

# What February Feels Like

by Ronit Feinglass Plank

**B**Y THE TIME I LEAVE FOR THE BUS to work the raised white bumps spelling out “Housatonic River” on the green highway sign are starting to reflect passing headlights. The poor river always looks so cold in February, rushing past with all its noise and splash. It still has PCBs in it from the GE plant that was here thirty years ago. So sad that a beautiful thing like that can’t actually be what it seems.

{ The poor river always looks so cold in February, rushing past with all its noise and splash. }

nd I used to go down and watch the river a lot when my mom first brought me here to live with him. She was supposed to come up to Pittsfield from Virginia tonight for my birthday weekend. Sweet sixteen, that’s me. She hasn’t visited since last summer. My stomach was nervous butterflies all week just thinking about it; I could hardly eat and the last two nights I didn’t sleep well. After school today, I practically ran home. I had almost finished straightening up the apartment for her when she called and cancelled. Work or something. I felt little prickles around my head when she told me. My throat went tight and I could barely speak, I had to move to the window for some air. Take care of yourself, she said before she hung up.

I stood there holding the phone, looking out from the third floor window. I stared at the naked trees reaching up for the sky with their scared veiny branches, I smelled chimney smoke from one of the houses down the street. My forehead was pressed against the icy glass when Botchnik’s called to see if I could fill in, they were down a server. I asked if Rob was working and they said yes he was.

That’s when I decided tonight is the night.

I am not going to spend my whole birthday weekend sitting around this dumb town thinking about how much better everything would be if Mom were here. It hurts too much. She can do whatever she wants, it doesn’t matter to me anymore. I’m going to make things better for myself.

Tonight I am going to ask Rob for a ride home and I’m going to kiss him. And when he kisses me back it will feel like we’re melting in the dark together. He’ll put his arms around me and press me to his chest and we’ll stay that way. He won’t want to let me go. Tonight everything will change.

The sun is almost gone by the time my bus comes. Dad likes me to sit near the bus driver, he’s been telling me that since I was ten, when Mom first dumped me up here. That first summer Dad let me paint my bedroom bright pink and he took me to a ton of garage sales. We walked to the diner every weekend and we talked about all kinds of stuff. We don’t anymore. Maybe it got hard for him to pretend all the time that everything was fine. That we both weren’t wishing my mom would change her mind and come back.

When I get on, the bus smells like heat and old bodies. I pass two crepe-y ladies on my way to the back. I can sit where I want, I am going to be sixteen tomorrow.

I still am not sure why Lori and me are allowed to serve liquor at Botchnik’s, I think everybody thinks we’re eighteen. Dad knows but doesn’t seem bothered by it, it’s only twice a month. He says I have a good head on my shoulders and twelve dollars an hour off the books is twelve dollars an hour I won’t need to ask him for. Lori is the one who got me the job, and Lori knows about the world. She and her boyfriend have done it. I asked her about it and she told me it’s like feeling pressure up inside, near your stomach. I can’t imagine it, I mean, she is sixteen and a half, but still. Lori gets to live with her mother and her mother smokes cigarettes and boils frozen Contadina ravioli and puts red sauce on it and Lori has her boyfriend over and they all eat dinner like a family.

Rob has a huge dinner every Sunday after church with his entire family. They all still live in Pittsfield and sometimes Rob makes the Sunday meal for everyone. He wants to go to school to be a chef, he’s only bartending to make money. He was fourteen when he cooked his first meal for everyone. It was going to be Lamb Kebab Night. And this is something he told me in confidence and when he did I didn’t say a word, not until I was sure he was finished because I knew how special it was that he was telling me, but when Rob went to the butcher shop, and saw a whole lamb lying on the counter, he got so upset, he had to leave. He made vegetable kebabs for his family that night instead and nobody even razzed him, his folks wouldn’t allow it.

I step off the bus and walk the block to Botchnik’s. Whenever I work with Rob I have a good time. He always gets me my cocktails first and he’s been teaching me how to do the garnishes. We talk about the guests at the parties, it seems to me everybody drinks like it’s their last night on earth. Rob says the alcohol helps them feel better about themselves. When he gets really busy he can barely look up at me when I come to the bar, but this smile sometimes shows up on the side of his face and I can tell I’ve made him laugh or at least I am not annoying him. He never laughs at anybody else at work like that. I feel like a real person around him. He’s twenty-three.

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winter, bar, river, birthday

## About Ronit Feinglass Plank



Ronit (pronounced ro-neat) writes fiction and nonfiction and has written and performed her own work in Los Angeles where she was a member of The Actors' Gang. She studies writing at the University of Washington and at Richard Hugo House in Seattle where she lives with her young family.

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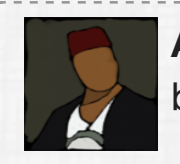
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