, the breasts of a grown woman, pink-brown nipples, explicit and obscene, down to the goose bumps and darkened areolas. Kris had to look away.

“Wit.” Her tone was loveless, a dried bouquet of baby’s breath disintegrating at the slightest touch.

He seemed puzzled, as if he only vaguely knew her, as if she had no business being there, in his domain of dolls. His condition seemed to have deteriorated over the past few weeks.

“Who is Wit?” He had a fit of hissing laughter, like an angry goose defending her eggs, then lowered his voice as if he was going to confide something, “What is Wit?”

“Why do you talk about yourself in third person? Is this one of your riddles?” Kris shook her head. “It’s late. I just don’t think I can do this tonight.”

She turned to leave. In a bound, her husband was at her side and squeezing her upper arm.

Kris tried to pry his fingers loose, but his will was the to-the-death sort. He held his nose to her and made loud sniffing noises like a dog smelling a tree, then inhaled deeply and sensually.

“Oh, will you stop.” When she rolled her eyes in disgust and jerked her body backward, the whites of his eyes enlarged and he crushed her tighter in a wringing motion. She slapped her free palm on his shoulder and pushed, making small

grunting sounds. Even when she hit his chest, he did not ease up, but pressed himself against her and nibbled on her ear.

“What are you doing! I don’t want – not this.” They continued to scuffle until he tore the front of his pants down and urinated on her bare feet, humming with spurts of laughter, his lips pursed in ecstasy. Satisfied, he abruptly sat, his back to Kris, cross-legged on the wet floor, and cradled a doll’s headless torso, caressing it once before inserting a large black spring from an old screen door.

“An artist must be cruel long enough to implant a spine,” he said, lecturing to his miniature, wooden women.

The sky was a light grey when Kris pulled herself out of bed. She was unclear whether she’d even achieved sleep. Her muscles ached. Sometime in the night, Wit had made his way beside her, a rare occurrence lately. As Kris watched her husband’s relaxed breathing, she imagined standing over him, clutching a pillow at both ends, pressing it squarely over his face, and watching his legs thrash, his stripped belly thrusting in agony, while his convulsions spaced out farther and farther between, the last popcorn kernels exploding in the pan.

In the waning light at the Mill, the wind kicked up. Kris braced herself. She gulped the dust that came hurling at her. Stepping into the sign maker’s world of fire and color, she felt her body relax. Over the speakers, some drawn-out bars of a symphony rippled with a cello pizzicato, giving her the sense of bubbles rising from

the depths of the sea. Harps and violins produced the hollow tones of slithering winds. The day was not cooling down. If anything, it was getting hotter.

“Tertullio? It’s me, Kris.” Until her eyes adapted, he was a faceless silhouette, a contrast to flames of orange and blue. “I came back. For the sign.”

“Ah, Kristine. Good. I have prepared something for you. Please, come closer. And call me Tullio.”

His accent flooded her ears and echoed. She approached the cluttered table. In a chipped vase stood a lush bouquet of roses, the petals perfectly black.

“Those are for you.” His stare was blunt, forceful. Again, that impenetrable tar of his eyes threw her and she reached out for the back of a stool.

“Well, thank you. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen black roses. How unique.”

“It’s a trick of the light,” he said. “Under ordinary light, they would be ordinary.”

It seemed to her that his subtlety had layers of meaning. She was charged and spellbound, two opposing sensations that stunned her, a vacuum between repelling magnets.

“That blue light you see shining on the flowers is argon laced with mercury. Argon is from the Greek for ‘the lazy one.’ It’s one of the noble gases, along with neon, the one that makes red. A funny name. Noble. Long ago, scientists determined that these gases resisted combining with other elements. That’s where their so-called nobility comes from.”

He was welding two glass tubes together, searing the ends with his hand torch, but she was only interested in the sound of his voice.

“So, how does neon make red?” she asked.

“In its natural state, neon gas is unremarkable. It’s colorless. No odor.” He smiled tersely. “But it’s all around us. It’s a component of liquid air. We extract it by liquefying the gas and distilling the air.”

Kris nodded. She was watching his mouth more than listening.

He ran a blade across the surface of a glass, and snapped it. The methodical heartlessness of the scoring and severing sent a shiver of pleasure through her.

Tullio handed her a pair of goggles, and she hesitated, searching his face for a sign.

“There are three risks. Cutting yourself, burning yourself and electrocuting yourself.”

He took the end of the yellow hose that had been in his mouth and slipped it inside her bottom lip. She studied his face. His attention was trained on the glass he was holding to the torch.

“Now, breathe out.”

In nervous anticipation, she took a heaving breath in, instead of out. The glass imploded.

“I’m so sorry.” There was a swell of music from the speakers above and she wondered what he really thought of her. It was impossible to mine any information from those thick pits.

Tullio gave her an unmarred tube.

When the melting and bending was complete, he stepped in close behind her, guiding her hand. Together, they fastened electrodes to the ends.

A steel cooler-shaped box thrummed, the sound of a strained motor on a drill. Two glass insulators grew out of its lid, like antennae from a black and white Frankenstein movie.

Next, she heard the sound of an old steam engine.

“This is the pumping heart of my workshop,” he yelled over the noise. “We must incinerate and suck out all impurities before the noble gas is injected.”

High current passed through the tube. Illumination was instant, but anemic, pale. Gradually, color seeped in, its cool glow warming to red in stages.

“Neon is a dying art, Kristine. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be creating words and images. But each time I prepare to pack up and leave, a job or two trickles in.”

He turned the pumping off, and in the sudden void of that rhythmic pulse, the radio station swept back through the air with the moaning of a tortured sea. Violins surged, their tempo that of blinding strikes of lightning.

Kris felt his hot breath on the back of her neck. She peeled off her cardigan, which had dark sweat stains on the underarms, and wondered if he could see the beads she felt forming on her back, above the dip of her tank top.

“Let’s take a break,” he said, “and cool off. The swimming hole is nearby. It will be refreshing, no?”

“I -I don’t have a suit.”

“Darkness will cover you.” He opened the screen to see outside. Fog swathed Vegas Vic and smothered the reach of his light, actually swallowed and internalized

the light, as if the fog were a lead apron. "Clouds have rolled in. Our night is perfectly starless."

In the abandon of darkness, Kris had no sense of the cliff's edge, until there was no more earth under her feet. For a sliver of time, they hung suspended, midair. Then, her outside arm flapped in tiny circles, her stomach dipped, and, hands still interlaced, they dropped through thirty feet of nothing. A prolonged yell, part exuberant, part terrified, escaped her and rang out to the treetops. Then a cold, hard splash. There was barely time to close her mouth before the water engulfed her, then curbed the freefall, like a net below a tightrope. They paddled up and bobbed. Kris pushed the clinging hair back from her face and unleashed a whoop, long and piercing, which curved into a kind of throaty grunt, the kind a javelin thrower releases as she takes her delivery step and transfers her momentum into the spear, her body a whip from toe to arm.

Veins of lightning throbbled above them, followed by a crack like a splitting tree. She clasped his neck, and entwining their ghostly, weightless legs, she grazed his jaw with shivering lips. The smell of him was masked by the film of water cellophaning his skin.

Holding their shoes and exhaling the last tendrils of adrenaline, they dressed and walked to his van, an arm slung casually around the other's waist. Ahead of them, a man was walking. For a sinking moment Kris wondered if it was possible, somehow, that Wit had followed her.

Don't be ridiculous, she thought, and shook her head. *Farfetched, even for me.*

A fat rain drop stung her shoulder, then another, until they heard plunks smashing to the ground in all directions, slow at first, and gaining speed, as does a train pulling of its station.

In the shadows of the little shop, by the red light of the bar signs and flames of orange and blue, they faced each other, dripping puddles at their feet. Kris stripped his sopping shirt from him, tearing it at the collar. Neither one blinked, not even when she kissed him, or when she pushed him back onto the loveseat and straddled him, unbuckling his jeans with one hand, and skimming her free fingers over and inside his mouth. They stayed that way for two nights and a day, she waking him whenever the hunger washed over her again, until the rains gushing onto the roof finally relented to a steady drum track, looping and isolated.

When Kris stopped at the gas station on her way home, her head was swimming with a long-forgotten sensation, of discovering herself in another, of going all-in, the idea that if she stepped into the void, an answer in a form she never expected would be waiting for her.

The convenience store was empty aside from a toothless cashier, who spat a squirt of tobacco into his spittoon, fashioned from a Styrofoam cup, ragged and stained, and lined with leaves from days-old chew. Squirt-plunk, went the brown sludge.

“Good Lord willin’, the worst is over. Best we can hope for, now.”

Kris sprinted from the driveway, into the house. Wit wasn't in there. No surprise. He was probably back in the barn, she thought. But when she squinted out the window, past a fresh burst of rain, she saw the barn was gone.

In the end, the river rose a record eleven feet. There was flash flooding everywhere. As the sky dumped an endless stream, floodwaters were strong enough to derail a freight train, lift cars and force animals in trees. People paddled in boats on streets underwater. On the sixth morning they awoke to find the sun illuminating the Neches River, and dozens of caskets drifting downstream. The dead had been disturbed, disinterred from their plots, coffins gently bumping each other – a jumble of corpses, coasting with the steady pull of nature, the formaldehyde used in the embalming process leaching into the soil, into the river, a bright greenish oil formed a skin on the river's surface, a potion of formaldehyde and melted flesh. As temperatures rose, the odor entwined with the sulfur.

Dozens of volunteers showed up to sort the bodies, with Kris among them. They were given cloth respiratory masks as they waded out into the slime, to heave coffins onto shore. It wasn't until mid-morning that a child-sized body came floating at them, facedown, about fifty feet upstream from where Kris was positioned. Those around her stopped what they were doing. They held their breath.

The child's Medusa hair snaked out, and, in the contaminated water, each strand had the green and purple hue of a snakelocks anemone, its tentacles tapering, flexuous, and rippling gracefully in the current. Following that one, there was another, and another, until a tangled sea of girls, soiled, lifeless, wooden, all of them the same size and shape, appeared, lashed together with fabric and debris, and

conjoined at the limbs like a mass of defective births, in one, long raft, bobbing languidly, high to low, and up again, from around the river's bend toward the frozen onlookers, and joining the coffins in their lurid parade, a drifting canvas of gray earth tones, blacks and browns, a dark vision welling up, unchecked, blotting out the light and spilling its ink out into the poisoned waters.

From the peculiar vessel's center rose an obtuse pyramid built from dismembered parts, a contortion of limbs, torsos, mouths and eyes, its capstone a half-sitting girl, straining upward in salvific longing and desperation, a shredded blouse sleeve flapping from her outstretched arm, like a flag hoisted in truce on its mast.

The dolls' faces were vacant, emotionless, their sideways eyes neither tormented nor satiated, painted lips pressed against navels and buttocks and necks, their unclothed places teetering between nudity and the innocent nakedness of children.

As it neared, the raft seemed to extend outward, into Kris, drawing and engaging her as a participant in the wooden contraption that seemed on the verge of fracturing apart.

She stood shuddering. A figure – a man with a charred-looking face – rested along the rear of this deranged pageant boat, pulled along by his head and shoulders, floating carefree as a monarch whose kingdom has been threatened, or an ant colony's queen in a flood, her majesty kept safe by her larval ant brood.

At first, the man looked like a massive, polyurethane balloon character. His inflated thighs and bloated arms trailed in the water, bulging with unnatural

strength. His blackened head twisted, confronting Kris, beckoning her with his open, putrefied palm, his stretched arm exposing a triangular gaping wound beneath his ribs, the blood-tinged froth about his nose and mouth taunting her, his eyeballs protruding in their sockets, between his teeth, the heel of a headless doll.

A gnarled branch in the water caught the hem of the man's pants. The collision disturbed his balance, dislodged him from the interstices of doll parts. His distended form slid from the raft and flipped over in the muck, the tarnished-bronze rag of him, macerated, broad shoulders slumped forward, his head now vanished underwater, acting as ballast. He released a sigh. The decomposing gasses produced by bacteria in his chest cavity and gut – methane, hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide – erupted from him as he began to deflate, until diving, groaning, a ship in distress, he was swallowed up whole by the Neches, with all that remained on the surface only bubbles, gas molecules rising upwards through the air.