

Julie in 2004

by John Riley

Outside the lakeside bar, the summer of 1957, she leans against the brick wall, one arm across the body that brings her so much trouble, her back to the door, cigarette in hand. Not yet full evening, she watches as the pelicans dip and circle and make headlong dives into the lake. It's the first body of freshwater west of the ocean and she wonders if each pelican makes a decision which they prefer, saltwater fish or the killifish and crappies scooped out of the lake. She knows they fish the closest body of water, but likes to imagine a fickle pelican flying in circles while deciding what to have for supper. One pelican looks pretty much like the other. Brown and beige with gold eyes and beaks that should be too long for their bodies. They seem to travel in groups but their coming and going is a thread that hides its end.

Inside the bar sits a man with a navy tattoo on his arm and while waiting for him to take her home she thinks about the newsreel she saw the night before when he took her to the Carolina Theater. We'll make it a real date, he'd joked. I'll even buy you a pop. When he smiled she thought about caverns, in the West, where dry birds sit on cliffs. The newsreel was about the future. In 2004 robots of all different sizes and shapes will do most of the work, leaving people plenty of free time to enjoy with their friends and family. Medicines will cure most diseases, and there will be flying cars. It's hard for her to imagine a sky filled with little flying cars. She'll probably be dead by then, but if her old body held up and her mind was still good she'd give flying one a try. She doubts the cars will be able to fly like the pelicans, in wide looping arcs and effortless soars, and the crosswinds that blew in from the Atlantic will make for a bumpy ride. She'd have to be careful, but couldn't you just see it? Her wrinkled and gray, most likely a widow, holding on to the little car's yoke, flying alone, aimlessly, satisfied. No one to bother her, no one to notice her, no more future forcing her forward.

