

SEE YOU NEVER.

We'd fucked despite ourselves.

I'd shown up at her door soaking wet from the rain, my shirt plastered papier-mâché translucent against my skin. She knew I'd be there, knew there'd be a spare condom in my pocket, and answered the door shirtless. Despite it being the third time we'd relapsed, we fucked fervent and desperate, like we would never sleep together again. And after both of us collapsed in soiled sheets, Parker said, "I'm sorry."

Earnestly. As if either of us regretted it.

I glanced at her, mindless, my vision still blurring at the edges. "You don't mean it."

"Of course I do."

I locked eyes with the spinning ceiling. "You're so fucking frustrating."

And with trembling fingers I wormed into my still-wet clothes and stalked out into the night.

###

The last time I ever saw her was at a house party, a scant high school reunion that consisted of brilliant UC students and me. I *knew* I'd drink more than anyone. When you work thirty-five hours a week *and* attend college *and* live by yourself, you either get on alcohol, nic, weed, or all three, and I'd indulged in this holy trinity like I had nine lives to lose.

I began indulging the moment I entered the party. The host's house, which existed only in marble and beige, connoted an 800 credit score and smelled like lemon verbena. In comparison, I smelled like my restaurant job and, in my secondhand graphic tee and torn jeans, looked like I lived off food stamps (which was accurate). I'd never felt more out of place. My immediate

solution: getting *hammered*. By hour two I was four shots, two smokes, and one bowl deep, crossed so smooth that I prickled at the fingertips; by hour six I was couchlocked and chattering so enthusiastically that I didn't notice her arrival. Memories of that night blur at the corners, but I remember her slipping through the small crowd, armored in her Rochester varsity jacket and absolutely dripping disdain. From my sprawled position on the couch, I saluted her with a shot glass.

"Parker," I slurred, "you finally came back."

"I don't choose when summer starts."

"Fair enough." I poured her a whiskey shot, the liquid spilling over my knuckles. "Want a drink?"

She scowled fiercely at me. "You know I don't."

Of course I did. I knew the way her eyes crinkled when she laughed and exactly when she made coffee each morning and the subtle pink of her blush, but I liked pretending I didn't.

I tossed the Jack back, feeling it burn my throat. "More for me, then."

"You should quit drinking."

"Awww. Someone cares."

"I try not to," she replied, crossing her arms.

"I missed you" rose on the tip of my tongue, and like medicine I swallowed it. I stared at her, drinking in her heart-shaped face and smooth tan skin, the silken stream of dark hair that rippled as she moved. She smiled, infuriatingly earnest, and I wondered what I was doing here. Parker and I within fifty feet of each other— what was I thinking?

"Brooks? You there?"

The shot glass shattered at my feet as I rose, and “I have to piss” left my mouth automatically, as if dispensing a parking stub. Before she could respond, I flew off.

The journey to the bathroom was bits and pieces– an endlessly spiraling staircase, hanging wind chime houseplants ringing high and shrill, unfamiliar towels that clung to my hands like pine tar. Time faded in and out, speeding up before slowing to a crawl. Right before the alcohol consumed me, there was warm, warm relief.

###

I was trapped in semi-consciousness for hours, fading in and out while a phantom Parker appeared behind my eyes. Misty images of her formed and dissolved in my feverish dreams, her afterimages velvety-soft and aching, but I could never seem to touch her. I only felt flaky layers of intoxication: folds of smooth sativa, warmly round Jose Cuervo, buzzing Zyn patches. The sober things were starkly cold and sharp. Longing stung my face like sleet; I felt the distance between Santa Rosa and Rochester writhe within me, a three-thousand mile snake. When I snapped awake, head pounding, I almost felt relieved.

It was completely dark save for a slit of golden light beneath the door. With a painful squint I gathered my surroundings: the cream tiled walls and glittering sink, the squishy bathroom mat I’d passed out on. My thoughts careened in time with the halting exhaust fan above. Before I could collect myself, soft footsteps stopped outside the door.

“Hello?” called a familiar voice. She rapped on the door, which felt like nails driving into my skull. “Brooks? Are you okay?”

I cursed my luck.

“Brooks?”

“I’m here,” I groaned. “How long’s it been?”

“Two hours. Can I come in?”

“...Fine.”

I crawled to the door to unlock it, and once I'd cleared the doorway Parker swept in. She flicked on the lights, which stung too-bright and piss yellow, and I shielded my eyes with a hand.

“Can you turn the lights off?” I begged.

Parker ignored me, thrusting a glass of ice water in my face. “Drink.”

I glanced at the glass, then her, fighting the urge to gape. In my drunken stupor, I hadn't noticed her makeup, but tonight she'd become a cat-eyed femme fatale, complete with glassy red lips, long, feathering lashes, and winged eyeliner drawn razor-thin. Sprawled beneath her, I felt infinitesimally small.

“You don't have to baby me,” I said sullenly.

Parker planted the glass on the floor and crossed her arms, expectant. For lack of anything better to do, I hauled myself to a sitting position and took a sip.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Like I shit my brains out.”

“You always do this.”

I cradled the glass in my hands, feeling the condensation pool under my knuckles. “Do what?”

“Ignore your limits,” Parker replied.

Despite my numb, cottony tongue and pounding head, I scoffed in response. “Are you *still* hung up on Joy's grad party? It's tradition for everyone to get smashed.”

That ever-present scowl crawled across Parker's face. “I didn't throw up in her pool.”

“Just got kicked out for punching Devon and Emmett. Sober, by the way.”

“It was over *Uno*,” she said hotly.

I shook my head. “We've done worse over a lot less.”

Her scowl deepened, and suddenly I was whisked back to the AP classes debates and track meets and card games that we'd fought so viciously over. Over six years of middle and high school, our class placements only rose or fell by one— we were either first or second. By the end of senior year, we'd butted heads thousands of times.

A memory rose in my throat, and before I could stop myself I blurted, “Do you remember freshman year of high school? When we passed out in Mr. Allen's class?”

She narrowed her eyes at me, a bomb technician scanning the field. “Yeah. Why?”

“Déjà vu? I don't know.”

Parker relaxed slightly. “During the mile, right? From heat exhaustion.”

“Yeah. And Mr. Allen sent us to the hospital—”

“—and we begged him to let us run the mile again?” Her gaze flicked sideways before returning to its stubborn place on the wall. “Yeah, I remember.”

“We were real fucking stupid,” I chuckled.

Parker leaned against the bathroom counter, her expression coolly guarded, and I tried not to stare. Even under the washed-out yellow bathroom lights, she was beautiful.

“Things were so different back then,” she said absently.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “They were.”

We locked eyes, our gazes searching— *for what*, I wondered, because it was over, *we* were over— before a yell goodbye echoed from downstairs.

“Looks like everyone's going home,” Parker said suddenly.

I stomped down the strange disappointment in my stomach. “What time is it?”

She flicked out her phone. “Two thirty-two. How'd you get here?”

“Christian drove me.”

“He left an hour ago. Some family thing.”

I stumbled to my feet, feeling the room spin. “Fuck. I'll just call a Lyft, then.”

Parker opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

“Spit it out already,” I said impatiently.

“Do...” A begrudging, half-hearted exhale. “Do you want a ride?”

“I can take a Lyft.”

“Do you have the money right now?”

“...”

She gestured for me to follow, and I sighed, relenting. My thoughts were becoming horribly, awfully sober, and I almost wanted to thank her. My pride didn't allow it. Instead I cursed under my breath and, against my better judgment, allowed her to drive me home. The walk back to her car went as well as comedown activities go—awkward, shambling, and weak-kneed in the wake of alcohol. Wordlessly, we shuffled into her battered sedan, the tension between us latent as a rubber band stretched tight. I didn't trust myself around her, and the sentiment seemed mutual.

The first half of the drive was spent in silence as the street lamps washed us in rheumy gold. I stared at the peeling bumper sticker on the dash, high school flooding back to me in droves. Even back then she'd been an excellent driver—unwaveringly confident as she drove one-handed, posture always easy. In this passenger seat Parker would make fun of me for my hard turns and the blustering way I merged lanes. I tried not to think about those days.

For twenty minutes we waited for one of us to break first, but remained silent. Then, while marinating in our lumpy seats:

“How are your college apps going?”

Startled, I broke out of my reverie. “Um— I'm delaying my transfer again.”

“I see.”

I tried to read Parker's face, but her expression remained perfectly still. What was this? Some ill-timed joke? A snickering critique? My major was undecided, and although I'd attended community college to choose it before transferring, I still hadn't found it. I always knew I was close, but Parker had never thought so. She'd always pushed me to jump into things I wasn't ready for.

As if reading my mind, Parker said, “I'm not judging. Just— curious, I guess.”

“Really.”

“Really,” she echoed.

“...I’m still undecided,” I admitted. “I was thinking about electrical engineering, but I don’t know if I’ll be missing out.”

She glanced at me, gaze strangely heavy. “Do you have anything else lined up?”

The alcohol afterglow broke, and I came to my senses. Suddenly it was a fierce injustice that she should be allowed to comment on my decisions, and I snapped, “Why do you care?”

“What, is it illegal now?”

“We’ve already broken up. I’d rather you not.”

The rearview mirror reflected Parker's frown. “I try not to.”

“You don’t do a very good job of it.”

Parker tensed like an animal raising its haunches. “I don’t get it. One minute you want to hang out, the next you don’t want to see me again.”

“That’s different,” I said sharply. “You keep getting involved in my business.”

“I wouldn’t be so *involved* if you just let me go.”

“What are you talking about?”

She took the next turn uncharacteristically sharp, air hissing between her teeth as she exhaled. “That party– you hang out with a whole different crowd. You text me high. And you still visit my place to ‘pick stuff up.’ It’s been a *year*, Brooks.”

Hot blood rushed to my face, and I spat, “So none of this is your fault?”

“That's not the point,” she replied. “You broke up with me. You have to follow through with it.”

“What are you saying?”

“This— tonight— that's going to be it. If we're not dating, I don't want to see you again.”

Air rushed from my lungs. I stared at her disbelievingly, searching for something that betrayed hesitance or unsurety, but her eyes were resolute.

“You can't be serious.”

“We can't keep doing this,” she insisted. Her knuckles shone white on the steering wheel, the bones jutting below the skin. “Both of us deserve commitment, not... whatever this is.”

“You can't—” Words welled up in my throat, and I struggled to parse them, to find something, *anything*, in that surging tide. “This is *fucked*.”

“Brooks.”

“*You* chose your career, *you* chose Rochester in fucking— *New York* instead of anything in California. *You* chose to not see me for eight months out of the year and expect me to stay. And now you're throwing me away.”

“Brooks, listen to yourself. You're not making any sense.”

I laughed on the brink of hysteria. “Be seeing you never, I guess.”

She glanced at me strangely, hints of *something* seeping through her guarded expression. “I thought... no, forget it.”

“Thought what?”

“That you'd be happier without me.”

“I—”

My words caught in my throat. The world slowed around us as Parker stopped at a traffic light, and I drank the sight of her indulgently, wantonly. Her smooth tan skin and heart-shaped face, the river of dark hair cascading around her shoulders, the stop light bathing her in muted red. Her glassy lips, now worried flaky. “I am” refused to pass my lips, leaving me silent.

I was supposed to be better off alone. Parker and I had been a mostly online long-distance relationship, interspersed with a mere month or two of summers and holidays together. Being together didn’t make sense. But that line of reasoning faded like mist, so nebulous and incorporeal that I struggled to justify it. I’d dated a dozen rebounds to little success. Her name lingered on my tongue; her face lurked behind my eyes. I was a train hurtling towards its preset destination, every track leading back to her.

Numbly, I replied, “I’m not.”

“Then why did you break up with me?”

“...I don’t know.”

Parker pulled into my driveway, and the engine’s purr sputtered, then stopped. Our seatbelts clicked free, and for a moment we sat there, the moonlight casting our faces silver. I trembled in place, helpless against her, helpless against myself, feeling the cool door handle against my fingers and being unable to pull it. When I didn’t leave, Parker placed her shaking hand over my own; suddenly we were nearing closer, *closer*, until we were nose-to-nose, precariously teetering on the trapeze wire of us. I remember her slipping expression, lips trembling, eyes hungry, cheeks sunken in the smoky darkness. *Desperate*. And I knew I looked the same.

In the inch of hot breath between us, she whispered, “Brooks. Do you want to try again?”

I slipped a hand beneath her chin and leaned in to press her lips to mine, because none of it, the distance, the communication, the scarcity mattered—

And then I remembered why I'd left her.

Suddenly my head wove everything together again, hemming the ends with what-if seams that screamed what if, what if, what *if* I found a special someone in California, what if someone wittier or kinder or better swept me off my feet, what if Parker and I were never meant to be and I was wasting my time on some half-satisfactory long distance fling when the love of my life was merely a block down the street?

I pulled away.

"Brooks?" she whispered.

"I can't."

I stumbled out of the car. Parker lingered in the driveway, waiting for me to change my decision, but I didn't. Without saying a word she drove away, and as she disappeared on the horizon I realized, too late, that I wouldn't be seeing her again.