

# The Drifter

By Andy Hinton

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Guest Editor MICHAEL ALIPRANDINI writes:*

*“The Drifter” is a moody, evocative story that pulls readers in with its masterful cadences, precise images, and intertwined timelines. Here is one of its many remarkable passages, which is also a key to the story’s aesthetic: “The wipers pass across the windshield at slow intervals. Just when the Drifter forgets they are on, they cut across the scene, removing away an impressionistic image and replacing it with one of startling clarity.” Throughout the story, with perfect control, Andy Hinton swishes the narrative back and forth between startling clarity and impressionistic images while preserving the pleasing mystery of where the characters are drifting.*

*The story’s metaphysical concerns are not some sort of bargain-basement mysticism. Instead, it dispatches metaphors of baptism and past lives to explore regret and how it can keep us trapped. We normally associate baptism with being reborn into a fresh, new life; but here the author ironizes and refuses such an easy concession. The Drifter—who is both an individual and an archetype—is beleaguered, stuck not in one life like an ordinary mortal but in a succession of lives which nevertheless fail to bring relief. Nietzsche’s idea of Eternal Recurrence springs to mind, with the Drifter occupying a liminal zone of the loneliest loneliness, unable or perhaps not ready to take the next step of heroically embracing all of life—its joys and regrets, its repetitions and absurdities, its demons and hauntings. (Spacing and font size are author’s own.)*

**QUALITY QUOTABLES** *(for the love of language):*

...the waitresses, who file in and out of the kitchen like a troop of sad clowns, wearing costumes of painted faces and colored hair, addressing customers with terms of endearment like “Honey”, or “Sweetie”, or “Sugar” while scowling at them through fake smiles.

... reincarnation was a religion for those with regrets.

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*The first time I killed myself it was an accident. It was summer and a violent storm had washed over the watershed, resurrecting streams that were normally dry, turning the river into a swollen, roaring beast, reeking with the smell of earth, of death, of decay.*

*My brother and I ran down to our favorite swimming hole only to find it a brown blur of current. Large trees swept past, bobbing up and down. Their canopies caught boulders below, cracking off branches with explosive snaps, sending the trunks rolling and twisting across the surface.*

*I was deep under the spell of the river, when my brother offered me his gold pocket watch to swim across. He knew that I was not a strong swimmer and even on days when the river was a narrow pool, I struggled to make it to the other side without having to stand and catch my breath. But he did not know the covet I had for the watch that Grandpa had given him.*

*As I saw my brothers smile, I knew that for the rest of the summer he would use this moment to remind me of my weakness, to remind me of my fear. I smiled back and began taking*

*off my shirt and pants. Then I walked into the water and launched into the flow, kicking my feet and swinging my arms. But despite my effort, I found myself floating downstream faster than I could swim across*

*Along the shore I could see my brother running after me, scrambling over boulder and bush. Although I knew he was too far away, I tried to swim back to him but was swept into a large rapid. The waves lobbed me up and down; rocks beneath the surface caught my legs, my feet, my arms, tossing and turning me like the trees I had watched moments ago. I took a breath that was more water than air and washed over a drop. The earth, the sky, the river tumbled about me.*

*My body went deep before the current wedged me in a tight crevice between two boulders. The world was black, yet my mind was calm. Suddenly the water was warm, the rocks felt soft, and I could breathe. Then the river began to move me until I was no longer being held in darkness but being pushed into the light.*

The Drifter takes the dishes, stained and discarded, and shoves them into the frothy water. He holds them there, caressing their smooth porcelain edges, rubbing away the filth before pulling them up, purified and new. The Drifter takes pride in the work, as boring and demeaning as some may consider it. He goes about his task with ritualistic automation while his mind swims in visions and voices of other times, other lives.

The cook is telling a story, one the Drifter has heard many times before. But the tale keeps getting interrupted by the waitresses, who file in and out of the kitchen like a troop of sad clowns, wearing costumes of painted faces and colored hair, addressing customers with terms of endearment like “Honey”, or “Sweetie”, or “Sugar” while scowling at them through fake smiles.

The cook harasses the women, trying to make them blush, trying to make them agitated, but the waitresses are a sassy sort, who know how to shut him up. But once they leave the kitchen, the cook's comments become all the more nasty and vulgar. Though he might as well be talking to himself, for the Drifter never acknowledges the cook, just as the cook never seems to notice the Drifter. For the Drifter is small and quiet, a specter that is felt more than he is seen or heard.

*I was not born with an immediate knowledge of my past lives. But as I aged, I became haunted by their memories. My first death was the clearest. The others were merely an assortment of faint and random images, like dreams dreamt in the deepest of sleeps. But the one detail that linked them together, was that in each life I became aware of a place on the New River where I could end one life, only to be reborn into another.*

It is Millie, the matriarch of the waitresses that gave the Drifter his nickname. She has seen his type before, appearing from nowhere, wanting a job, here a week, a month, a year, then gone without a word.

“Oh, he's harmless,” says Lucy, as she drinks her coffee, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the Drifter is out of earshot.

“Maybe he is; maybe he ain't.” Millie lights a cigarette and watches the Drifter bus a table across the room.

“And he's not bad looking. Checkout at those arms.” Lucy sneaks a peak of him carrying the tub of plates through the kitchen doors. “How old do you think he is?”

“That’s the problem. When I look at his face, I see a man that could be a hard twenty or a young forty. But when I stare into those eyes,” Millie takes a long draw, playing the image through her mind, “it’s like I’m looking into an empty tomb.”

*I was 15 when I first realized that my soul was much older than my body. My momma was in one of her church going spells, and she had taken my sister and me down to the base of Sandstone Falls, to be baptized by Brother Davis .*

*My sister went first. Brother Davis led her into the water, caressing her with a gentle touch, whispering to her as he cradled her back, and combing her long brown hair out of her eyes as he brought her to the surface. Although I was not religious, his actions looked so soothing, so comforting.*

*But when it was my turn, there was no love, only a desire to rid me of the evils plaguing my flesh. As Brother Davis jerked me deeper into the water, his voice sounded as if he was exorcising a demon rather than saving a soul. And it was in that moment when the world turned black and blurry and my mind seemed disconnected, hovering about my body, that I had my first memory of dying in this very spot. Over the next few years I had more revelations about other lives, and the memories of my deaths hung heavy upon me.*

The Drifter is putting on his apron when Millie walks into the kitchen, giving instruction to a young woman in a waitress uniform. “Boys, this is the new kid Lydia. Now Frank, you be nice to her.”

The cook gives a gap toothed grin. “Hey, you know I’m a sweetheart.”

Millie cuts Frank a stern look as she continues showing Lydia around the kitchen, and then pulls her back into the dining room. But just before she leaves, Lydia turns towards the Drifter, casting him a shy smile.

*Ten years ago, I hitched a ride towards the river, planning to drown myself and begin a new life. But as we neared the pull off for the Falls, my courage seemed to wane. Rather than have the driver stop, I continued to ride as far as he would take me. Then I hitched another ride and another until I was well away from the Fall's temptation.*

*And this was how I have lived this life. I drifted through jobs and towns the same way I drifted through my former lives. I did not form relationships. I did not to engage people more than necessary. And I did the work set before me until I got the urge to move on.*

The diner is slow, and the Drifter and Lydia are sitting at a booth rolling silverware into napkins and securing the bundle with a paper ring. The Drifter enjoys talking to Lydia, so much so, that when he runs out of tales to tell, he is quick to make up new ones. Those are the stories that make her laugh and smile. And this makes him happy, for most of the time Lydia is at work, she is sad, in the way that young folks are good at being sad. It is the kind of melancholy that draws in the hearts of those around them.

Like the Drifter, Lydia is unassuming. When Lydia was in high school, her peers considered her neither ugly nor beautiful. She was not disliked, but she wasn't popular. Lydia was just there, but there in such a way that if she vanished, she wouldn't be missed. But her boyfriend, Tommy, saw something in Lydia that others didn't, recognized a beauty in her that was waiting to blossom. And this attention drew something out of her. Now that Lydia's friends

from high school are seeing their splendor diminish while Lydia is just starting to flower. She is still reserved and modest, yet she appreciates the attention of the men who come into the truck stop. She doesn't flirt like the other waitresses. She doesn't need to. Lydia just does her job, acts polite, and collects the cash as she buses the table.

Lydia enjoys talking to the Drifter, hearing of the places he has been and seen. All her life she has wanted to travel. Tommy was a couple of years older than her and went into the navy straight out of high school. The plan was for her to eventually join him at whatever navel base he was assigned. But by the time she graduated, Tommy had flunked out of Nuke school. Then disillusioned and homesick, he flunked a drug test. So instead of moving to a city by the ocean, they moved into a camper in a trailer park by the river. He got a job at a factory, and she enrolled in classes at the local technical college. Tommy says that they are going to move, but each day she sees his roots locking onto this town and his ambition withering. Lydia tells the Drifter that she took the job at the truck stop to help pay the bills, but she also confides that she hides most of her tip money. At some point if Tommy doesn't take her anywhere, Lydia says she will take herself.

*I began washing dishes at a small diner in West Tennessee back in May. There was an old motel connected to it, no longer in use, and the owner, rented me one of the rooms so that I would have a place to sleep and shower.*

*Sometimes I stayed up late at night to watch talk shows where people claimed to have had former lives, but these people weren't like me. They seemed intent on claiming some past glory, or laying blame for their current condition. I found no solace in their company, no comfort in their beliefs. Unlike them, I didn't believe in karma or God or devil or science. These*

*were just myths trying to find reason where none exists. For I knew more than most that reincarnation was a religion for those with regrets.*

The Drifter is through cleaning the floors and counters, but he is staying late to help the owner, Joe, close down the register. Usually Joe only cooks in the morning, but since Frank stopped showing up, he has been pulling double duty.

“I hope whatever woman Frank’s with or drunk he’s on is treating him well, because when he comes back around...”

Joe’s rants continue throughout the night, but instead of listening, the Drifter is eyeing Lydia who paces around the empty parking lot. Tommy is supposed to pick her up. But often he doesn’t show, and Lydia has to walk across the bridge to where they live on the other side of the river. She is just wandering into the darkness when the Drifter catches up and offers to keep her company. As they reach the apex of the bridge, they pause to watch a tugboat and barge drift beneath them.

Lydia looks onto the moonlit water. She likes to let her thoughts drift with the river, dreaming of where it goes and where it could take her. She knows that the towns downstream are just as small, just as depressing, but anywhere other than here is somewhere. The lot where her and Tommy live is flood zone, and once a year they have to move the camper to higher ground, usually his parent’s backyard, when the backwater gets out. Sometimes she wonders what would happen if the dam upstream broke and washed them away in the night. Where would they end up? What adventures would they have together? She knows these fantasies are unrealistic, but it is thoughts like these that keep her going. But sometimes she wonders if there

is a line between dreams that drive ambition, and dreams that make you complacent by offering false hope.

As they talk, Lydia confesses her fears of never leaving the diner, her fears of getting anchored down by Tommy, this small town, of becoming just like the other waitresses, a worn and weathered shell. “Do you ever wish you could start all over, become a new person?”

The Drifter hesitates. “Yes... It’s what I’m good at.”

“Sometimes,” Lydia’s eyes follow the current, “I just want to jump in the water and let it take me far away.”

The Drifter doesn’t say anything, for Lydia has already said it all.

When they get close to the camper, the lights are on and Tommy’s car is out front. Lydia says maybe it is best that they say goodbye now, and she walk the rest of the way alone. The Drifter pretends to turn around, but just before her camper is out of sight he watches her walk up and step inside.

When Lydia opens the door, Tommy is laying on the couch with his boots on and an empty bottle of whisky sitting in his lap. His eyes are watery and dull, but he does not look apologetic, rather there is a rage to his sadness that Lydia recognizes and chooses not to stir.

“ I quit work today, just walked out the door.” Tommy takes a swig of whisky and waits for her response. She gives him none other than to stand and watch, a silent prompting to tell the rest of the story. “I’m tired of that asshole Larry, and I’m tired of his shit.”

Lydia knows Larry, his boss, to be anything but an asshole. And the only shit Larry gives Tommy is the shit he deserves. Lydia does not argue with Tommy, but she does not encourage or console him. Rather she just steps into the bedroom to change out of her work

clothes. When she goes to put away her tips, she finds the plastic storage box that holds her socks to be open and scattered, and she realizes where Tommy got the money for the whisky.

*It seemed that in each life the odds were stacked against me. Except for my first life, all my other deaths were of my own choice. In one life the law was chasing me; in another, I was trying to escape an abusive father. And during one of the happier times, I was called to war and chose to drown myself in the river, rather than risk dying on foreign soil. Despite having lived for over a hundred years, I have no memories of being an old man.*

*And whenever times got hard, I knew that if I could make it to the river I could find rejuvenation, redemption, and for a moment, peace. At one time I considered my knowledge of the Falls to be a blessing, but the more I learned the details of these former lives, the more I felt my soul was cursed.*

The wipers pass across the windshield at slow intervals. Just when the Drifter forgets they are on, they cut across the scene, removing away an impressionistic image and replacing it with one of startling clarity.

The door swings open. “Sorry, I’m late. I had to get some things out of the camper.” Lydia throws an overstuffed pack in the back seat, then sits and turns to the Drifter. “Isn’t this Frank’s car?”

“Yeah, he sold it to me the night he left town, said he needed the money. I didn’t tell Joe because I thought somehow he would get mad at me.” The Drifter glances at Lydia to read her reaction. “Besides, I think having the car out there gave Joe some hope that Frank was coming back.”

Lydia doesn't respond but stares at ignition, wondering why Frank gave up a whole ring of keys. For the next hour Lydia does not talk. She just looks out the window like a girl who has jumped from a ledge and is watching the world rise towards her.

*I lost contact with my family after they had me sent away. The hospital was tall and old, built of muted brick walls that contrasted with the ornate roof and curved eaves. There was nothing inviting or healing in its appearance. It loomed over the landscape as a gothic monstrosity, a design of ghostly tales and children's nightmares. And the floor itself bled a cold that poured up the feet, freezing the bones stiff and listless.*

*Those who had been there the longest, had not the energy to walk proper. Instead, they shuffled listless through the halls and corridors. And when they became trapped, locked down behind closed doors, these same patients paced about their room, constantly moving but going nowhere. Since they could no longer travel through space, some instinct drove them to walk in circles, as if returning to the spot from where they had come could speed through time, for their destination was no longer a location but death itself.*

*The constant scraping of souls across the tile sounded like a hundred people murmuring about me, with no one speaking clear enough to be understood. It resonated throughout the building, a whisper so loud it could drive one mad.*

*The medication they forced upon me dulled my brain, so that I seemed to be in a constant fog. Not only could I not remember past lives, I could barely recall the details of my current one. Although the memory of the Falls remained, its significance began to take on an air of fantasy. I knew that if I stayed in the hospital much longer, I could lose sanity and never leave. Or if they healed me, I would lose my faith in the Fall's power, and my soul would die with this body.*

*But it was the will to escape that kept me alive. Because I appeared meek, the orderlies never paid me any mind. Because I was small and unassuming, no one noticed as I walked out into the night, dressed in the clothes of a dead janitor.*

Sometime around midnight, the Drifter and Lydia pull into another gas station just off Interstate 81. There had been a wreck outside of Nashville, and they had spent most of the afternoon stuck in traffic.

Lydia has been asleep for an hour and does not stir as the Drifter coasts into the side of the lot and nestles the car in among the big rigs. He lays his seat back, and although his body is too tired to drive, his mind is still racing. It's in times like this, between silence and sleep, when the Drifter is most tormented.

*I closed my eyes. But rather than seeing my past, I was transported to a scene of the future. Lydia was working in an all night diner in the city. She was old. Although she tried to smile, her face was worn to a frown. And as she went along the booths taking orders, Lydia stopped to refill my cup, but there was no recognition for the loner sitting before her.*

*And I was not even sure it was Lydia. But when she paused by the kitchen window, her gaze locked on something from her past. And I saw the same sadness in her eyes that had made me love her in her youth. She took a deep inhale, then let it out. It was not so much of a sigh, but more like a soul gasping for air.*

The Drifter opens his eyes and looks at the clock. It's 1:00. In an hour, years have passed. He raises the seat, starts the car, and is just about to pull out when he sees a state trooper cruising through the lot.

The trooper drives around the gas station, taking note of all the vehicles. As he passes their car, his brake lights brighten, and the trooper stops. Seconds feel like minutes, but then the trooper starts moving again, accelerating toward the interstate.

When the Drifter hits the road, he turns the opposite direction heading into the darkness of a rural highway. Once out among farms, he stops and turns on a flashlight to study an atlas, looking for the most direct route to New York by taking back roads. It is then that he realizes that New York had never really been his destination.

*I held my breath, expecting that any moment some great force was going to collapse upon me. And it was not until the trooper's taillights disappeared that I was able to breathe again.*

*By now everyone at the diner would know that neither of us was at work and Frank's car was gone. It wouldn't take them long to start piecing things together.*

*It was as if my soul was a bird flying home. I closed the map and threw it in the seat behind me, tears running down my face.*

Water hangs in the trees like ice, shimmering and glimmering in the fiery fog of the morning sun. The Drifter stares out the window, burning the image into his mind so as never to forget this scene, so he may recall this very spot for lives to come.

"Where are we?" Lydia is awake and stares out the window through squinted eyes.

"It's just a nice place to pull off the road and rest. I use to come here... a long time ago."

Lydia rubs her face and yawns. Then she stumbles out of the car and into the woods.

When she returns, the Drifter is leaning against the hood waiting for her. “Let’s stretch our legs for minute. The river is right down here.”

Lydia does not respond, but turns down the path, arms crossed to keep her warm and head down in discontent. Her makeup is smeared, her hair a mess.

*For a moment I am filled with pity, then fear, then love. I feel time slow as it builds into a wave pushing us to the river’s depths, taking us to our next lives.*

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**AUTHOR’S NOTE:**

*About ten years ago I came up with the idea for a character that was able to retain large parts of his consciousness as he was reincarnated through various lives and time periods. Although the concept has great potential for a longer format, I decided when writing the short story to strip it down to a couple of core questions raised by such a scenario. I wondered if a young man saw death as a “restart” button, would he be tempted to commit suicide and try his luck with a new life anytime things became tough. And I wondered how would such a casual view of death affect his morality.*

*The opening scene came out in the first draft, but I struggled with the rest of the story and put it away for years. I felt it was important for the tale to be written from a first person point of view, so that the reader would buy whole-heartedly into what the main character believed. But as the story progressed, I wanted the reader to question if the Drifter was a reliable narrator and determine if he was hero, a villain, or a victim of his own delusions. After reading the Life of Pi, I came up with having the point of view switch back and forth so that the reader could get an objective look at what was happening in the story to contrast with the Drifter’s perception of the world.*

**AUTHOR’S BIO:** Andy Hinton has a background writing and photographing for small town newspapers. Currently he guides multi-day whitewater rafting trips and blogs for the Duct Tape Diaries. His essays and feature articles have been published in American Whitewater and Canoe and Kayak Magazine. And his fiction has been published in The Moonlit Road.

**EDITOR'S BIO:** Michael Aliprandini lives in Italy and works internationally as a curriculum developer and teacher-trainer. His short stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in several publications, including *Litro*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Counterclock*, *Fresh Ink*, *The Bacon Review*, *Crooked Arrow (Bullseye)*, and *Columbia Journal*. He is a fiction reader for the online UK edition of *Litro*. His story **The Book of Annihilation** appears in this issue (fiction).