

Benedict Wells, *Hard Land*

Sample translation from

Benedict Wells

Hard Land

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Number 1

This summer I fell in love and my mother died.

More than a year has passed since it all happened, but it'll always be “this” summer to me. Strangely, I often picture myself back then, standing behind the house, watering the garden with a hose. It was the start of summer vacation, there was a mountain of boredom looming ahead of me, and I had yet to grind down even the tip of it.

I stared across the fields into the distance. The air stood still, and the longer I gazed at this idyllic landscape, the blurrier it got around the edges. Until I sensed again, as an undertone, the fear I knew so well from childhood: that the moment was about to shift and something terrible was going to happen... The feeling was deceptive, as always. Because as usual, of course, nothing happened.

Until my parents called me into the living room.

This summer, a few things had changed almost overnight, like when you discover to your surprise that you've grown a little taller. A weird anger would often seize me out of nowhere; and I was asking myself questions that I never used to ask. Such as: why most adults were so hot to get jobs

and bring children into the world when in the end all that happens is that death comes and blows it all away. And whether it was actually possible for my mom to be happy with my dad, the way her life with him had turned out.

So anyway: the two of them were sitting there on the living room couch, and they announced that they had some great news for me.

“We’ve spoken to Aunt Eileen,” said Mom. “You can go and stay with her for a few weeks. Jimmy and Doug would love to see you.”

I struggled to control my breathing. Jimmy and Doug were my cousins from Kansas. Between them they weighed as much as a horse, and they’d already whupped my ass several times. I could believe they’d *love* to see me. The last time I’d visited, I’d spent all day hiding from them down at the garbage dump, throwing stones at a rusty street sign.

“You can’t do this... Seriously, there’s no way I’m ever going back there.”

Dad said, stern as ever, “Yes, you are! It’ll do you good. The past few days you’ve just been moping around in your room again. You need to get out and see people.”

And Mom said, “Honey, I know the situation with me is... hard for you. But that’s exactly why it’s good if you

don't spend so much time alone. And maybe you'll even make some friends in Wichita."

So that was it. They'd been going on about the friends thing for months already. I was nearly sixteen, and they were treating me like a child.

"Stevie was my friend!" I glared at them. "If he was still here, we wouldn't even be having this dumb conversation."

Mom walked over to me with faltering steps. She seemed so frail, but she hugged me tight, and for a moment there was a hint of something more serious about the discussion. At the time, though, I didn't want to see it.

"I don't want to go to Aunt Eileen's," I said, giving her the saddest look I could muster. My last chance to wiggle out of this thing.

But Mom wasn't buying. "I'm sorry, honey, you're going have to."

I pictured my activities schedule in Kansas. The days: fun and excitement at the garbage dump. The evenings: The Art of the Headlock with Jimmy and Doug.

So it was time to explain to my parents, calmly and rationally, why I was definitely not up for this. I would persuade them with my sensible arguments, after which they

would realize once and for all that I was grown up and would be doing my own thing from now on.

“Go to hell!” I yelled, and stomped upstairs.

That afternoon I stuck my head out of my bedroom and listened. Mom had gone back to her bookstore. The atmosphere in the house had changed, as it always did when she wasn't around. I could tell right away that *he* was still home. There were two kinds of silence: the normal, neutral kind, and my father's. A brooding quiet that I could hear all the way up here. I crept downstairs. Dad was slumped apathetically in front of the tube in the living room. He was watching a rerun of *The Fall Guy*, and had actually turned off the sound. We'd never been all that close, and this year we hardly talked at all. I didn't know whether it was because of Mom's illness, because Dad couldn't find a job, or because he just didn't know what to say to me. All I knew was that I would not survive eleven weeks of vacation stuck in the house with him.

I walked around town on my own until evening. Since I didn't have any money, I went to the Replay Arcade in the mall and looked to see whether anyone had broken the Defender record. And I almost dared to go into Larry's for

the first time – until I saw Chuck Bannister through the window. Larry's was a Grady institution, the diner where all the older kids hung out. There were a few unwritten rules. That fifteen-year-olds had no business being there, for example. And that you definitely didn't go in when a psychopath like Chuck Bannister who had it in for you was sitting inside.

Instead, I perched on the wall around the parking lot. I watched the cars going past for a while, then suddenly my mind was filled with the images of my mom again. Back then I thought about it all the time, at the most inappropriate moments. It was like a dark humming in my head. Sometimes there was enough noise around to drown it out. But it never went away.

On the way home, I walked past the only movie theater in our one-horse town: the Metropolis. Nearby Hudsonville, best known for its massive penitentiary, had a multiplex that showed all the latest blockbusters. Our movie theater, on the other hand, was an ancient den of senior citizens that was closing down at the end of the year. There'd been a sign in the window for weeks:

METROPOLIS

Help wanted—part time

Alongside it was a poster for some black-and-white French film. No wonder the place was going broke.

I was about to walk on when I heard voices in the foyer and peered inside. Two guys and a blonde girl in uniform shirts, all older than me, were standing at the box office. I'd seen the girl around. She was leaning forward while she talked, as if what she was saying was the most exciting thing in the world, then she laughed at a comment from one of the boys. A moment later all three of them disappeared into one of the theaters. I looked up again at the white sign with the red letters M-E-T-R-O-P-O-L-/S (the "I" hung crooked, like it had stumbled), and went home.

My parents were in the kitchen, playing Scrabble. Dad seemed to be winning, as always. His unimaginative approach consisted of systematically trying to block Mom from getting any points, while she preferred to put down beautiful but useless words like "passion" and "fleece." In other ways, too, they couldn't have been more different: Mom small and fine-boned, with glasses, a colorful blouse,

and woven bracelets on her wrists. She was addicted to books, and whenever she said goodbye to someone she would almost always recommend a novel they should read. With Dad, you could tell he used to be an athlete. A strong, slightly grizzled bear, he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, as usual. And he hardly read anything apart from the newspaper.

Before dinner my parents said we'd talk about Kansas again in the next few days, "without the drama" – and then we had my favorite pizza. They probably thought a cheap trick like that would appease me, and, well, they were right. All the same, I remember that I couldn't sleep that night. I lay in bed thinking: maybe it would actually be nice to have some friends. And: why am I so goddamn reserved?

Take my sister Jean: she came into the world, and right from the beginning she was confident and did what she wanted, whereas I was afraid of my own shadow. I didn't even dare learn to drive a car and get my license! I actually used to see the school counselor because of my anxiety. One time I couldn't make myself go inside the stuffy gym, another time I had a panic attack in class. Whenever it happened it was as if my mind was a warehouse full of lights,

and one light after another would suddenly go out until I was standing in total darkness. It always felt like dying.

I guess I was kind of a freak even then. That's what some of my classmates called me, anyway. But over the years I became so harmless that they didn't even hate me anymore for getting top grades in math. Since Stevie had moved away in the fall, I'd sat at a table by myself whenever I went to the cafeteria. On rare occasions I'd be joined by another loner, but never for long. And sometimes I had the feeling my whole life was like that table.

I was still awake after midnight, so I went to my sister's room. Jean was much older than me; she'd moved to the West Coast years ago, and my parents had left everything untouched for when she came to visit. But she hardly ever did. I sat on her bed for a while, listening to her old cassettes and really missing her a lot, even though we almost never did anything together. Maybe that was why.

In the end I put on my jacket and went out to the cemetery. Although, again, that sounds as if I was a bit of a psycho. Actually, it was just that we lived right next door to it, in a little white clapboard house where a forest ranger and his wife had lived before we came along. The cemetery was

on a hill outside town, and sometimes people would act shocked when I said I could see lots of graves from my window. But the house was cheap, and we weren't exactly rich. And the cemetery thing never bothered me. Seriously – I actually liked the silence. I was spending a lot of time there that summer, because of Mom and the dark humming in my head. I would picture what the funeral would be like, someday, and how I'd go back there afterward. Funny: In my room, the thought of death was often unbearable. And the cemetery, of all places, would calm me down.

It was cool for a summer night; the sky was huge and full of stars. But it didn't interest me. All I could think about was how Mom had fallen off her bike, twice, a couple of years ago. She'd blamed it on her poor eyesight and got a new pair of glasses, but that didn't help. And then the dizzy spells started, and the headaches.

That's how it all began: with two minor falls.

I walked through the cemetery, scanning the gravestones for something unusual. Martha F. Suderow, April 24, 1876 – March 1, 1979: a hundred and two! What I liked best was thinking up short biographies for the deceased. Carl Rothensteiner, April 12, 1901 – February 21, 1973: reliable craftsman, made it through a lot of difficult

times, never complained. Bad poker player, big Dallas Cowboys fan, taciturn, sometimes teared up at the movies. Died suddenly, heart attack; had had a long talk with his son a few days earlier, after a twelve-year estrangement...

I was just walking over to the next grave when I heard the crunch of gravel.

There was a flash of blonde hair in the darkness. I narrowed my eyes and saw that it was the girl from the movie theater. All I knew was that she was called Christie or Kirstie and went to my high school. I'd seen her many times before, of course, even here in the cemetery, but it was only recently that I'd started to notice her properly. Like when you've just learned a new word and suddenly it pops up everywhere.

I kept quite still. She didn't notice me, and flitted like a ghost to a grave near the entrance. I heard the hiss of a match. For a moment her profile was lit by the flame, then all I could see in the darkness was the glow of her cigarette.

All of a sudden she turned around – and looked straight at me.

I flinched as if someone had dropped an ice cube down my T-shirt.

She didn't seem surprised that I was there. She just went on smoking, observing me for a while. Then she stepped out through the gate and left.

The night wind blew in from the woods. I was still standing in the darkness, staring after her, long after she had disappeared. And that's all there is to tell – until the next day, when I started work at the movie theater, and the most awesome and terrible summer of my life began.

Number 2

June 4, 1985, was a day that reminded you just how good a day can be. Infinitely blue sky, the sun pouring down on Missouri, summer hanging heavy in the air. I was to present myself at the Metropolis around noon. Mom had responded to my summer job idea with excessive enthusiasm and immediately called them. I wasn't exactly keen on spending the summer selling tickets and snacks to old folks, but there were five reasons for doing it:

- I wouldn't have to go to my cousins' in Kansas;
- I'd be doing something at last, and would maybe make some friends;
- I'd get away from my father's gloomy looks;
- I could contribute something to the family budget (Mom's insurance costs were high, and Dad was unemployed, so we'd had to sell his car);
- I could get to know the blonde girl from the cemetery (maybe).

So I walked down the hill and into the sleepy hick town of seventeen thousand inhabitants, with its red-brick houses, maple trees, and the old-fashioned shops on Main Street. It was like walking into a postcard from the 1950s.

Grady lies near the Missouri River, surrounded by forest, Lake Virgin (yes, that's really what it's called), and endless fields of wheat and rye. For years there's been a sign on the edge of town saying "Discover the 49 Secrets of Grady." Why forty-nine and not fifty, or just ten, no one really knows. This saying first appeared in a poem by Morris, in which the hero spoke of "forty-nine secrets" allegedly hidden here. William J. Morris was Grady's most famous poet. "A Walt Whitman imitator," Mom always said. But he'd won a cultural award or something, ages ago, making him the only person from this backwater who'd ever won *anything at all*.

Apart from that, Grady was only good for one thing: running away. Everyone here knew everyone else, and if the wife of Barry the lawnmower salesman started an affair with a guy from St. Louis, everybody would immediately be talking about it. All the rumors were germinated either at Good Folks, with its regulars' tables – the hunting club, the veterans, the Republicans, the knitting circle – or among our five church communities: Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals and Presbyterians. The whole area was ultra-conservative. *The Catcher in the Rye* was still banned in schools, as was anything that even hinted at sex, and so far

as people round here were concerned, the argument that trumped all others was: that's as may be, but we've *always* done it this way!

At the entrance to the movie theater I hesitated. I've always been scared of new situations; my comfort zone (the school counselor's favorite word) must have been about the size of a penny. I practiced a casual introduction, murmuring to myself over and over again, like a madman: "Hi, I'm Sam... Hi, Sam's the name!" Feeling apprehensive, I opened the glass door.

The air inside was cool. The red carpeting in the foyer had holes in it; an ancient chandelier hung from the ceiling, and the walls were decorated with posters of classic films and signed photographs of famous actors. It smelled of oil and sugar, and also, somehow, of the dust of nostalgia.

"Here I am!" Mr Andretti, the owner, came out of the office, whistling.

Not much bigger than me, he was wiry, tanned, and as cheery as Tony the Tiger from the Frosted Flakes commercial. Besides the movie theater, he also owned the ice-cream parlor in the mall and the auto shop, Andretti

Automotive. Rumor had it he was distantly related to Mario and Michael Andretti, the racing drivers.

He explained to me that the job would be until the end of the year. I would take over from the current employees, who'd just graduated from high school.

I only really wanted to work there for the summer, but Mr. Andretti seized my hands in his great hairy paws and asked, "So you're ready to immerse yourself in the magical world of motion pictures?"

And I just nodded. Because what can you say to that?

"Excellent. The others will explain everything else."

The others... I was suddenly embarrassed to be walking around in these stupid kid's clothes because we didn't have money to buy new ones (and because I still hadn't quite grown out of them, unfortunately). The print on my T-shirt was a grinning banana wearing sunglasses, with a balloon saying "Cool banana!" I wanted to turn on my heels and run home.

Mr. Andretti pushed me into Theater 1. "This is Sam. Show him the ropes. Be nice." Then he patted me on the shoulder and left us alone.

The first thing I noticed was that the blonde girl wasn't there. Just the two older boys I'd seen the day before, who

stared at me. I was nervous, and started fidgeting, especially when I realized that one of them – an athletically-built guy with a mustache – was *the* Brandon Jameson, wide receiver on the Grady Hornets, our high-school football team. His oldest friends called him Brand; everyone else addressed him, reverently, as Hightower. He was black, and impressively tall. Even in winter he wore short-sleeved shirts, but above all, he always looked fierce, and there were some scary stories about him. He was actually said to have bitten the head off a bat before a game, like Ozzy Osbourne, because it was the mascot of the opposing team.

Hightower nodded to me and murmured, “Hey.”

Apart from that, it was only the other boy, Cameron Leithauser, who spoke. He was also tall, and had a pleasantly asymmetrical face, like a cartoon character. His dark hair was long at the back and short at the front. “Okay, *old sport*, let’s give you a tour of paradise.” He took my arm. “This is Theater 1, where we show the first-run features. The others usually perform this mundane task; I prefer to supervise the classics in Theater 2, because I seem to be the only one here with any taste.”

“Fuck you, man,” said Hightower.

They grinned, and fetched me a faded employee T-shirt from the office. Then they showed me how to lace up the projector, use the cash register, and work the popcorn machine without burning my fingers. Not long after that it was time to open the doors. There were exactly five customers.

“Perfectly normal for the two-thirty matinee.” Cameron stuck a cigarette in his mouth. “But at eight in the evening the place is bursting at the seams. We usually have six, even seven people in. No idea why old Andretti is planning to close this gold mine.”

An hour later I was standing on my own at the box office while Cameron and Hightower repaired the soft-serve ice-cream dispenser. They both seemed to be pretty big film buffs, and talked for ages about a “context-specific guitar” in an Antonioni film or something; I still don’t know what that was about. Listening to them, I was reminded of Stevie’s last night in Grady. We’d gone down to the Missouri River, had a barbecue, talked about other kids at school, and about girls. And as we lay there in our sleeping bags, I’d told him that I couldn’t get the scenes of Mom in the hospital out of my head. And Stevie confided that he was scared shitless about moving to Toronto. We’d cursed the

factory that had laid our fathers off and promised each other we'd stay friends "forever." I knew now how childish all that had been. He'd stopped writing; my last three letters had gone unanswered.

Overall, it felt as if I'd grown a new pair of eyes. Because I must have been blind for all those years before. Of course I'd known that mothers die and friendships fade away, but I'd never seen these things actually happen. Now I saw my dad's self-doubt as he scanned the want ads. And I saw my mom's fear when she tried to give me a comforting smile. And I don't know whether that was better or worse.

In the afternoon break, I went and sat on the steps outside the theater. I had one of my sister's mix tapes in my Walkman (a crude combination of Patti Smith, punk, and her secret weakness for OMD ballads) and was eating an ice cream when the blonde girl from the cemetery came down the street on roller skates. She was wearing sunglasses, and almost stumbled on a bump in the sidewalk, but she braked skillfully in front of the entrance and said something. To me.

I took off my headphones. "What?"

She grinned. "I said: So has my dad finally found a fresh victim?"

Until then I'd always thought braces were a bad thing, but I actually liked hers straight away. She must have been wearing them because of the little gap between her front teeth. I stared at it and licked my ice cream again without replying, which probably looked pretty deranged.

“So, you having fun?” She took off her roller skates and pressed them into my hands – “Hold these a minute” – while she slipped on a pair of flipflops.

I watched her, mesmerized. Incidentally, I always think it's dumb when people in books or movies say “time stood still” for them at moments like these. The problem is that that's exactly what it doesn't do – which makes it all the more embarrassing when it takes you forever to think of something to say.

“Uh ... yeah, I reckon,” I said finally, handing back her skates.

To cut a long story short: At this point in time, I hadn't had much to do with girls. And by “not much”, I mean nothing at all. I'd had a girlfriend once in elementary school, Wendy Stohler, but only for two days; I don't think we even held hands. If kissing was first base and sex the home run, I was still in the locker room tying my shoelaces.

I did at least manage to pick myself up off the steps – I was a little shorter than her – and hold out my hand. “Sam Turner.”

“I know.” She shook it. “Your mom is my dealer.”

I gave her a questioning look and glanced furtively at her hair, which was bobbed to her chin.

“Reading material...?” she said. “Books? Those rectangular things made of paper?”

She told me that she’d started coming to Best Books as a kid, when my mom used to read aloud in the bookstore on Saturdays. And that she was glad Mom was getting better. I nodded, but my mind was all over the place. I thought: Okay, this pretty girl is really talking to you. I thought: Stand up straight so you’ll look taller. I thought: At least you’re not wearing the banana T-shirt. I was still holding her hand, though. When she noticed, the little gap between her teeth flashed in a smile.

“Kirstie Andretti,” she said, chewing gum, and squeezed. Pretty hard. I let go, and watched her walk into the movie theater with the skates in her hand. And for the first time in ages the dark humming in my head was gone.

Number 3

The first week at the movie theater was a total loss. Again and again I resolved to “come out of myself” a little, because that was what the school counselor was always urging me to do. Only, if you think about it, it doesn’t say much for your “self” if you’re better off slipping out of it and leaving it behind like a broken shell. The counselor didn’t think that was funny. And maybe it wasn’t funny – just true. Because here I was again, standing around in the Metropolis, saying nothing.

The others helped out when it was busy, but otherwise they kept to themselves. Even though they didn’t really work at the movie theater any more, its office was apparently where they still met to kill time and plan their evenings. The three of them were their own little gang. On my breaks I often saw them heading off to the lake, or to Larry’s, and if one of them had asked me, I’d have joined them in a heartbeat. But no one did.

The only one who really talked to me was Cameron. Hightower ignored me, and Kirstie was like the personification of sweet ’n’ salty popcorn. She could be nice, but when she was with the others she often teased me. Once,

when I was about to get the theater ready for a horror film, she said mockingly to the other guys, “Can we actually let this kid in without his parents?”

I don’t know why she always did that with me. And it annoyed me even more that I kept on looking in her direction anyway. I thought about her eyebrows, which were what I secretly liked best about her; they were brown, which contrasted with her blonde hair, and were like her dad’s. And I thought of a conversation I’d overheard in the Replay Arcade. Two guys from my math class had been gossiping about girls like a couple of morons. At some point the conversation had come around to Kirstie Andretti, and one of them had claimed she was “hot to trot.” Only it wasn’t clear to me what that meant. That she’d gone with lots of guys? Or that she was eager to go out with guys?

Either way, it was definitely food for thought.

After the evening shift, I didn’t go home. Instead, I stood around in the box office for ages. I was fighting the pictures in my head and thinking about Mom, who hadn’t been feeling well that morning. And when I heard the three of them talking and laughing in the office again, I summoned all my courage – and walked in!

The room was a total smokehouse. Kirstie, Hightower and Cameron were sitting on a ripped leather couch, and looked up at me inquiringly. For several seconds I stood in the doorway like a discarded broom, completely tongue-tied. But when none of them said anything either, I just sat down on a chair alongside. I don't know whether that counts as "me" finally coming out of my "self," or whether both of us were sitting there.

The three of them were watching MTV on the little old TV by the sink. They commented on the videos, and talked about people I didn't know, and the colleges they'd all be going to after the summer.

"You know what'd be cool?" said Cameron, rolling a joint. "If people purred like cats when they liked something. Involuntarily. So, like, a couple on their first date are both really shy. And suddenly the guy starts to purr. He tries to cover it up – 'Uh, d'you know what you want to order?' And the girl also acts like she hasn't heard anything, and stares at the menu, embarrassed, but the purring keeps getting louder..."

Hightower and Kirstie looked at him as if he were mental, but I thought it was funny. And it was kind of nice, the way they talked about stuff like this and poked fun at

each other. It reminded me of me and Stevie. Cameron and Hightower had known each other since childhood; they came across like two brothers who were just very different. And Kirstie could tell dirtier jokes than any guy, and would say weird things like, “Well, you know, the truth has sharp edges.” Or, “I was still dead then,” instead of “I wasn’t born yet.” And she seemed to be all sorts of things when she was with the group – just not the silent girl from the cemetery.

I didn’t say anything, but that was okay. Because, even there, all I was really thinking about was how Mom had wanted to send me to Kansas for summer vacation – away from her. And I don’t know if anyone will understand, but it was really good not to be home that evening, and to be in the office of the movie theater with these three.

Later, they were heading out to a party, so I locked up and just followed them out. We were already outside and standing by the car when Kirstie took me aside.

“Hey, Sam?”

I looked at her and knew what was coming before she said it.

“Listen. No offense, but the three of us” – Cameron and Hightower glanced over sheepishly – “we’ve known

each other for ages, and we've only got a few more weeks together. We'd just like to hang out by ourselves, and ...”

I kept nodding. In fact, I don't think I stopped.

“Sure,” I said. “Have fun at the party!”

On the way home it was like someone had dumped out an ashtray over Grady, and it was the same when I opened the front door: everything dark and gray. It took me a moment to realize that the hall light wasn't on. And then I heard Dad's muffled voice upstairs in the bathroom – and Mom throwing up.

The same as that morning.

It was like when you're half asleep and still hoping that something is just a bad dream. And then you understand that it's the other way around: the reality was there in your dream the whole time, weighing it down like lead.

I could hardly breathe. I staggered up to my room. Mom in bed... her bald head, tubes everywhere... her empty eyes...

For a while I stood there, motionless. Then I punched my pillow and bellowed into it. Nothing, nothing ever changes in this shitty life, I thought, and yelled even more. The humming in my head grew louder. And it frightened

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me how angry I was at myself; I didn't even know exactly why. The anger began where my thoughts came to an end.