

The Cupcake Factory

<https://soundcloud.com/americanshortfiction/the-cupcake-factory>

This is New Hampshire in winter, past midnight. The roads are clear, the houses dark, the sky a suffering orange-gray, fat with frost and the forecasted blizzard. In the distance, like the North Star, John Stapleton, Jr. can see the truck-stop sign hovering above I-95, Bob's Big Boy spinning just above the tree line, offering up his empty tray.

Stapleton's sister Esther is driving. She tucks a greasy lock of hair behind her ear and pounds a fist on the dashboard, trying to resuscitate the speakers, which have worked sporadically for years but seem to have sputtered out completely today, along with their banter. Still, he trusts her enough not to ask where they're going.

She drives along the railroad tracks, past the dump, the ASPCA, the police test-firing range, finally pulling off the road just beside the back gate of the cupcake factory, a long, low building situated in the middle of a deserted parking lot. It's lined along one side with 18-wheelers pulled up to the loading dock like cattle in wait at a trough. Stapleton is sixteen years old and can't shake the idea that his sister has suicide on her mind. "You ready?" she asks as she opens the door, her dirty hair lifting in a chaos of spires, her unbuttoned army coat filling with wind.

"Sure," he says, but Esther is already sprinting toward the row of semis by the time he even thinks to ask: *Ready for what?*

She steps up to a bright-red Mack truck, wedges a foot atop a front tire, grabs hold of the rig's chrome fixtures, and hoists herself onto the hood. She shimmies up the windshield to the roof of the cab, concentrating her weight on the frame instead of the glass. Stapleton notes this and reminds himself: *Don't step on the glass. Don't fuck up and step on the glass.*

Up, up, he climbs, to the steel surface of the truck, to the top of the world, where Esther is now sitting cross-legged waiting for him.

Do you know the pleasure of climbing to a seemingly inaccessible, forbidden, uncharted vantage point? Can you describe the invigorating slice and tickle of the wind? They can see past the highway's tree line, past the pooling gas station lights, past the tips of the golden arches higher than the pines.

They walk the length of the truck to spin and stare. In such moments, where do self-loathing and sleepiness go? It doesn't matter what your watch says; you're at your finest hour. It's 3 p.m. and school is out. You're launched into a reeling afternoon, even on a frigid gray night, even with your fraught and fucked-up family less than a mile and a half down the road.

But there you are, lying on a truck in some New England winter, the frozen steel announcing itself to your ass through your jeans. You can pass a cigarette back and forth, you can watch the smoke rise. You forget the freezing steel; it passes. You can watch your own breath

overtake the atmosphere.

You pass that cigarette until there's nothing left to grab.

To Stapleton, smoking that butt to its very bottom seems to be precisely what they've come here and climbed these trucks to do. Expedition complete. *We have escaped and trespassed. Here we are stabbing our red-ember flag into the moon.*

But there's a flicker, a leap in time.

Stapleton can't figure out how and when, but out of nowhere, his sister has begun to accelerate. He watches as she reels back to the semi's edge for a running start, and then she's hurling her body toward the next truck in the row, across the deep, wide gulf, giving herself to the void and the atmosphere. Stapleton can't even get a hold of his own terror before the air thunders with Esther's landing. This is the sound of victory: her body colliding with Mack truck steel.

"Come back," Stapleton calls, but again and again Esther throws herself onward, receding into the darkness, each leap punctuated by reverberation and crash.

And there is Esther spinning a little dance at the end of the line, just a small, shadowed form turning to call out her command: "Give yourself a running start and don't look down!"

Stapleton goes. He can barely breathe. With each leap he can see it: his body bludgeoned and crushed, ricocheting between semis to the asphalt below, but he launches himself anyway, rising up into the bakery air.

He can just discern his sister's voice across the distance and wind. "Good," she says. "Go."

And there he is: flushed and electric, he's flying—he is!—for seconds at a time.

Can you really fault him, in this moment, for his failure to focus on the only important and somehow *obvious* thing: that Esther is going to kill herself, that suicide is already the main thing on her mind. Stapleton knows this, or he *almost knows*, or he *should know*—but he's flying, for fuck's sake.

Can you not forgive him this distraction? They've escaped their childhood home; they're together and they're flying. They're together, and they're flying, and the air smells like Ho-Hos, Ding-Dongs, and snow.

[clear-line]

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