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The Industrial Room of the Illiana Hotel, Whiting, Indiana

In Whiting it was a natural to name the hotel bar The Industrial Room. Walking past, a summer night, from a puzzling double feature about grownups’ romantic and murderous attractions, a laugh speared out at me the way some friends of my uncles laughed—loud and dangerous, thick necked and something broken in the eyes, with lots of cutting edges. The bar smell was sweet, the way certain carnivorous plants are. The laugh said, This is how you will be. I was a reader. I loved the first half of biographies, when the subjects were too young to be served in the Industrial Room. The last half of the biographies was as boring or threatening as the loud laughers my uncles brought home. Whiskey numbed the fatigue of not knowing enough and working too hard and you had to laugh that loud to feel yourself doing it, you were that numb. They were married to smart, good-looking women who drank as much but laughed less, who were sweet to a boy and seemed to say, with grown men this is as good as it gets. God damn it, I prayed out on the buggy summer sidewalk that night, what can a boy do to make sure his biography’s as good in the last half as the first?

James Hazard