



Alone Town

By

Connor de Bruler

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

“Alone Town,” by Conner de Bruler is rooting in loneliness and the connections that make us more like shadows of longing rather than a human with the true, emotional capacity for being with another.

Our protagonist is a modern ghost of chivalric conception; alone, he wanders the world seeking love and purpose in the salvation of those who are lost, need help, or lack the love he so often pines for. Tipping strippers for their conversation and not their profession, attempting to endear himself to the ginger haired homeless who may or may not be in a violent relationship, preferring a normal massage over the happy-ending offered, he is unable to fix the broken pieces of himself with the broken pieces of others he tries to pick up.

de Bruler crafts a story leaving us knowing that, although we’re alone, there is a brief respite – sometimes – in the kindness of others, or, if not kindness, then the idea of being viewed by another to make us complete.

When we are desperate for love, for feeling, when you know that you aren't but have resigned yourself as the hero of your own story, it is all too easy to see beauty where there is the constant undertone of ugliness.

As always, read on.

Five stars.

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

He let the memories of the dancers' touch occupy him as he drove, as the windshield wipers swung like two dark metronomes completely in sync, remembering the curvature of the girls' ribs through their milky soft skin and the look of their sternum tattoos designed like gemstone-woven lace beneath their small breasts.

The sky was the color of asphalt and steadily turned blue as the evening diminished. The rain fell harder. He parked at the gas station to buy a couple of cans of cheap malt liquor and took them back to his crowded-but-tidy studio apartment. He sat on the couch, drinking and smoking in the dark wearing his dirty undershirt and heart-pattern boxers.

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It was still raining when he walked out of the club. The doorman called him 'sir' and told him to have a safe night. He nodded and noticed the bald doorman had a jagged neck tattoo crawling up from his starched collar toward his skull like a progressing disease. He drank from a miniature bottle of Nestle spring water; and, as he swallowed, a long, stringy vein beneath his sun-worn skin pulsed underneath the lights of the suspended awning, making the ravaged blue dragon dance.

He wiped the soles of his sneakers on the edge of the wet, purple carpet where the seven-foot propane heaters stood like the Greek columns of some portico. All he could hear now, other than the muffled decrescendo of the club beat, was the satisfying chatter of rain. Dead leaves stuck to his Volkswagen's tires like discarded citrus rinds as he pulled out of the lot and drove south on Airport Road back to town.

He felt a special type of loneliness when he left a strip club. He spent most of the time inside slumming with a finger of bourbon and a cheap cigar. Sometimes a girl would allow him to place his hand on the small of her back. Sometimes they pulled him up by his shirt collar to the edge of the tip rail and breathed in his ear just right, the way Josephine used to. He did what he could to endear himself to the dancers, to convince them that despite his gruff appearance and hulking six-foot-four frame, he would stay respectful. He liked to watch the dancers the way someone might stare into a sculpture or a painting at the museum. It gave him an extra dimension, or, at least, he thought it did. He hoped they thought of him differently than the other customers, but nothing he said could ever make him unique in their eyes.

They had just seen too much. A tall girl who called herself Martina, the one with the wiry, muscular build who liked to talk movies and stand-up comedy, seemed to appreciate him when he came in, knowing his cheap but still vaguely chivalrous habit of tipping girls for their time. She had talked about a client the previous night who wanted to tell her everything about his dark, oedipal fantasies. He shuddered when she relayed the horrible details. She said, "I just sat there nodding and telling him how hot it was because he was tipping so well. I had to pretend like always." Merle had given her a five-dollar bill while she stood beside his barstool with her small mauve purse wrapped around her defined, athletic shoulder.

He liked to play something old, something nostalgic when he drove back from the club: a song that might have made him cringe if he heard it in a bar around other people. But here, in the safety and anonymity of his little Volkswagen, he could listen without any sense of irony. He scrolled through his phone and played Joan Osborne's One of Us.

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He looked at the empty space where Josephine used to sit. He remembered the first time he saw her on the side of the street between the Starbucks and the pizza parlor in the little grassy oasis where the mimosas grew around all that dirt and soot and ash-colored concrete. She was wearing a white tank top and silky shorts. Her socks were pulled all the way up to her knees to conceal her legs. The ginger hair on her arms stood up as if from electroshock. She was making a sign on a thick, white section of particle board. He had no clue how she got it. He passed her by in his Volkswagen and they locked eyes. He drove to the QT gas station and bought a liter of Evian mineral water and took out ten bucks from the ATM. When he gave them to her, she looked at him as if she was upset. She said, "God bless you." He drove away, thinking about her, feeling ashamed that he was so attracted to a person in such a bad situation. But he wasn't exploiting her, he liked what he liked and couldn't help it.

He stared at the bright, television flicker on the empty spot on the couch where she used to sit.

She looked like a child from a distance, but once he got close enough to her face he could see the years of hard-living in the creases around her mouth and eyes. She must have been about thirty-five. She was arguing with a man in a bright red pickup truck. She kept walking around to the passenger door and opening it like she was trying to get in, but she never did. She'd slam the door at the last minute and run back across the road, up the hill, and through the elephant grass with her cellphone in her ear, talking frantically like she was afraid of him. He saw the man's hand hanging out the open window, duplicated in the side mirror as he gestured and reasoned with her. He must have been a good talker, because he convinced her to come back while he was stalled in the middle of the road.

He watched the silent film play out a couple of times: he'd talk her back down from the ridge and she would almost get into the truck before running off in hysterics. The man in the car was black and the girl,

as far as he could tell, was white. She finally crossed the street into the parking lot of a local park. There were plenty of people walking their dogs or monitoring their children on the playground, but he followed the red pickup anyway. The bed was full of scrap metal which rattled as he drove over the speed bump at the entrance. The early-spring wind was brisk but the sun was bright and warm. The telephone polls cast their lines across a cloudless sky. Cherry blossoms and pear trees bloomed. Pollen turned the watery trickle in the gutters a slimy neon green. The red pickup truck cornered the woman by a dumpster. At this point, it looked more like a marital dispute. She wasn't afraid of him. It looked like he was trying to cajole her into the vehicle to calm down. But who was he to tell? No one was throwing punches. No one was grabbing clothing. This shit was none of his business. He guessed he was just bored and nosy. He watched them a little longer, unwrapping a nicotine lozenge and setting it under his tongue. He heard it was faster that way to get the nicotine in his bloodstream.

After a little more arguing, she got in the truck. He went ahead and followed them out of the park. He had nothing better to do. When they got to the railroad tracks about a half mile down the road, she stormed out of the red pickup again. The driver didn't fight for her this time, just drove off. Maybe she said something she couldn't take back. He watched the pickup disappear at a traffic light and pulled up to the gravelly edge of the tracks and rolled down the window.

"You alright?"

She waved him away without looking at him as she headed down the center of the tracks holding her bright pink bookbag.

He could see the old house buried in the wild canes overlooking the tracks, the house where Angel Resendez, the Railroad Killer, murdered an old recluse years ago for a twenty-dollar bill.

"I wouldn't walk these tracks," he said. "The cargo trains plow through here pretty fast."

She just kept walking and didn't look back. He watched her step around the bend in the tracks but didn't start the car back up. He got out and crossed the raised foundation of glistening white gravel and splintered wood and hiked through the razor-wire brambles up to the forgotten old house. Something slithered past his boot as he took an awkward seat on the crumbling brick steps. He thought he saw a hawk's nest inside the eave of the roof.

He didn't want the developers to survey and raze so much earth. He thought we needed more ruins like this place around us, places where nature could recycle people's mistakes and show us that regeneration is a slow and unmanicured process.

Seasons later, a woman at an Asian massage parlor lightly caressed his penis in the morning. He had been there a couple times before. Nothing. This time, she pulled off his giant, skirt-like boxer briefs to better work around his tailbone. After a little while she had him turn over and began caressing his flaccid, recently washed penis. Unimpressive, he was sure. She had a smile on her face and a bubbly demeanor, not unlike someone under duress, or simply exasperated.

"It's okay?" she said in her clear, but fairly limited English.

He shook his head and waved her hand away.

"No, no. I don't want," he said.

There was a little bit of fear in her eyes as she hurried around the room to drape the towel over his midsection.

"Okay, sorry," she said and sat down at his head to start massaging his scalp.

After a minute or two she gave him a curious look.

"You no...." she trailed off and did a hand motion for jacking off.

"No, I don't. I just like the massage for my back."

She said, "You only do massage. You married?"

"No," he said.

"You are a good man," she said happily and lowered her forehead to touch his. Her respect meant more to him than that missed opportunity for a happy ending.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I can't say that I'm a particularly political individual. I'm slow to vote. Slow to form an opinion. Not particularly well-informed. But I think I understand right from wrong. I live in a state with a disturbingly high rate of domestic violence and spousal abuse. I've seen some bad things, and while I'm no hero, I've had to get involved more than once in helping a person in a vulnerable and dangerous situation. I suppose I wanted to write a story for a very small group of blue-collar men here in the South who are not users and abusers of women. I wanted to speak to the loneliness they feel in a culture that doesn't reward their decent behavior.*

AUTHOR BIO: Connor de Bruler was born in Indiana and grew up in South Carolina. He is the author of eight novels: *Tree Black*, *The Mountain Devils*, *Last Junction*; *Goodbye, Moonflower*; *Hollow Bible*, *Olden Days*, and the forthcoming *Hell, South Carolina*.