

Everything In-Between

A Thesis

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&

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By

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## Introduction

Everything In-Between follows Matt, recently unemployed young man in his mid-twenties, as he drives from Brooklyn to San Francisco to reconnect with a college friend. Along the way, Matt finds himself in trouble and among new acquaintances and places that cause him to question where he is going and where he is coming from. I wrote this novella as I imagine the twists and turns life after college might bring, and how those changes will inform how I grow and explore the world once out of college.

## Chapter 1

Nothing laid between the open road and me. I shot down the highway happy to finally put city traffic and cars in my rearview. It took me nearly two hours just to get out of New York and find quieter highways. My truck's windows were down and my music was turned up. The Beatles were my company this morning. The crisp morning air and the sounds of Sergeant Pepper's woke me up better than any cup of coffee would. A sign indicated that Philadelphia was sixty miles to the left and I realized I was likely now the furthest from home I'd ever been.

I let out a deep sigh and, along with it, I released a bundle of pent-up energy that was collected in my chest over the last few weeks. I didn't fully realize it was there until now as I felt the absence of the anxiety.

I noticed the towns becoming further apart and the forests becoming thicker along the countryside. This was exactly what I wanted. Jerome told me all sorts of stories about his adventures from when he was my age, how he and his friends would drive through the night to see a sunrise in national forests or find small towns to go dancing at. "Growing up in Brooklyn was great," he'd say, "but you couldn't find a fun girl and an open country road in these tight blocks." I don't know why he stayed in the city at all.

He filled my head with all of his stories over the years I worked for him, especially in the last year, making him more of a grandpa than a boss to me. Jerome owned a store called Homefield Hardware back in Brooklyn. In the last decade, he slowly lost his customers to commercial hardware stores in the area. He complained that people didn't know how to do things for themselves anymore, that they needed others to come and fix things for them. I asked how his store was any different, since the truck I was now driving was intended to be the company vehicle for completing jobs in the homes of customers.

He said, “We went and taught people how to fix their apartments and houses. You think some kid from The Home Depot is going to get to know their customer and give them that kind of service? No, they rush people in and rush them out of their massive warehouses trying to get to as many customers in a day as they can. We got our truck so we could bring our services into folks’ homes, so we could show them how to fix a doorhandle or build a table, and then they wouldn’t need us to come again. That’s the difference.”

Jerome had his contradictions, I was always aware of that, but he was from a different generation. I worked for him every summer since I turned 14, and once I graduated college, I was there full time for nearly a year. By then, Jerome and I were the only ones he could afford to employ. While I wasn’t surprised to see the store close, it still stung. When it went under, Jerome sold everything at a discount, including the store’s truck, though the latter was only on the table for me. He told me it was time for me to make my own stories when he passed the keys and registration to my hands.

I smiled to myself, thinking about Jerome, his quirks and stubbornness. He was ready to do anything to keep the store afloat, but he was too old to pull together a plan to really save it. I hoped retirement was treating him well. He told me he wanted to make furniture and watch wheel of fortune. More than anything, I hoped he was happy to have all his time to himself now.

The highway continued to rumble on. I gazed out the window and softly sang along with Paul McCartney. The fields and forests were beautiful in the early June sun. Spring was past its peak but flowers and leaves still covered the vegetation while they could before the true scorching months of summer arrived.

As pretty as the landscape here was, I was curious to see the rest of the country. The supposed beautiful mountains, expansive great plains, and lush west coast forests were enough to

pull a city boy like me out from the concrete jungle. The whole country was at my fingertips, and I was eager to see it all.

I loved the feeling of the wind rushing through the car windows and around the small truck cab. The stars aligned for me to leave the city, with this truck being available and my job ending, but also with a friend from college contacting me a few weeks ago on the west coast. Mason had told me that he and a few older friends of his started a band and that their first show was coming up soon. His text said they'd save a ticket for me if I could get there somehow. Back in college, we spent hours daydreaming about being in a band, getting to have fun and travelling to make a living. I was excited for him to be making that dream a reality, though I was a bit envious as well. That mix of emotions was coursing through me as I drove, and I noticed my knuckles were clenched white on the steering wheel. I took a breath to loosen up and looked around me to pull my mind away from Mason.

The roads zipped by under the wheels of the small, old truck. Its maroon body was dusty from its years spent in the store's garage. It was so old that there was no aux cable – there wasn't even a CD player. A janky radio and cassette player were my only media sources. Luckily, I found a cassette to aux cable at an electronics store that worked. Doubly lucky, my iPhone was old enough to have an aux port anyways.

I found myself already loving the truck. The freedom of a set of wheels was unrivaled. I could go anywhere I wanted with this vehicle. It was small compared to most trucks I see on the road. It was a single cab, with a long bench seat made of worn, fuzzy cloth connecting the two doors and windows that were rolled down by manual cranks. A large shifter was on my side, allowing me to drive and reverse, but also bump the car into four-wheel drive. Google informed me that 4x4 was worse on my gas mileage, which was already shocking in the ancient truck, so I

left the truck in two-wheel drive. The bed of the truck was short, probably only around five feet long, but a sheet of plywood I fastened on as a cover made it a perfect trunk for my few boxes of clothes and books. My guitar, backpack, and duffle bag, with a few changes of clothes and my laptop, sat in the cab with me.

Sunshine filled the cab along with the music. I chose the scenic route for the beauty of it, and to enjoy the long rides in the truck. I quickly realized why people often skip the scenic route.

The rural fields, though recently plowed and empty, indicated that farms scored the countryside. With the farms came animals, and with animals came the unpleasant smell of manure and sweat. This, I decided, I could live without. People back home complained about working in New York City and the smells on the streets, but I determined this was worse. At least in the City you can escape the smells by going inside. I wondered if the people living in the homes along the roads smelled the overwhelming stench from inside their houses. Maybe they're noses are just dulled to it by now.

I stopped to gas up his truck in a run-down, small town. Finding gas stations proved easier than I expected on the backroads, but the fuel gage on the old truck didn't seem all too reliable to my eye. The truck's mileage was reading only 77,845 miles on it despite its age of nearly three decades. I determined that I would have to fill up every few hours, just to be safe, and to give my legs a stretch anyways.

The quiet town I found myself in was home to a single, gas station so old it made my truck look new. The outside contained only two pumps, both without credit card readers, and no covering or roof to the filling area. I headed into the paint-chipped, wood-sided station building to pay for the gas.

Inside the greasy, rusty station, I grabbed a few snacks for the day. A large man sat unmoving behind a cash register with a cap pulled down past his eyes. I approached the counter and coughed, hoping to get the man's attention. A snore snuck out of the man's mouth.

"Uh, excuse me?" I asked to no response. I leaned forward and nudged the man's shoulder from across the countertop. The man shifted and raised his head just high enough to see out from under his cap.

"Gah damn, what you want?" The man demanded groggily.

I was taken aback. I wasn't ready to have to wake up a gas station worker just to pay for food and gas. If I were a less honest guy, I could have just walked out with the snacks, and no one would have known. "Gas and these snacks," I said, keeping the conversation simple and direct.

"How much?"

"Uh, just these two," I held up the bags of candy and goldfish.

"No shit. How much gas?" The man asked again.

"Oh. Forty dollars should do it," I guessed, realizing I had no idea how large the tank on the truck was. It had been sitting with a full tank for years, which probably wasn't good for it, but I wasn't complaining as it got me far from the city on that first full tank.

The man pushed a few buttons on the register, then grunted and nodded towards the snacks in my hands. I tossed them on the counter. As the man checked out the items, I asked, "So, you from here?" hoping to break the tense silence.

"Sure as hell didn't move here on my own accord," he grumbled.

“No, I suppose not.” I paid with cash and hurried out of the store to start pumping the gas and hit the road. A few minutes later, I was back on the road and questioning just how joyful this trip will be if every gas station was run like that.

Noon approached and the sun began to beat down on me in the truck. I was sweating despite the cranked down windows and the wind rushing through the cab. The occasional farm shattered the illusion of nature along the road, and the peacefulness of the forests and fields, with their smells. I noticed wind turbines littered the horizon at points, like a new forest being built onto the land.

The sun was starting to hang low in the sky. The horizon, lit orange by the light, was blurring between the sky and earth. I hoped Allegheny State Park laid only a little further ahead. The park was my destination for the night, a free space with free campgrounds. This was the first of many planned stops I wanted to make. I wanted to find myself among the trees and away from people and cities. Jerome told stories of drinking and camping in the woods with friends during the summers and while I didn't have a group of friends to camp with, I figured being alone in the woods would be a good alternative.

A sign saying the park was on the right zipped by me and I pulled off the main road and down a county road into the forest. I drove down the quiet road with a canopy of trees over top giving the illusion of driving in a tunnel. A few miles later, I found a clearing with campsites.

A few other cars were scattered around the space. A half hour later, once the sun had set and twilight set in, one of the other spots had a fire going in a pit and a woman singing along with a guitar. The distant sounds of her music filled the air while I set up the old tent that I found in Homefield Hardware before the store closed. The tent was small, but provided plenty of space



for me. I had never set up a tent before, and looking at mine, I wasn't all that confident in the structure. The sides were sagging in, and it looked like a strong breeze might blow it right over.

"First night out alone," I said to the tent, "Here's to new experiences, I guess."

With my tent set up, I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and ate from the bed of my truck. I chewed silently, listening to the sounds of the guitar a campsite over. The dry sandwich tasted dull in my mouth and felt scratchy in my throat as I swallowed. The coming night enveloped me in darkness, making the nearby campsites feel further and further away, and the fire a mere speck of light against the night.

With nothing else to do, I decided to turn in early, though it was only eight. As I put away the rest of my stuff and slammed the truck bed closed, I noticed the guitar had stopped playing and the woman's voice was speaking to a few others. I squinted their direction, and though I couldn't make out anything, I thought I saw people standing and talking to the woman. She seemingly invited the people to join, as the voices continued to talk, their conversation carrying across the campsites in murmurs. A moment later, the guitar was playing again, and multiple people were singing. The group sounded joyous and excited. They were a community around the fire and music. I suddenly felt very alone and cold at my campsite.

I wanted to go over to their campsite. An aching in my gut told me that I wasn't quite ready to be completely isolated from people even though I thought I wanted to be. Perhaps Jerome was right in saying his best nights were with his friends, shared with other people. And plus, they were musicians, at least someone over there was. What did I have to lose? I stood up and took a few steps then stopped. I don't want to be annoying, and I don't really know how people act at campsites. Do they leave each other alone? I suppose those other people didn't seem to care about keeping to themselves. Why should I have too as well? I took several more

steps towards the campfire. I was now halfway between my tent and their RV. I won't be bothering them, will I? Worst case, it's awkward and I leave after saying hi. Yeah, if nothing else, I can always just walk away. I took a deep breath and walked the last thirty feet or so to the fire.

As I approached, I saw the group was made up of four shadows silhouetted by the fire. The group was singing a country song I didn't recognize, a woman playing the guitar and the other three swaying as they sung. I slowed in my approach, not wanting to interrupt them in the middle of their music and knowing how frustrating that can be. Luckily, they finished the last chorus, the guitarist played a few extra chords, and they broke out in a small applause for the musician and themselves. I clapped as well, standing on the outskirts of their circle, trying to both be polite and catch their attention.

The guitarist looked over her shoulder at me. "Hi there. You need something?" She asked with a smile so wide it was visible in the faint fire light she had turned away from.

I took another deep breath to collect myself. "I, uh, no, I heard you all playing and singing and saw your fire. You're a great guitarist," I winced at my words and felt silly for bothering these people.

"Oh, aren't you sweet. Thank you," she replied holding a hand to her heart. "Why don't you join us? There's bound to be a log or rock you can pull up from over there."

I nodded and ventured over to find a seat, my anxiety ebbing. Sure enough, just past the campfire and the group of people, I found a log that I rolled over and propped up to use as a seat.

"I'm Nick," said a man, "and that's Jane," he pointed to the woman holding the guitar, "and these are some new friends of ours, Case and Andrew," he gestured at the two on the far side of the fire. The group all looked to me.

Getting the hint, I introduced himself, “Hi, I’m Matt. Nice to meet you all.”

“Likewise,” said Jane, “What brings you out here?”

I looked around the group for the first time. Jane and Nick were on the older side, at least in their fifties. Both seemed good natured, with wide smiles and inquisitive eyes. They had the presence of young, hippie grandparents. Jane sat cross legged and barefooted on a blanket while Nick had a camping chair pulled out - like the ones parents bring to their kids’ sport games - and held a beer in his hand. On the opposite side of the fire, Case and Andrew sat on a blanket, with their shoes to the side and a bottle of wine between them. I noticed that they were holding hands and seemed relaxed and at ease. They looked to be only a few years older than me, maybe in their late twenties or early thirties, but had the presence of more mature adults than I felt like I was.

“It’s a long story,” I said, not wanting to be under the spotlight around the group of strangers, as good natured as they might be.

Case pipped up, “Oh, come on, give us some sort of story.” Andrew nodded with him.

“Err, fine,” I said with what must have been an awkward look on my face. “I’m from Brooklyn. I was living at home and working but the store I worked at closed and my parents wanted me out anyways, so I hit the road. I bought my truck from my old boss and now I’m driving across the country to see a friend in San Francisco.” I didn’t want to linger on any details and looked down to my fiddling fingers when I finished.

“Now that wasn’t too long,” joked Jane, “Quite the week you’ve had then, huh?”

“Quite,” Nick agreed, “And is this just a stop along the way I take it?”

“Yup, I’m trying to camp as I go.” I perked up. “Got to save money and I’ve never really done it before, camping and road tripping, but I’ve heard there’s a lot of nice outdoor spaces in the West.”

“That there are. Tons of national and state parks and dispersed camping just about everywhere. I think a road trip in the outdoors is something people should do more often,” Jane offered.

“Is this your first time out of the city?” asked Andrew, turning the conversation back to me with a nod to Jane.

“Pretty much, yeah. I’ve visited family in Philly before, but that’s it,” I shared. I felt a bit more at ease knowing that they didn’t think me crazy for such a trip and life change.

“Good for you,” Nick said with as he raised his beer in my direction, “Not enough young adults get out into the real world now a days. It’s all about the internet and smartphones. I say, who needs ‘em?” He took a long sip from his can.

I shrugged and nodded not out of agreement but because I didn’t know what to say to him.

Andrew replied instead, “Well, it isn’t all bad. The amount of knowledge at our fingertips, and how we can communicate with friends and family around the world, technology is a good thing, too.”

“More bad than good, I say,” grumbled Nick.

“We can listen to all kinds of music now, too” I offered, “it’s so easy to hear an album on Spotify rather than tracking down a CD, cassette tape, or record.”

Jane perked up, “I do like being able to listen to music and radio stations around the world. It’s a real blessing. Remember how much work we put into simply sharing a dozen songs on a cassette tape or CD when we were younger, Nick?”

“I remember you making them endlessly and not knowing how to repay the favor, yes,” he said with a chuckle.

“I suppose you were a bit slower at making mixtapes than me. It’s not all good though, I do agree. People can’t sit still and with their thoughts anymore. They always need their phone as a distraction from the real world. We as a species don’t take the time to walk through the trees as much anymore. We don’t talk as much as we used to. People don’t spend enough time looking at the stars anymore.” Jane finished and gazed upwards.

The group stopped talking to join her. There wasn’t a sound except for the crackling fire and nearby crickets.

I lost track of how much time we passed looking up. Case and Andrew occasionally whispered to each other, but otherwise we stayed completely silent. My eyes went in and out of focus as I gazed up at the infinite stars above. More stars popped up as my eyes adjusted from looking at the fire. I felt a bit silly, sitting and looking up, but I didn’t want to be the one to break the silence, so I continued to gaze, despite my neck aching from the strange angle and my back aching from my uncomfortable seat.

Eventually, Nick spoke up, “How about another song? You all like John Denver?”

Case and Andrew both nodded and sat up from laying back on their blanket, and Jane began strumming a few chords. I could tell which ones she was playing simply by ear, but I didn’t know the song or artist Nick mentioned. I stayed quiet in anticipation for the music.

Everyone else joined in and sang a song about the Rocky Mountains. I made a mental note of the name so I could listen to the original song while on the road tomorrow. I felt like I was in a bubble with the group. The warmth of the fire, the circle we sat in, and the pulse of the music kept me drawn into the present moment. My road trip, leaving my family, driving to see Mason, and everything else slipped my mind while Jane played, and the fire crackled in accompaniment. The darkness around us eased me into feeling like there was nothing around but our group itself. And really, there was nothing else around save for a few other campers and the unseen wild animals of the forest.

Jane played several songs, and Nick took a turn to play a few as well. However, as the night went on, and the fire died down, our group lost steam. Case and Andrew began to only murmur the lyrics, their bottle of wine now empty and them both lying down and either looking up at the stars once again or facing each other to sing and tap each other's noses. Jane and Nick shared enthusiastic energy between themselves, but they were both wanning. The full day of driving was catching up with me and I hunched over on my seat.

When Nick finished his last song, he looked up at the group and asked, "Anyone else know any songs to play? Or should we call it a night?" He clearly didn't want to be the one to end the evening but seemed to not want to control the entertainment any longer.

"I know a song that will be nice to end on," I shared. Nick passed the guitar, and I played a few familiar chords to warm up. I started plucking and strumming slowly, building up to the actual speed of the song.

"Oh, I love this song," Jane said.

Once I reached the proper speed, I played the melody through one more time and then began singing. After a line or two, Jane joined in. The words to Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide" flowed through us both.

While I played, the already small bubble of our group shrunk even more, containing only Jane and me as we sang. My fingers easily and naturally plucking the strings across the guitar in beat with the familiar rhythm. This was one of the first songs I learned on guitar because it was my mother's favorite. I thought about her as I played. She supported me when I decided to move out and drive across the country with barely any money to my name. She told me I needed to make this trip, though not that she was excited for me to see Mason or travel across the country, finally out of the only city I'd ever known.

"But time makes you bolder, even children get older, and I'm getting older to," Jane and I sang.

The song seemed to last an hour. When we finished, Nick asked "How long you been playing, Matt?"

"About eight years. I found a guitar in a secondhand store and taught myself."

"Well, you play damn well. You should be in a band or something."

"I tried that, it wasn't quite for me," I shared, my shoulders stooping forward and my head hanging. "I'm going to head to bed. It was nice meeting you," I said abruptly, tired from the song and the long day.

"And you as well. I was a pleasure to spend the evening with you and your beautiful playing. Safe travels," Jane said back.

I shuffled back to my campsite with only the light of my phone. It felt silly to be relying on my connection to the whole world simply to navigate through the woods. What did people do

hundreds of years ago without flashlights and technology? I went straight into my lopsided, saggy tent. A few minutes later, I was passed out in my worn, flannel lined sleeping bag with dreams of playing music and driving in sunshine floating about my head.



## Chapter 2

I woke up to a cold, wet feeling on my face. I raised a hand to wipe it and realized my face was more than just a little bit damp. A shiver ran through my body as I realized the wetness was all through my sleeping bag. I sat up, shocked awake by the cold running across my body, and saw that the tent was sagging in on every side. A puddle formed all around my sleeping pad in the night leaving my sleeping bag soaked. Wind and rain roared outside and blew the saturated tent's sides which caused small droplets of water onto my face as if it was raining inside the tent walls. I hurried to get out of my sleeping bag, knowing there was no choice but to rush into my truck and hope the rain would pass. I scrambled out of the tent and left everything behind. Besides, I reasoned, my gear can't get more wet.

It was still dark outside when I unzipped my tent and felt water splashing onto my face with a newfound aggression. My bare feet squelched in the earth as I ran to my truck. A spongy puddle had replaced the green grass and dirt patches overnight. Wind and rain stung my head and back.

"God damn," I cursed to myself, fumbling in the dark to put the car key in the door handle. By the time I was inside the cab, I was shivering and questioning why I ever thought camping on this trip was a good idea.

I was zapped awake by the cold and rain, but my mind was groggy. I pulled out a spare shirt, dried off the best I could with it, and pulled on sweatpants and a sweatshirt. I started the car and turned on the heat. The small truck cab heated up in only a few minutes and I was warm again. The cloth bench looked very appealing to my tired body, so I turned off the car and stretched out as best I could across the fuzzy seat. I drifted in and out of sleep with dreams of

driving and camping with an RV until the sun began to rise and the streaks of pale light woke me up for good.

Much to my dismay, the rain continued to pour down. I was in no rush, but more so than that, I had no desire to sit in the woods during a downpour. In a feat of either bravery or stupidity, I tossed on a raincoat and ran out to grab my tent, sleeping bag, clothes, and foam pad. Everything was drenched, and with no means to dry things out, I elected to toss the mass of wet gear at the passenger side's feet.

I laid my head back against the backrest and took a few deep breaths. The toll of a poor night's sleep and the late night before were doing me no favors, but I shook my head and fired up the engine. Grit kept me awake as I developed a runny nose during those first few hours of driving.

The rain poured on all morning. I drove without stopping, but the storm was endless, or at least it was following me west. The sweet musings of John Denver were my only companion through the dense downpour. Evidently, the windshield wipers needed changing as they seemed to smear the water just as much as brush it off.

I pulled into a small town around noon, the rain finally ebbing and flashes of sunlight visible through the thick blanket of dark clouds. I found myself desperate to see the Rocky Mountains of Denver's songs. The thought of driving through the great plains first felt daunting, but I decided to view the flat stretch of fields as a necessary rite of passage before the supposed beauty of the rugged Rockies.

The town proved seemingly insignificant - I figured most of the towns I was going to see would be. It was made of a dozen roads, most of which shared yards and forests with short houses between which broken windows and mangled fences were the only similarities. The sole

exception was a few meager stores on a main street: a gas station, diner, and local dive bar, or at least I assumed it was such based on the neon signs and grimy windows.

I pulled into the gas station seeing as I was low on gas once again.

“This trip is going to kill my bank account. Why couldn’t Jerome have bought a hybrid or something?” I said to himself as I shoved the nozzle into the large tank. A series of coughs came from my throat while the pump started.

Another truck pulled into the gas station while I waited. A pair of high school aged boys sat in the bed, another two in the driver’s seat. The truck’s roof was sawed off, and the doors were removed, making a sort of open vehicle. Massive wheels and a lifted suspension formed a truck that I figured was too large and too tall for any practical use.

One of the boys in the back gave me a grin and waved. I returned the greeting but pulled my arm back quickly to cough into it. The other boy hauled up the head of a dead deer, its neck bloody and trailing down to the body in the bed, with an ecstatic expression. The two started cheering. I nearly gagged, still coughing but also now trying to not puke.

They must have been out hunting in the forests nearby. I couldn’t imagine such a hobby, waiting around with a rifle until an animal wandered by only to shoot the life from the creature. I turned away to hide my shocked face and tried to focus on the gas pump.

A gun shot made my heart nearly jump out of my mouth. One of the boys held their gun above their head in celebration of their deer. My pump wasn’t finished, but I pulled it out of the truck and hopped in anyways.

I drove off while they cheered and high-fived each other. The distant Rocky Mountains called to me stronger than before, not just for their beauty and wilderness now, but for the

distance they provided from those hunters. I let out a dark chuckle at my thoughts – I sounded like an old man, trying to get away from the darn teenagers. My amusement did not last long.

I pulled over to a campsite I found on the side of the highway several hours later. With a few hours of sunshine left in the day, and the stormy clouds long gone behind me, I wanted to set up my tent and lay out my wet clothes. Additionally, I was starting to get a headache and sore throat while my cough was becoming worse by the hour.

I wanted to get a glimpse at how far along I was on the route west but had no service to check my phone. In fact, phone service was spotty for most of the afternoon as I drove. Instead, knowing I was somewhere in Ohio was going to have to do.

I popped down my tailgate and sat on the edge of the truck with my guitar. I strummed a few chords but couldn't help but think of my family. The realization that I was in the middle of nowhere and simultaneously the farthest I'd ever been from home was setting in. Right now, my family would be sitting down to dinner. They might be having pizza. I tried to not think about my own dinner, knowing full well it would be PB&Js again.

I focused back down to my guitar, shaking thoughts of home and my family from my mind. "Dad wanted me out," I mumbled in rhythm to the instrument. My mind started to fade out, as if I was in calculus again, lost in the mix of letters and numbers. Instead, my fingers did the talking, the expressing, and the understanding. There was no one around to listen to what they said, but that was ok. Time lost meaning and before I knew it the sun was low on the horizon behind me. The mountains I faced showed the light fading as darkness crept up their slopes and trees. A chilly breeze blew through my t-shirt. I came back to reality with a shiver and grabbed a sweatshirt from the truck bed.

It felt ironic that the truck was used for my escape from the city. As Jerome told me several times, he bought the truck in the height of Homefield Hardware's success in the 90's. The surrounding blocks were home to blue collar families and hardworking immigrants, all of whom were looking to save money and build their lives up. The truck was meant to be a way to continue serving the community by bringing Homefield Hardware's knowledge and tools to those who needed work done.

Along the way, the community faded, and the store was forgotten. The truck was left to collect dust. Jerome sold it to me at a low price, though it still ate a chunk out of my savings, when the store closed. Now it serves as my means to leave the very community the vehicle was intended to serve.

The sentimental moment was ruined by a wave of coughing in my throat. A bit of phlegm flew out of my mouth, and I cleared my throat to stave off the tickle I was feeling. A sip of water and a thrown together sandwich was the rest of the cure I needed, though my head was feeling lighter than when I stopped driving hours ago.

With the sun fully down and my lonely campsite set up, I crawled into the tent. My camping gear was all a bit damp still. I briefly considered packing up and going to a motel but decided my budget couldn't make room for such a luxury. Tonight, I thought to myself, I'll get a good night's sleep out here. I coughed more as I stretched out on the ground, the solid, rocky earth proving difficult to be comfortable on.

The coughing fits grew stronger and longer as the night darkened. I laid in my sleeping bag and coughed on and off for half an hour. Despite the darkness I started seeing spots in my vision. Sweat poured from my brow, yet I was shivering in the thick sleeping bag.

I didn't understand. This night was warmer and dryer than the last, but I felt shivery and sweaty at the same time. The sickness must be from last night, it being so wet and cold. I must have gotten a cold. I shifted over onto my side, my throat scratchy and head swimming. This might be more than a cold, I realized. I didn't have any medicine. I didn't even think about packing any when I hit the road. How could I have been so stupid and not brought at least a first aid kit and some cough syrup. My isolation made the coughing feel even worse. I didn't have anyone to help me. Instead, I left myself high and dry. I tried to think about what my mom would do.

When I was a kid, back in elementary and even middle school, Mom used to give my brother, Jack, and me 7up with a crazy straw when we were sick. I used to look forward to getting sick – I got to lay in bed, watch cartoons, and drink soda all day. Those comforts made the scariness of being sick easy and forgettable. She was a genius. And now here I am, alone and sick and in the dark, an idiot. I would have given my truck and everything in it to be in my bed at home in that moment.

Instead, a part of me wanted to just curl into a ball, give up, and see what the morning brought. A larger part of me knew that was stupid, and that I should drive to a town and at least get cough syrup. A shiver ran through my body – I couldn't tell if it was from being sick or in a damp sleeping bag. I felt stupid lying on the ground. I'm just going to get sicker if I stay out here. I sat up and rolled out of the sleeping bag. Maybe that motel room would be for the best tonight.

Despite the haze, my logic prevailed, and I sat up. My head swam as I rolled my camping gear into a haphazard ball and chucked the mess into the truck cab. I lumbered to the driver's

side, slid into the seat, fired up the engine, and rolled back onto the road. The lack of service meant I had no directions. I made a mental note to get a physical map next chance I got.

I wasn't a fan of driving in the dark - the sunset was my marker of when the day of driving was done. Rumbling down the county roads only further emphasized my opinions as tunnel vision caused me to feel like I was staring at the road yet seeing nothing. I pulled on my cap, which was sitting on my bench seat, hoping to combat the shivers I was feeling. My nose was as stuffy as a subway during rush hour and my throat was coated in phlegm and ached from the coughs.

And on top of my physical symptoms, I was beating myself up over my lack of preparation. How could I have let myself get into this situation? I could crash or pass out at any moment, and I needed to find a motel for the night, maybe some cough syrup at a gas station, too.

I was only two days into this road trip and already risking breaking my bank to get through a night. This all could have been avoided if I had a better tent. This all could have been avoided if I stayed at home again. I was so focused on getting away from home and making up for wasting the last year in Brooklyn that I tricked myself into thinking I needed to leave now. All this road trip has led to is getting sick, burning a hole into my savings, and seeing some dumb teenagers play with a dead deer.

I pounded the steering wheel with my hand and a dull pain spread in my knuckles. A loud "arrrrgghhh" aimed at myself, my parents, at Mason, at everyone, screamed from my mouth. I shook my head and stared down the road in a bitter silence.

A town rumbled into view after a dozen miles. I was aching and shivering, wanting nothing more than to clear my stuffy nose and lie down for the night. I pulled off the highway to

find a motel, but a few quiet blocks contained only homes and the occasional store. I came to realize there wasn't much of a town here at all and it took me fifteen minutes to drive every street.

I pulled into the parking lot of a wood-sided church. The white paint on the building was chipped and a pair of minimally carved wooden doors served as the entrance. The church was not very large, but a few rooms were connected onto the side of the building and a bell tower stretched above everything else in the area. The dirt parking lot was nearly full, which I found strange for a Saturday night. I didn't think much of it, though, and parked. I laid down on the seat of my truck to cradle my head and figure out my next move.

Chills ran up and down my back, and each shake brought a new level of achiness in my muscles and bones. My joints felt like they were those of a grandpa's. I slipped in and out of sleep, fever dreams filling my mind and blurring the line between reality and my imagination.

Eventually, people filed out of the church. I heard the shuffling and murmuring of voices followed by the cars around me igniting their engines and driving across the gravel lot. I fell asleep and woke to an empty parking lot, but I could not tell how much time passed between the people leaving and my waking.

I felt no better, but I also didn't feel worse, which I took as a win. I grabbed my water bottle from the floor and emptied it into my scratchy throat. Feeling a bit better from the water, I laid back down and pulled an arm over my head. A moment later and I was dreaming of a quiet knocking on my car window. The knocking continued, a bit louder now, and I sat up. This was no dream. I turned around and looked out the passenger door to see a man waving from outside the door.



I scooted across to the far side of the truck and fumbled with the keys, but the man waved and put his hands up as if to say he's innocent. The rush of adrenaline faded quickly, and the aching returned to my body. I reached over to crank down the passenger window only an inch.

"Hello," the man asked in a slow, mellow voice, "are you lost? Do you need something?"

I let out a few coughs in response.

"You seem a bit sick, please, come inside, you can spend the night here."

I was wary of the man, but I noticed he was wearing a black shirt with a white collar and realized he was a priest. I sniffed up a line of snot that was escaping my nose, then stepped out of the car and lumbered towards the church with the man.

## Chapter 3

I woke up to a hazy headache and sunlight sprinkling down from a window high above me. If I didn't know better, I would have guessed I was waking up in my college dorm after a night of bar hopping and listening to live music. The sunlight streaming down from above me was warm and cozy on my face. My body was still achy and my sinuses clogged.

With the concentration came my memory. Last I remembered, I was outside somewhere, and it was nighttime. I was trying to sleep in my truck because I didn't find a motel. Then that priest invited me into his church.

I gazed around the room I was in. I sat in a small cot on the ground. The room was small and very minimally furnished. There was a desk and chair, a coat-hanger, and a large cross on the wall. The space felt larger than my bedroom back home, but only because it was so empty. It must only be a few feet by a few feet wide – adding a bed and a closet would have taken up the remaining space.

I was interrupted by a creak of the floorboards behind me. Over my shoulder I saw the priest from last night walk through the plain, wooden doorframe of the room. He was tall and skinny, almost like a ghost, and wore a black shirt, black pants, and a cowboy hat. In more normal circumstances I would have grinned at the look of this old cowboy priest.

“It's good to see you up,” he spoke with his slow voice, “You slept all through the night and the morning.”

“Who are you?” I asked, not wanting to sound ungrateful, but feeling awkward, out of place, and untrusting of the stranger despite having accepted his invitation inside last night.

“Oh, sorry, yes. My name’s father Richard. I’m the priest of this parish, have been for the last twenty years,” he explained. “I found you in the parking lot after mass last night. You were sleeping in your truck, don’t you remember?”

“I do remember,” I said. I felt wrong for having accepted his help despite having spent a night inside and feeling better now than I did yesterday. There must be some other shoe waiting to drop – I didn’t believe that he would be so gracious on his own accord.

“Well, you’re welcome,” Richard said with a nod.

“Thanks,” I replied, feeling like a kindergartener who was told to say thanks by his teacher. “I won’t be able to repay,” I added.

“I don’t expect you to,” Richard replied, “You need to rest more, though. Do you want any water or food? I made some onion soup that is some of my best work, I must say.”

Though I didn’t want his food, I was hungry and needed to eat, so I gave an unenthusiastic yes. Richard went to get the soup and I stared at the ceiling. I suppose I should be more grateful towards him, but I was too frustrated with the situation to be thankful. My whole ordeal felt like a bad dream but was far from it. I really should have packed medicine in the first place. I wanted to feel better and get back on the road as soon as possible.

“Here you go,” Richard said, walking through the door and passing me a steaming bowl.

“Thanks.” I took a swallow of the hot soup with Richard watching expectantly. The soup nearly burned my throat, but it was delicious, at least, what I tasted through the heat was.

“So, what brings you through town?” Richard asked.

I pondered his question. There was the easy answer, the immediate truth, I was sick and needed medicine. But there was a more complex answer, not just to what brings me to town

today, but why I'm passing through this town at all, which is because it's on the way of my longer trip.

"I was camping nearby," I decided to say, "and started feeling pretty sick, so I pulled into town hoping to get some cough syrup or a motel room," I finished without making eye contact.

Richard chuckled, "A motel. That explains how you wound up in the parking lot here. You won't find a motel anywhere in this area." He pulled his hand across the brim of his hat as he spoke.

"Apparently not."

"So, what brings you out here from the New York?" He questioned. I gave him a questioning look and he said, "I saw your license plate."

"I'm driving across the country," I replied, not feeling a need to lie, but also not feeling a need to say more than was asked.

Richard leaned back against the door frame and gazed off, as if overlooking a wide field or a river, and nodded. "Sounds like quite the trip, that must be at least a week of driving." A moment of silence passed between us as I chose to not respond and instead slurped up more soup.

Richard continued, "I always wanted to set out on my own like that. I almost did, once, but chose to stay home because of my folks."

"Why's that?"

"Why'd my folks make me stay?"

"Yeah."

"I was all packed up, in a truck much like yours out there, planning to go west, but my Pa had a fall and broke his hip. He needed to be looked after and my Ma wasn't strong enough to do

everything anymore. A year later, he passed away, and my Ma lost her will to go on. She'd been fading along with him during his last couple months, but once he was gone, she was as good as gone, too. She was a shell of herself, except for the fact that she was still baking the best cookies in the world, but passed away a month later."

He spoke openly, speaking of his late parents as casually as one might talk of the weather. I sensed a hint of pain in his words, though, and didn't want to push the conversation more. I wasn't ready for such a loaded response in the first place.

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

"Nothing to be sorry about. That's the natural course of life, and those years led me to the priesthood. It was all in the Lord's plan."

I was never a religious person. My parents did not raise Jack or me to be so, and I never thought much of it, but heard stories of wild church services, exorcisms, and near fantasy miracles that people believed in the name on 'faith.'

"It was God's plan to kill your parents? That must've been a dark time. Why would he do that to you?"

"Like I said, it led me to the priesthood. That's what I was sent here to do, to share the word of the lord. And as for death, it's inevitable. We all die just as much as we are all born. I was always going to have to say bye to my folks, it would not have been easier if it was a decade earlier or a decade later."

I shrugged at Richard, but he didn't seem to like my response.

"Being afraid of death is like being afraid of the sun. It will always find you, impact you and everyone around you. Look at the seasons of the year. A circle of life, from spring through winter. First, everything blooms. Then everything turns cold and dies. Finally, it all returns. It's a

constant cycle, and death is at the forefront along with birth. It's not the end, either. There's something beyond this life, and everyone has a different answer to what lies in that beyond."

I didn't know how to respond. I stayed quiet, pondering his words, nodding, and thinking.

"That became a bit deeper than you intended, I'm sure," Richard said.

"No, no, it's fine. I, uh, never really thought about it," I replied. An awkward moment of silence passed between us.

"Tell me about your road trip so far," Richard offered, pulling out the desk chair.

"It's been," I paused to figure out my response. I was about to say it's been fine, but that isn't the truth, and why not be honest, "a bit of a mess, so far."

"Why's that?" He asked. I felt he meant it, that he was truly curious, and not asking out of politeness.

"Gas is more expensive than I thought it would be. I got poured on in my first night which left me sick on my second night. The people I've been meeting are weird and not always friendly," Richard frowned at me, "Not you, no, really, I appreciate what you've done for me here. I meant other people I've met. Like this guy at a gas station who seemed mad at me for coming in to buy gas, or these teenagers who were hunting and playing with t

"It's a big, weird world out there. Sounds like you're learning that now."

"I kind of always new. New York isn't exactly known for being the home of normal people, but I just didn't think about it how much is out there, you know?"

"It sounds like your lack of thinking gets you into tricky situations often."

I felt a bit scorned by Richard. He didn't know me but seemed to think he did. I looked down to my soup and continued eating.

“I must tend to some church matters. The kitchen is down on the right of the hall if you want more,” and with that, Richard left me alone.

I slurped up the rest of the soup and laid back down on the small cot. Who does he think he is, telling me I can’t plan ahead? A small part of me knew he was right, though. Sitting and denying what he said would do me no good. I trapped myself in a few situations with my lack of preparation. I was so eager to get away from home and make up for not leaving earlier that I forgot to think beyond the immediate actions. My stomach growled at me, so I got up to search for the kitchen.

The door of the room led to a small hallway. The walls were plain white, and the floor was lined with grey carpet. Warm yellow lights poured into the hall along with the light from the few windows in-between the doors of the hallway. To one end of the hallway was the church’s main area – a few pews were visible from the doorway I was at – and the other end contained a couple doors on each side. I opened the first one on my right and found the kitchen. A large pot sat on the stove, which was a wide eight gas burners and look ancient. I filled my bowl and ate at the counter. A massive fridge and freezer filled one wall, counter space and wooden cupboards filled the others, with a sink and the stove sitting under the windows facing a cornfield and the sunset. I washed my bowl and left it on the counter to dry.

With nothing else to do, I wandered back down the hall and into the church.

When I was a kid, my parents said they didn’t have the time to go to church, even though they were both raised Christian. Personally, I didn’t really care what people believed in and was happy to not have to spend my Sunday mornings in a church. I didn’t feel a higher calling or anything, and that was fine by me. Being inside the church felt odd. I felt out of place, like I didn’t belong.

The church was wide, with a dozen pews on either side of an aisle leading to a stage. I think that's what they call the altar. A large table, a few chairs, and a few crosses completed the place. I sat down in one of the back pews and gazed up at the main large cross. It hung above the altar and had a four-foot-tall statue of a man attached to it. I suppose that's Jesus.

“Are you a religious man?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Richard sneaked up behind me to ask his question. How I didn't hear him in the silent church was beyond me.

“Nope.”

“Do you know who that is?” he asked.

“Jesus?”

“Yes. That's him on the cross, being crucified to atone for the sins of all.”

“Why did he need to atone for us?”

“God sent him as an example for us all to follow. His crucifixion was a sacrifice for us, the rest of man, to strive to be our best selves and live by the commandments and lessons of the bible.”

“But don't people always sin anyways? Like, lying, or eating too much, those are sins, right? It's a lose-lose situation for everyone.”

Richard pondered this for a moment, searching for the right words. “In a sense, yes, but the goal is forgiveness, not being perfect. No one can be perfect and live by every rule, but we gain humanity and are humbled by having to atone, pray, and confess to our sins. That's the essence of being human.”



I turned from the priest back to Jesus. It seemed too arcane to torture and sacrifice a human just to serve as an example. I suppose Christianity was born in times in which such actions were more common.

“What’s the end goal then? If we never become perfect and are always learning, what’s the ending?”

Richard sat down next to me in the pew. “The goal is to embrace the imperfectness, the need to always learn. That’s where the true beauty of life lies not in the knowing, but the learning.”

“You spend a lot of time thinking about this,” I said, reflecting on his words.

“That’s my job.” Richard gave a grin, “and like I said earlier, I devoted myself during a particularly dark time in my life. It was the philosophy and knowing that there was a light at the end of my tunnel that brought me here.”

We sat in silence for a while. The sun set behind us through the windows of the church. I gazed at the cross and back to the priest. He had his hands crossed in his lap and his eyes were closed. I didn’t want to interrupt his praying, but I did want to leave. I sat next to him without saying a word.

I was starting to fall asleep when Richard stood.

“Would you like dinner? There’s still more soup left.”

I wasn’t ready to hit the road yet, health-wise, and accepted his offer. We walked to the kitchen to grab a bowl of soup each and a few rolls. We made small talk as we ate, talking about our upbrings and families. We were both basketball players in high school and joked about who would beat the other in one on one. Richard also had a younger brother and a sister, too. He never liked being the eldest child, feeling like there were too high of expectations upon him. I

shared that I didn't like being oldest because my brother, who ended up being smarter than I and a better athlete, often outshined me in our parents' eyes.

"I'm sure that wasn't the case. Your parents must be proud of you now."

I scoffed. "Yeah, so proud that they kicked me out of the house."

"Is that what happened or only what you saw?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's your side of the story, that your parents 'kicked you out,'" Richard said with air quotes, "but do you think they wanted to? Were they happy to do that? What was their side?"

"I don't know. Dad thought it was childish for me to still be living at home. He thought it was time I go out on my own."

"He can be proud of you and want you out at the same time, you know."

"Sure, whatever," I turned away from Richard, not wanting to talk anymore though I sensed he was right. Maybe I was being childish. First, I moved back in after college, which is fine, tons of people do that, but when my parents tried to get me to move out, I decided to drive across the country?

That wasn't the entire reason I decided to leave, I reminded myself.

"Well, it was a pleasure talking to you," Richard said as he stood, "But I'm going to hit the hay. You can sleep on the cot in my study again. I'll see you in the morning." He made to grab my bowl, but I held up a hand.

"I'll get it, thanks," I stood and walked to the sink. As I washed the few dishes, Richard lumbered out of the room. "Thanks for dinner, and for letting me stay here," I said without turning to look at him.

"Of course."

I finished cleaning and laid out on the cot down the hall. My mind was swimming with Richard's advice and our conversations. I thought about texting my parents but fell asleep before I made up my mind.

I woke at sunrise and was on the road before Richard awoke.

## Chapter 4

The Rocky Mountains came into view exactly at noon. Their peaks were purple and stretched over the horizon, making the wide, flatness of the great plains feel like a distant memory. I glued my eyes off ahead of the car in front of me to the growing mountains – they seemed to be stretching higher and higher towards the heavens as I approached. Through the old car speakers my phone played a random playlist from Spotify titled “Songs about Colorado.” I popped it on when I entered the state. After Texas, California, and New York, I figured Colorado must have the most songs written about it. The pride of its residents was quite strong.

I had a friend in middle school, Ashton, who moved out here with his family. In those days, before I was on social media or owned a phone, it was hard to keep in touch. I remembered using my school email to keep contact with Ashton, but we dropped off each other’s radars in a matter of months. I hadn’t heard from him in years, and I felt old thinking about him.

I distinctly remembered Ashton talking about how pretty the mountains were in the mornings, and how everyone in the state seemed to love hiking and skiing. It being summer, I knew there would only be one of those options to do. I picked out a few random towns along the highway a day earlier, the choices made based on which names sounded the coolest and decided to camp in those areas. National parks and forests littered the landscape according to my map. I felt confident that any of them would be beautiful and reclusive. I wanted to hear the nature, to really disappear into the wilderness for a night or two. The plains offered a solace of sorts, but the ruggedness of the mountains and the area around them was unparalleled.

Plus, the great plains scared the shit out of me during the night. I slept along fields of green crops, I think they were corn, for two nights, one in Illinois and one in Nebraska. The flat, wide-open landscape felt desolate and lonely, and the wind at nights was like the howling of

wolves and disaster. I heard coyotes and that was creepy enough, but the wind itself sounded like it was calling to me, asking for something despite being lifeless and constantly flowing.

Everything felt so spread out and desolate in the Midwest.

The mountains grew and the sun began to hang in the sky. I gazed straight ahead, aware of the road but not really paying attention. A slight glaze spread across my eyes and the music went in one ear and out the other. The road was mostly empty, a few cars coming and going along with me, and I loved it.

The county highways were well worth the extra time tacked onto the road trip. I reflected on the changing landscape. I never considered flying, simply because it was expensive and would have been difficult to move my possessions across the country via plane. Though, I contemplated, the way this truck is inhaling gas, flying may have been cheaper. The tank was getting close to empty once again, and each refill cost around \$60. At this rate, I'll be lucky to make it into the bay area with any money left. I am already living off peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and don't know what more I can do to save money. Gas and food are the bare minimum for a road trip and those are the only needs I'm buying.

I worried about my finances as I followed road signs towards highway 24 west. Driving without a GPS on was becoming easier and easier. I needed to save my limited data in the first place, and using the maps was fun, in a way. My map was dotted with campsites and route options and my head swimming with highway numbers. Each day, I made a list on my phone of each highway to turn onto and was finding it easier to navigate with them written out. The road trip was becoming easier and more manageable as I slipped into a routine. I was going further and driving longer each day.

I decided to use the time I saved crossing the Midwest on camping an extra night in Colorado. I felt better about my camping ability seeing as I went two full nights with no problems.

The mountain range was no longer distant, and I began climbing a steep incline for what felt like half an hour. The truck was making louder and grumpier noises as I ascended. Each turn brought a groan. Finally, I managed to reach the top. The truck made a final clunk but continued to move forward. It sounded much smoother once the peak dipped downwards.

The view from the summit was stunning. I managed to see the sun hide behind some fat, puffy clouds that looked like cauliflower. The clouds were playing around the peaks of a long range of mountains, their tops hidden from my view. The mountains were jagged, with patches of snow and points that broke the tree line leaving sharp cliffs and boulders at their peaks. Forests and open fields dotted the wide landscape leading to the line of mountains. I was shocked to see such open spaces and taller peaks further off. I always figured the Rockies would be made of tall, jagged mountains all along, but now that I saw them for myself, it made sense for there to be stretches of openness. My mind was blown at the thought of being over a mile higher than the plains and still able to farm the stretches of land.

This part of the journey was far more enjoyable than any other point simply because the views stunned me. The plains were a beauty in their own way, but they paled in comparison to the mountains. In a way, I felt like I was back in the city, surrounded by high points and looking up. The sun shone off the hills similarly to the skyscrapers of New York, though it was warmer and gentler here than the bright reflections off windows in the city.

For the first time on my trip, I missed home. I was currently the furthest I'd ever been from Brooklyn and breaking that record with every minute. New York was nearly a week away

by car and only now did I recognize it as home. I lived there for over two decades and it was a part of me, but why did I have to leave the city to appreciate that? I doubted I would have come to the realization and developed the appreciation I felt had I never left the city.

Brooklyn taught me to look around myself – to take in the world around me. People were always hurrying from one place to another, but there's a beauty to being able to sit down and watch them run about. Green spaces popped up here and there as parks and squares. Brooklyn is a forest of its own, made up mostly of tall buildings instead of trees and streets instead of prairies and rivers. Thinking of the city as a 'concrete jungle' made a lot more sense.

The sky began to shine a brilliant array of pink and orange. The county road I was riding down provided a small campsite to the side, which I took as a good sign, and I pulled into it. I parked the truck facing west and watched the silent array of fireworks in the sky. My phone played Sweet FA, a favorite song of mine, and I found myself further transported back to Brooklyn despite being in the mountains of Colorado. The song reminded me all too much of my walks in Prospect Park during this same time of day. I could see the trees, and behind them the tall apartment buildings, as I stared out at the sky.

"This world isn't really all that big," I muttered.

Time froze and I simply sat and breathed. A warm breeze blew through the window, and I felt at home.

The sky was dark blue and dimming quickly a few minutes later as if nothing happened. It seemed to forget the beauty it held just moments before as if to say, "good things don't last forever," to me. I grabbed my tent out of the truck bed and set it up. I slapped together a sandwich and ate all before the first star shone in the sky.

There wasn't a soul around the campsite. There were faint flattened sections of the grass and a couple old fire pits providing evidence of past campers. There wasn't much wood nearby, but I found a couple logs left around the old campsites and started a fire in the nearest pit, just a stone's throw from my own tent.

This was my first fire since the first night of the trip. I thought back to the people I met there, the woman named Jan, no, Jane. And there was her husband. Was his name Nick? I couldn't remember the other two guys – I barely talked to them anyways. She said people don't spend enough time looking at the stars. I decided to make up for my own lack of stargazing tonight. I laid down on my sleeping pad and watched the stars pop out one by one.

I couldn't tell how long I laid there. My body sunk into the earth and my mind faded into the sky. After a while, I couldn't even tell if I was going in and out of sleep or not. My mind wandered to Brooklyn, and back to me, then off to San Francisco. What was really waiting for me there? The obvious answer was Mason and his band. That was the reason I decided to go at all, to see them, but somewhere deep down hid another reason. I didn't want to acknowledge it, but knew I had to. I was hoping to find a spot among them, to play in their band and hop right into the success they built.

I remembered saying bye to Mason on our last day of college. He had been talking about going to the west coast to play with a couple guys who graduated a year earlier. I remembered those same guys. We used to all play together, jamming our Friday nights away. One time, we even played music until the sun rose. We drank so many energy drinks and beers that we didn't feel the passing of time, but the sun crept through one of the apartment windows and we woke up without having fallen asleep.



Mason went straight to San Francisco to play with them, and I was too afraid to go that far. Back then, the world felt too big, and all I wanted to do was keep working the same job I had been at for seven years. I went back to the hardware store, telling myself I was making the responsible decision. I knew I made the wrong decision within a month, but I buried that realization down. When Mason texted me out of the blue telling me they formed a band and were playing a concert the hidden knowledge bubbled up to my head and I sunk low. I didn't eat for a day; my stomach was chewing at me. They were making it. They were a real band. And I chose to not be a part of it. On my solitary campsite I grimaced at my regret and lack of confidence.

That realization gave me the courage to travel across to San Fran. I passed up on the opportunity once and I couldn't pass it up again. A part of me thought I was making up for my past mistakes by making this trip, and though I tried to deny it, that meant a part of me wanted to make up for my not being a part of their band earlier.

I shouldn't have been surprised or felt particularly shocked by myself, but I was. My reasoning was in my head all along, all through this trip and the weeks leading up to it, yet I refused to see them. I felt like an idiot and a genius at the same time. I was kicking myself for pushing down my feelings, but oddly proud to have found it in myself to realize my deeper longings and motivations.

I took a deep breath, cleared my head, and stared up at the starry sky.

"I suppose this world isn't all that small, either," I said to myself. My issues faded away as I stared at the cosmos. I realized that Jane was right, that people really don't look at the stars enough. I fell asleep right there under them.

I slipped into my tent at some point in the night and, more importantly, into my sleeping bag. I woke with the sun, its rays illuminating the sides of my tent. I could tell today was going to be a warm day despite the cold night.

My back cracked when I sat up. I spent a few minutes stretching while I rolled up my sleeping bag and camp only took a couple of minutes to take down. It felt odd to be sitting in my truck just twenty minutes after waking up, but my quicker pace of taking down camp was the reason I was cranking out so many more miles these last few days.

I decided to treat myself to a warm breakfast in the next town I found. My budget was slim, but I couldn't make it another morning with only an apple and granola bar. A little luxury wouldn't kill me.

Luckily, the next town popped up in only half an hour. The sun was already starting to beat down on the earth when I hopped out of my truck and wandered into a small, wood paneled building with a banner saying "waffles, omelets, coffee" hung across the top. It didn't necessarily look like a restaurant from the outside, but it certainly wasn't someone's home. The two sides of the highway contained a handful of buildings each, this restaurant being one of them, and a couple dozen houses were scattered in the hills and fields behind this main street of sorts. It felt like a small stopping point, an oasis for travelers like me.

I parked in front and stepped inside the building only to be greeted by a massive stuffed Elk head on the wall. There were a few small tables, a bunch of squares seating only four, spread around the single main room, with white tops and silver legs. Towards the back was a bar with a handful of stools sitting before it and a couple shelves bolted into the wall behind with bottles of liquor. The shelves formed around a large cutout in the wall with viewing and passing access

into a kitchen in the room over. I smelled grease, batter, and bacon the instant I walked through the front door and my mouth watered before I sat down.

There was an older man at the bar and a family of four at one of the tables. The tired looking couple had two kids, probably around four and six, who were bouncing up and down, hopping in and out of their seats with paper and crayons spread across the table and a couple action figures on the ground. I smiled when the weary father glanced up at me, and he kindly returned with a nod and a smile. I wandered to a table of my own, on the opposite wall, thinking it would be awkward to sit close to the family or bar when the only other customers sat in those areas.

A woman came out from the kitchen and walked to my table. She was short, grey haired, and had loose skin around her face and hands. A pair of thick-lensed silver glasses in the shape of a half circle sat low on her upturned nose and a grimy apron was hanging around her jeans and t-shirt.

“Coffee?” She asked,

I glanced around her to the kitchen, but there was no one else there. She seemed to be the only employee.

“No thanks. Do you have any tea or anything?”

She merely chuckled and said, “Not a single bag.”

“Coffee will be fine,” I muttered.

“Great. And for breakfast we have waffles, omelets with a selection of toppings, and hash browns, with eggs, bacon, and sausages for sides.”

She waited for me to give an answer immediately, but she didn't even give any prices. I didn't want to make her wait too long. “I'll take whichever of those is cheapest.”

“Great. Hash browns, scrambled eggs, and a side of bacon or sausage,” she peered down at me.

“Sausage,” I shrugged.

“I’ll have that out for you in just a minute.”

“Thanks.”

The waitress shuffled back to the kitchen without a glance back at Matt. She instead waved at one of the little kids, the older one, who was staring at her. The kid gave an enthusiastic wave back.

With nothing to do, I sat back and began a slow look around the whole bar. Several more animal heads lined the walls, mostly deer, with a bear in the mix as well as a mountain lion. I wondered if locals shot these animals and where they came from. The image of the waitress standing out in one of the nearby fields and shooting down an animal was funny to me, but also a bit too realistic.

I was interrupted mid thought by the family. The mother stood to go to the bathroom, but the older of the two kids was trying to show her a drawing she made. The kid, a loud blonde boy, was yelling at his mom as she walked away. She merely turned, said, “that’s wonderful, Abe,” to the kid, and turned to her husband with a look saying, “quiet him down, damnit,” which he nodded at and turned to talk to Abe.

The family had a certain grace to them. They were like something from a TV show, the stern mom, the loud kids, the tired father, yet they were altogether original and real. Maybe it was because I hadn’t watch TV in nearly a week that I felt more inclined to people watch, but I shook my head and looked away from the family, feeling awkward in my staring.

On the far wall, next to the kitchen window, was a map of what seemed to be the surrounding area to Hartsel. A large sketch of a mountain range, seemingly hand drawn, was another wall over, under the family. I felt a tap on my leg as I turned to look that way.

The younger of the two boys, a brown haired and wide-eyed child, was standing next to me. The small boy was wearing overalls far too large for him, something I recognized to be hand-me-downs from seeing my own younger brother wear mine, and a plain black t-shirt underneath.

“Hey there, what’s up?” I asked, putting on a parental voice, with gentle words and a higher pitch than I naturally speak in.

“Why is your hair so spikey?” He asked.

I let out a laugh, assuming my bed head was bad, and said, “I didn’t realize it was. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Can I touch it?”

“Uh,” I struggled for a response. I didn’t really care, but it felt weird and somewhat wrong to let a random kid play with my hair. “I’m going to have to say no, buddy, sorry.”

“Aww,” he frowned.

“But,” I started saying without knowing where to go, his face was too adorable to not do something to cheer him up, “I can show you a magic trick.”

“Really?” The boy’s face lit up.

“Yup, here, one sec,” I reached into my pocket to grab a quarter. Stealing a glance toward the boy’s table, I saw his mom was not back yet and the dad was deeply concentrated on a drawing or game or something on a piece of paper with the other son. I looked back to the boy in front of me with my quarter in hand.

“Okay, so, you see this in my hand, right?” I asked.

“Yeah!”

“Now, watch carefully, it’s going to,” I waved my hands around and stuck the quarter in-between two of my fingers then held my hands still, “Disappear.”

“Wow,” the kid said with wide eyes.

“Should I bring it back?”

“Yeah!”

“Ok, I just need to find the quarter. Hm, wait a second, let me look over here,” I reached to behind the boy’s ear with my hand hiding the quarter, “yup, here it is.” I pretended to pull the quarter from behind his ear.

The boy grinned and giggled. He reached behind his head to look for more quarters and I returned his smile. At that moment, the father called him back over to their table. He gave me a wave of apology and I heard the boy say I was a wizard to his brother.

I turned back to my table and looked at my hands. I wish I was a wizard, then I could do anything I wanted. I supposed to an extent that I already was doing that with this road trip, but I can only do it for so long. Money was going to be the first thing to stop me. I flipped the coin in the air, caught it, and slide it back in my pocket.

I begrudgingly opened my bank app on my phone. Truth be told, I was nervous to see where I was going to be at with my expenses, but I had no choice, I had to check and budget them. The first few days of driving were an indication of how much tougher this road trip would be to fund than I expected. I grimaced in anticipation while the app took a few moments to load my account.

The screen read out \$254.67 in my account with an additional \$200 still in my savings. I wanted to get to San Francisco with at least a little bit of cash left to my name - something to tide me until I managed to find a job. I figured I might just be able to make that work now. I was a hundred over where I expected, and a smile grew over my face. If nothing else, I can try to find ways to move things for people with my truck bed to get some cash in the city. I knew of people in New York who made cash by helping people move apartments and belongings.

The waitress brought out my piping hot food on a large plate. The hash browns were wide and crispy, the eggs soft and scrambled, and the sausages thick and juicy. It tasted wonderful, and though I couldn't tell how much of my enjoyment came from my lack of quality food in the last days and how much stemmed from the actual food itself, I didn't care. I scarfed down the breakfast in a few minutes. The food tasted better now that I knew I hadn't completely busted my budget.

The waitress came out a few minutes later. "I don't think I need to ask how everything was seeing as your plate is cleared, huh?"

"It was fantastic."

"That's what they always say. You want anything else?"

"Just the check, please."

The family was packing up. The boys ran to the door, the father hurried behind them, and the mother picked up toys and drawings that were left behind. She tidied up the table as best she could before walking out behind her family with a wave at the waitress.

I wondered if my family ever looked like that when we went out to eat in Brooklyn. We didn't go out much, usually just on birthdays and for celebrations, but it was always a highlight. Our favorite spot was a pizza place around the corner from our apartment. They mostly did pizza

by the slice, but we would order two massive twenty-inch pizzas and tuck in at a tiny table they had in the back of the store. There was only seating for a dozen people or so, but we almost always managed to find a spot. One time, for my twelfth birthday, I ate a whole pizza by myself. The owner took my picture and hung it on the wall next to a handful of others. When I asked what the wall was for, he said it was to remember his favorite customers. Some of them ate record breaking amounts of pizza, and some simply loved to pizza more than others. He told me I was a bit of both.

Looking back, I'm sure he only said that to make me feel special, but my picture stayed on the wall and, as far as I'm aware, is still up there now.

The sun was still rising in the sky and the temperature was going up with it. My weather app said it will be reaching 90 today. A quick google search pointed me in the direction of a beautiful hike leading to a lake along my route west, just an hour or two down the road, so I made that my destination.

I squinted into the sunlight as I drove. My windows were down and a warm breeze blew through my cab. I felt a need to listen to folksy music while in Colorado, so a few downloaded albums and playlists, mostly featuring the Lumineers and Mumford and Sons, played through the old speakers. I didn't know any more about folk and country music, I wasn't even sure if the bands I did know qualified, but I was nodding along with the songs anyways.

I was always a music listener first and player second. I bought my first song on iTunes when I was ten, but before that had lists of songs in notebooks that I would play on YouTube. I would have spent all my money on iTunes it wasn't for Spotify. The streaming platform was the entire means of my music library, the thing that made my hobby possible. There was a tinge of



guilt at streaming all my music, though. I felt for the artists, especially the smaller ones and independent ones, who are screwed over by my streams that replaced my CD and concert purchases. There was no perfect solution, and I wouldn't be able to afford all their music if not for Spotify, but I still wished there was more to be done for them.

The sun was at high noon when I reached the trailhead. Thanks to the four wheel drive I was able to make it up a rocky road to reach the trail. How people did this type of driving all the time was beyond me. I imagined folks all over the country live on roads just as bumpy and shoddy. Having to drive up this to get home each day would drive my blood pressure through the roof. Those who live out here probably say the same thing about driving in New York traffic.

I nearly got stuck along the way at a particularly steep section that was cutting back on itself. Sure, maybe the city has people yelling, crowded streets, and impossible parking, but at least I didn't have to worry about popping a tire or slipping off the side of the road.

The parking lot was barely even that. An open area, with enough space for a dozen cars or so, was cleared out. It wasn't totally flat, with slants and dips etching the earth, but at least there were trees cleared out making a wide dirt area for cars to be left. I parked next to the only other car there, an old looking Subaru wagon, thinking I might run into them owner on the trail.

The trail was several miles long, a steep climb up to a lake, so I grabbed a few snacks and a water bottle, tossed them in my backpack, and set off in the afternoon heat. I was sweating in a matter of minutes, but it felt great to move my legs, which were tired after days of driving and sitting. My limbs burned and my lungs heaved, but I felt awake and alive.

I decided to not listen to music, opting for the sounds of the forest instead. There wasn't much to it, at least not at first. Pine trees lined the trail, their branches swaying in the breeze and

many their needles fallen across the forest floor. A few birds chirped from the trees, but I didn't see any of them save for the occasional flitting of wings.

The air smelled funny to me, like pine, which made sense, but it had a certain clarity as well. With a laugh, I realized that it was the smell of fresh air that was confusing me. I was so used to the stink of New York that I didn't even recognize the fresh mountain air around me. Breathing heavy from the exercise became less annoying - I imagined I was healing my lungs with each deep breath.

I lost track of the time as I trekked along. I had no idea how far I hiked and was even less sure of how far away the lake was. I kept stepping and hoping that the top of each hill or around every corner would give me a glimpse of the water, of my destination. I was beginning to wonder if I made a wrong turn when a glint of sunlight reflecting off water became visible.

A surge of energy passed through me, and I marched along with a newfound vigor for a few minutes. The bank of the water was surrounded by trees and bushes, in which I found a small opening with a flattened dirt area at the water's edge. I took off my shoes, socks, and shirt and immediately walked into the clear water to cool off. I splashed the cold water across my chest, shivering at the sudden change of temperature, and continued to splash the water all over.

This was silly, so I dove out, careful of the rocks around me, to fully submerge myself. My body, despite the splashes of water, began to shiver instantly and my mind was pulled out of a lethargic state that I didn't even realize the hiking put it in. The coldness of the water permeated through my body, and I stood in the thigh height water letting the sun warm me back up.

The lake was surrounded by a long ridge and a few mountain peaks. Clouds were gathering around the tops of the mountains, but I ignored them and enjoyed the sheer edges of the peaks and the cool water dripping off my body.

The reward of the water made the long hike worth it, well worth it. It was a free rinse off on top of everything, something I'd been needing these last few days. Now back on the bank, I felt cleaner and calmer than I had throughout the entire trip.

Near where I left my clothes was a large, flat rock, which I sat on to dry off. I sat back and enjoyed what warmth I still managed to feel from the day despite the now absent sunshine. — a cloud was passing in front of it. I couldn't tell if I drifted off or not, but I was brought out of my relaxation by a woman snapping at my face.

“Hey, wake up, come on man, what are you doing?” She was asking, her fingers flicking just inches above my nose.

“Whoa, hey I'm up, what's going on?”

“Were you napping?” She asked, putting her hands on her hips and rocking them to the side. I sat up and realized she was around my age, with an athletic build and a urgency in her voice.

“Yes. Or no. I'm not sure. Do you need something?” I was a bit annoyed at her attitude, getting up in my business and being all sassy.

“No, but you need to get out of here. It's going to start storming soon,” she pointed up at the clouds, which were clustering around the mountain peaks and looked greyer than they did before.

“Oh shit,” I said, more to myself than her. “How can such a pretty day be threatening a storm like this?”

“You must not be from around here. We always get storms in the afternoons during the summer. It has to do with the warm and cool air mixing. Since today was especially warm, we’re getting a big storm,” she said very matter-of-factly.

“Oh, okay,” I pretended her explanation made sense to me.

“I’m hiking down. Get back safe.”

“Yeah, for sure,” I said to her. She started to walk away, but I called after her, “what was your name?”

She stopped and turned on the trail. “I’m Lucy.”

“Cool, I’m Matt.”

“Great,” she said with a shrug, “Bye.”

“Yeah, bye, and thanks,” I called out. Lucy threw her arm up over her shoulder in a wave but didn’t stop or look back at all. I watched her walk around a bend in the trail, disappearing behind a wall of pine trees, and I was alone again. I glanced up at the growing mass of dark clouds. Were those already thicker and darker? A rumble of thunder answered my question.

I hustled to pull on my clothes and started speed walking down the trail. Luckily, since it was mostly downhill now, it was easy to go fast. Unluckily, I wasn’t fast enough. The clouds caught up with me and a downpour left me soaked before I was even halfway back down the trail. Flashes of lightning and loud rumbles of thunder roared all around me. I’d never felt unsafe in a thunderstorm before but being alone out in the woods and surrounded by the forces of nature was giving me chills and goosebumps that were not just from the cold rain on my bare head and arms. I began jogging down the trail, my care to avoid slipping dissipating with each flash of lightning and bang of thunder.

It felt like the storm was bearing down right above me, as if a god was in the sky and throwing lightning in my direction. I read stories about people being struck by lightning before, I think less than half of them survive it. On top of the threat of lightning, the rain was beating against my face, causing me to squint and making the trail hard to see. Panic was setting in and I was nearly at a full sprint fearing a terrible fall just a hair less than the lightning. Then, through the storm, I heard a voice yell out. I whipped my head around and saw Lucy standing under a mid-sized pine tree. Its lower branches were missing, and she was huddled by the trunk. She was waving me towards her.

I ran over and leaned against the tree. My heavy breathing was embarrassing as I stood within a foot of her.

“You’re kind of an idiot, trying to run through this, you know,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I am?” I felt my cheeks blush a little.

“Yeah, you are,” she said with an incredulous expression, as if she couldn’t believe she was stuck under the tree with someone so oblivious, “everyone knows you wait out thunderstorms under a medium height tree. Not the tallest or largest because those might be struck by lightning. I can’t believe you didn’t fall flat on your face or something.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“You don’t have to apologize. We’ll just wait this out.” She gazed off to her side and looked around us. Grey clouds filled the sky and there was no end of the storm in sight. We stood with no words between us, only the rain and thunder.

Lucy looked dry and patient under her raincoat, and though I was cold and wet, I was okay with the rain lasting a bit longer. I stole a glance at her face as she gazed up at the sky and

got my first real look at her face. Her features were tough and her cheekbones high. Her eyes held a certain kindness to them, though, which was jarring with her other features at first, but I realized the opposites complimented each other and made her look confident, stern, kind, and understanding all at once.

“So,” I started, “you’re from around here, huh?”

Lucy looked back at me. “Yup, lived here most of my life.” She turned away, which I should have realized meant she didn’t care to talk, but I continued.

“Where else did you live?” I asked, hoping a conversation would make the storm pass faster.

“My family lived in Montana when I was little. I was six when we moved out here.”

“What’d you move for?”

“Sheesh, is this an interview?”

I shrugged and she shook her head and carried on.

“My dad. He’s a professor. He taught at a school in Bozeman then got a job down in Gunnison.”

I was about to ask what he taught, but Lucy beat me to asking the next question, which was probably for the best. “Where are you from? You’re clearly not from nearby.”

“I’m from Brooklyn. Lived there my whole life. This is currently the furthest I’ve ever been from home.” It felt weird to share that outright with someone, but it was a big deal for me.

“Nice. What brings you so far from home?”

“I’m driving to San Francisco to see a friend from college.”

Lucy gave me an incredulous look. “You drove all the way from Brooklyn? That’s a hefty road trip. Why’d you leave?”

I sighed and gazed down the trail. I was thoroughly soaked by the rain and didn't really want to tell this girl, who seemed super cool and was pretty cute, that I was living at home and lost my job. I felt like a loser. On the other hand, I felt worse about the idea of lying. "I was living at home after college and working at this hardware store, but the store closed and I felt it was time to move on from home, you know? Spread my own wings and fly."

"Alrighty, birdie," She chuckled at me. I felt silly, and it must have shown because Lucy added "oh, hey, no, it's cool. Lame you said you wanted to spread your wings, but it's good to branch out and all, see the world a bit beyond the neighborhood you grew up in."

"That's my goal," I said.

"How's the trip been so far?"

I contemplated the last week and summarized, "It's had its ups and downs. This had been the best day until the storm, really."

"I don't blame you for that," Lucy said as she held out a hand to feel the rain.

"Well, it's not all bad," I grinned. "Are you going to college around here or something?"

"I just graduated. I'm spending some time at home this summer, helping my parents do some renovations on their house, then I'm off to find some type of seasonal job. I want to bounce around, work at a ski mountain and teach people to ski in the winter and spend some time as a wilderness firefighter in the spring and summer with some raft guiding mixed in there." She seemed very proud of her plan, as if it was her life's dream to hop around so much. She looked like she wouldn't have a problem shouting at a group of first-time skiers as they struggle down the slopes or facing a wildfire in the woods.

"Isn't a bit scary, the thought of moving around between so many places and not really having a home?" I asked.

Lucy shrugged, “Sure, but I get to travel around a bit, see the Rockies in my free time and hop back down here to see my parents some, too.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s nice,” I muttered. A lifetime living in one place and a week of driving alone opened me up to her point of view more than I would have been a week ago, but I still wasn’t sure how she’d be content with the jumping around. I thought about what she said. I suppose there is something to be able to go anywhere, to not be tied down, but I still couldn’t imagine doing it myself. I wanted a home, a place to crash at the end of a long day.

“Looks like this will be clearing up soon,” she said, which snapped me out of my thoughts.

“I’ll trust your judgement.”

“Sounds like the lightning and thunder is about three miles away now. We can probably start hiking,” she commented with a step onto the now muddy trail.

I stepped out from under our tree with her, taking her ‘we’ as an invitation to join her on the hike back. “How do you know it’s that far away?”

“You need to count the seconds between a flash of lightning and the sound of the thunder. Light is faster than sound, so you get the flash and then the rumble, and the second in-between add up to miles. Five seconds makes a mile, and it needs to be at least six miles away to be considered safe.”

“So, thirty seconds.”

“Ooo, look at the human calculator over here,” she teased.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. That’s a neat trick.” I made a mental note of her counting method.



We hiked side by side the whole way back. Lucy told me about her parents, their work, and how she was an only child. She told me she was raised in the outdoors, hiking, skiing, climbing, rafting, doing all sorts of activities because, between her two parents, there was some experience to be had for everything. We talked about growing up in the mountains versus New York. She asked a lot of questions about the city, since she'd never been there, but really wanted to go. I told her she could visit sometime and that I'd show her around.

I was sad to see our cars come into view – it meant a goodbye was coming.

“You drove that hunk of junk all the way from Brooklyn?” She asked me.

“Hey, it has been a pretty reliable vehicle,” I defended, mocking offense.

“Sure, Matt. I guess this is good-bye. Enjoy your trip,” she smiled to me then stepped over to her car.

“It was nice to meet you,” I said after her with a half wave.

She pulled open her driver door and gave me a sweet smile back, “right back at you.”

I busied myself at my own car and was kicking myself. I should have asked her for her number. I realized it would be nice to have some type of connection to this trip, something to help me remember it more than simply having done it. I wanted something from these long days to emerge from this journey and making a friend out of it would be more than enough.

I gathered my courage before Lucy started to pull away and walked over to her car. I knocked on her window, and Lucy, who was queueing music, looked up from her phone and rolled down the window.

“What's up?” She asked.

I froze for a second and cursed myself for coming over at all. This felt silly, unnecessary. What good would the number of a girl I probably won't ever see again do? I took a breath, shook those thoughts from my head, and asked, "Can I have your number?"

Lucy's eyebrows perked up and a gentle smile grew across her face. "Sure," she said, and repeated the ten digits.

"I'll, uh, be in touch," I said, hoping that it sounded cooler than it felt.

"I look forward to keeping in touch," Lucy said back, "Enjoy your road trip, Matt." I didn't get a hint of there being anything romantic in her words, and besides, I was about to travel across the country. Nonetheless, it felt good to have a connection made on this trip that will stick. This won't end up being some random couple weeks that I spent alone and remember alone, there will be something, someone, to remember it by and with.

## Chapter 5

I arrived at the campsite well after dark. I was peeking into Utah now, practically on the border between it and Colorado. This site was a stretch of forested road which allowed ‘dispersed camping,’ a phrase I discovered meant free camping. A few other cars seemed to be parked in the area, but it was hard to tell how many people were there in the darkness.

I managed to find a flat area with my headlights and walked through the motions of setting up camp. First, the tent, then dinner, and lastly getting ready for bed. It was too late to start a campfire, and I was far too tired anyways. All I wanted was to pass out in my tent.

My mind had different ideas.

I laid in my sleeping bag for an hour, rolling this way and that, shuffling between lying on my back, side, and stomach, and could not get comfortable. I felt tired, but my mind wouldn’t let me rest. I had one thing on my mind, Lucy, who was more exciting than any dreams or sleep. I vaguely remembered a Dr. Suess quote about how not being able to sleep means your reality is better than your dreams. I didn’t see how that was the case, really, because here I was again, alone and on the hard ground, stuck thinking about a friend I just said bye to.

I didn’t want to say bye, though, that was the problem. I had no choice, but I didn’t like the decision I was forced to make. I sighed, thinking of my decision to stay in Brooklyn instead of going to San Francisco with Mason. Everything came back to that choice, it seemed.

I pulled out my phone and looked at the last text I sent Mason. “About a week out, currently in Kansas. I’ll let you know when I’m a day or two away. Any details on where we’ll meet or anything?” Mason hadn’t responded. In fact, he hadn’t responded to my last few messages, dating back to nearly four days ago. A shiver ran down my body as I thought about

getting to San Francisco and not even hearing from Mason. If I ended up coming all this way for nothing, I'd lose it.

"No, stop it," I said aloud, "he'll get in touch." I was unconvinced of my words.

That night was one of the longest of my trip. I slipped in and out of sleep, though I felt like I was awake more than I was asleep. The little sleep that I did get was fitful. Coyotes howled in the distance around one in the morning and I felt less alone. At three, I heard an owl hooting. The same tune shot through the woods for nearly half an hour before the owl gave up. I imagine it was trying to call out to another owl, but no one was out there in the darkness. I drifted back to sleep in the silence left by the absence of the owl's calls with a mutual feeling of isolation.

Eventually, sunlight lit the walls of the tent. I felt like I hadn't slept at all but shuffled my way out of my sleeping bag and tent into the rising sun.

The morning air was brisk, but with no breeze passing through, I felt stiff. The rising sun kissed my bare arms and legs, a t-shirt and gym shorts all that I had on. My mind was foggy, and I passed through my morning routine in a haze. Another sandwich, another few minutes packing up the camping gear, and before I knew it, I was ready to go. I didn't really feel like hopping into my driver seat quite yet.

Instead, I grabbed my guitar and sat on the truck's tailgate. A few chords came naturally to my fingers, and I plucked along to a beat my feet were tapping. The haze in my head left me only partially aware of music. My eyes swept the nearby area. Tall pine trees with orange-brown bark and vivid green needles filled the space, along with small bushes and dry, yellow grass. The dry dirt, also slightly orange, filled most of the ground. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, leaving the sun to shine at its fullest onto the woods and my face.

A few other tents and campervans dotted the surrounding area. Most of them were quiet, their residents still sleeping. The people in the nearest one, probably 70 feet away, were just getting out of their tent. A middle-aged man looked my way and gave a wave, which I returned. He set about his own morning routine without another glance my way, which I was fine with. I didn't really feel like talking to anyone today. I packed up my guitar, slammed the tailgate closed, and jumped into the front seat.

A few minutes later, with my route planned and written out for the day, a campsite found near Austin, Utah, I got ready for a long day of driving ahead of me. All I wanted was to drive as many miles as possible and let my mind wander. I was tired and felt over worked, my legs ached from hiking yesterday, and my thoughts were scattered.

The last thing I did before leaving for the day was check my phone. There were a couple bars in the camp site area, but I didn't have any texts. I wasn't even sure who I was hoping to hear from, Mason, Lucy, or my parents, but there was nothing there.

I played a random playlist on Spotify and drove off with the rising sun shining in my review mirror.

Utah was a desert.

The occasional river passed by, and trees sometimes dotted the hills and mountains in the distance, but the stretches of highway I followed were surrounded by orange sand and rocks. The air was dry and dead. It reminded me of the long expanses of fields and farmland in the Midwest, but at least the plains felt alive in the open stretches of uniform landscape.

What Utah lacked in vegetation, though, it made up with layered cliffs and otherworldly rock formations. I saw several arched pieces of rock stretching across the ground along the east

part of the state. At points, I felt like I was on Mars, surrounded by foreign soil and rocks without a trace of humanity within miles except for the highways I followed.

I stopped to eat a late lunch under the shade of one such rock arch. Once again, the day was defined by its heat. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but Colorado left me second guessing how well I was able to predict the weather with my eyes.

I was running low on food. My loaf of bread was nearly finished, my peanut butter jar close to empty, and I only had a few apples and granola bars left. Chips and pretzels were things of days past. I made a mental note to stop at the next grocery store I passed.

Who knows how long that will be, though? I glanced around and couldn't see a single sign of life anywhere nearby. Just desert, sand, and mountains were visible to me. The lazy heat of the day was like a warm blanket, but under the shade it was bearable. I leaned back, practically laying flat under the arch, and closed my eyes.

I woke up to the sun squarely on my face and chest. The shade I fell asleep under was a few feet to the left of me. My arms and neck felt a bit tender and were tinged red while my vision was blurred in the bright afternoon sunlight. A yawn escaped from my mouth as I sat up and stretched out. A crooked metal bar must have replaced my back during my nap because I could barely twist and move, but the stiffness ebbed as I walked back to my truck.

Besides the sun moving, nothing had changed while I was out. My watch read a few minutes past two. I wouldn't be able to stop at all, besides getting gas and bathroom breaks, to make it to the campsite I picked out for tonight by sunset.

The truck cab was stiflingly hot from the sun. I immediately cranked down the windows with the manual knobs, but it didn't help much with the heat, as the outside was nearly as toasty.

I needed to get moving, to have a breeze passing through, to cool down at all. The engine fired up without complaint and I pulled back onto the long stretch of open highway.

The road slipped by under the truck's tires. I made a conscious effort to not check the clock on the radio, wanting to avoid counting the minutes and hours of driving I had left and instead focused on the road itself. A queue of indie rock and folk albums blasted from the speakers and the warm breeze kept me awake, along with the water bottle I drained due to the dry feeling of the desert air.

The first town I passed through was the only break of the afternoon. Gas, water, and food were resupplied, and I continued.

The scenery became more vegetated after I passed through the middle of the state. More trees popped up along the mountains – I even saw the occasional forest as I reached further and further west. I made up games to pass the time, like counting the mountain peaks and naming them or the ABC game, where, as far as I knew, you look at signs and license plates to work through the entire alphabet. I didn't get very far in the latter game and the former was more boring than it was entertaining.

I had service, though, and decided to call some people to keep myself awake and entertained. The first number I dialed was Mason's.

The phone rang a few times, then I was greeted by Mason's messaging machine. "Hi," his voice rang out waiting reply. I knew his stupid trick, and a couple seconds of silence later, heard his recorded voice say, "hah, gotcha, I can't talk, so do the thing." I hung up and didn't leave a message. I assumed he doesn't listen to his voicemails anyways.

"Figures," I said to myself. I didn't really expect him to pick up, but I hoped he would.

I glanced through my contacts, saw Lucy's number, and scrolled past after a moment's hesitation. There weren't many other numbers, just relatives, parents, my brother, and a couple other friends from college and high school who I haven't kept in touch with despite having their numbers.

I decided to give my mom a call.

He picked up on the second ring. "Hey Matt, how's it going?"

I took a deep breath and replied, "Hi, mom. It's alright. I'm fine, just passing through Utah. It's a pretty state."

"Ah, yeah. It's real pretty out there. Your dad has never been and really wants to go."

To my shock, I heard dad's distant voice shout, "I've always wanted to see the Grand Canyon."

"Mom, tell dad that I'm pretty sure the Grand Canyon is in Utah."

I heard her tell him that, then a moment later she spoke into the receiver, "He says it's definitely in Utah."

I rolled my eyes. I didn't call my mom to debate the locations of natural American monuments. "Sure, it's in Utah. How're dad and Jack? How's everything there?"

"We're all doing just fine. Jack is playing in a summer basketball league with some other boys from high school. He's very excited for his senior year, you know. He's all about the prom, homecoming, senior pranks, and senior night for basketball. He's hoping to get some college offers this season, you know."

I knew quite well. My parents were talking about Jack and his achievements all year when I was living at home. It was one of the reasons I wanted to leave.



“You know,” my mom continued, “You could have been quite the basketball star yourself back in the day, too.”

“Yeah, you and dad have told me,” I never understood how they thought that was a compliment, telling me I could have been something. It’s like going to someone’s funeral to talk about all the things they nearly did with their lives rather than remembering what they actually did.

“And how’s dad?” I asked, hesitation in my voice.

“He’s just fine. Busy with work right now, but you know how the summers get, tons of people moving to the city and plenty of apartments to help them find.”

“I’m sure he’s loving it,” I didn’t really know what more to say.

“He would be, but it’s just so darn hot right now. We’re having quite the heat wave in the city. The subway is just awful. I sweated through my shirt every morning this week.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah.”

Silence passed between us. I didn’t have anything to say and had even less to ask about. It seemed my mom felt the same way. I was getting ready to hop off the call, feeling disappointed but not knowing what more I really expected, when she spoke up and surprised me.

“We all miss you, Matt, you know. The apartment feels emptier without you here. Jack says none of his friends are as good at basketball as you when he plays one on one.”

A lump filled my throat. I murmured out something about how Jack’s friends aren’t that bad and that I miss home too, but mom didn’t seem to hear and continued.

“I ordered pizza last night. We got two whole pizzas, like usual, but had over half a pie of leftovers because you weren’t here to eat the cheese slices. Dad had to eat Jack’s crusts, too,” I

could tell she was trying to be funny with the last detail, but she sounded melancholy as she said it.

I managed to speak through my scratchy throat, “I, uh, I’m sorry to hear that. I miss you guys, too.” I didn’t quite realize that I missed them until I said it. I called my mom out of boredom, not a longing to talk to her. Deep down, I guess I wanted to hear about the little things at home. I thought I was being a burden, a useless mass taking up a bedroom that mom wanted to make into a reading room and dad wanted to put his Peloton in. I fought back tears in my truck as mom spoke from so far away, “I just wanted you to know that. But, well, I should get going. I think I hear Jack calling for me. I’ll let him know you called.”

“Alright, mom.”

“We,” she paused a moment, “we love you, Matt.”

“Love you all, too, mom.” She hung up.

I sniffed and wiped my eyes. I wanted to eat pizza and watch a movie with them, but I made my choice to not be there. I chose to stay home last year. I spent that whole year wishing I didn’t stay at home, and now, as I drove across the country to make up for that mistake, I found myself wishing I’d stayed again.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I almost didn’t hear my phone vibrate with a text. A quick glanced revealed that the message was from Mason. Finally, I thought.

I pulled my phone up and glanced from the road to my screen to read the message. “Hey, Matty,” it read, “been meaning to text you.” I looked up to watch a car zip by the opposite direction. “We’re stoked for you to get here.” I glanced at the open road. “The show is in three days, so,” I peered up, “make sure you’re here. Here’s my addy,” I didn’t bother reading his

address. I wouldn't need to know that for a day or two still. I scanned the rest of the message and saw "see you soon homie. Gimmie an ETA" after the address.

I tossed my phone down on the seat and let out a sigh of relief. I was starting to get nervous that Mason had dropped off the face of the earth. He didn't give a reason for going MIA, but I didn't really care since he replied at all.

Funny, how you can forgive someone or move past an issue so easily. One right makes up for days of wrongs, I suppose.

I drove all afternoon and into the evening, as I planned. The campsite came into view a little before sunset. It was, to my surprise, an empty lot of land on a street corner in an abandoned unincorporated town. There didn't seem to be any people around, just a few dirt streets making a grid and some run-down houses that could have been totally empty. There was an old gas station, but it didn't seem to have pumps that worked and the building itself was not open at all. There were no signs for gas prices, a few boarded up windows while the rest were broken, and a neon open sign that was turned off.

I didn't see a single soul and my small plot of land soon housed my tent. "I must be the only resident," I joked aloud. "Ghostville, inhabitants, one." I made up the name but didn't even find my own silly humor funny. These "streets," and I felt generous calling them that, were just sad. I imagined a once thriving community, an oasis of sorts, isolated among the mountains, forests, and desert, once brought life to these blocks. A handful of families, a working gas station, even a grocery store or an all-purpose store, would have made this place a thriving location. A community based on kindness to one's neighbor and working together in the small

space they had. Everyone would know everyone, and I'm sure kids would want to get out of their tiny, dinky home, but that's how kids are everywhere.

I tried to wonder what could have caused a tight little community to dwindle into a ghost town here. The answer came quickly – they were too isolated, too alone. How could they have really survived out here? I suppose living off the land would have gone a long way for them, but what hope did they have as the world evolved and the people who lived here were left behind. There's a tough balance between being off the grid and being a member of society, a balance that was not met here.

My mind drifted to Lucy. She had a good balance between those two. She works and spends time with people but knows how to disappear into the wilderness and disconnect when she wants to. Maybe the people who lived here could have taken a note from her.

I ate a cold dinner and played guitar as the sun set. My arms, neck, and face were defiantly burned from earlier today, so, despite the heat, I put on a hat and long sleeve shirt to protect against the setting sun. I'll have to get some sunscreen soon. I knew I'd make it to San Francisco with my current financial situation, but I wanted to have something left when I finished my road trip. Rolling into an expensive city with only a handful of dollars to my name did not sound like fun.

I played guitar until I felt tired, which didn't take long. The previous night of poor sleep and a long day of driving in the sun caught up to me earlier than I thought it would. Night hadn't set in, only dusk, but I slipped into my tent and was out in seconds.

## Chapter 6

The next morning was sunny, but cool, the desert air feeling brisk with the morning sun rising. I embraced the chilliness. It was only a matter of time before the sun was in the sky and the heat kicked in.

Ghostville was just as empty and eerie as I left it last night, even with the brightening sunlight. I gazed out at the shells of homes while I packed up my campsite and wondered what this place looked like when the houses were filled. It felt like leaving a graveyard to drive away from the dead town.

I had no stops planned for the day – I just wanted to get out of the desert. My directions for the day were going to take me through Reno, Nevada, straight across the massive state. There were beautiful forests in Northern California where I planned to camp, Tahoe National Forest being the destination for today.

I decided to break my scenic route rule today as well. I zipped along the interstate going far faster than I drove every previous day. I felt myself making better time. The images of the northern California forests were too good for me to not make my way there as fast as possible, and I was ready to be out of the deserts.

I barely even remember Nevada. It was like Utah, just longer and with a little less desert. I slipped on my sunglasses and lost my mind in the sunny haze of pavement and nature.

Towns and cities came and went far more often, and the road didn't feel as lonely. There were far more cars on the roads, too. I tried to make up stories for the people in their vehicles. A minivan held two adults and a few kids in the back. I pretended they were a family on their way to the west coast for a well-earned family vacation. The kids would write about it on their first

day of school and the parents would pick the best picture they took during the trip to use for their Christmas card.

A small hatchback filled with boxes and bags, driven by a woman and a teenage daughter, might have been the pair on their way to the daughter's college. I imagined she was doing summer classes in preparation for her freshman year. She's straightlaced and ready to live out from under her parents' thumb at college, but she'll call home every weekend after she goes to her church, just like they raised her.

The hours passed quickly when I made up the stories and backgrounds. I even got all the way through the ABC game for once.

Yet, something felt missing when driving along the interstate. I missed the quietness of the highways, which, though still busy roads, didn't have as many cars zipping along and even had stretches of solitude. The higher number of massive 18 wheelers was a shock, too. They commanded the road in a way that no one else did, especially now that they rumbled by ten and even twenty miles per hour faster than on the highways. A life spent behind the wheel, living out of their semi-trucks and seeing the country from the interstates, sounded fun. I imagined spend each day driving like I already was but getting paid for it. To me, it seemed like a pretty good gig, especially when I realized the job would allow me to listen to music all day long, too.

As like each day before, the sun was my main guide of time. I chunked my days into morning, midday, afternoon, and dusk, and based on the sun, it was approaching afternoon to dusk time when I crossed the state boarder into California. I gave a loud cheer from my truck as I zipped by the "Welcome to California" state sign.

A couple hours later and I was at my campsite in Tahoe National Forest. The trees here were still pine, but they seemed taller than in the Rockies. Their trunks stretched farther up, and

the branches seemed to leave more space between each other making the trees seem thinner as well. They charged for a space here, but it was a small price to pay for the beauty of the forest around my campsite. I couldn't start a fire because of California state fire bans, which was a bummer, but there were more people and life at this campsite than any of the others I'd been at yet. Families and older couples were camping out of RVs and SUVs. Kids were running around, climbing the trees and playing with soccer balls and footballs, while parents did their best to cook on camping grills and stoves. The chaos and number of people was a welcomed, albeit strange, environment.

The campsites were very established, with a parking space and a lifted platform, basically just a wooden frame with some dirt and rocks a few inches higher than the actual ground, all in close proximity. Only a dozen feet separated myself from the two sites next to me, which were all right along the road that allowed campers to drive in, loop around, and look for a spot. It was basically a campsite themed parking garage. To my left was an old couple with a large RV. They were sitting in folding chairs by the door of their camper, a porch shade pulled out to cover them, with drinks in their hands. To my right was a family with four loud kids, all running around and fighting with sticks and sports balls. Privacy was not much of a concept in these close quarters, and I heard the parents telling off their kids for being loud and rude each time they got in trouble. I heard the old couple's conversations, which mostly revolved around how campsites used to be so much better and that it's too hot out now a days as well. I wondered if they believed in climate change or not.

I once again slipped into my camp set up routine and was all done before the parents next to me even finished dinner for their kids, which they had started when I arrived.

The number of people around, though somewhat exciting, left me not knowing what to do with myself. I felt embarrassed to play guitar with so many people being able to hear me. It's one thing to play around a campfire when being invited to, but another entirely to start playing for all these people who may or may not even want to hear it.

I decided to remain quiet and kept to himself while night came and went. When the sun rose in the morning, I wasn't the first out of my tent, but I was the first to leave the campsite.

I was only a six-hour drive from Mason's address. I felt like I was cheating when I put the address in Google Maps to gauge how much longer I had to drive now that he had provided me with an address.

I did, however, have a free day to fill before driving to San Francisco. I considered arriving a day early in San Francisco, but I decided to spend another day hiking and camping in Tahoe instead. I told Mason to expect me tomorrow, around two in the afternoon, and drove to the nearest ranger station to find maps for the National Forest. Nature was calling me more than he was.

A woman in the station, an older lady with gray hair and a paternal vibe, gave me a map and her favorite full day hike to do, a several mile trek around a series of lakes and following the Pacific Crest Trail for a section.

"What's the Pacific Crest Trail?" I questioned, noticing her enthusiasm at the trail name.

"It's a remarkable 2,650-mile-long trail stretching from the north to south of the US. The hike takes you through several national forests and parks. It's grueling, but absolutely stunning. Being able to hike even just a stretch of the trail is a wonder."

"Nice," I said, a bit thrown by her enthusiasm, "have you hiked it before, then?"



“Oh, years and years ago. It was amazing. If you ever have even an inkling of a desire to hike it, I say go for it.”

“Noted. For now, I’ll stick to this section of the hike. Thanks for everything.”

“Of course!”

I walked away from the counter struck by the joy of long-distance hiking. I had no idea people even attempted to do things like that. I used to get annoyed just by having to walk a dozen blocks to a train station. Well, not quite annoyed, but not as excited as she was for hiking nearly 3,000 miles.

Thoughts of being alone on a trail remained at the forefront of my brain while I drove to the trail head. Being alone and among nature for that long, while scary, seemed rather appealing to me. No hustle and bustle of cities and work, no worrying about anything except the next day of hiking and the weather. It sounded like a dream.

I wandered the forest and hiking the trails as recommended by the ranger. The Pacific Crest Trail section was well marked, and I followed it, feeling a sense of grandeur because of length and renowned of the trail.

The concept of organized outdoors still felt strange to me. Why did people feel the need to form a community centered around this long trail? Or centered around certain activities? As far as I could tell, the outdoors was a space for the individual, not the community. Then again, look at the sparse green spaces in New York. People went to the parks to walk, get exercise, escape the city a bit. Sports leagues, daycares, classes, all sorts of communities were formed there, while people still had the space to do their own things. I suppose the nature out here is that, but on a larger scale. I can still disappear, like I did today, but people can find shared interests in their activities and locations in the outdoors.

Lucy wanted to share her skills, to teach people how to have fun outside. I thought it sounded fun when she told me about her aspirations, to be doing what she loved and be outside, but now I realized the purpose she must feel in giving back, in being a part of those communities, and in being an educator sharing her passion.

I found a campsite near random trail head was and stayed there for the night. It was quieter than the last place, and I slept like a baby in a crib as I wrapped myself up in a sleeping bag.

## Chapter 7

I hit the road early to make it to the city by two. Mason didn't respond to my text about my arrival time that morning, so I was going in hoping he would be home when I rolled up. As excited as I was to see him, I was nervous that the trip was coming to an end. I was putting off figuring out my next step after this, hoping that maybe I could crash with Mason for a bit then sort myself out. With that reality quickly approaching, however, I was feeling less and less confident in my plan.

I needed to stop worrying, just get there and things will work themselves out. My fingers drummed on my steering wheel and my knee bounced at my side while I drove.

The interstate zipped me along to the city in the time I expected. For once, I was going to arrive on time, something that didn't seem to happen too much when I was driving with my maps. It was nice to have an ETA and traffic reports from the Maps app, but it felt like cheating in a way.

Eventually, though, the signs for San Francisco popped up more often. The green highway signs with the mileage to the city showed a shrinking number. I even felt myself getting closer out of pure anticipation. The towns came more frequently, then became suburbs, and before I knew it, I was in Oakland.

The long Oakland Bay Bridge came into view and a moment later I was driving down it. I slowed down to take in the views of the Bay, stretching out wide with islands and land poking around it. Treasure Island appeared on the right of the bridge, but I strained my eyes hoping to catch a glimpse of the Golden State Bridge across the bay. The bright midday sun made it impossible to see.

Luckily, traffic didn't pose too much of an issue as I crossed the bridge. It was midday on a Thursday, which likely helped. If San Francisco was anything like New York, then it would have constant traffic once I reached it.

I always assumed San Francisco was like Brooklyn, hip and fun, with a lively community, and that Los Angeles was more like Manhattan, bustling, busy, and over-populated. While I was unable to prove my LA to Manhattan comparison, I found my Brooklyn and San Francisco parallel to be somewhat plausible.

I felt the life of the city oozing out of the graffiti architecture and the activity of its inhabitants. People were out enjoying the wonderful day, which I assumed was a common thing to see. The city was out and about, thriving and living, with an atmosphere of excitement. I was happy to have the city traffic slow me down so I was able to appreciate the city around me.

I street-parked a block away from the address Mason gave me. There wasn't much around, just a few apartment buildings and small restaurants, as we were a long way from the downtown area according to my phone. I gave Mason a call and to my surprise, he picked up immediately.

"Hey, what's up dude?" He asked.

"Hey, I'm here," I said, my phone pressed between my shoulder and cheek as I locked my manual doors. The windows were up and the bed covered, perfect.

"For real? Awesome, I'll be down in just a second!" Mason shouted and hung up before I had a chance to share in the excitement. I hurried down the block and across the street to make sure I was there when Mason arrived.

I beat him to the front door of his apartment building. I was waiting outside for ten minutes before he opened the door and stepped out on the sidewalk. It was only a few floors, but I ignored his tardiness.

“Come here, Matty, it’s been so long,” Mason gave me a big hug. I was happy to be there, in that moment, happy to have made all the effort to get to that very moment, even though he did use the nickname I hated so much from college. Right next to my ear I could hear him sniffing as if he had a runny nose. “This is crazy,” he said as we pulled out of the hug. “I can’t believe you really made it all the way down. That’s so cool that you drove, too. I bet it was a bitch to drive through the city, eh?” He gave his nose a big wipe from his hand.

I was amazed by how little he changed, yet something felt somewhat off about him that I couldn’t place. “The city traffic wasn’t too bad, really. I didn’t hit any until I made it into San Francisco itself and even that was pretty chill. So, this is your place, huh?” I asked, looking up at the brick complex. There were a few balconies overlooking the road on the floors above and barely an alley way between the building and its neighbors. Rusty rails and chipped bricks made up the street facing side.

“Cool, that’s dope. Look, we were about to go out and get some food for dinner. We need to eat early because our show is at seven and we gotta be there by five. Come on upstairs, I’ll show you the place, then we can head out.”

“Works for me,” I said, happy to be along for the ride rather than the planner for the first time in over a week.

I followed Mason into his apartment building. There were a few apartments right on the ground floor, and a staircase towards the back that took us up to the third floor, which also happened to be the top floor. I noticed cracks in the walls and peeling green paint in the hallway

but figured that's small price to for what should be lower rent. I'd heard that San Francisco is expensive and guessed that this old, and to be honest, smelly, building was on the lower end of the average apartment rates.

Mason lived in one of the apartments that faced the road, which I realized as we turned back down the hallway and walked towards the direction we came from, only several floors above where we started. Mason pushed open the faded and weary green door at the end of the hall with a golden number "36." The six was hanging by one nail upside down making the number look like 39 instead.

Inside the apartment was no newer or nicer, it was worse, really, than the hallways. The place was a mess. Shoes were piled up near the door, a mountain of them which forced Mason to push the door particularly hard to move a part of the pile and open fully. Cracks and chipped paint continued to line the walls. Despite the sunny day, the space was dark and dingy with a stale smell hanging in the air.

"Home sweet home," Mason said, leading me from the small entry way area down a tight hallway and into a living room. A half wall separated a grimy kitchen and a couple closed doors indicated bedrooms and a bathroom.

"This is quite the place you have here," I nodded.

"It's nothing crazy, but we've made a home out of it. Steve and I share the bedroom through that door," Mason pointed to the door back down the hallway, "and Ashton has that one," he said with a nod toward the door between the living room and kitchen. Past the kitchen was a final door, which Mason said was the bathroom.

“I’m going to use the bathroom real quick, been on the road all day,” I said.

“Cool, I’ll get the other two up and we can track down some food.” As I closed the door on the bathroom I heard Mason shout out, “Ay, let’s get some food guys.”

The bathroom was tiny. The toilet seat and handle were sticky, and they seemed to be out of soap at the sink. I washed off as best I could but didn’t dare use any of their towels to dry my barely clean hands – there was a strange smell coming from each one hanging on the door and rack. I stepped out of the bathroom happy to be back in the living room because it was a bit cleaner, even with the pile of dishes in the sink and crumbs across the floor.

Ashton and Steve were both out of their rooms and pulling on shoes. At least Mason could get people moving so we didn’t have to stay here much longer than necessary. I glanced at the stain-covered cloth couch in the living room area, the space I was hoping to crash on for the night, and decided that I’d rather sleep in my truck.

“Hey, if it isn’t Matty,” Steve stood, shoes on, with a large grin, “get over here, man.” He gave me a quick hug. Ashton followed suit.

“It’s good to see you, Matty Matt,” Ashton added when we pulled out of our hug. I grimaced at the nickname.

“It’s good to see you both, too,” I exclaimed. It really was. They graduated a year before me, making it two years since I had seen them. I wasn’t as close to either of them as Mason was in college and I felt a little validation at deciding not to join them out here with Mason last year.

Mason led us out the door and back outside. I took a deep breath of the city air hoping to clean my lungs like I did in the Rockies, but I was disappointed to not feel the same sensation of freshness.

“I’m in the mood for some Polly’s,” Mason determined, and turned to lead the way there. I was hungry enough to eat anything and happy to check out one of their go-to spots. There’s no better way to explore a new place than with someone who knows their way around.

“So, you guys excited for the show?” I asked.

“Fuck yeah!” Steve roared.

“It’s going to be dope. We’ve been doing little gigs here and there, but this is the real deal. We’ve got a warmup band for us and sold three hundred tickets,” Ashton added, sharing in the enthusiasm.

“That’s so cool, guys. I’m not going to lie, I’m pretty jealous. Remember the nights on the roof of the science building talking about going and being a real band? You guys are really doing it,” I reminisced.

“Hell yeah, we took a shot on ourselves and it’s paying off,” Mason said. I felt a bit targeted with his comment, but he wasn’t wrong.

“I’m excited for you all. What can you tell me about tonight’s show?” I asked.

Steve began describing the old theater hall they were going to perform in. It was a bit closer to downtown and was once an opera house but was converted into a theater, with the seats removed making a big standing area for fitting in more people and a bar added in along with the lights and sound system necessary for concerts.

We arrived at Polly’s while he talked. Polly’s was a small, hole in the wall type of place. It was a part of a long building making up a busier and more commercial block of town compared to where their apartment was. There was a walk-up window for ordering slices of pizza and to-go pies and a door into the building next to that. While the other guys ordered at the window, I glanced in, but only saw a few tables.



“Hey, Matt, want to split a pizza?” Mason asked, drawing me away from the door and to the takeout window. “Ashton and Steve always share a Hawaiian. I don’t know how they can stand the pineapple. I’m feeling some mushrooms and sausage, though.” Before I could explain that I didn’t like mushrooms, Mason stepped up to the window and ordered our pizza anyways.

There were a couple round tables with chairs out front, one of which we claimed while we waited. I sat back, happy to be out and enjoying the day. My legs felt strong and well-toned from the hiking over the last week. I felt like I could walk straight across Brooklyn. My stomach gave a grumble so loud that Steve looked over and chuckled.

I ate nearly half the pizza while peeling off the mushrooms when the food arrived. The other three scarfed down their food. When the bill came, Mason was so engrossed in telling Ashton about how they should extend his guitar solo in one of their songs that he didn’t even notice. I picked up the tab instead.

We sat for as long as we could. No one else came by that needed the spot and the trio of locals were engrossed in their talks about their show. I kind of expected this – I would be anxious and meticulous in discussing each part of a concert set if it was my first show, too – but I felt invisible to them.

“What do you guys do besides play in your band and practice?” I asked, interjecting them more abruptly than I meant. They all looked over to me in unison. I sat, waiting for someone to reply.

“We all have jobs, too. Mason and I work at a restaurant around the corner from our place. Ashton works in a warehouse further south,” Steve offered. He didn’t sound very excited or proud about his job.

“I suppose you do that because you have to, though, and hopefully can start making some money with your shows, right?”

“No shit. That’s the goal, to quit our jobs and be musicians full time,” Mason said.

“Do you think you’ll be able to soon?”

“It depends on how this show goes,” Steve explained, “And the one after that, and the one after that.”

I was aware of all this. The struggles of being successful, of being heard and signed to a label, was part of why I decided to not come to San Francisco in the first-place last year, but it was at least something to talk about. Plus, I was trying to gauge how up-and-coming they were. Mason made it sound as if they were thriving, but after seeing their apartment, I felt lied to. It wasn’t the first time Mason kept the truth from me.

“Hey, we should probably get going,” Ashton said, checking his phone, “Only got half an hour to get to the theater.”

With that, we all walked back to their apartment. I followed along behind the trio, walking in their wake. They weren’t living as glamorously as I thought, not that I expected much more flashiness from a crew of struggling musicians, but this barely felt like living. It must be worth it, the lifestyle and boring jobs, to make the band successful. The concert was going to make this all clear, I was sure. I mean, clean up the apartment and find other simple jobs that are more engaging and they’re doing just fine, right?

I felt less confident in my judgement as I sat on the sticky couch and waited for the three to get ready and dressed. They didn’t take much time, mostly just changing into nicer clothes than their gym shorts and t-shirts, and now, rocking cleaner t-shirts and black or grey jeans, they felt ready to go.

Ashton drove us to the venue in his minivan. There were fast food wrappers and dirty clothes covering the floor of the vehicle, continuing the lack of cleanliness.

We passed the concert venue, a tall, vintage looking building with the names of the two bands listed on a sign on the front of the building, then pulled into an alleyway behind. The venue was older looking than I expected. It was brick walled and looked like a large square on the street. The front had a couple sets of glass doors and a ticket window sitting between the entrances.

“Isn’t this sick?” Mason asked.

“I mean, seeing your name up there and everything, that is awesome,” I replied. I was being honest.

Mason led us to a side door a little further down the building’s back. I felt like a minicelebrity, using this back entrance, and the grins on Steve, Mason, and Ashton’s faces said they felt the same way.

The door led us into a long hall, with several rooms along the way. I suspected these were dressing rooms. I followed the trio down the hall and around a corner to the side of the main stage. We walked out onto the stage, a drum set sitting in the back and several amps, monitors, and cables running along the ground and rest of the stage, connecting guitars, a keyboard, and a bass to large towers of equipment sitting just off stage.

I walked onto the stage and gazed out at the empty space below.

“Doors open in a half hour,” Mason interjected my thoughts, “how about we go backstage and hang out until it’s time.” He said it more as an instruction than a request.

“I’ll meet you guys back there in a little bit. I want to check this stage out for a while longer.”

They slipped back through the door and left me in the large, empty theater. I gazed out at the openness of it. A few sound engineers came out and tinkered with some instruments, but I focused on the space in front of me. I thought it would feel exciting to be up on a stage, even if I wasn't the one performing and the crowd was missing, but I felt like a fraud. It didn't feel quite right.

I played a few house parties, back in college, and shows for my university, but this was different. It wasn't a college group having some fun, it was the real world. This should have felt more stimulating, but it didn't. I didn't really want any of it, not by myself and not with Mason, Ashton, and Steve. I chuckled to myself and tried to imagine cramming into their nasty apartment and living in that grossness. No sir.

Something else was nagging me in the back of my mind while I stood on the stage. I had been expecting more from being up there. More recognition, more enthusiasm, more sense of place, more something. It was small, and that was fine, and empty, which was to be expected since the doors weren't open, but it was lacking. I couldn't place my finger on what, but the picture I had in my head just wasn't complete. The stage was too, serious, or real, or it didn't have enough of my friends' personality. That must be it. The concert hall was lacking the space to allow them to be them. There were no posters or merch, so there was no sense of themselves in the space. This was a shell that they were filling for the night, that was all.

Maybe I'll look at it in a new light once they're playing. I hoped I would.

It wasn't hard to find the guys. They were shouting and laughing in one of the dressing rooms with enough volume to be heard through the walls. When I poked open the door, I found they were with another group made up of two more guys and two girls. They looked about our

age, maybe a few years older or younger depending on the person. Steve, who was sitting on a chair by the door, waved me in.

The room stank of cigarette smoke and was hazy. I coughed slightly and found a seat on the arm of a couch. The space wasn't large, and with all of us crammed in, it felt especially small. There were a couple couches, a make-up table and mirror, and a few chairs. If anyone else came in, they'd have to sit on the floor.

“Hey, hey, this is our buddy, Mason. He came all the way from Brooklyn to watch us play and to party with us! Woo!” Mason yelled. Anxiety and energy coursed through the room and between each person there.

The whole room cheered with him. I couldn't help but grin, even if the attention was sudden and awkward. People turned back to their conversations and my moment of recognition vanished as quickly as it arose.

“These guys are the warmup band,” Steve explained to me gesturing to the other people in the room.

On the couch beside me sat one of the girls in the band. She had short black hair, a ring in her nose, and several tattoos on her arms. She turned to me, and for a second, despite her being much shorter and smaller than me, I felt like she might beat me up. Instead, she gave me a warm smile showing off her perfect teeth.

“So, they said you came all the way from Brooklyn? That's cool. I've always wanted to go there,” she spoke with a warm voice.

“Uh, yeah, it's a cool place. I lived there for my whole life before driving out here,” I shared.

“So that road trip,” She leaned towards me and kept talking, “that’s gotta be like, a hundred hours of driving, right?”

I smelled a bit of alcohol on her breath, which was surprising considering she was supposed to play soon, but I put that aside for now assuming it was a drink or two for nerves. “Yeah, it took me over a week. I had some down days and all, but it was no small feat.” I tried not to sound too braggy.

“You really came all this way for these guys,” she said in disbelief.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, offended for my friends.

“Oh, it’s not like it’s a bad thing,” she said quickly, with her hands up in innocence, “you’re just a really good friend is all.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, turning away, and giving her a side-eye glance.

We all stayed in the room for a while. I heard voices growing louder and louder as people were welcomed into the theater. One of the other band’s members got up and rallied the rest of the band to head out and get ready to perform. Ten minutes later, Mason, Steve, Ashton, and I heard a drum beat and a guitar riff rip through the theater. The crowd cheered in unison and the girl I was talking to only a few minutes before was greeting the crowd.

“Sounds like a good crowd,” Steve said.

“Oh yeah,” Mason added.

“Are you guys going to go check it out at all? Maybe watch the warmup band?” I asked.

“Nah, we need to focus on us,” Mason said.

I stayed in my seat for a minute. While hanging out with these guys seemed like a more reasonable idea, I couldn’t bring myself to not go watch this band from backstage. I came this far for music and I intended to listen to it.

“I’m going to watch them for a song or two,” I stood up and declared, “be back in a bit.”

I half expected one of them to get up and follow me out the door, but they all stayed glued to their seats. I followed the hall to the stage once again, the concert growing louder with each step, and popped around the corner to just off stage.

The warmup band was giving it their all. The singer was dancing hysterically, even with a guitar strapped across her, in beat with the hyperactive drummer. Their bassist and pianist were both focused on their instruments, their eyes darting between each other and their fingers. My foot began to tap instinctually with the indie rock music of the group.

When the song I walked in on finished, the crowd gave a polite applause. The audience didn’t seem to be out of their minds with excitement, but they certainly weren’t booing either. The lead singer, the girl I was talking to, thanked the crowd in her sweet voice. She promised three more songs, and the drummer kicked off their next one.

I stayed for the next song and tapped my foot along with their beat from the side of the stage. The indie rock was catchy, with sweet drumbeats and catchy guitar riffs. I was shocked at how loud the voice of their small lead singer was as she reached up her range to hit higher and louder notes. The energy of the band was strong, and the crowd cheered along with their song.

Ultimately, I wanted to be with Mason and his band for their last few minutes before they hopped up on stage and I headed back to the dressing room once the second song ended.

All three of the guys were still in the room, and a small white pile laid on the make-up table. Mason sat before the mirror, his face sliding across the surface of the table, Steve behind him waiting with a wide grin on his face.

“Hey, Matt,” Mason said, leaning back and facing me, white powder across his nose making him look like a little kid who got milk on his face while drinking.

“Is that cocaine?” I asked, shocked to see them doing a hard drug right before a show.

“Oh yeah. We’re living that rock and roll lifestyle,” he replied with a grin. Steve pushed Mason off the chair and sat down to his make own line.

“You can’t be serious. Do you guys do this before every show?”

“Pretty much,” Ashton said from the couch. I noticed a hint of white on his arm. He must have wiped his nose off just a moment ago.

“That’s disgusting,” I muttered. No wonder they were so strapped for cash. No wonder they were messes, with a dumpster of an apartment and old clothes that were dirty and greasy.

“It’s the lifestyle,” Mason said again, trying to validate himself and the others.

“Are you all addicted?” I asked.

“No,” Steve and Mason said in unison.

“Then throw the rest of that away,” I suggested.

“No.”

A moment of grim silence passed between us. Ashton eyed the desk while Mason’s eyes flickered between me and the drug.

“Why?” I asked. “Why go through all this work to be a serious band and then get caught up in a hard drug?”

“What do you want from us, Matty?” Mason demanded. His eyes were dilated and his nose runny again.

“I just want to know why.”

“It’s the lifestyle,” he said.

I shook my head at him. “You’re playing one little show, you’re not a rock and roll legend, and even that wouldn’t make this okay.”



Ashton and Steve looked back and forth between Mason and I with glances towards the table. They wanted to take their lines, even as we argued about the cocaine.

“Shit, what do you know? You’re not even a part of our band anyways,” Mason scoffed.

“I guess I don’t know anything, and I’d rather that than be a part of this,” I said, feeling dramatic and walking out the door.

## Chapter 8

I left the room, the hall, the building, and stepped out into the alleyway behind the building. I didn't know where to go. Twilight was set in and night quickly approaching. The night life of the city would be about and about soon, I suspected.

Wandering around was my only choice. I didn't want to follow my maps to go back to my truck. I felt lost and pulling up physical directions didn't feel like any kind of solution. As much as I didn't want to admit it, a part of me was hoping that one of the guys would text me or something, that they would make an apology, and this would all be forgotten.

They did not.

The streets led me around blocks, past parks, bars, and through the city. Tight buildings, small apartment complexes, restaurants ranging from fancy to grab and go lined the streets. People wandered all along, and cars passed by nearly constantly. The city was very much alive, but I felt dead and stupid for my last line as I walked out of the concert venue.

Putting the last couple weeks into context showed how much of an immature idiot I was. I drove across the country, spent hundreds of dollars, got lost, sick, and exhausted, just to come see a few friends, no one former friend and a couple guys I didn't really know, from college who had grown into dicks. I could look past messy apartment, even the dominating nature of Mason, but to be with a handful of drug users who didn't really care beyond themselves, that was too much for me.

All along my trip I was helped by strangers, by Lucy and Richard, and now the people I came to see use an old nickname they know I don't like and are losers. That's on them, I told myself. The dream of being in a band with them was still alive in me, and I was jealous of what they could be, but not what they were. It was all too raw, too fresh.

I walked into a small school playground and sat down on the swings. I probably looked crazy, but I didn't care. There wasn't anyone around anyways. God, I'm stupid. I wasted my savings on this damn trip. And for what?

My foot connected with the dirt beneath my feet to kick up a pile in my frustration. My stomach twisted itself into a knot. I didn't have enough money to drive home. I didn't have any leads on a job, any desire to do anything, and no direction. I was too stupid, too eager to follow an empty dream, to think ahead.

"I need a drink," I said to myself.

I walked west, towards the Pacific. The first bar I saw was lively, with a deck overlooking the ocean and a crowd dispersed between the inside and outside of the place. The walls were brick, giving the place an industrial look. It wasn't huge from the outside, just a ground floor with apartments above and a back deck. A couple motorcycles were parked out front, along with older looking cars. Across the street was a street duo playing an acoustic guitar and a drum kit made up of buckets and boxes.

The inside was similarly old fashioned. A long wooden bar took up one of the walls while a running counter spread across the other wall. People were standing and leaning along it, as well as filling the dozen or so tall, round tables in the room. A small pool table was tucked into a corner and a pair of biker guys were in the middle of a game. A dart board sat on one of the walls, which were all covered in California band posters, such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Blink-182, sports jersey's representing California teams, like the Lakers and 49ers, and several California flags. I couldn't tell if it was a California support bar, a biker bar, or a successful dive bar.

I beelined to get a drink, where the three bartenders were busy pouring and talking to customers. The shelves behind them were stocked with liquors and drinks, which I suppose is normal for a bar, but this place was really stocked. There were bottles of every color and alcohols of every type I could think of and a lot I didn't recognize at all.

“What're you drinking?” came from my right. One of the bartenders, a middle-aged man with hair that was both greying and balding and wearing a “I heart San Fran” shirt was turned to me.

“Whatever your favorite beer on tap is,” I replied. I never knew what to drink at bars – the amount of choice was overwhelming – but my dad said asking what the bartender liked was always a safe call. I'd been doing so since I turned 21.

“We've got this great IPA, real hoppy and a bit sweet, made right here in the city. That sound good?”

“That'll be fine.” I leaned back from the bar, my hands still resting on the wood, and gazed around to my right and left at the collection of characters in the building. All along the bar were older people, ranging from 30-60 or so. They look a bit rough, like they used their hands for their work and this time at the bar was the only way they got through the days at all. There was a biker aesthetic going on as most of them wore leather jackets and bandanas.

The tables were a bit more upbeat. The people sitting around them were all talking. At the nearest table, a large man was waving his hands around and telling a story about a “whale of a fish” he saw in the bay that day to the other two guys at the table. I didn't know if his story was plausible or not, but his buddies seemed skeptical.

“Here's that IPA. It's called the Golden Valley.”

I turned to see the bartender setting down a tall glass with a deep yellow colored beer. He was turning away as I thanked him but gave a wave over his shoulder anyways. I took a sip, and while I wasn't crazy about the beer, I didn't dislike it, and took another, longer sip.

It was nice to not have anyone to talk to. All those hours on the road made me think I missed talking to people, but I preferred my own quietness. Listening to the people around me made me feel less alone while I sat with my drink. My solitude was shattered by the man to my right.

"You're not from around here, huh?" asked the gruff man in a worn t-shirt and a pair of jeans. He had a long grey beard, making me think he was a less wintry version of Santa Clause. Honestly, I was surprised that he even said hi at all, but I didn't want to be rude.

"Nope," I kept it short, hoping he would get the hint and not carry on the conversation.

"Huh, me neither. I wonder if this bar just brings in folks from all over." When I didn't reply, he continued. "Whereabouts are you from then?"

"Brooklyn."

"Neat. I was in Queens about," He put a finger to his lip to think, "well, shit, I guess that was over a month ago, now. Time really flies."

"Cool."

"I was there for work. Just passing through. What brings you out here?"

I bit my lip, not wanting to be short with the man, but knowing I had no way to reply with one word for this question, "I came to see a friend, but turns out he became a dick, or I guess he was always one and I just now figured that out."

"Ah, he speaks more than one word at last," the man joked, "I've been there, before. Right in your shoes." He took a long sip from his drink then continued, "One time, back in the

80's, I took three different trains over two full days to get from Seattle to Dallas to see a girl. She left me a voicemail back at home saying she didn't want me to come anymore, but it was too late. I showed up on her doorstep, but she wasn't home. I waited for three hours for her to get home and she came walking on up with some other guy draping his arms around her."

My situation suddenly seemed far less shitty. My shock at his story must have shown on his face because he looked at me, chuckled, and said "Oh, it wasn't all bad. It's a funny story to tell strangers at bars now." He stuck out a hand, "name's Dave Arnold."

"Matt Crenshaw," I gave him a firm shake.

"Pleasure to meet you. Sorry about your friend being a dick. Some people age like fine wine, and some like a loaf of bread."

I chuckled at his comment, and he explained, "my ma used to say that. Dad thought it was the funniest thing."

"Are your parents still around?" I inquired tentatively.

"Nah, passed away eight years ago in a car crash."

I could tell that was all he wanted to say on the subject. We both took a sip of our drinks and I noticed he had some sort of bubbly clear drink in his cup. I asked him what he was drinking.

"Sprite," he replied without missing a beat. It seemed odd that man like him, on the larger side and weathered-looking, wasn't drinking a cheap American beer. I shook my head to remove the stereotypical image and asked him why soda.

"I stopped drinking shortly after my parents. Hit a low point but my sister brought me out of it. Family's important like that," his chest puffed out as he finished. "What do you do for work?" He asked.

I squirmed in my seat a little bit before saying, “Nothing right now. I graduated last year and worked in a hardware store back home, but it went under, and I drove out here. What do you do?” I asked, realizing I didn’t really find out what he does when he mentioned he passed through Queens.

“I’m a trucker for Walmart. It’s a dying business, as everyone knows, but it’s all I’ve known, and I plan to work until I’m laid off or retire anyways. I get to see the country and that’s enough for me.”

My ears perked up at his explanation of his work and I turned to face him. “How does one become a trucker, exactly?” I asked, ready to take some mental notes.