

WHERE ARE YOU WHEN WE'RE TOGETHER

by

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DEDICATION

To Sanya, Kylie, and Ram <3

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I want to thank my friends and family for their support throughout this semester and the four years prior. I would also like to thank my advisor Jordan Morille for his help this semester. I appreciate your encouragement on this journey. It would not have been possible without you.

ABSTRACT

"Where Are You When We're Together" is a work of creative fiction inspired by the film "Thelma & Louise" following Elaine, a woman in her early thirties, whose profound dissatisfaction with the world around her manifests in severe insecurities and social anxiety. After growing closer to a new neighbor, Elaine joins her on a mission west to abort an unwanted pregnancy. Elaine sees this new relationship and journey west as an opportunity to escape her own mental ailments, but soon realizes that her bond with this mysterious woman might have far more dangerous consequences than she was prepared for. On her journey she is forced to reevaluate her worldview and her perception of herself. As she familiarizes herself with her new terrain, Elaine finds herself reverting to her old dissatisfaction with the world, but with a new understanding of the pervasiveness of capitalism and mental illness.

FOREWORD

The idea for this story evolved after watching the movie *Thelma & Louise* and being inspired by the feminist story told in a typically male-dominated genre. I wanted to explore the complexities of relationships between women and how their inner worlds can shape the other person. I began with the intention of exploring the pervasiveness of capitalism and how it informs the cyclical nature of trauma and mental illness, particularly in women. I intend to continue working on this story after graduation to develop the characters and their relationships.

Chapter One

My days usually began with a rolling alarm, bells interrupting one another signaling a new beginning, a fresh start that I had not taken advantage of the day before or any day prior. This was my chance to begin my journey as a better person and the first obstacle was getting out of bed before noon. The first alarm was followed by at least seven others, more if I could muster the will to press snooze. I would relentlessly twitch some part of my body, usually my toes, in an attempt to keep myself awake long enough to pull myself out of bed. In the moment, it seemed like that was all I could do to fight the

impulse to go back to sleep, which I inevitably did. Rarely was I successful, dozing in and out of this world between those alarms.

In the space between I can imagine that I'm not in bed alone. I don't reach out to the other side of this queen size bed. I confine myself to exactly half of the bed that was passed down to me by my mother's aunt. I'm almost paralyzed by the thought of reaching out to the conjured person occupying the other half of the bed. This person is someone who wanted me, but doesn't want the person I've grown into. To confirm the reality of my solitude would break me. The divide was too lethal, the consequences too disastrous, to take the chance and find out what's on the other half of my bed from my childhood home.

After giving in to the urge to sleep, I awoke for the last time with the sun already creeping past the top of the window in my bedroom, pulling itself westward. I let the weight of my full bladder hold me to the bed for as long as I could stand it. When the stabbing pain became too insistent, I rolled out between the scratchy cotton sheets. I winced as my toes first touched the carpet, the first new sensation of the day. My limbs stiff and my breasts sore from a night of tossing and turning. These unpleasant sensations followed me to the cold tile that surrounds me in my cramped bathroom. The tile was a cool Pepto-Bismol pink that I actually didn't hate. I thought it was cute because it reminded me of my grandmother's old apartment. She hung framed paintings of the apostles, but I chose to decorate the space with horrible 'abstract' paintings I'd done myself. I would replace them with something nicer to look at, but I saw them as reminders to practice, though they usually just watered the pit of self-hatred in my stomach. Besides, there wasn't room for redecorating in the budget.

By the time I got in the shower it was close to one in the afternoon, but I spent an hour standing under the hot water, inspecting the pale flesh turning a bright red. It wasn't intentional, spending so long in the shower, but it was hard not to obsess over every inch of skin, every pore, and every hair. I rolled my torso so I could see the fat of my stomach undulating like waves meeting the shore. I pulled the skin on my thigh taut to see the stretch marks grow to their maximum length. I wanted to contort my body to its ugliest. It wasn't vanity that fueled this trance, but repugnance. I knew that I wasn't anything special, but something closer to unlovable. While I was raised to hate myself and hadn't ever grown out of that, I took pride in being unlovable. I wasn't going to change myself to conform to fit patriarchal standards of beauty, and if that meant living the rest of my life as a hermit, then so be it.

I lived alone in a small duplex that hadn't been renovated since the seventies. Wood paneling and shag carpet made up the four corners of my stagnant world. The dark paneling in the living room soaked up what little light came in from the small windows. It was often difficult to tell what time of day it was due to the north facing windows. The dark edges of the room crawled closer to the windows as the day grew long, making the small space feel even smaller.

The gray shag carpet disgusted me. I refused to walk on it barefoot so I wouldn't feel its moldy tendrils between my toes. Even with socks on, I was careful where I stepped. Dark stains had been worn into the carpet with decades of tenants' dirty feet weighing down the ugly carpet. No matter how hard I tried to clean these stains, they stayed put. I had rented a carpet cleaner twice, and it brightened all but the dark stains

that were nearly crusted over. It did leave the floor damp for a few days, which I'm convinced was the beginning of the mold infestation.

The path from the front door to the short hall that led to the kitchen and bedroom was worn the most. The path ran right through the center of the room, from the front door in one corner to the doorway to the hall in the other corner, but I had bought a rug as large as I could afford to cover the worst of it. There were a few stray stains that I tried to cover with furniture, but others were too inconvenient to be disguised. Those were the real issue, the ones that limited my steps to this square foot of carpet, but not that one. They shrank the size of walk-able space in my living room by a third. I was a mouse in a maze.

My landlord, Will, was an older man who wears wife-beaters and a trucker cap to cover his receding hairline like a uniform. I hadn't ever called him to fix anything in the unit out of fear of being alone in the space with him, so it was left in a state of perpetual decay. Aside from the moldy carpet, the faucets always drip and the water heater constantly makes a screeching noise that can be pretty disturbing, especially as my only company at night.

I ate my first and hopefully last meal of the day between three and four o'clock. It's not that I particularly care about looking a certain way, but the dwindling unemployment checks last longer the more I scrimped on things that didn't bring me joy. For this one meal I could overindulge in cheap processed food bought via curbside at the chain grocery store in town. My rationale being the less time I spent cooking or eating, the more time I could spend on self-improvement: consuming and creating art.

I'd often convince myself that there was some purpose to be had for me in this world, invest myself half-heartedly, then be disillusioned with my new hobby in a few months time. My latest fixation was painting. Before that it was making clothes from up-cycled materials, gardening before that, and woodworking before that. The abysmal fruits of my labor were never worth the wasted materials it took to make. With the world going to hell in a hand basket, I figured I was doing more harm than good at this point. Every day I woke up with a new reason to quit trying.

I ate my one meal of the day on my dumpy navy couch in front of my small TV, feet propped on the coffee table cluttered with abandoned paintings and paper plates of drying paint, my bowl of soup resting in my lap. I'd put on some movie or YouTube video, part of my quest to consume everything ever made. It was nice to finally have some noise in the space after spending all of the early afternoon alone with my thoughts.

Back story please...

After my late lunch, I made myself some tea and put on an ambient environment video on YouTube and sat on the couch attempting to paint for as long as I could stand the voice in the back of my head telling me that I'm not good enough and to stop trying. The video I chose today displayed a cozy scene inside a cave looking out onto a snowy forest. The weather outside lent some reality to this fantasy landscape, though I lived in a perpetually dry chill in the winter, with little chance of snow blanketing this town.

Today I was using gouache paints to replicate a picture of a beachside crag. I squeezed dollops of blue, white, green, and brown onto a fresh paper plate and picked a few brushes out of a gallon size Ziploc. I used a watercolor pad, but I had to use water

and paint sparingly. Too much still made the paper curl up. I started with thin layers for the base colors and tried to achieve the shapes with shading and highlighting. I was able to make a decent shape for the cliff, but I was bored with the blue of the water. It was too static, too little going on to really resemble the actual ocean. I tried to create more texture in the water with more layers of paint, adding a stroke here and there. Despite my best efforts to control the movement of the slick paint my brushstrokes were too erratic and left clots of paint that wrinkled the paper. I tried to use more water to even it out, but it eroded the surface of the paper, nearly wearing holes in the image.

The first signs of failure broke my streak of concentration, draining my motivation. I tossed the cheap flat brush I was holding back onto the paper plate. It hit the lip of the plate with too much force and rolled off onto the table, smearing a cerulean shade onto the already damaged surface of the coffee table. The defeat I felt was nothing new. I was done for the day. Maybe tomorrow would be the day I finally gave this one up.

I sunk back into the couch, my torso creating a deep slope that was entirely uncomfortable, but I couldn't bring myself to readjust. While I was quite familiar with these feelings of worthlessness, more recently these moods have knocked the air out of me. It was hard to persuade myself to do anything after hearing, tirelessly, that I am incapable of doing what I want to. Recently I'd tried to stop being so harsh on myself, but the habit was ingrained into my brain. It was hard to let go of.

Still slumped on the couch, I stared into the fantasy world playing on loop on the small screen in front of me and took a step back from reality. I felt pathetic for how little it took for me to reach for escapism. But what else was there.

My consciousness reached for the image playing on loop on the television. The fire beckons me, inviting me to help it fight off the chill of the snow. The main activity of the soundscape is a crackling fire close to the entrance, casting a warm glow on its surroundings. A mattress occupies half the floor space and has a fur blanket draped over it, the excess running onto the cave floor. Oil lamps and disposable coffee cups littered the floor skew the historical context of the ambience. I ignore the thermos and disposable coffee cups, pretending it's the setting of an eighteenth century romance novel and that my lover is waiting underneath the heap of fur blanket on the mattress.

I can feel the cold damp floor of the cave on my bare feet and the waves of heat the wind pushes off the fire towards me. I imagine crouching low to run my hands over the thick fur underfoot. I comb my fingers through the strands of fur, running my hands up onto the bed, seeking out a buried foot. I think to crawl under the blanket, looking for much needed warmth. I greet a faceless man as I tuck myself under the cover, enveloped in surprising warmth. As I close the distance between our bodies, I begin to sweat. I imagine how it feels to touch myself through this stranger's hand. As he stirs, he runs a hand up my leg and I feel the hair that is too long to indicate habitual shaving. A disgusting creature, he thinks. A last resort. Perfect for exploration in seclusion. He's aroused by the unfamiliar terrain of my body, but is only brave enough to explore it in this fantasy I've created for him.

The roar of a large engine takes me out of this reverie and abandoning me in reality again. I turn on the couch to peek out of the curtains. I see a U-haul rumbling up the street and pull into the driveway on the left side of the duplex. There's a blonde woman sitting in the driver's seat, but no one is in the cab of the truck with her. Of course Will would rent out the unit next door and not tell me. He never tells me shit about what's going on with this place. He could sell it and not tell me until the day before I needed to move out like the inconsiderate jackass he was.

The woman opens the door of the truck, holding it open with her foot as she twists her torso to grab something from the passenger seat. As she sits up, I can see she's loaded her arms down with trash, a phone, and the keys to her unit. She steps out of the truck and closes the door with her elbow. She's wearing converse, biker shorts and a ratty t-shirt. Her outfit makes me wonder if she's moved here from out of town, driving for hours on end just to end up here. Questionable judgment on this one.

She walks to the porch I suppose we share now and I let the curtain slip between my fingers so she doesn't see me watching her. She disappears inside for awhile so I look to the rest of the neighborhood to see if anyone is out. Usually I liked to sit by the window every day, watching the early evening sun move across my street and how it colored the lives of the strangers that lived in such close proximity to me. It felt so special to observe a glimpse of what made their lives theirs.

The guy that lived directly across the street from me had work for most of the day, I presume because his driveway stayed empty from the time I got up until seven in the evening. An older woman lived in the blue house to my right. The paint was chipping

and the screens bulged out at the corners of her windows, but she had a nice porch. Every day she got home around five, but wouldn't leave her car for at least fifteen minutes. She always wore a similar outfit of jeans and a button-up shirt, her hair pulled back in a low bun and bangs curled over her forehead. I imagined she worked at the front desk of a warehouse or at an automotive shop. She always looked like she came home from a long day surrounded by male coworkers. The fifteen minutes in her car were necessary to decompress, like therapy.

She was probably in her late fifties and was hardened by years in a male dominated field. I felt sorry for her, but also admired her in a way. It was something that I felt entirely incapable of, which was perhaps why I was now unemployed. She would come outside to sit on her porch with two Michelob Ultras soon after going inside and sit on her phone for an hour or so, and then she'd head back inside to grab two more and return to her spot on the porch. She was always my favorite to watch. I liked to think of her as radical and compassionate, the type of person who wouldn't let me say no to treating me like her daughter, if only I could work up the courage to talk to her.

I watch her every day without fail, trying to think of something to say to her. I imagine walking out onto my small stoop and checking my empty mailbox, and making remarks about expecting something important to start up a conversation. I never make it out the front door. I spend an hour passively watching her and fantasizing about the relationship we could have.

Today when she got home and saw the woman moving in next door, dragging a couch across the dead grass in our front yard, she went over to help her lift it inside. I felt

bad for not offering to help, but those feelings soon wilted. The woman's back was to me and Michelob Ultra Lady was at the other end of the couch, squatting and ready to lift, when I guess the other woman said something and she laughed. I was jealous at how easy this interaction seemed. Of all the times I've fantasized about making my neighbor laugh with some clever quip, I've never known what would actually make her laugh. I don't really know anything about her. But now this other woman does. She'll probably be the one Michelob Ultra Lady adopts. She'll be the one to get invited over for dinner, maybe they'll even spend Thanksgiving together.

I try to distract myself with a movie, fighting the urge to smoke and lay in bed for the rest of the night, the screen of my phone glaring back at me. I settle into the well-worn folds of the couch, scrambling to find the remote lost in the blanket burying the lower half of my body. When my search is rewarded, I start the process of scrolling through Netflix, unsure of what to watch. This is always the most difficult decision of the day, choosing between easing the foul mood that hangs over me all day, or to stoke its embers, trying to ignite dormant emotions.

I settle on an older adaptation that I haven't seen before. The ache in my chest snowballs, expanding outward from my chest as I watch the main characters navigate a cruel world. I feel closer to tears than I have in months. I feel like a witness to the chaos and disorder of these women's lives. I relate to their refusal to make the choices that are expected of them and their frustration when they are punished for it.

Three sharp knocks from the back door are barely audible as my living room fills with the sound of a chorus of women barking in an ice cream parlor. My heart starts

racing. Someone must have gotten my door confused with my new neighbor. Someone intentionally knocking on my door, to see me? The thought seems ridiculous.

I rehearse what I'm going to say on my short trip to the back door. *Sorry, I think you got the wrong door. No, it's not me you're looking for. It could never be me.* Past regrets that I could never forget play on a reel in my mind as I approach the door.

A stained glass privacy film blocks my view of out back, so I unchain the door and twist the deadbolt, cracking the door an inch, before I'm finally able to get a glimpse of who disturbed my solitude. It's the new neighbor. She looks a bit older than I thought she was earlier in the day. Her hair golden in the sunlight and the distance between us smoothed the lines on her face like a filter. She's probably in her late twenties. There was a pinch of skin that stayed raised between her two brows that seemed like it would be there to greet me every time I laid eyes on her. Like she's always got something on her mind.

"Hi," she says. Her voice is raspy. Perhaps she's a smoker. Cigarettes seem to be making a comeback these days. At least it was if you were young, skinny, and white. "I'm Natalie."

"I'm Elaine." Nerves get the better of me and my voice cracks over my own name. She's the first person I've spoken to in months. I try to recall the last interaction I had with someone else. Aside from the brave souls delivering my curbside orders at the grocery store, it was probably when I first moved in. Will met me here to show me around and pass off the keys. Ever since then, I've just sent him every month's rent through Venmo. Just over two years ago. I had used my savings in reserve to pay rent in

advance and surviving off unemployment checks through the pandemic, but the well was close to dry. No matter how much I tried to scrape by, it was never enough to stop the digital number from depleting.

“I’m your new neighbor. I just moved in today.” She extends her hand as if she’s trying to shake my hand, but rethinks her decision. She curls her fingers and gives a small wave instead. “Actually, I wanted to ask about the shrieking noise coming from the water heater? Is it supposed to do that?”

“Oh yeah, every time you use the hot water. You get used to it,” I reassure her. I start to feel more comfortable with the interaction. She seems to be just as nervous as I am. I realize that she probably didn’t have a clue who lived on the other side of the paper thin walls. The outside of the unit is missing a trace of my existence, giving no context as to who could live here.

“I know it’s frightening at first. Bet Will didn’t mention it either,” I say. I feel the obligation to sympathize with her. I must seem like I have the upper hand, having known Will longer, and being more familiar with the peculiarities of this decrepit place. Little does she know, I’m little more than a ghost in this unit.

“Yeah, he should have put that on the listing,” she replies sardonically.

“I get depressed if I think too much about the legalities that Will probably doesn’t concern himself with,” I confess. I’m frozen for a moment, internally wincing at this comment. I have no gauge of her worldview. She could be an aspiring landlord for all I know. It was a risky thing to say, especially during a first conversation. Something dark

inside me laughs, as if. I feel embarrassed for letting myself think there might be another interaction.

The possibility of it excites me though. I'm suddenly glad to have a new neighbor. I foresee tension and anticipation in my upcoming days. This is the most I've had to look forward to in a long while. I could ask her what Michelob Ultra Lady is like, what her name is. A part of me feels stupid for the thrill I get at these thoughts. I'm anxious to keep talking to her and nervous to mess it up at the same time.

"Put something on in the background. The sound takes up a lot of space," I try. I think being helpful might endear me to her, she could think of me as an asset to her new life here. Suddenly, I crave context for her life before. I'm not only looking forward to what she could tell me about our neighbor, but what she might tell me about herself.

"I thought I heard something. Were you watching something?" she looks at me with an unspoken question in her eyes. I imagine her living room filled with boxes and minimal furniture. It probably doesn't feel small to her yet.

"I was watching a movie on Netflix. I just started it," I lie, hoping this will make her more agreeable to being invited to join me.

"Oh, anything I might have heard of?"

"*Girl, Interrupted*. Would you want to watch it with me? I don't mind re-watching the beginning." If she agrees, I'll just have to get to the living room faster and get a head start on rewinding. It's subjective what 'just started' means, but I'd hate for her to think of this situation as contrived.

But she just smiles as though this is what she's been looking for since she came knocking on my door. Well, tonight I am happy to oblige.

Chapter Two

The cool blue of pre-dawn darkness greets me when I wake. My body is folded up on half of the couch. My toes meet something warm in the center. Turning, I see Natalie in a similar position on the other half. Her head is thrown back over the arm of the couch, mouth open wide. The scrunch between her brows was there, even in her sleep.

I remember putting on another movie after finishing *Girl, Interrupted*, but I must have fallen asleep pretty quick seeing as I don't remember much of it. It was late already by the time we started it, since it took us forever to finish the first movie. As we got more

comfortable Natalie began talking over certain scenes. She'd confessed that it was one of her favorite movies while I was rewinding it. Each time she would talk over a scene I would pause the movie, refusing to miss a second of it. It's been nearly two years of watching movies alone, with no threat of interruptions from anyone else. The change was welcome, in a way.

I wake Natalie and on the way to the door we agree that we'd like to do it again. As she reaches the door she hesitates before opening it. She turns back to me, her expression unsure.

"I don't want to be weird, but I don't have any groceries. Do you mind if I borrow a few eggs?" I don't think the request is unusual, I know I'm the one sprawled on the floor in front of my rocker, but she doesn't need to know that. I don't have anything in my fridge that can't be cooked in the microwave. I could tell her I'm vegan and don't keep eggs. She might ask for something else though.

"I'm out actually, I need to go grocery shopping," I say hoping this will be enough to make her drop it.

"Oh, that's kind of perfect. Would you want to go together? I'm new to town and I don't really know my way around yet. I could use someone to show me around," she said with a shy smile. I feel bad only trying to think of excuses to get out of this instead of ways to make it worse, but that might actually be worse than letting her look inside my barren fridge. I couldn't imagine showing her around a grocery store I hadn't been inside of in years.

“I just do curbside,” I reply with a tight smile. Guilt settles in at my dismissal, but it would be worse for her to think of me as the irrational, incapable thing that I really am, instead of just guarded.

“Would you mind if I tagged along? My wheels are gonna disappear by the end of the day when I have to return the rental,” she says with a grimace. A bitter taste settles on my tongue. I shouldn’t just give in after making it so difficult for her, but I’m surprised she hasn’t given up yet.

“My car is pretty gross,” I mumble in a last ditch effort to get her off my back.

“That’s better than nothing, which is what I’ve got.” This final remark was resolute, she wasn’t taking no for an answer.

My car wasn’t quite a lemon, but it had definitely seen better days. It wasn’t anything to write home about, except maybe to ask if that squealing sound was okay. It was an older Chevy Impala that I bought used a year or so out of college. I pictured a single mom working at a Waffle House owned it before I did. It made me feel better about the perpetual cigarette smell that would probably never disappear. This imagined history made the interior of the car take on a comforting quality.

Natalie, deprived of this story, might be offended by this little quirk of the car, among other things. Like the stained seat of the passenger’s side, or wires ripped out of the dash and dangling by her feet.

We rode through town, the concrete landscape filling out the flat wasteland that otherwise occupied this region. There was nothing particularly interesting to look at in

Amarillo, Texas. It was a typical city, except the smell of oil and shit would blow in with the harsh and too frequent wind. I was still anxious to delay getting to the store, though it was unlikely that Natalie would see any of the food I ordered. We made the orders separately and we could tell the person delivering them not to mix the bags up. I shouldn't worry about it. It wasn't even a big deal if she did know, yet I still took a few wrong turns, prolonging the drive.

"I'm sorry about the smell," I said, embarrassed to call attention to it, but I couldn't leave it unaddressed if that's what she was thinking about.

"Hmm, it's kind of comforting," she responds, looking out the window at the old buildings of downtown pass by. She felt more familiar to me then. I didn't mind that she'd strong-armed me into this excursion since she was apparently a reasonable person. Not that I expected anything different, but I always imagined the worst.

I let her put her music on instead of playing something for her. I thought that she might be more inclined to open up if she was more comfortable with the atmosphere of the car. She played mostly Big Thief, but sprinkled some Fiona Apple and Elliot Smith in. The sad overtones helped me to picture a younger version of Natalie wearing combat boots secluded in a corner of her high school cafeteria hunched over her phone and scrolling through Tumblr.

I shared this image with her and she scoffed in mock-offense. She went to hit my arm, but pulled the punch as I was turning into the busy parking lot.

“Like you were any better,” she remarked, probably intending to prompt me into divulging more about my past selves, but it would take more than an off-hand comment for me to reveal that embarrassment.

It left a playful note in the cab of the car for the rest of the trip, though. It sparked a banter that seemed to flow naturally between us, despite my anxieties about screwing something up. She was a gracious partner in conversation.

I was in high spirits by the time we made it back home, the warmth in my chest fended off the West Texas cold trying to seep in and crack my bones. We went our separate ways at the porch, but the light feeling stayed with me. I snuck into bed for a nap, not giving myself the chance to ruin my mood by staying conscious.

When I woke I found the sun dipping into my room, making its way back to the horizon. My room did not feel like the cage it usually did. I felt the expansion of the walls of the duplex with Natalie’s arrival. She was like a breath of fresh air. Even my bed felt softer this afternoon. I lie still in between my sheets recalling the way she spoke last night and earlier today. Her voice was so mesmerizing; it coaxed something out of me.

I kept pausing the movie last night so I wouldn’t miss anything, but I really didn’t mind. I wanted to hear her thoughts about the depth of Angelina Jolie’s portrayal of Lisa. I loved to hear how she related to the movie. Being a woman adrift in her own mind and constricted and abandoned by a system you are told is supposed to protect you. Relating to her felt intoxicating. She was so patient when I wasn’t forthcoming about my own experiences. She was opening my world up.

I crawled out of bed with a vigor I haven't felt in months. The chill of my apartment felt refreshing instead of isolating. I pulled a pair of socks out of an off-white squat set of drawers opposite my window and slipped them on my feet. I made my way to the kitchen and pulled a mason jar from the cabinet above my microwave. I filled it with tap water and gulped it down to rid my mouth of the morning cotton.

The early evening air carried the quiet of a lonely neighborhood and two low voices coming from the front yard to my ears. I sauntered to the front windows and pulled aside the curtain. I found Natalie, hands braced on her hips, talking with our neighbor. They were both bundled in sweaters, the wind whipped around them, tossing their hair around their faces.

Their expressions gave away the tone of their conversation. There was a sympathetic tilt of the older woman's head and Natalie's tight lips seemed to convey frustration, or perhaps resignation. I tried to read their lips for more clues as to what they were talking about, without much success.

I strained against the glass, trying to be pulled into their shared moment by sheer will. Michelob Ultra Lady's eyes flickered to the side and she caught sight of me fully. Her head reeled back a bit, and I felt shame blossom in my core. I ducked down, diving into my couch. I could just picture what she saw through the window: the prying eyes of a reclusive neighbor straining to join a world that she knew for a fact she wasn't a part of. I imagine that scene must have confirmed what she what she already believes about me. There's no chance I'll be able to recover from this.

I rose from the depths of my couch cushions to peek at the scene outside again. Natalie caught her expression, turned around and waved at me. She looked like an angel then. Her blonde hair whirled around her face and her sweet smile beckoned me to join them. She was unaware she was giving me the opportunity that I fantasize of every day.

Her expression was so welcoming I couldn't help but smile back. Like most moments of mental respite, the relief I felt was short lived before trepidation crept in. What was I going to do when I joined them? I was sure to say something that could be misconstrued by Michelob Ultra Lady, how could I possibly go out there and talk to them like it was no big deal? I had nothing to say.

Today with Natalie was fine, I didn't say anything stupid, but Natalie is different. She understood me. She didn't even say anything about the repulsive condition of my apartment as hers likely looked exactly the same. We had gone on and on about the horrid state of the world, and she didn't find it strange that I was fairly reclusive. She had said I was living the dream, and that she regretted nearly every interaction she'd had with people for the last two years. How could she not, living in the cesspool that we do. She even said she found the smell of my car comforting... unless she had been lying. I did kind of put her on the spot.

Natalie's waving became more insistent, a light shining into my darkness. I gathered myself and turned to climb off the couch. I slipped on a sweatshirt that lay on the arm of the couch and slipped into my sneakers by the front door, where they lay untouched most days. I tucked the laces in anxious to get outside before they changed their minds.

I opened the large wooden front door and saw them still standing there through the screen door, both their heads turned towards me. I opened the screen door slowly, and I was met with the bite of the chill. Cautiously stepping outside, I wrapped my arms around myself and crept to the duo standing in the grass in front of my stoop.

“Hi,” I said cautiously. I was too timid to try for much more, anxious about how my unfamiliar neighbor might perceive me after such a peculiar sighting.

“Were you spying on us,” Natalie says with a wry smirk. I think she wants me to know she’s joking, but the truth of it stung.

“Oh, I just heard voices through the window and got curious.” I look to the older woman, praying she doesn’t take the moment to testify how habitual my spying can be. “I’m Elaine,” I say when she looks back up at me, anticipating the question.

“Nora... I was wondering when I was going to get to meet you,” she responded. Nora. It was such an elegant name for a woman who looked like she wouldn’t take shit from anyone. I fell in love with the idea of her a little more because of that.

“I don’t get out much,” I said, as if that wasn’t obvious. Nora was just being polite, giving me the chance to offer an explanation myself. I wanted to ask what they had been talking about, but our dynamic was too fragile for me to be sure it wouldn’t be taboo.

Natalie wrapped her sweater tighter around herself and started bouncing on her feet, trying to keep the chill at bay. “Well, I’m gonna get going, thanks for your help

Nora,” Natalie said, her body already turning towards her door in dismissal of further conversation.

I looked between the two of them for some sign of what she could be referring to. Maybe she just meant help moving in, something I hadn’t offered. But no, it seemed more than that. The set of their shoulders and the downturned corners of their mouths before I joined them seemed to indicate something much more serious.

I withered inside, afraid that I had said something the night before that she thought was stupid. I was not the confidant she needed. Nora had something to give her that I wasn’t able to offer. Perhaps she didn’t think I was that interesting and wanted to avoid further conversation with me. She was just waving to be polite, that’s all. I felt as though I had this one moment to establish whether or not we would only ever exchange pleasantries in the driveway, were I ever to leave the house, or if I would have the chance to redeem myself from whatever it was I said last night that offended her.

“Natalie, would you want to come by and watch another movie tonight? If you don’t have anything going on, of course,” I add, worried it would be the last chance I would have to change her negative perception of me.

“Yeah, I had a good time last night. When should I come over?” she asks

“Whenever you’d like,” I respond. I hope she doesn’t think that means I have nothing better to do. I don’t, not really, but I would rather not have her think that. I turn awkwardly to Nora and question whether I should invite her too. She probably actually has something better to do, but I’m not familiar with the protocol of inviting someone to something in front of another person.

“We had an impromptu movie night last night,” I say as Natalie disappears inside. “You could join us tonight if you want?” I offer, extending the invitation to be on the safe side.

“That depends on what y’all like to watch. I don’t do rom-coms,” she says. I feel a smile spread across my face and a small chuckle makes its way out of me. I couldn’t have been sure what she was going to say, but now that she’s said it, I can’t picture her saying anything else. This is exactly who I imagined she would be. I don’t even mind the rom-com slander. Not from her, it fits her character too much.

“We can watch a non-rom-com,” I say, feeling giddy and clever. Warmth fills me from the inside out; I should’ve talked to her ages ago. I feel like we are the types of women that could make each other feel special in a teasing way. I wanted this to be the type of relationship we had oh so badly.

“Just swing by later,” I say in lieu of goodbye. I duck my head as I turn, hoping to hide the wide smile spreading across my face. I suppress the urge to skip back to my door as my heart races. Hopefully I’ll be able to extract the details of their conversation later as they settle into my couch to spend a night with me.

I spend the remaining hours of daylight dedicated to cleaning up the living room. Unlike last night, this felt more like an event. I had to actually try tonight. Try to make it presentable for these women that I want to mean something to. They were my chance to reach out beyond what my life is now. To reach something beyond stewing in my own hatred for this life. The beautiful world that is so often spoken of doesn’t exist in these

four walls, and if I wanted to see it one day, I would have to escape. But I have never been strong enough to do it on my own.

By the time Natalie came knocking, I had managed to dust the couch, fluff the pillows, and vacuum the top layer of grime from the carpet, and pack away all of my paint supplies from the coffee table. Looking on with dopamine coursing through my veins, I was able to see the space in a new light. One might call it cozy. Someone other than me probably, but still. Natalie might be able to appreciate the contrast from its appearance last night to now, but to Nora it would probably still look like a dump. Whatever. I had done as much as I could for the time being.

When I opened the back door for Natalie, the setting sun shone through her blonde hair, painting my vision golden. If I hadn't disillusioned myself from the belief of a higher power, I would be convinced she was heaven-sent by now.

We exchanged greetings while twirling around one another so she could come in and then again so I could lead the way into the living room. I wondered how many times you had to hang out with someone before you could call them your friend. I hoped that Natalie thought only a few times.

I hadn't considered anyone a friend since leaving college, though I still kept up with people through their social media, but that usually just gave rise to contempt. Scrolling through their near identical feeds confirmed to me my role as the black sheep of every crowd I'd ever considered myself a part of. Even if they were pretending to be happy, you couldn't pretend to be happy that often without buying into your own bullshit on occasion.

“Is Nora coming?” she asked as we settled into the couch.

“I think so... how do you like her so far?” I asked hoping she’d fill me in on their conversations I hadn’t been able to hear through my windows.

“She’s great. She’s already helped out with so much,” she said. She’s had her right leg tucked under her on the couch to face me easier, but now she turned away, as if physically shutting down the conversation. It seemed like there was something there that she didn’t want pried into. I thought it would be easy considering people love to talk about themselves, but she seems like a tough one to crack.

I wanted to know where she’d come from, she couldn’t have just appeared in town one day with no origin to speak of. I wanted to know what lead her here. Through her shroud of mystery I could sense that she was deeply emotional and likely struggled quite a bit before she ended up here. That’s not entirely uncommon for women past a certain age though. More of an educated guess, I suppose.

“She said no rom-coms, sadly,” I cast a sardonic smile her way, hoping she’d appreciate it. Last night I had a hard time gauging her genuine opinions on genres that are considered low-brow. She tore them apart, but did so like she was making fun of someone else, I just didn’t know who. Perhaps it was someone she had left behind, or a faceless archetype that she found distasteful. I knew that I didn’t ever want her to speak about me that way, so I was always watching her expressions to see where her tastes settled when it comes to things like movies and music.

“Oh, that’s a shame. I would’ve loved to see one of those Netflix Christmas rom-coms with y’all,” she mumbles, more of an aside. She seems distracted as she pulls her phone from the pocket of her jean jacket and starts scrolling.

In the awkward silence that follows I notice our reflection in the black TV screen. It sits on a cheap TV stand I found in someone’s yard that just barely fit in my car, thanks to the chipped particle board at one end. In the shiny blackness I see Natalie’s eyes flick up to mine and I look for the remote and hit the power button out of embarrassment.

“What should we watch then?” I ask, hoping to keep her engaged. I hated that I always felt like she was slipping, like I was never interesting enough to keep her entertained for more than five minutes. I tried to tell myself that she just had things going on, things I didn’t know about, but my insecurities always got the better of me.

“Oh, I don’t know. We could just pick when Nora gets here,” she said. I let it go and stood to grab water for the both of us, trying to appear unbothered by the interaction.

As I filled the second glass, Nora knocked at the back door and I yelled for her to come in, grabbing another glass. I handed one glass to her and she followed me as I carried the other two back to the living room.

I moved to give Natalie her water, but she sprang up from the couch and asked where the bathroom was. I pointed her down the hall and to the right as I set her glass on the coffee table instead.

“Girl’s got it bad,” Nora said just as I heard retching from the direction Natalie disappeared to.

“What do you mean?” I asked, afraid my tone betrayed my anticipation. I felt like I was on the verge of what Natalie used to keep herself distant from me.

“Mornin’ sickness don’t just happen in the mornin’, girl,” she offered as an explanation.

“She’s pregnant?” I asked, truly shocked. I hadn’t put much effort into speculating what it could’ve been and this possibility did not occur to me. I suppose it makes sense.

“Oh, you didn’t know? Oops, well, cats outta the bag now,” she responded, not seeming very phased at all.

“Is that what y’all were talking about before I came out earlier? She looked stressed is all,” I ask, concerned.

“She was asking for a ride to the doctor, if you’re smellin’ what I’m steppin’ in,”

“Oh, is she not keeping it?” I ask, surprise overtaking my voice. My speculations of her life before she pulled into our driveway in that U-Haul truck coming to life. My perspective of the both of them shifted drastically at Natalie’s willingness to disclose this information to our older neighbor, and Nora’s acceptance of it.

Natalie finally returned to the living room and Nora shot me a piercing look, likely to keep me from prying any further. Natalie settled back into her spot on the couch, so I sat at the other end, leaving the middle seat open for Nora.

Unwilling to refer to Natalie getting sick in the bathroom, I returned to the subject of movies. Nora maintained her distaste for rom-coms, but this time Natalie was here to dissent. She made it clear that she thought it was cheap to dismiss the entire genre.

“That is so disrespectful to Julia Roberts,” she said incredulously.

“My Best Friend’s Wedding isn’t really a rom-com though,” Nora responded. I felt myself settling into this dynamic. I felt warm to be a spectator of such a light-hearted argument; I didn’t want them to stop, though I wasn’t sure what to add to egg them on. “It is simply a story about love. Much more complex than a rom-com,” she added. I grinned at hearing this from Nora, she was much more reflective than I had originally given her credit for. Feminine in a less obvious way, granted, but still feminine. I still hadn’t asked her where she worked yet, and made a mental note to the next chance I got.

“I haven’t seen that one,” I admitted, feeling almost too shy to break into the conversation. I could have been content to watch them bicker for the rest of the night, truth be told.

“Sounds like a perfect compromise,” Natalie said with a self-satisfied smile.

The movie made good on Nora’s promise, as did Julia Roberts. The true shining star was Rupert Everett. I fell in love when he started singing “I Say a Little Prayer,” Nora and Natalie joining in with the other restaurant patrons from that scene.

Nora left right after the movie, saying she had to get up early for work. Natalie lingered, using the bathroom again, but returned to her position on the couch as if we were going to watch another movie like we had the night before.

Since I had met her, a thirst for social interaction that had gone unquenched for years took over me. It was insatiable. I wanted to soak up these bits that were offered to me, but I still wasn't satisfied. I would prod for the rest that I could feel was being hidden from me.

Instead of putting on another movie I tried broached the topic of her pregnancy without letting on that Nora had told me why she was getting sick, though she didn't leave me in the dark for too long.

She told me she had come from a small town about a few hours away. She was leaving an unhappy marriage and decided on Amarillo, the second largest city in the panhandle, because one of her coworkers gave her a lead about a backdoor doctor that would perform the abortion. It was becoming harder every year to have safe abortions and her options were so limited, but she told the story with a note of relief in her voice. It almost sounded like she was glad to have an excuse to move this far away from her husband. It was inspiring to see that she was the type of person to see serendipity in such a confining situation.

“Is that what you and Nora were talking about earlier?”

She gives a long nod of her head in assent to my question. I guess she realized that it's been on my mind for most of the day.

“I asked her to give me a ride to the appointment,” she said. “I would have asked you, but you just seem like you don't like to be bothered much.”

“I would love to be bothered.” I respond, feeling comfortable to show her how much I wanted to be her friend after all she had revealed.

I wasn't necessarily upset with her initial impression of me, I was more so grateful that she had thought to ask me to drive her to the doctor before Nora. She saw me as a potential ally, but it was just my routine that got in the way. But now that it's been disrupted, there would be nothing stopping her from wanting me on her side. These unspoken hints in our conversation gave me the impression that the course of my life had finally been altered. I was headed for new destination. I felt like the purpose of my life would be revealed to me if I stayed on this trajectory. Natalie couldn't possibly grasp the depth of my gratitude. She couldn't understand how her showing up here would be life-altering for me.

Chapter Three

I had always been a quite child. I never wanted to leave my parents side to play with other children at family gatherings. I suppose I was never brave enough, because I don't ever remember being content with my parents company. I kept myself busy daydreaming and imagining what my life would look like when I wouldn't have to rely on them. A week ago I'd have given anything to have their company just so I wouldn't have to spend another minute alone.

Now I couldn't be bothered to remember that loneliness in the moments I share with Natalie. Every time it creeps into my mind I shy away from it, like if I acknowledge it, it will return to me and overtake my life like a tidal wave.

Now every morning I wake up and stare out the window until Natalie comes and knocks at my back door. She started bringing me half of a sandwich when she noticed that I wouldn't ever feed myself until late in the afternoon. She had noticed something without me having to mention it and she handled it like it was her problem. Like she wanted to care for me. I felt so much closer to her; I'm starting to think I just wanted to be taken care of. I was no active participant of any interaction. I was just a rock on a river bed being weathered by the flow of the water around me. But I didn't know how else to be a part of the ecosystem.

There were days that the weight of her heartbreak kept her shut away in her apartment. On those days I would go to her and try to weasel my way in. I would knock four or five times, waiting far longer than was necessary. I knew she wasn't coming no matter how long I stood there, shifting my weight from one foot to the other on the creaking wooden porch.

The short walk back to my door would stretch out before me, back to a loneliness that I couldn't escape, no matter how hard I tried to forget it. I was reassured every day she showed back up at my door, but that didn't stop me from stewing in paranoia on the days I had to spend alone. I couldn't stop myself from believing that I had done something wrong.

On the days she wasn't weighed down to her bed in a depressive episode we spent every minute together. We would watch movies or YouTube videos together, exchanging favorites. It seemed like we put most of our effort into trying to become as similar as possible. All our hours spent together were in an effort to meld into one person. The rest of the time we would do something inane like go on walks at the park nearby.

After I learned of her pregnancy, Natalie was much more open with the details of her life before she moved here. When we were unpacking her boxes of dishes she told me about the hours she spent painting the nursery on her own, waiting for Brett, her husband, to come home and help. She told me how she couldn't keep from crying when the days turned into nights alone. She'd thought she'd done everything right. She'd gotten married, bought the house, and was about to have a baby. All the boxes were checked and she wasn't any happier for it.

"I feel broken. Like I'm not capable of having a normal life, or of wanting the things everyone else wants," she had said, setting a stack of plates in the cabinet forcefully, the clamor of the ceramic bouncing together echoing the frustration in her voice.

"I don't think anyone that fits the mold is genuinely happy. The issue is finding out who the genuinely happy people are," I reply as I fidget with the paper she'd used to wrap the dishes, trying to flatten the wrinkles. I could repurpose these for painting, if Natalie would be okay with it. I've often thought about dragging my painting supplies out onto the table while we're watching a movie. I fantasize about us working on a project like Mia and her mom in *The Princess Diaries*, so blasé about creating something

together. It could be a normal part of our lives. I always abandon the idea before I get anything out. I've always been too embarrassed to show anyone my paintings, let alone Natalie, whose approval I am so desperate for. So the paint all remains tucked away in my living room.

I always tell myself that I'll work on it the days that Natalie is shut in, but I never do. I haven't touched the stuff since she's moved in. The desire to work at it, to look for fulfillment from it has receded from me. With Natalie, the days come and go with much more ease. They glide past me, but not in a blur. Now I count the days by remembering the conversations I have with Natalie.

I still hadn't told Natalie much about my life, and I knew she was curious. I could see the unspoken questions in her eyes. The way her mouth seemed to linger on a subject if there was a lull in conversation. I knew what she wanted to fill the silence with. Or rather, what she wanted me to fill the silence with. It's not that I didn't want to tell her about how I ended up here, especially since she had started to open up about her past. The thing was, I just didn't know how to talk about it. I had only really started to contemplate the implications of my relationship to my father in the past few years, a period of my life in which I spoke to virtually no one.

Not only did I want to share this information with Natalie out of reciprocity, but I also have a sneaking suspicion that this trauma would validate me in her eyes somehow. She would appreciate our relationship more deeply. And for this validation, I would try my hardest to formulate the words necessary to tell her about myself.

I would never be able to look my father in the eyes so long as I lived, especially not if I could help it. It wasn't about what was done or wasn't done, but the fear of what might happen. He would loom over my childhood bed for a goodnight kiss, and off-hand comments that I'd felt silly for over-analyzing, but I wouldn't be able to get those interactions out of my head for years. There was always a fear that something more perverted would come after those interactions. Though it never did, the anticipation was like a scar on my psyche.

It is much more complicated to deal with a father who, as far as you know, isn't a bad man through and through, but beneath the surface you always felt the ghost of the man he could be. My family took it pretty hard when I stopped coming around and stopped answering calls. I just never knew what to tell them. It never felt like reason enough to say that I just didn't feel comfortable around my own father.

"Some days I fantasize about what type of mother I would be," Natalie says after exhaling a puff of smoke, her body is reclined in the lawn chairs we set up on our back porch. "I would love it if I wanted kids, or if I thought it was ethical to bring kids into a world like this."

"You could always adopt kids that are already here... but then you'd have to worry about not fucking them up even more," I respond. I said this with a note of bitterness in my voice. Through talking with Natalie I had come to the conclusion that it was my parents' were the root of why I'm fucked up like I am. I had always known that they had some influence over the way I turned out, but I can't help but regret the parents I had. I know I would appreciate life so much more if I felt like I could rely on them or

love them the way you're supposed to love a parent, someone who has provided emotional and physical support to you for the majority of your life. I, however, did not have that. I was left to navigate terrains of socialization and vulnerability with my peers with no support from my parents.

We were incensed by our proximity to poverty and the impossibility of escaping it. We loved to be angry at the world together. It might actually have been our favorite past time, even more so than watching movies together.

We felt the existential dread of the end of the world looming over every decision we made or didn't make. We were perpetually getting closer to climate disaster and every tragedy imaginable, no matter what we did, so it was easier to do nothing.

I felt in love with the idea of us. I was so giddy at the thought of being ahead of the disaster. We were standing outside the storm looking back at everyone who had yet to realize it was all about to be over. Even if we were isolated from the rest of the world, I felt more a part of something with her than I had ever felt before.

When she finally told me that this doctor she had told me about was out of state, I was excited about the commitment that a road trip promised. But I couldn't keep dread from creeping in.

After my initial acceptance I had begun to voice my anxieties about going. Though Natalie had already done wonders getting me out of the house more, even if I wasn't interacting with anyone outside of her and Nora, my life still looked drastically different from before. She asked if I was nervous about the legality of what we were

doing, but I revealed to her that it had been years since I had left Amarillo, or stayed anywhere besides my apartment. I told her I wasn't ready for that.

Any number of horrible things could happen. We could be stranded or killed, or she could get sick of me and abandon me in the middle of nowhere. She tried to reassure me that wouldn't happen. She didn't think I could say anything that would make her get sick of me. But I couldn't stop my mind from reeling with these insecurities. I was not too naïve to realize that a particular strain overcomes relationships in those types of situations. In some cases the stress bonds people for what seems like will be forever, but other times it's just enough to break what tenuous connection there is.

While I didn't want the stability that I had had before Natalie, I didn't want to test the odds of how close we truly were.

I think my reluctance hurt her. I was too clouded by my own worries that I didn't consider her perspective. Going on this road trip was not an option for her. It was only a matter of how she was going to get there.

I knocked on the screen door to her apartment in the back. Natalie's tired brown eyes peeked through the crack in the door. She looked like she'd been crying and I felt guilt consume me. Apologies spilled out of me, I couldn't get the words out fast enough. Natalie turned her head away from the door and her shoulders started shaking.

"I'm sorry, I'll just go," I said already headed for my door. I suppose she had already made her mind up about me and showing up at her door had just made it worse.

“Elaine, wait,” she said, the light tone of her voice catching me off guard. I spun around to find her silently laughing. I had no idea what she was thinking. It was impossible to gauge her mood from her body language. I was lost.

“What’s going on?” I finally asked.

“Brett called,” she confessed. “He wanted to know where I ran off to,” there was humor in her voice, but her smirk betrayed an element of devastation.

I reassured her that she wouldn’t have to worry about it very soon. Between the three of us, we were going to make up a plan to get her life on the track that she wanted it to be on.

Natalie cleared up the confusion of the source of her emotions and invited me in. We talked and I told her that I could be ready to leave town to support her. I would do it for her. We were able to plan a trip for the beginning of next week, both of us being unemployed and virtually untethered to society.

Chapter Four

We left early that morning as the waking sky painted everything blue. Nora was headed off to work around the same time so she saw us off. I watched her give one solid wave and climb into her truck out of the rearview mirror as we turned off the short street.

We took my car since Natalie had to return her rental truck to the dealership. Nora had checked the oil and the tire pressure, but she said that was about all she could do for us before we left. She insisted on the maintenance check after I told her I hadn't used it much in the past few years and this was the first time I was taking it out of state.

I tried to start out our drive behind the wheel, but I got us as far as Cadillac ranch before the tremor in my hands started to shake the wheel as well. My hands vibrated the wheel as I anticipated leaving the city limits. Anxiety licked up my spine and made it impossible to sit still and concentrate on the road.

Natalie told me to pull to the side of the road so she could take over. She refused my apologies, and assured me that she understood my anxieties. She said she was the same way the morning she left her husband.

The sun rose too quickly and scorched the inside of the car, and left us surprisingly hot given that the winter air left the windows cool to the touch. I kept glancing at Natalie looking for signs of discomfort, worried that she regretted agreeing to take my car, or even have me on this road trip with her at all.

Even still, there could be countless other thoughts racing through her head about the state of my car. Logically I knew that she wouldn't be bothered by it, considering conversations we've had about constantly having to worry about money for things like food and rent, let alone a luxury car. Yet, I couldn't stop myself from worrying that she was still judging me for it from the comfort of her own impenetrable consciousness.

She had gotten used to the disgusting state of my apartment, but it was easier to reassure myself that she didn't hold that against me because hers was almost identical. Having her in my car was different. Somehow more embarrassing.

Despite feeling jittery when I was sitting behind the wheel, I was able to fall asleep soon after I got in the passenger seat. The sprawling plains lit up by the rising sun and the soft indie music Natalie was playing lulled me into a heavy sleep.

I woke when I felt the car roll to a stop. I figured I'd been asleep for a few hours at least from the grainy texture of my tongue against the roof of my mouth. I was close to sweating under the blanket I was curled up under. Natalie had the AC going, but the sun shone directly onto me and the red velvet blanket looked like lava poured over my lap, glowing brightly in the sun.

We'd stopped at what looked like a diner out of the 70s. It was a large squat building that was half gas station, half restaurant. Wood paneling extending upward from the cobblestone at the base of the building welcomed travelers in from the parking lot. Vans that looked like they were being lived in and sporty SUVs with cargo carriers populated the parking lot. I felt out of my element, surrounded by people who appreciated getting out and exploring what the world had to offer. The more cynical part of my brain chided them. They were of a privileged crop of society. They didn't have to worry about money, or what they were doing with their life. They had already found their purpose.

I stepped out of the car into the colder weather and felt a shake in my knees from being curled up for so long. I waddled to the entrance to go pee, Natalie following a few steps behind me.

Natalie was overcome with a cynical excitement when we walked through the doors and realized there was an entire museum dedicated to Americana and Route 66. Disregarding the ache in my bladder I walked to the back entrance of the museum at the back of the store and was met with floor to ceiling faded red Coca-cola and Texaco memorabilia scattered among pictures of Elvis and Marilyn.

“Shit like this makes me want to end it all,” Natalie says softly behind me. My heart jumped into my throat. I didn’t realize she was standing right behind me. I was shocked at how casually she said this. I looked over my shoulder and examined her face, looking for any indication of her seriousness, but her casual expression gave nothing away.

I gave a noncommittal hum and moved on, not wanting to validate the thought if she was being serious. Maybe it was because of the age difference, but she did seem to have a penchant for dark humor, so I decided to let it slide.

We moved among aisles of ceramic Elvis statues, a bumble-gum pink 1960s Thunderbird, plenty of retro drive-thru menus and old striped barber shop poles. Seeing the excessiveness of Coca-cola branding I began to understand Natalie’s distaste with the exhibit. So much of this revered brand of American culture was just advertisements and blatant capitalism.

“Have you seen that video on YouTube, the one about ‘selling Marilyn’?” I asked, searching for common ground as the silence stretched out between us. The rest of the exhibit was empty, so the room was filled with the sounds of air moving through the vents and our feet shuffling across the industrial carpet.

Natalie looks back at me, her eyebrows scrunched up in response, prompting me to continue.

“She’s an icon of the 20th century, but her whole persona was crafted to drive the public mad,” I start, trying to choose my words carefully, trying to give Natalie the story she wants.

“Of course, she’s the classic manic pixie bottle-blonde,” she adds while we approach what can only be referred to as a shrine for Marilyn. The wall was plastered in pictures of her in various uncomfortable looking positions. There was a vintage Barbie still in its original casing with the striking pin-up style blonde hair. They even had different official looking documents that had to be fake. It was hard to believe that any of the memorabilia was real in this roadside gas station museum, so I suppose they even made replicas of checks with her signature on it; anything would sell with her name on it.

“Actually, she wasn’t appreciated as much when she was alive. People thought she was an okay actress, but what they really wanted from her was her picture,” I said looking at the array of photographs of the star, candidly taken by paparazzi, capturing every moment of her life. Never not prying.

“She was one of the first Hollywood icons that people obsessed over. They wanted to consume every aspect of her life, even if they didn’t appreciate her work. They saw the opportunity so after Marilyn and her manager died, they sold the rights to her likeness. That’s why there’s so much Marilyn merch everywhere. Isn’t that fucked up,” I ask, finally looking over to Natalie to see a sympathetic scrunch to her eyebrows.

I knew she how she’d react to hearing all this, she always had a soft spot for the unsuspecting tortured type, like Daisy in *Girl, Interrupted*.

“The real kicker is some guy even bought the plot above Marilyn’s grave, and his final wish was to be buried face down so he could say he laid on top of Marilyn Monroe for the rest of eternity,” I add as an afterthought, though this detail is the most heinous to me.

“That’s so sick. I don’t even want to imagine what that kind of perversion costs,” Natalie said, head reeled back in disgust.

Looking at shirts and placards with her face on it did disgust me. Marilyn’s immortalized open-mouthed smile stared back at me, and all I felt was pity for Norma Jean Baker and the woman she had to hide behind.

The only reassuring bit of the display was a glass case lining the front wall of old post cards of different destinations along Route 66. I suppose I was being a bit romantic, but my heart went soft for what seemed to be the only piece of real history in the museum of merchandise.

“It doesn’t even look real in person,” Natalie said as she pointed out a post card of the Grand Canyon. It was a group riding horse-back along a trail with the wide chasm occupying most of the background. I asked her when she’d been to the Grand Canyon and she said that she’d gone with her mom and older brothers growing up. It was a trip for boy scouts, but she would often tag along on those adventures. She said it was her parents’ way of including her without actually having to get her involved in any activities of her own. The way she phrased it made it sound like she didn’t mind in the long run, but the tone of her voice held a note of resentment that likely wouldn’t be dealt with for a very long time.

“We should go, if we have time. Or money,” I suggested. I hadn’t really seen much, having spent the years after leaving school in a hell of my own.

“Yeah, we gotta get you out more,” she said with a smirk.

Lost in this reverie, I was distracted in my perusal of more pleasant thoughts when Natalie's arm reached up to the figurine of Marilyn in the open display case and snatched it right off the shelf. She covertly slipped the statuette into the sleeve of her jacket.

"They don't deserve her anyways," she said making eye contact with her, daring me to challenge her, she knew I wouldn't, and she started pacing to another section, likely trying to defer attention from the scene she had just caused.

Instead of stopping again, Natalie kept walking towards the exit and I blindly followed her, what else would I have done? The pace of my heart tripped over itself as we left the exhibit, trying not to draw attention to ourselves. Natalie strode ahead of me, a confident set to her shoulders. I felt shriveled up in comparison, sure I would give us away. Moving through the front of the store the other patrons flitted about us, creating a shroud of distraction, among them we were no different from all the other tourists.

We were able to slip through the swarm undetected and pass through the entrance into the similarly busy parking lot. Making it to the warmth of the sun felt exhilarating. I felt like we had done it, we'd gotten away with it! I took the keys from Natalie, afraid she'd try to stop for gas here. I drove straight out of the parking lot and got back on the highway, looking for the next stop.

We savored the stretch of the road between the scene of our crime and Albuquerque. It was a short drive, and we weren't worried about getting there anytime soon. We had booked a motel for cheap and they didn't seem to care what time we got there.

A chill settled in the car as we drove through Santa Rosa, clouds carpeted the sky and brought with it a wind so strong it turned the pale blue sky a tint of brown.

The squat brick buildings of the main road blended into the whirlwind of dirt flying through the air everywhere. It seemed to suck the life out of the town, and everything slid into a grayscale. I was disheartened by the change in the weather. This was exactly what I was trying to escape from in Amarillo. This weather characterized the essence of what it felt like to live in the panhandle of Texas. If we were to roll the windows down, the air would choke us, dust particles making their way into our mouths to live between our teeth, the spit of the earth incessantly ground between our teeth. I was glad to be leaving the dust storm as quickly as we did.

The hours passed as easily as the wheels turned on the asphalt of the highway, conversation ebbing and flowing. Natalie would fantasize out loud what it would be like to live out here off the land. She said she had always wanted to see how long she could make it without the crutch, or burden, of society. Our thoughts wandered, but before long we were in Albuquerque.

We pulled into the gravel parking lot of the motel around six that evening and checked in briefly. The stretched out building was a light yellow, glowing almost neon under the waning light of the sun.

We didn't have anything planned for the evening, so we turned in early. We booked a single room to conserve funds, but I was excited at the prospect, giddy at the thought of a sleepover, even in my thirties, though I never got to experience any sleepovers as a child.

When we first lay in bed, there was a tension to the air, as if we were mentally debating who would say something first. There were a million things I wanted to ask Natalie, but I always felt like I was overstepping when I brought something up, especially about her past. It was a sensitive subject.

“What would you do, Elaine?” she asked into the silence.

I turned onto my side between the cool sheets. The AC unit chills the darkness, somehow making it so much harder to start speaking. I assume she’s asking about her pregnancy. I’m not surprised she’s thinking of her options, it would be on my mind too.

“I think you’re doing the right thing. You don’t need to second guess yourself.”

“I asked what you would do,” she says turning to face me.

“I think I wouldn’t be able to make up my mind... I would take too long contemplating what the right thing to do would be that it would just sort of happen to me,” I admit. I’ve often felt that way about the course my life has taken. I rarely ever make decisions, I just tumble down the path of least resistance, even if that path was simply not making the decision to have an abortion and becoming a mother by default.

In the morning we went to the clinic after getting up for a quick breakfast at a diner down the street. The clinic was a small one story building with a fence set up in front of the main entrance. We had to drive through a mob of protestors to park to the side of the building, the jostle of the crowd left a hostile tinge in the atmosphere. We were on edge the second we pulled into the parking lot.

The edges of the mob slowly turned toward us, redirected energy rippled through them like a wave. I felt like a pebble dropped in a riptide moving through them. Thankfully they were denied access to the parking lot proper, so we were still able to find a spot to park. I wouldn't have felt comfortable making Natalie walk in alone, or sitting by myself in the car for that matter.

We sat in the idling car for a stretch of time; I didn't want to push Natalie into a decision one way or another. I knew that she was likely to go through with it, but I wanted to give her all the space she needed to feel like the decision was truly her own.

“Ready?” she said into the quiet of the car after nearly fifteen minutes.

“Ready,” I responded, only taking as much as she was willing to give.

Walking by the crowd was so much worse than driving through. At least in the car we had the protection of the windows and being in a two ton machine facing a bunch of pedestrians. But out on the sidewalk, it was truly us facing down a mob. The yelling rose to a crescendo as we got closer; they seemed to be egging each other on, straining their vocal chords to be louder than the person who cursed before them. Finally someone threw an open water bottle at us, making sure the both of us were in its trajectory. There was only so much soaking a single water bottle could do, but it was still annoying to suddenly be wet in the early morning chill of New Mexico.

I turned in the direction of where the water bottle came from, suddenly struck by an urge to scrape and claw at these horrific urchins. Natalie felt me pulling away and wrapped her hand around the curve of my elbow, dragging me along behind her. Pulled out of the moment, I felt silly for thinking that I could have been capable of

accomplishing anything useful. Slightly embarrassed and grateful, I followed Natalie into the doors of the clinic.

I felt stupid for being surprised at how medical the inside of the clinic looked, no different from a small urgent care or a day surgery center. Even the woman sitting behind the front counter had the same dead-eye stare, head filled with fantasies of being anywhere else. Even her lavender scrubs couldn't trick me into thinking she was remotely happy about having to talk to us.

I stood a few feet behind Natalie, unsure if she would be uncomfortable at any of her private information being disclosed to me, even if I did know exactly why we were here. I wasn't sure if I should sit down either, I didn't want her to feel all alone, so I stood in limbo, lingering in the middle of the lobby, waiting for her to be done.

The woman handed Natalie a thick stack of papers on a clipboard, the clamp extended much further than was usual. I followed her to a chair in the corner as she started to flip through all of the papers, sighing about how long it was gonna take

Over the course of the next hour my attention drifted between the posters on the walls demonstrating the different stages of gestation and the reruns of House Hunters showing on the T.V. in the corner opposite us. I picked at the loose threads of the wholesale stock chairs as the periods between Natalie's sighs became shorter and shorter.

"Can I help you with anything?" I asked, settled into a deep state of discomfort, feeling bad for just sitting there while she was doing all the paperwork.

“I’m almost done. These questions are just such bullshit. Like I don’t already know what all of my options are,” she said, her voice pointedly raised, I think so the woman behind the counter would hear her. Not like she would do anything about it, but I understood why she was frustrated. Each question was just another obstacle between her and getting this over with.

“Sorry,” I said, not sure how else to respond. I stared down at the scratchy carpet, rubbing the toe of my shoe against the fabric.

Finally a nurse opened up a one way door calling Natalie’s name, and I hesitated as she got up after taking a second to fill out the last page.

“Am I allowed to go back there?” I asked, afraid that Natalie would forget about me out here. I was an integral part of this trip and I wanted to see it through all the way to the end.

“I don’t see why not,” she replied no hint of modesty in her tone, not even glancing back in my direction. I stood and followed her behind the door like a lost puppy. Her lack of discomfort struck me as peculiar. I found myself wondering if this was the first time she’d experienced something like this.

I held her phone and her purse as she stepped on the scale in the hallway before we reached the private room. This wasn’t the first time I’d held her phone, but it was the first time I felt a sort of possession over it. I stared down at the clear phone case, discoloration marking the worn corners. She had her license in the back and a fortune that read *Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire*. I couldn’t think of a reason what

that could mean to her. I felt estranged from her then. I didn't really know much about her.

Before we had left for the road trip I always looked at her and thought that there was so much left to discover. But looking at her phone now, I simply felt like I was a means to an end for her. I figured I was just over thinking it, but a month ago I never would have been able to imagine myself here now.

"Elaine?" Natalie called my name, already halfway down the hall. They'd moved on without me, but when she realized I wasn't following, she waited for me. Feeling reassured, I stumbled to catch up to her.

In the private room Natalie sat atop a throne of hard cushion and paper, waiting patiently to get her life back on track. Natalie reclined on the exam table so the doctor could do an ultrasound before they began the procedure.

"How far along did you say you were ma'am?" the doctor asked, chasing the fetus with the ultrasound wand, gliding it across the gel spread over Natalie's lower abdomen.

"About five weeks I think," Natalie responds, an edge to her voice. She'd said she was worried they might raise issue with this. Pro-life legislation was constantly being passed, making it more difficult to get an abortion within a reasonable time frame.

"When would you say date of conception might have been?" he asked. He had his face turned towards the low light of the monitor, but I could just make out the confused expression on his face.

“Five weeks ago,” She shot back, unmistakably defensive at this point. She rolled her eyes, neck following the movement so her head shifted on the table, crinkling the paper. The sound filled the awkward silence that followed. I could tell the doctor was preparing himself to say something that Natalie wouldn’t like.

“It looks like you might be farther along than you thought Mrs. Blake,” he finally admitted. My head shot up to catch Natalie’s reaction, but she didn’t as much as blink. I began to worry what this might mean for her. The dread creeping into my stomach told me that I already knew.

“How far along am I?” she asked. The stillness of her voice scared me. A complete lack of inflection was more telling than any shouting or quivering she could have done.

“You seem to be closer to eight weeks along. We’re not going to be able to go through with the procedure.”

“There’s nothing you can do?” she asked, desperation finally taking hold of her voice. Despite multiple protests from the both of us, the doctor told us he couldn’t do anything more. He left to grab some pamphlets on adoption, but Natalie wouldn’t take them. By the time we left she was nearly completely dissociated, I was the one leading her by the elbow on the way out.

Natalie stewed in silence the entire ride back to the motel from the clinic. I tried a few times to reach into her reverie, but she wouldn’t budge. I knew that it wasn’t my fault, how she was feeling, but I couldn’t stop myself from letting the silence stir the anxiety settled on the floor of my chest.

Passing through the threshold of the door seemed to break the seal holding back the tidal wave of Natalie's emotions. She started hissing, sucking in deep breaths through her teeth, tears filled her eyes, and red splotches bloomed across her face.

"Natalie?" I started, unsure of how to continue. I felt inept dealing with other people's emotions. That feeling was particularly potent in this moment, because I think I knew that nothing I could say would make this situation better.

I knew Natalie was sinking into a hole of hopelessness, feeling like she had exhausted all her options. There seemed to be no other safe option for her now, aside from committing her body to seven more months of not having total control of her body. Of unwillingly sharing it with another. I knew she felt devastated.

These thoughts were confirmed as Natalie escaped to the bathroom and locked the door behind her. Muffled sobs followed soon after. I sank down to the carpeted floor on the other side of the door, hoping she could sense my presence and not feel so alone in this moment.

I sat waiting on the floor so long my legs fell asleep, and I had to crawl to the edge of the bed to drag myself up with my arms. I stooped over the bed until my legs didn't feel like bags of sand anymore, but that was long enough for me to begin questioning my role here once again. I wasn't sure what Natalie needed from me. I didn't feel particularly useful. Which I assumed was all that she needed me to be. I wasn't here for any other reason, really. Means to an end. That's all.

I started ambling around the room, fiddling with the usual accessories of cheap motel rooms. Outdated phone, bible on the nightstand, generic notepad on the most basic

of desks. The T.V. caught my attention. It reminded me of the Luke Wilson movie *Vacancy*, which wasn't exactly ideal. Scary movies didn't usually tickle my fancy as Nora would say, but I'd seen that one on cable years ago, and I haven't been able to forget it since.

I looked around the room for the vents and other possible nooks and crannies that cameras might be stowed away in. I went so far as to pop the grate off the vent to make sure the passage was clear. I suppose it wouldn't be as obvious now as it might have been back in the early 2000s, people have gotten much stealthier. Still, it wouldn't hurt to check.

I couldn't dismiss the paranoia after combing over every obvious hiding spot, so I figured I would be better off going on a drive. It would give me the opportunity to go exploring and to escape the weight of Natalie's emotions. It's not like I was much help to her anyways.

As soon as I grabbed the car keys from the nightstand I heard the door to the bathroom creak open at last. I turned around to find Natalie peeking through the crack in the door. She looked completely disheveled. Her hair stood up at odd ends and her face was completely swollen, the splotches of red expanded to color the entirety of her face.

"Where are you going?" she asked, I was caught off guard by how small she sounded. Like she was unsure of how she fit into my plans, our roles reversed somehow.

"I was gonna go on a drive," I responded, scared to send her back into hiding.

"Can I come with you?" she asked, almost demurely.

“Of course,” I replied, a smile tugging at my lips, grateful to have her reach out. I suppose it would serve the both of us to try to escape her mood.

Chapter Five

We drove aimlessly around the town, stopping in antique shops and rundown dinners until they started to close one by one. Each stop less planned and more breakneck than the last. I was sure I'd fuck the car up somehow, whipping into every single parking lot.

I let myself wander past the city limits as the sun started to set, looking for a nice view of the mountains and the desert. This landscape was very different from Amarillo, it was comforting, to finally be somewhere new. Even if I was just a means to an end for

Natalie, I could still say this trip was worth it for me too. Regardless of what our relationship looked like.

I made a somewhat stupid decision to turn off onto a private road after driving on a farm-to-market road for a while. Well, it was actually really stupid. But the road took us up a hill where we were able to pull off onto a cliff side with a beautiful view of the sunset. If someone shot us now, I don't think I'd be that upset.

I backed the end of the car up to the edge of the cliff, and we got out to sit atop the trunk, our heels tucked up close to the bunker, both our knees covered in some of my old ratty thrifted jeans. Natalie had started borrowing some of my clothes as hers started to fit her tighter and tighter each day.

We watched in silence as the sky turned into a vibrant orange and red, before descending into a light pink and purple, each transition incredibly smooth. The sky allowed us to process each shift in color, kind enough to not surprise us.

“My life is totally ruined,” Natalie huffed out a breath of air so dramatic, it was almost a laugh. I tried to hold back a laugh of my own, but I couldn't help it. This situation was genuinely absurd. And we were totally helpless.

“We could do it ourselves. The old fashioned way,” I offered, mostly joking. There's not a chance I wanted her to say yes, but if she agreed to it, I would find a way.

“Women taking matters into their own hands, that's the old fashioned way... I like that.” She left the suggestion open ended in the air between us. Her way of letting me off the hook, I guess.

We stayed long after the sky grew dark, long after it was even remotely safe for us to be there. On private property, in a different state, no less. It was exhilarating. This is something I never would've imagined myself doing even a month ago. Being with Natalie, I found myself in positions where I couldn't help but start to like myself, how different I've become, even if it's just for one fleeting moment.

"We could keep going west," I suggested, the thought tumbling right out of my mouth as soon as it occurs to me. I didn't want the trip to be over. I wanted more than anything to stay out of Amarillo for as long as possible. "We could see the Grand Canyon, like we were talking about. You might even still be able to get an abortion if we could make it to California."

"I knew there was a reason I liked having you around," she responded, finally seeming to be able to take a full breath. The corners of her mouth and eyes rose along with her shoulders. It looked like pure relief.

We drove through the night, only stopping by the motel to grab our things and checkout. It felt like we were chasing the night with the sky growing brighter in the rearview mirror, a last ditch effort to stop the irreversible march of time. As if this was the one thing that everyone'd forgotten to try.

Natalie tried to keep me company, but eventually the soft vibration of the car coasting along the gravel of I-40 was enough to put her to sleep. I felt like I was driving into the yawning mouth of some monster with the road and the sky stretched out before me.

Eventually my head grew heavy and I couldn't keep my eyelids from trying to meet. I almost swerved into a car in the next lane as my head tilted forward and rolled around my neck without my permission. I had to stop somewhere to sleep or for coffee.

It was almost six in the morning by now, so I knew something had to be open, though there were hardly any signs of civilization once we drove across the state line into Arizona. We stopped in Holbrook after driving through the Petrified Forest, a small town with all the same fixtures of every other small town along this stretch of road. Holbrook was flavored by its proximity to the Navajo Nation it seemed. All the touristy things proclaimed a Native authenticity.

The gas station was nearly empty save for an older man behind the counter and one other customer. The other customer was a younger man fitted for a day at a construction site it looked like. I felt kind of guilty for passing through their domain just to see the Grand Canyon when they were up this early just for work. I hadn't had that obligation for years now.

I grabbed a bottle of cold brew from the fridge and checked out quickly, stewing in my shame as these two men were just going about their business. I wanted to abandon this feeling as I walked out the door of the gas station, but it followed me even as I merged back onto the highway.

We only had a couple of hours left and the cold brew was able to tide me over. It was even easier keeping my eyes open when the sun finally rose. Natalie joined it in waking, though her disposition was much dimmer. Sleeping in the car probably didn't help, but I couldn't be sure that she wasn't annoyed at me for suggesting this excursion. I

tried prompting her into telling me what was going on in her head, but she was not very responsive, so I just turned the music up a little louder.

I grappled with an internal panic the rest of the way to the south rim. I had known Natalie for a month, maybe? And here I was, two states away from home for the first time in a couple of years with a near stranger. I was coming to find this experience of becoming someone's friend to be very frustrating. There were too many moments when I have these realizations, hoping it would be the last time I felt like I didn't belong here, yet they would always come back to me.

"I wish I had known you for more of my life," I added to the white noise of the car, hoping it didn't fall on deaf ears. I snuck a sideways glance at Natalie, trying to gauge how she might react to this confession. She looked a little lost, like she was trying to decipher what I could possibly mean by that. Other than I wanted to have more time with her. "I just meant that it would've been nice to have each other earlier in our lives. Maybe things wouldn't be so fucked up if we'd known each other sooner?" I try again, hoping she wouldn't be offended.

"My life was fucked up from the start, I don't know that there's anything you could've done for me. I had to do it myself," she responded, somewhat cavalier, gazing out the window at the scene of the rolling hills and trees spread out across the landscape.

Perhaps we were both thinking selfishly. I had only imagined how my life might have been different if I'd known Natalie sooner. Even still, I thought she was wrong.

"I would've helped," I counter, stung by how little credit she was willing to give me. Maybe she wouldn't have left her husband any sooner, but I could've helped her feel

less alone. We could've helped each other. I still hoped that's what we were trying to do now, but maybe we were both just along for the ride. Two separate entities that were merely caught in each other's orbit for a brief period of time. Never actually together, just sharing the same morsel of the universe for the time being.

Natalie was right. The Grand Canyon did not look real in person. It was too massive for my eyes to fully comprehend, but they did try. I would stare at the same spot for minutes on end, trying to make out the reality of its existence.

We parked the car on the side of the road next to the edge of the canyon and found a couple of rocks to sit on and scrutinize the view. As the sun got higher in the sky more tourists stared rotating through our vicinity, though they all kind of seemed the same. I picked out fifteen people wearing the same kind of hiking shoe, ten or so with the same kind of backpack, and those were just the ones I kept track of. Of course, everyone had the same phones that they used to take the same picture.

I thought that this leg of our trip would brighten our spirits and enlighten us to some sort of meaning in our lives, but as the day wore on Natalie and I grew increasingly glum. This spot was on the main road, so we left, looking for a more secluded area that might actually be more fulfilling.

Strangely I felt more at peace driving down the winding road of this national landmark than actually sitting there looking at it. I felt like a lost cause, too comfortable in the seat of this two ton automobile than in the nature I was apparently so desperate to see I would drive across state lines overnight.

We eventually found a more secluded spot. A small overlook with only room enough for one or two cars to pull off the road. Looking out at the wide chasm spread before us, the colors of the rock seemed made up; a haze covered them, so much air between us and the other side. It was even difficult to pinpoint the bottom of the canyon, it seemed like we were constantly finding new folds deeper than the one before.

Small black specks dove in and out of the canyon, the tiny birds always looking for new places to perch.

“It’s so mesmerizing,” Natalie said, seeming to read my mind.

“I feel like I could watch them for hours,” I respond, finally feeling at peace with myself and Natalie in this moment.

“How sad is it that we can’t do this forever,” she said, sounding almost like she was in a dream, or anywhere that wasn’t sitting on this rock with me. Maybe I should feel honored that she felt comfortable enough to go elsewhere in her mind in my presence. I should feel honored, right?

Out of all the relationships and friendships I’ve seen in movies and shows, I had always fantasized that I would someday get to participate in something electric and overwhelming. But the both of us always seemed so caught up in our own minds to pay each other that kind of attention. I guess what we shared was something quieter, and maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

“I miss being a kid,” Natalie starts, “it was so much easier to just enjoy this view when I didn’t have to worry about money or being pregnant. Or being responsible for my

own happiness. The grass is always greener on the other side. Except growing up is realizing that the lawn is just spray painted green,” Natalie lamented.

“We don’t have to go back,” I start, thinking that maybe I’d escaped Amarillo without even realizing it. I’d woken up in that cesspool for the last time days ago.

“I think about it too sometimes... just giving up,” Natalie starts cautiously, not wanting to reveal too much it seems. I think I know what she’s hinting at. We’ve been dancing around the subject this entire time. But I don’t want to air my suspicions without her confirming it first. I can’t be the one to say it out loud first. If it’s not already on her mind, I don’t want to bring it up. But there’s no way it isn’t already.

“What do you mean,” I play dumb, forcing her to say it, terms in black and white.

“How do you live in a world where every day is just you scraping by, dragging yourself through the muck of existence and not contemplate offing yourself? Fuck the rest of the world,” she says softly, forcing what little she has in her out through these words.

It has been an exhausting 24 hours, and I doubt the next will be much easier. In all ways, Natalie is mourning most avenues of life that seemed closed to her now. The trip here had diminished our pool of money quite a bit, so I doubt we’d make it to California, let alone be able to afford the abortion once we got there. It seemed like she saw this as her only option to getting out of this pregnancy, but it was an option, and really that’s all she was looking for.

“There’s not much for me in Amarillo anyways,” I concede. Maybe I could do this with her. We’ve been together for this much, why not go all the way? She turns to me, question set into her face. Her brow perpetually scrunched and her eyes squinted in the sun of this chilly morning. She wants to know if I’ll really go through with it.

“Imagine what it would feel like to be soaring over the canyon in the car, before it starts to make its descent,” she asks of me. She turns away from me and looks out over the wide expanse of the canyon. It looks almost purple through the mist in the air, almost cold, but still inviting.

Generally it’s a solitary decision, but in this moment we have to make it together. We can’t do it alone and leave the other one stranded. So I’ll do it. Natalie has been the most important thing to happen to me. I would never have seen outside of my world if it wasn’t for her. I can’t leave her to do this on her own.

I give a small nod of my head when she returns her gaze to me and we make our way back to the car. We’ve decided that we’re going to do it, but we haven’t committed to it yet. It doesn’t seem real until she turns the car on. I gave Natalie the keys because it has to be her choice when to do it. I was just along for the ride.

My throat clenched up when she turned the keys in the ignition. We were really doing this.

“Are you just gonna floor it? Should we back up at all?” I asked her, suddenly nervous about the logistics of how to properly kill ourselves.

“I think driving over the edge will be enough,” she says, one last laugh escaping her throat before she put the car in drive.

The revving of the engine pushed a dormant scream out of me. One that felt like it had been waiting there for years. A life of passing moments, of being weathered by the world around me had left me feeling like a caged animal. It was cathartic.

The next moment we were airborne. I felt the second the tires left the ground. Natalie was right, as soon as we drove over the edge, the front of the car flipped over, and we were spiraling through the air. There was no proper view on the descent. Only the world spiraling around us, which was not so different from what the world felt like on solid ground.