

“Thanks again for coming with me”, Marissa said. Her eyes were still trained on the barren landscape ahead of her. “I don’t think I could have done this by myself. I know it’s a little awkward for you, but I have to visit him after what happened.” She allowed herself to breathe before continuing. “This trip really should have happened weeks ago but, well it’s been difficult.”

Jordan turned the music to a low hum. It was an awkward volume, loud enough to hear that the stereo was still on, but low enough that Marissa couldn’t make the words out anymore.

“Did you say something?”

“Just want you to know I appreciate you coming with me.” Marissa sighed; thankful her friend invested more attention in the music than Marissa’s excuses.

“Of course,” she said, forcing her hand into a bag of potato chips Marissa had packed. She threw the empty bag in the back where it made a soft noise after colliding with other plastic bags Jordan had emptied on the long drive. She ate the chips in her hand the same way she ate all the others and talked her way through them. It seemed like a chore for her to devour them, but a chore she was more than willing to perform.

“I just wish he lived in a more interesting place,” she exclaimed, remains of chips still in her mouth. “This drive is horrible.”

Marissa felt that she should defend the unique beauty of the landscape. The life was missing, that was impossible to argue, but surely there was something here. Why else would they choose to live here? Why else would *he* choose to live here? Marissa would have to practice saying things like that.

Marissa focused her gaze on the rounded hills that disrupted the otherwise flat ground. She looked for some green on those hills, but all she could see was the color one would see when starting the process of burying someone. At least Jordan was free to turn her head if she wanted, in fact she had abused that privilege on this trip. Marissa had to watch the road tease the corner, only to discover that it continued to stretch on and into the horizon.

“You’re right,” she said. She looked at Jordan, desperate for any reason to not stare at the road and noticed that Jordan’s hair was the same color as the hills. “This drive is the worst.”

“Keep your eyes on the road, Missy! The only thing worse than driving in this desert is dying in it.”

“Oh right, sorry.” Marissa forced her eyes back on the road and saw the same strip of road laid out before her like a carpet.

Marissa felt her friend’s eyes and the burn it left on her side profile. “Do you want to talk about it?” Jordan finally said. Marissa knew the question wasn’t about her distracted driving, but before she could open her mouth, Jordan continued. “I know it hasn’t been that long since it happened and it feels weird being around him, but this is the right thing to do.”

Maybe it was because Jordan had never had something like this happen to her, or perhaps it was simply because of the way the sun danced with Jordan’s hair, but for whatever reason Marissa gave no answer.

“You know, sometimes I worry about you.” Jordan squinted her eyes and put her shoes on the dashboard. “You can be so hard to reach. It’s okay to talk about something that makes you sad.”

A long pause. Marissa’s mouth opened just as the music was brought back to life and her dangerous words died in her throat. As the next hill came into her sight Marissa told herself that Jordan meant well. The words on her tongue were cruel and she looked at Jordan’s hair again.

Finally, the drive was over. His home stood on a hill that overlooked the other houses as if it wanted to observe its neighbors but was scared of getting too close. Marissa touched the brown and desiccated remnants of plants nestled under the house’s window. She allowed a leaf to separate from the plant and held it delicately on her palm. Jordan patiently watched as Marissa carefully placed her hand on the side of the house, on what was once a refuge. Marissa could feel the bumps enter and leave her hand as she moved it across the rough surface and couldn’t decide when she should stop.

“Do you want to go in now?” Jordan asked gently. She took Marissa’s hand, crushed the leaf that still rested in her palm, and led her to the door. Marissa reached her hand up and knocked where the paint hadn’t rubbed off yet. Small particles of white deposited themselves on the side of Marissa’s hand and she had to concentrate to make her breathing appear at an acceptable rate.

After the silence layered itself over them for long enough, Jordan reached her hand to the knob. Before Marissa had time to say anything, the door was opened and Jordan walked without a glance at Marissa to make sure she followed.

“The door used to always be locked,” Marissa said to no one. She put her right foot into the doorway and then her left. She saw Jordan turn to the right to go in the kitchen and

picked up her feet again. She ignored the clothes on the ground and the half-finished puzzle on the table, along with the dishes in the sink when she finally reached the kitchen.

He was sitting in a chair underneath a picture of a cat stretching that was slightly skewed to one side. His white hair was disarrayed. Another detail that never would have happened before. It made him look like a stranger. Marissa felt the distance lengthen to her father's father and carefully made her way to him; she made sure to keep her eyes on him the entire time.

"Grandpa," she said and placed her hand on his shoulder. He woke up slowly and when his eyes finally met Marissa's, he gapped at her, his mouth opened slightly. Marissa's grandpa rubbed his eyes, and his mouth closed. Blue became brighter as the white in his eyes slowly filled with red veins.

"Hello Marissa", he said. Before she could respond her grandpa's body threw itself into a coughing fit. As she ran to the fridge, she noticed a small kennel and an assortment of toys with strings on the end of them. They rested against a cabinet near the dishwasher. They were the only things in the house that looked organized and ready to pick up easily in one trip.

"Grandpa," she said, after he drank the water. "Why are the cat's things all packed?"

Her grandpa avoided her eyes. "I'm giving the cat to the pound."

"That was grandma's cat though!"

His bottom lip quivered and for the first time Marissa saw him as someone who had a life before he married her grandma. "I know Marissa."

A blur of color rushed past them. The cat was full of greys and whites, with tan splashed across her face. Marissa thought about the three-hour drive it took to get here and Jordan's hatred of anything that walked on four legs. Then she thought of Jordan's hair and the rolling hills that she alone had to watch. The cat meowed and Marissa saw her vibrant green eyes look at her and she sucked in a breath.

"I'm taking the cat home with me, grandma."