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Waking is like a slow chemical reaction from murky, silent dreams into an abrasive true world so real it hurts. Light through paper thin greenish tent walls; naked girl's back; the smell of mildew and sweat; the sound of murmuring outside. Amber slips on a pastel t-shirt, turns to you with a morning-wilted smile. How you feelin'?

You want to answer but you can't help taking an inventory. Only one sleeping bag. You're wearing only the Stones shirt you stole from Kyle long ago and your underwear. You have to pee, not bad now but it won't be long before it is. A pain in your head rises, crashes in soft, regular waves. You are in a strange tent in a strange place with a girl you've only known for a few hours. At least you hope it's only been a few hours.

My chem test. Panic like hot bile in your throat now and you feel around for your clothes.

What about all that fuck school shit from last night? She's frowning, tight lips, puffy hung over face, and you can see the baby crow's feet around her eyes without her makeup. Flatly: you said you'd go with me to the park.

What park? Hurt on her face now, or the beginnings of it so you stop, breathe. You tell her you're confused, hung over. She smiles

again and nods. She pulls clothes, hers and yours, from a duffel and shimmies into her pants. Before you can finish doing the same, she's unzipping the tent. I'll get us some water. You'll have to meet Josh. He's got to say it's okay for you to come along.

I met him last night.

He won't remember. She laughs, slips out into the crisp light outside and rezips the tent.

Kyle sits, cross-legged, where Amber sat moments ago, like a disapproving monk. He wears the same Stone's concert shirt you're wearing, the one that somehow ended up in your clothes when you went away to college, the one you wore home for Christmas your freshman year but never noticed.

To the phantom: I'll figure it out, tell them I broke down or something.

But you know what he'd say, that you're ruining your life, throwing hope away, throwing everything he worked for, to give you.

Just stop.

The loss of control, of failing out, of being told again and again who you are, what you will be, somehow the same panic; it uncoils inside of you, spreads out, hot in your veins. But you rein it back in, like you always do, coil it back up deep in your gut, tighter each time.

And when Amber returns there's a tight, white smile on your face.

Can't find Josh, but here's some water; might help you feel more normal. We can maybe find someone to take you back to town if you don't want to go to the park.

You're not sure now. Do you really want to go back, to take the tests, to get the hotel management degree your parents insisted you get instead of art or archaeology?

Tell me about the park again.

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After a whore's bath, you emerge from the tent into a scattered camp of nomads, burnouts, hippies, and other riffraff arranged along a pot-holed dirt road that winds through a thinning forest. It can't be too far from the tiny college town; at least it doesn't feel like it's been that long. You check your phone: it's dead and won't start up. Deep down, something starts to uncoil.

You ask about a phone charger and Amber assures you someone's got one. Somewhere.

What about some Tylenol?

You weave with her through some parked cars along the road, none of them newer than ten years. You smell something breakfasty cooking nearby as you hover behind Amber.

Ahead, a still-dapper Henry emerges from a faded yellow short-bus side door. He strikes a thick wooden match on the sole of a lifted, shined leather shoe. He holds the flame to a short cigarillo. You're

surprised at how much older he is in the light than in the dark party house pool room. He grins at the sight of Amber—and maybe even you—and the lines deepen. Thick, satisfying blooms of smoke lift from his mouth as he hugs her with a slight lift.

He might be a hugger but some sixth sense tells him you're not ready for that, not yet, and so he offers a wide, toothy, homey smile and a long, weathered hand tattooed with a fading black anarchy symbol.

Hanna! His voice tells you how totally happy he is to see you again and you're struck somehow that he remembers your name; the way he way he growls your name, warm and inviting makes you feel more at home than you ever have. Why go back to school, or to whatever your mom is planning for...

It's clear he has no love for Josh when Amber asks where he might be, just saying Yeah, dunno, sweetie, maybe scout around for some breakfast first, with his hand on her shoulder and concerned eyebrows arched under a wrinkled, tanned brow.

She tells him about introducing me to Josh, but Henry's not having it: You all treat that cat like he's some kinda king, but I'm not sure why or what he's done but act like a bossy fool. Amber makes a girly, pouty face and you know that some part of her needs Josh, needs his fickle approval like some kind of drug.

You both say seeya later to Henry and head off looking for Josh, but your bladder is screaming now. When you ask for a bathroom, she

points off into the trees. You hesitate and she shrugs and insists it will be okay. You tell her to wait while you slip off into the woods.

Thin, sparse trees flank the dirt road, so it's hard to find a spot you won't be seen, so you head farther from the road. You can still hear and see the campers but you think it's far enough that no one will notice, so you find the thickest tree. Kyle stands, far off, deeper into the woods. He's looking out and away from the camp.

Unnerved, you pee quick, head back, distracted by Kyle, nearby now in the same casual day clothes from the tent.

You can't just fuck'n do that!

Your head spins, scanning for the source of the shrill, high woman's voice.

Hey, bitch! It's a mean and righteous voice, somewhere behind you. You spin and spot her stomping after you. Short and round, she's trying and failing short of goth chic, covered in ratty black lace and ill-fitting black satin. Her makeup is mostly hard, uneven lines. She jabs a cracked, dark purple nail at you.

You can't just piss any place you want! People walk here, bitch!

You look back at the camp and can't imagine anyone strolling out here, but you don't argue, just apologize.

Bitches like you just do what they want, right? Don't have to follow no rules?

You're sorry again, but she stomps past in cracked, fading black girly boots.

You will be sorry, she tells you over her shoulder. Half-turning as she goes, shouts, Nasty ass bitch!

She's gone and yet you're not alone. Not even Kyle, though he never has any real presence, lives only in the sense of your own failure, of a father's endless judgement. You look around, focus on one tree, another, so on. Nothing, but you feel like you're on a city street, like someone's going to swerve around the corner any second. But you hear only the distant chatter of the camp through the filter of the trees.

Henry's welcome has faded and now you feel like a target. For a second you worry about how you might look, check your clothes and spot a small stain on your pants. You try to remember what happened, what you might have eaten or spilled but it's lost in a murky haze tinged with mild embarrassment. Before heading back you pull the long, red ribbon from your pony tail, retie it, then take a breath.

No one's around Henry's bus when you get back so you peer through a window.

Hey, now! from behind. You spin and there's Henry.

I'm looking for Amber.

Yeah, you get some food yet? His face is an open map of concern.

No, I had to pee and ran into an angry goth muppet.

Henry waves this aside, looks back and forth down the length of the camp: I think the boys down the way got some oatmeal. You should get some food, yeah?

I think I've got to find a way back home.

Ah. Amber'll be bummed.

I've got... and you can't really think of how to explain missing finals, an anxious roommate, a looming funeral

...things to deal with that I'm sort of avoiding.

Lotta that here, so I get it. I mean, pretty sure no one's headed that way. The whole crew's, like, headed out to Fun City. You got somebody you can call?

Yeah, maybe. Have you got a charger? My phone's dead.

Don't think so. My electronic world on the road is limited to an old Motorola flip phone. For, like emergencies.

A clique-ish knot of whispering girls walk past along the dirt road. You recognize one from the party called Sick Mama. You push past the strong feeling they're talking about you and call out:

You guys have a charger I can borrow?

But they just chatter to each other. A willowy girl in a brown-patterned sundress and a blue choker with hair in loose bundles on the sides glares at you. You're not sure if she's trying to look mean or coquettish.

Something brushes your ankle and you look down at a salt-and-pepper Toto dog staring up at you. Henry scoops him up, tells you to Say hi to Hobo.

Hobo?

Short for Hobart, but, yeah, he was a stray I found in St. Louis. Just, like, bounced right into the bus and looks up, like, Hey, dude, we're friends.

Henry looks up and down the camp, petting Hobo. You give the dog a bet, too.

Almost conspiratorial, he leans close: Thing is, these cats're all avoiding something bein' out here like they are, you get me? For a lot of 'em it's like a lifestyle.

You're just looking at the little Toto dog in the lanky, tattooed arms, his ironed dress shirt sleeves folded up neatly. All you can manage just now is I don't know.

Cuz' yeah, you don't know, do you? But I know you didn't end up where you are now cuz' you really want to be where you're tryin' so hard to get to, do you? Which is fine. Sometimes ya gotta be where you don't want to be. I get that, trust me. But maybe there's gotta be like a pressure valve, a way to let it all out. Maybe that wasn't something you had.

You emerge from his thick string of words and think about tests and the papers you've worked on, the parties you missed, the calls you never returned from your mom and Kevin, because you just couldn't even

let death intrude, fuck up all you've struggled for. It was like he did it on purpose, like you chose that moment to do what he did to crash your life at the moment you needed it to be about you, how you told no one, not even Mandy and just kept working until they had to force you out of the dorm to that party.

I have a chemistry test, a final. It's today, this afternoon.

Yeah, that gonna happen?

You shake your head. There's no chance of making it back to school in time.

Maybe let people know you got distracted?

Maybe.

You don't know if you can pass without the test, what the numbers add up to, who to ask if you can retake it. You need the science credit to graduate and if you don't, then you're working at the Gap for the rest of your life, struggling to rise above minimum wage...

And somehow those words sound like Kyle's, to the point that you can actually hear minimum wage reverberate in your head in that stifled midwestern twang of his.

Yeah, I can figure something out. I don't know what.

He smiles wide, one hand floats to your shoulder: Right on, cuz' that's most of life, ya get me? Figurin' shit out. Meantime, just roll with the crazy and see how it plays out. Got me a feelin' all that

stuff you built up, the school, friends, even family, that shit doesn't just fall apart from one missed test, right?

You nod and hope that's all true while you pet the dog.

You waited in the den—you weren't allowed to call it a living room like other kids—until you heard the van. Carved in some deep, primitive part of your brain it triggered a subterranean fear. Years of lectures, berating, condescension that always began after he came home from work had set that trigger.

You had planned to stay there, feign disinterest while they lead him in to show just how much you no longer cared. There was the hatred, the spine-deep outrage from years of being the source of his need for achievement that had ended, unfulfilled, when he left school and was burdened with a family. It kept you awake at night with the burning impatience to flee, to finally be gone, hotter now that you'd had to wait a year because of his disease.

But something had finally broken when you found your mother crying one night when fighting to get some sliver of sleep. Sometime after that day when you left the track and never went back you fell out of step with normal human connection. You wanted to hug her, comfort her, but stood watching her weep while clinging to a half-crumpled sheet of paper. She held it up when she spotted you in her bedroom doorway.

It spilled out of her while you hovered out of range and it was like she wanted to bridge that space with the pain of his affair. She waved the proof at you, the tear-stained letter she found hidden when she searched through his older clothes in the back of the closet. He'd put on some weight over the years which the cancer had reclaimed and so she'd gone digging through the tubs in the back of the cavernous walk-in closet.

Then, somehow, you appeared in front of the tall windows beside the doorway and watched as mom and Kevin piled out of the powder blue minivan, his van. When she slammed the driver door, your hands balled into involuntary fists remembering years of that sound forecasting sprints, memory drills, recriminations, words like lazy, stupid, waste.

Your mom had read them all and reviewed the narrative arc that night for you, the last letter, the breakup one, still fresh at two years old. They spanned five years. The date on the last one rang a terrible bell because it was after the accident which led to the diagnosis. He'd picked you up from school and for some reason you just got in not thinking he'd try to take you to the meet against your will. But the van flew off the road and into a tree.

You could see the new paneling, just a darker shade of blue, as they slid open the door to get him out. He wasn't the skeleton you saw when you visited him in hospital but was nothing close to the wide, imposing man you'd remembered. He struggled to slip off the back seat into the driveway, gripped the handrail in the van as mom and Kevin

flanked him. Ever so slowly, cautious like a small child learning to walk, he scooped off the seat and stood, smiling in a loose pair of old jeans and an old college hoodie that hung off him.

Watching him shimmy out of the van you remembered the terror that day: after the crash, in the hospital with him in another room. The airbag had deployed late so he'd hit the steering wheel before it punched him hard in the face and slammed him back into the seat. You waited, sitting on the exam bed for the cops to come and ask the hard questions, the ones that meant handcuffs and Miranda rights and a cold jail cell full of scary strangers.

But they never came, only a patient doctor who checked you for injuries, and then a taller, serious woman doctor who told you about the mass in his chest. There was guilt then, that the accident was somehow tied to the cancer, that you had somehow created the disease, that if you hadn't grabbed the wheel it wouldn't exist. But floating over the guilt was a strange relief, that you might just have to wait it out and he'd be finally gone. That feeling startled you and you pushed it down until your mom showed you that letter.

They helped him, one on each side, shuffle-walk-shuffle up the driveway to the door. You ignored the impulse to flee, to look busy and unperturbed by the spectacle of his return from not just the hospital but from cancer. Because all the tests were in the green and, fingers crossed, it would never come back. Inch by inch the interior pitch of some kind of hiss or scream, something animal, afraid and angry at the same time, rose up up up up. You watched them pause

before the door, his head arcing around as he insisted he didn't need help he could make it inside on his own and the fierce protective grimace of your mom at this because... because...

Because she forgave him.

Confronted, he'd admitted it all, didn't want to die knowing she'd been hurt and laid it out in detail in front of all three of them. At home you'd told her never to go back, never let him come back, to let him die in the hospital alone. She'd tried to hug the anger away, held you, but it only raged hotter.

The rubber weather seal of the front door popped from the air pressure change and in he walked, clumsy like a drunk or a little kid. His face was lined and older than it was when he'd checked in, like he had returned from a long and brutal war. You guessed that was true because you'd seen him withered up into a ball from the pain of the disease and the cure that was almost as bad. He smiled a cracked, arid smile, a broken version of that smirk that was all condescension and superiority.

Hanna.

His voice crackled, drier even than that smile. It was a desert you had to crawl through to say the one word you'd practiced so long in your head and you wondered how dry and hollow your own voice sounded.

Kyle.

He faltered then, trying to understand. Not even on the last day you saw him, that sophomore Christmas that was just interludes of bickering with your brother and mom while he tried to tell them to leave you be. And while he tried to sue for peace, to get them to see your side, to show them and you how much he'd changed and wasn't that angry controlling asshole anymore, it stung every time you called him by his name. And every masked flinch, fraction of a pause when you did gave you a deep-down thrill of victory until it became normal.

Henry leads you to a bulky, beat-up seventies behemoth with faded gray and gold paint parked alongside the road. Hidden behind the mass of the hulking old car is a foldout table attended by two of the party kids from last night and one of the girls who walked past with Sick Mama. Henry, ever the gentleman, introduces them to you to them and vice versa.

The taller one, called Buddha Boy, with the bowl cut wears a dirty thrift store sweater Kyle's dad-Grampa Joe-would have worn. Silky-smooth black and white tattoo of the top of the Buddha's head pokes above the top of the loose sweater; a red and black lotus covers the top of his left hand and a black and purple ohm the right. He smiles a smile of perfect teeth full of bits of food.

Beans made pancakes.

He points to the other kid who Henry called Beans also. Beans looks right into your eyes and you look back into his; there's

something lost and soulful, fragile and wounded. But he looks away, at your chest and then your hands, never again returning to your eyes. He has tattoos too, but his are sketchy explosions of old-school style and mediocre lettering all of which leak out from tattered, unreadably old band shirt sleeves to cover ragged scars along his wrists and forearms. He stands, a volcano of nerves, grabs a plastic gray plate, loads it with flimsy, oblong pancakes.

They're buckwheat he says pouring agave syrup onto them. Gluten free, because, uh, buckwheat's not really wheat, it's not even a grain really; it's related to rhubarb actually.

The girl at the table giggles, but it's forced, nervous and a little mean. Henry introduced her as Violet. She runs a hand through bleach-blonde hair with week-old dark brown roots and you see that she, too has at least one tattoo: a fuzzy symbol you barely recognize as a zodiac sign.

You suddenly feel naked and out of place without any tattoos or even a thought to get one. You're the outcast now because you can't actually imagine getting one because there's a deep-down terror at the corruption of your flesh. Why mark yourself as different?

Beans slides the plate onto the free side of the table and drags his own chair in front of it. You start to protest the sudden generosity but he's walking away already, toward the back of the faded gold beast. You sit down, smile across to Buddha Boy. No words: neither of you are ready yet, so you try the pancakes. They don't look or taste like the fluffy, carby monstrosities Kyle made when you were

a kid. They're somehow tough and soft, moist and dry, and even bland and sweet.

Beans returns with a stool to replace the chair he gave you:
Good, right?

I don't know, it's different.

Buddha Boy offers a wide, commiserating grin, sets a hand gently in front of your plate while Violet smirks and puffs derision. A shadow arcs over the girl's face. She looks up and the smirk flows into a satisfied grin so you follow her gaze to Sick Mama, at least that's what you've been calling her, were told was her name.

Instead, Violet calls her Mary.

Sick Mama or Mary slinks around the table and looks down at Beans with dark dagger eyes: You said you'd make breakfast for me n' Shawna.

That's not, you said... I mean, you brought it up that you, that you thought I could do that, but you never said, or asked me to.

Violet finds this funny, makes hissy little, in-and-out titters through her nose.

Buddha Boy tries to clarify: Don't think he thought you were asking; that maybe you were just commenting.

But Mary shakes her head still glaring at Beans, spits out her words like tight little darts: No. I think you're lying. I think you have a gross little crush-y wush-y on this new girl. You wanted to impress her. And make me look stupid.

Beans freezes like a rabbit in the road, stares to a nowhere deep into the trees.

You stand up and something changes. Something dangerous lurks nearby.

Mary or Sick Mama and her tagalong friend who steps behind her and Violet all look over at you. You feel an electric burning up and down your legs and back; it rises up like a furious rash to your neck and the thin, tiny hairs there scream like tiny needles piercing your skin.

What're you smiling at, she's asking, trying to sound strong, but she's not. You feel the weakness there, waiting. Waiting for you.

You let her wait for just long enough, until she thinks it's a bluff and she can slide back into pretending to be the predator.

And then you smirk that Kyle smirk, the one that says no matter how hard you try you'll never be good enough. And you're oh, so good at it even if you hated it.

She's on her back foot but you can't let her get her bearings: Who're you, exactly?

Violet tries to stand but your mock curious gaze falls from Mary to her and you arch your brows to ask what the hell she thinks she's going to do if she makes it to her feet? So she sits back down.

Eyes back on Sick Mama, and they're saying I asked you a question.

But she's got her tough chick bearings back by now, grins a grin that says she's seen lots of pretenders, wannabe tough-guys/girls. She turns it back on you now.

Gretta says you're pissing in the camp.

Then I'd advise you to step over any puddles you see. Because I'm sure Gretta's a reliable source of local news and whatnot.

Beans smiles.

Hey guys, everything okay? It's Amber, leaning in to deescalate.

Mary/Sick Mama is all coy grins and charm but it's saccharine, tinged with a sour aftertaste: Peachy Keen.

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