

The Bigger The Star, The Faster It Burns

By Gareth L. Powell

ED STOPS AT a lonely roadside café on a hot autumn night. He drums his fingers on the counter.

"Hey, how about a coffee?" he says. It's late and he's the only customer. The waitress comes over. She's eighteen or nineteen, with long hair and black eyeliner.

"I'm waiting for the water to heat up," she says. She's got a black t-shirt and there's a biro behind her right ear. She looks over Ed's shoulder. "Is that your car?"

He turns in his seat. He's left the Dodge across two handicapped spaces in the empty car park.

"Isn't it a beauty?" he says.

She looks at the sweeping tailfins and scratches her chin. There's dried egg on her sleeve. "It looks old," she says. "Is it American?"

Ed nods. He's just borrowed it for the weekend. "I'm on my way up to Hereford, to see the crash site."

She looks him up and down. "Are you a reporter?"

Ed shakes his head. "I'm a photographer."

"Up from London?"

"How did you guess?"

She leans her elbows on the counter. "Are you going to take my picture?"

Ed smiles. "That depends. You haven't told me your name yet."

She brushes the dried egg from her sleeve. "My name's Natalie."

They shake hands. "I'm Ed."

The radio at the back of the kitchen's playing an Elvis track. A truck rattles past on the road outside. "I'll get you that coffee," Natalie says. As she pours it, she looks back at him, over her shoulder.

"There's some wreckage at the top of the valley," she says, "I can show it to you, if you like."

Half an hour later they're rolling up the valley in the Dodge, with the roof down. The single-track road smells hot and the stars overhead are hard and sharp. Natalie's finished her shift. Ed's taken his jacket off. He pulls up his sleeve to show her his tattoo.

"I got that in Amsterdam," he says. Natalie wrinkles her nose. Whenever she moves, her jeans squeak on the seat.

"Take the next left," she says.

Ed lets his sleeve drop. He likes her accent. He touches the brake and downshifts into the turn.

Natalie points through the windscreen. "It's just up here."

Ed pulls off the road. Up ahead, caught in the headlights, is the wreckage she promised him. It's strewn over the gorse and heather, twisted splinters glinting in the moonlight.

He kills the engine. "Does anyone else know about this?"

Natalie shakes her head. "No-one comes up here much."

It's midnight. Ed opens his door and climbs out, camera in hand. He can smell the heather. He walks over to the nearest fragment. The metal's smooth and warm to the touch. With a dry mouth and sweaty palms, he starts snapping; knowing the pictures he's taking will make his reputation.

Back in the car, Natalie lights a cigarette. She puts her feet up on the dashboard and lets her long hair fall over the back of the seat. She knows there are armed helicopters patrolling the main crash site to the north. But here in the valley, all she can hear is the click of Ed's camera in the hot night air.

Ed comes back to the car with a souvenir from the wreckage: three luminous brass gauges mounted on a broken panel, all smashed, faces starred, each the size of a dinner plate.

"These have to be worth something," he says, and drops them onto the back seat. Natalie says nothing. She keeps her eyes closed. Her hair and clothes still smell of fried eggs. She hears Ed

walk around to the driver's side. He gets in and pulls the door shut, *ka-chunk*.

"Thanks," he says.

Natalie arches like a warm cat.

"No bother."

She looks down into the valley. The lights of the main road snake away like an orange river. She can see the café, and beyond it, the town. She can almost see her house. It all looks pathetically small from up here, and she can blank it out with her hand, cover it over as if it never existed.

Ed shudders the engine into life, and pulls the car round in a tight circle.

"Where can I drop you?" he says.

The wheels bump over the uneven ground. Natalie leans forward.

"Take me with you."

"What?"

"Take me with you to London." She's never even been as far as Cardiff, but she's feeling wild. It must be the fresh air.

Ed looks at her as if he's looking over a pair of spectacles.

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"What about your parents?"

"They won't even notice I'm gone."

Ed scratches under his white t-shirt. He knows that thanks to her, he's going to be rich, and so he's feeling generous.

He says, "Okay, what the fuck."

He steers the car back down the hill and on to the main road, where he guns the engine and lets the old car wind out to seventy-five. As they scream past the café, Natalie turns her head. She watches it recede into the darkness.

Ed clicks on the radio. Another Elvis song. It's a long, flat drag back to London, but he doesn't care. He's wired, practically jumping in his seat. There's music on the radio, the top's still down, and the warm night air makes him feel like a teenager. It's the first time he's felt like this in years. Beside him, Natalie starts to pat the side of the car door in time to the music. Her hair straggles out, careless in the wind.

They hit London an hour before dawn. On the backseat, the brass gauges glow, brighter than ever. Ed eyes them in the rear view mirror. By the time he pulls up at the kerb outside his house, the glow's spread itself to the dials on the car's dash.

Later, after they've freshened up, Ed introduces Natalie to some of his friends. He takes her on a Monopoly board tour of the Capital. He's trying to offload the brass gauges, but no-one will buy them. He tries all his contacts, but they won't touch anything from the crash site. They're scared of the government. All he manages to sell are the pictures – but that's still enough to land him a suitcase full of money.

He brings it back to the car, a stupid grin smeared all over his face like grease paint.

"Let's go shopping," he says. And by three o'clock in the afternoon, they're both fitted out with new suits, shirts and shoes. They keep stopping to admire themselves in shop windows. They're drunk on how good they look.

He takes her for an early dinner at an achingly hip Thai place off the Portobello Road. She's bought a new mobile phone, and while they're waiting for their food, she logs into her social networks, and brags to her mates about her new boyfriend.

"So," says Ed, "we're young and rich in London. What do you want to do first?"

Natalie puts the phone down. They're both tired. She reaches across the tablecloth, and her fingertips brush the back of his hand.

"Take me home," she says. "Take me home, with you."

Ed buys a bottle of wine and they walk back to his flat. It's a third floor studio, up six flights of stairs. There's a framed picture of Elvis above the fireplace. The fire escape opens onto a flat section of roof, still warm from the day's heat.

"Sit down, make yourself comfortable," he says.

It's getting dark. In the city, night comes all at once. The orange streetlights fire up and the blinds in the apartment blocks across the road go down. Everyone's cooking dinner and watching TV with the volume turned way up. No-one's looking out. No-one wants to hear what's happening in the street.

But out here on the roof, Natalie smells of flowers. She's wearing a silvery cocktail dress, and has her hair chopped into a shaggy mop. Planes pass overhead, one after the other, on approach to Heathrow, their navigation lights like drifting fireworks. After a glass of wine, he kisses her, and she wraps her arms around his neck.

They stay together for the rest of the week, hardly leaving the flat. They live on takeaways and cups of tea. Ed tells her about his ex-wife. She tells him about her parents. They have both forgotten the brass gauges on the back seat of the borrowed car. Neither of them expects their relationship to last.

Natalie's had boyfriends before, back in the Valleys, but nothing serious; symptoms of her boredom rather than cures for it. Ed's the first man to bring any real excitement into her life, and that's why she's grabbed him, the way drowning girls grab ropes.

The next morning, Natalie tries to phone her dad, but can't get through. There's a government block on the line; no calls in or out of South Wales. So she takes a shower instead. Ed pops out to buy a paper, and he reads the headlines on the way back to the flat. Three helicopters have disappeared from the crash site. An eyewitness claims they shot straight up into the night sky, glowing like meteors.

On the street, there are stalls setting up, and crowd control barriers being lowered into place. It's the weekend of the Notting Hill Carnival. When he gets back to the flat, he finds Natalie in the kitchen, wrapped in a towel. Breakfast consists of cold pizza from the fridge, left over from the night before. As they eat, he shows her his portfolio of photographs: the landscapes; the portraits; the journalism. She flicks through it all with one hand, a slice of congealed pizza balanced in the other. Eventually, she comes to a shot of the Pleiades.

"That's pretty."

She turns to the next page, which shows the familiar rectangle of the Orion constellation rising above the black branches of an autumn tree. The stars in its belt are cold and blue.

Natalie takes a bite of pizza, and talks around it. "Why's that one red?"

Ed leans over her. Her hair smells very clean. Her fingernail's tapping the upper left corner of the rectangle.

"That's Betelgeuse," he says. He traces the star with his own finger. "It looks red because it's all swollen up into a giant, nearing the end of its life."

"So it's an old star?"

He shakes his head. "No, actually it's younger than the sun."

She raises a quizzical eyebrow and he shrugs. He looks at the framed Elvis picture over the fireplace.

"The bigger the star, the faster it burns," he says.

Accepting this, she flips the page to find another view of the same constellation.

"These are great. How did you take them? Did you use a telescope?"

Ed straightens up. "No, it was a tripod camera on a ten second exposure." He had a telescope, years ago. Not much use for one in London, though; too much light.

He walks over to the window. Three floors below, he sees the borrowed Dodge parked at the kerb. It's a handsome machine, and he's a little bit in love with it. It's brought a much-needed splash of glamour into his life, and he'll be sad when he has to return it to its rightful owners.

Natalie's still eating pizza, still wrapped in her towel, her bare legs crossed at the ankles. She's cute, and he loves her accent, even though he knows there's no future for them, because they're too different. She's too young and excitable; he's too old and restless.

And he hasn't noticed that down below, the car's floating with its tyres half a centimetre above the road.

The phone rings. Ed picks it up. It's the editor to whom he sold the pictures.

"There are government types sniffing around. They want to know how you breached security at the crash site."

Ed stiffens. "I wasn't *at* the crash site. This was a separate area, a secondary impact."

"Then you should have reported it. They want to pull the pictures."

"Screw them."

"I can't protect you, Ed."

"Then screw you, too."

He breaks the connection. He takes Natalie out into the carnival crowds. Hand-in-hand, they walk the length of Ladbroke Grove, and she can't stop gaping. She's never seen anything like this. There are at least a million people packed into these streets. It's a sea of bodies, bright costumes and police horses. They buy coffee and jerk chicken from a stall. They have to shout to hear each other over the music.

They spend the day wandering, edging their way through the crush. They pause to watch live music on improvised stages; they follow the procession route, marvelling at the stamina of the dancers; and end the afternoon on a wooden table outside a corner pub, drinking overpriced beer in plastic pint glasses.

They watch it get dark. It's late, but the carnival's still in full swing. Everyone's celebrating, even though it's been raining and the pavements are wet.

"What time is it?" Natalie says. She has damp tinsel in her hair.

Ed shrugs. He doesn't have a watch. It's been a wild day, but now he's had enough of playing tour guide.

He pats her leg.

"Let's go home."

Natalie stiffens. She's been having the time of her life. She feels like a caged bird released into the wild, and she doesn't want it to end.

"I'm going to stay here," she says, not looking at him. "I'll meet you back at the flat later, okay?"

They both know she won't. She stands up and brushes down her skirt. Ed folds his arms.

"Don't be like that," she says.

By midnight, she's in the arms of a Brazilian telemarketer from Teddington. They lie together in his hotel room, the open window allowing the deep bass of the street festival to ebb and flow over them, the mingled smells of hashish and fried onions to galvanise their empty stomachs.

"I feel kind of bad about Ed," she says. "I shouldn't have left him like that."

Alejandro rubs a sleepy palm across his face. Although bare-chested, he's still wearing his jeans, and his hair's flattened on one side, damp with sweat.

"You don't have to worry about him anymore," he says. "You have me now."

He lights a cigarette from the pack on the bedside table. Natalie sits up and hugs her knees.

"Do you think he'll be all right?"

There are steel drums playing in the street. She gets up and pulls back the net curtain, looks down at the crowd. She says: "It was just a stupid argument."

Her shoes are lying on the floor by the door. In the orange half-light, Alejandro holds the cigarette pinched between his thumb and forefinger. He takes a small, tight drag and curses in Portuguese.

"Come to bed," he says.

Natalie ignores him. All she wants is to be left alone.

"You know, it was his idea to come here," she says. There are people blowing whistles in the street, and strange lights in the sky. She wraps her arms across her chest. The Valleys seems so far away, and she doesn't know where she is.

"I hope he's all right," she says.

Meanwhile, Ed walks back to the flat alone, hands in pockets. He hates London now. It's so dreary, and he's so tired. He needs to move on, find something new to do.

By the time he gets home, the crowd's started to thin. He sees the old Dodge parked where he left it, and no-one seems to have noticed that its tyres are floating a good couple of centimetres above the tarmac. The gauges on the back seat light it up from inside, like a miniature carnival float.

He looks up. A few stars poke through the ragged clouds. He doesn't want to go back to the flat. He's thinking of the crash site and the vanished helicopters, and how bone-achingly bored he is.

The very metal of the car seems to glow and sing. When he touches it, it makes his fingers tingle. He gets in and starts the engine, and the Dodge immediately rises half a metre into the air, much to the surprise of the crowd. He touches the accelerator, and it jumps up another half. Ed gives a fierce grin.

"Okay, here we go," he says. He waves to the circle of astonished onlookers, and mashes the pedal. The car leaps. Foot to the floor, he drives it straight up into the night sky, aiming for the stars.

He drives it so far and so fast that he ends up on a planet somewhere out on the edge of the galaxy. It takes him six weeks to get there. He gets a flat near the shoulder of Orion and has to drive the rest of the way on steel rims, but he gets there.

And he never comes back.

THE END

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