



STOPPING

BY

BRAD BARKLEY

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Brad Barkley's, "Stopping," is as much a travel down the road to no where as it is a recognition of how and when to let things go – a Junot Diaz meets Denis Johnson who met Gatsby at a hotel and had to tell him to let go of the green light.

Stopping is a gerund for a reason.

I can remember sitting outside of a girl's apartment and, after I had sobered up a bit, had to explain 40 texts and calls that went unanswered (not my finest moment). I can remember being told to stop because I had hurt someone enough that they had no more words and didn't want to talk anymore. I can remember ghosting someone because their desperation would suck me back in.

I can remember.

There is a self-realization/deprecation in Barkley's story that I think is a narrative any reader can connect to. The voice of pain and longing and paranoia, the drive by yourself to no where (because where else is there to go?), or imitating small talk because the mere connection to another in times of strife are what can keep you going when you find yourself lost without direction.

Sometimes the light of a phone can give you enough hope to make it to the next day, and, by then, your candle hasn't been burnt on both ends.

There is light at the end of the tunnel.

There is always an exit to pull over.

Sometimes it's okay to stop.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

He likes to imagine people gathered in the dark, holding hands, trying to connect to the dead. Trying to say things. Trying to get a glimpse. Romantic and frightening, until morning comes. Then...what? Exposed. Hard edges of finality. Something pierced through.

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Go further, he thinks, just one more exit. Then nothing. The blankness of night. Indiana or Ohio.

A defunct Stuckeys rots among the trees. Some broken service road exits to nowhere. He doesn't

like music when he's stressed. Just rain sounds and tire hum until finally a sign, hand painted,

leaning. *Motel A Head*. Geez people. It's something, the night says. Something is better than

nothing, the rain insists. Dirt road in the weeds. He turns, berating himself. Berating and

narrating. *You'll get stuck* he says aloud. Habits of doubt. Windshield rivers. Graying boards and

a leaning porch, a mailbox made from a plow. Open door and a desk and a kid, all gothic. Kid asleep on her folded arms. Owl tattoo and something in Chinese. He feels like he's in a story, then forms the edges of the story he will be in when he tells it (...*this kid, with the tattoos, fucking candle burning*). There is no candle, just her phone, desperate for attention. He rings the bell (there is no bell). The kid awakes. Pierced lip and acne scars, face sleep-wrinkled like a child's. *Need a room?* Yes, he needs a room. She opens a ledger, leather-bound and dusty, but the ledger is just a tab on a laptop. Is this place haunted? She looks at him, swipes his card. Shadows press in. *What?* Is it haunted, this place? He wants her to say yes. She says, *Science much, bro?* The wrong words. He shrugs. You should say it is. Bites her lip ring. *What?* You should say it is. On the sign. Advertise. People will come here. *To be haunted?* Yes. Ghost hunters, psychics...they love that shit. He doesn't know why he says this, why he wants his ideas to be important to strangers. Because he drove all night and she never answered? Because she can't return one fucking text? Some calculus there that eludes him. All houses are haunted. All roads. All nights. The iPhone is a séance, attempting contact, sending out messages that are never answered. Girl drops a key on the counter, the fob a plastic diamond. Don't see those much anymore, he says. Her eyes are blank and dark. You should stop saying things, he tells himself. Go to bed. You could have a spirit night, or ghost tours, he tells her. *Is this your thing?* Is it? He's not sure. He likes to imagine people gathered in the dark, holding hands, trying to connect to the dead. Trying to say things. Trying to get a glimpse. Romantic and frightening, until morning comes. Then...what? Exposed. Hard edges of finality. Something pierced through. *Breakfast at nine, just donut and coffee.* She looks at her phone. I'll be gone by then, he tells her. He could leave right now, he could leave at dawn, he could die in his sleep. There are choices, some of them his. Girl shrugs again (...*this kid, with the candle, the ledger, these spooky empty*

eyes). She is almost pretty. The stairs creak but his key works. Iron bed, a dresser, a toilet wand, a tiny TV. He reclines in his clothes, still damp, night-drenched. Three hours till daybreak, give or take. Somewhere off, faintly, the sound of fiddle music. *Thin*, he thinks, *lonesome*, just as he realizes it's only some mechanical squeak, a rusted gate hinge, a grommet on a flagpole. Just noise. He wonders if being dead feels like this, fatigue digging for meaning, boredom that wants to break through. Or maybe she is dead, and can't answer the phone, return the texts. Can't, not won't. Would she glimpse him now? Would she know?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I imagined this piece as a story about a hotel that holds seances, but then it morphed into something different, as stories often do. I think it turned into a short study of our tendency to romanticize everything, in particular loss and loneliness (and of course back roads and rainy nights). If we insist on that, and circumstances stubbornly insist on the merely mundane, then I guess we are left with imagination to swoop in and save us. As with most things, though, it's just saving us from ourselves. It's only in moments that we brush up against this kind of abyss, so sudden-fiction felt like the best form for exploring the idea.*

AUTHOR BIO: Brad Barkley is the author of the novels *Money, Love* and *Alison's Automotive Repair Manual*; two collections of short stories; and three YA novels with Penguin/Dutton. His short fiction and poetry have appeared in nearly forty magazines, including *Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, the *Oxford American*, *Glimmer Train*, *Book Magazine*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, which twice awarded him the Emily Balch Prize for Best Fiction. He's won numerous awards, including a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He's on Twitter(X): @bradbarkleybook.