

The Trip to the Euthanasia Clinic

It wasn't a particularly interesting day to die. Though it was only 10 am, the house was empty and quiet, only disrupted by the fastidious cleaning and organizing; the kitchen floor was swept, the living room vacuumed, and all of the bedroom was neatly arranged—maybe not on the level of an Ikea catalogue, but at least the bed was made, prepared for the rest of its life, never again to be bothered or slept in, but rather it would be preserved, glorified, kept as a memorial. So now Wendall stood, aimless, in the center of the hallway between his bedroom and the shared bathroom, snapping his fingers and bouncing around uncomfortably while rotating and evaluating every corner of the one-story house to ensure it was in the proper condition. After he couldn't bear to do this anymore (around 15 minutes), he turned his attention to the grandfather clock that sat at the end of the hall, next to Ruby's bedroom. It was made of cherry oak, polished smooth—or that's what Ruby said when she brought it home, claiming it to be a family relic—nearly impeccable save for one scuff mark, on the right side, just below the face of the clock; it was a scratch, which Wendall left maybe five years ago, during one of his incidents. He didn't intend to scratch it. That's what he did though—ruined things.

Wendall lifted his arm and pressed his index finger against the glass of the clock's lower compartment, blocking out his reflection's hair, sloppily parted into place, and its eyes, which were sullen but empty, leaving a small fingerprint on the glass. This would be the last time he saw this clock, and while he always thought it was ugly—a bit too historical, and pretentious, for his likes—he still felt a stabbing in his throat, a discord in his chest that felt as if his limbs were going to float away and as though everything in the house were suddenly ten feet taller than him. “Bye.” he said. “Looks like you outlived me.” His finger left the glass.

Soon thereafter Ruby arrived home, a slew of cloth bags slung over her shoulder. Wendall stood upon her entrance. “Sorry I’m a little late,” she said, glancing at the black-metal analog clock shaped like a kitten mounted on the kitchen wall. “Mr. Hendrickson wouldn’t let me take my lunch break any earlier and I had an errand to run.” She set the bags on the kitchen table and turned to face Wendall.

“That’s alright.” he said. “My appointment isn’t until 1:30. Still got a couple hours to get there.” He looked at the floor.

Ruby approached him and placed a hand on his scruffy chin, bringing his eyes to hers, then moving her hand, running it down along the sleeve of the grey and tattered t-shirt he was wearing, then down the rest of his arm. It was the t-shirt he always wore when he was sad. He had it since his childhood; he stole it from his dad’s closet shortly after he died, and although it was too big for him as a kid, it became a perfect fit as Wendall grew to be as big as his dad.

“I’ve just gotta go grab the rest of the stuff from the car then we can go.” Ruby said. Wendall gave a disingenuous half-smile to signal he understood. “Do you want me to make you brunch or something before we go?”

Wendall looked into Ruby’s melty-brown eyes, confused. Maybe she did care after all. He shook his head no.

“Maybe we can stop somewhere then.” she smiled. Her hand left his arm to tuck a strand of her deep-red hair behind her ear before she went back out the front door and returned with another armful of bags. “Are you sure about this?” she asked.

Wendall looked up at her, surprised, although he should have seen it coming; she had asked that question at every step of the process and it was only fitting she would be asking it again now. “Yes.” he replied.

“Seriously, if you’re gonna back out, now is the time.”

“I’m not going to back out.”

“Last chance.” she pressed.

“I am doing this, Ruby. You can’t understand, hardly anyone can, but I’m depressed, and I always will be. Besides, it’s not like anyone cares...”

Ruby absorbed his words, biting her lip in uncertainty before letting out a defeated sigh. “Are you ready then?”

Wendall nodded and followed Ruby out the door making sure to turn around and get one final look at the house he’d occupied for at least a decade, blinking his eyes as if to take a mental photograph, even though the lethal dose of secobarbital he’d be receiving in two hours was going to erase it--and all the other images in his mental gallery.

With hot eyes, he finally closed the door and turned and followed Ruby into the sunlight. It had been at least two days since Wendall was outside; the sun warmed even behind his ears, which picked up on a jingle, somewhere down the block, the noise of a windchime clattering in the light breeze. The world was alive. Alive and humming, thriving in that perfect window between Summer and Fall.

The two of them got into Ruby’s car—it was new, as her old one had taken its final breath on the way home from work one day, leaving her stranded on the side of the highway.

Unlike her old, beat-up SUV, this one had a dark, sleek interior, filled with silence as the two pulled out of the driveway, at least until Ruby spoke the words, “Play music,” and after a series of melodic beeps, an accented male voice responded *Opening Library*.

Wendall tensed himself in anticipation of the folk music Ruby typically played, and was caught off guard when she said, “I downloaded Thrash & Foam on here. That’s your favorite band, right?” Wendall nodded, too surprised to speak. How had she known that? How long had she known that? “What album do you want?” she said.

“We don’t have to listen to it if you don’t want.” Wendall mumbled.

“I want this day to be special for you.” Ruby said with another smile.

“Ok...Ocean EP is pretty good, I guess.”

Ruby commanded the car to play Ocean EP, and Wendall relaxed in his seat slightly. The song rocked Wendall’s chest and filled his head and pumped his adrenaline, synthesized arpeggios like the magnetic vibrance of the sun and the sequestered call of seagulls, a pronounced bass like footsteps plodding against the hot afternoon sand, high notes like the glimmering of Ruby’s hair as she stood, beckoning, in the cool navy water. It was the beach, the vacation Ruby spent over two years saving up for, and only the second time Wendall had ever seen the ocean. As he waded over to Ruby that day, spongy, damp sand clinging to his feet and the occasional shell pricking him, he felt like everything would be okay. Ruby was even smiling—she didn’t do that often, at least not genuinely, not around him; she only did for the men, and women, she brought home from the bars, who he could only imagine she was smiling at as he heard their breathy moans and deep grunts like the sharpness of the sun’s rays and roar of waves that crashed against Wendall as he’d approached her—and when he finally met her, she

splashed him with a flick of water, and he doused her with a bigger splash, and she pushed him back, down, head submerged under the tide. Now, as he sat in her car, he wished he could go back to that beach, feel the warmth of the sun distort through the ocean's surface, he wished he could feel Ruby's hand grabbing his arm, hoisting him upwards, through the turbulence of the water, he wished they could drive, drive, keep driving, and never stop. A bioluminescence appeared in the murky distance, piercing the water, a sharp orange hue that took form on the driver's side dashboard: the blinker. Ruby turned left.

“Where are we going?” Wendall asked.

“Need some gas.” she said. She pulled next to an empty pump—which most were, on a Tuesday morning—and put the car in park. “Want anything?” she asked.

Wendall shook his head. She opened the car door and walked over to the gas station. Once the door swung shut behind her, Wendall slumped in his chair and started humming along to the music tapping his fingers on the passenger-side console. He watched the gas station intently, waiting for the red hair to pop out its door again.

A knock on his window broke his gaze and made him jump. He sat up and rolled the window down, recognizing the two people he saw behind it. A boy and a girl, Parker and Taylor, the former with a baseball tee—sleeves rolled up to reveal an arm tattoo of a snake or dragon or eel and a Chinese proverb, or something—Wendall never bothered to ask—and the latter with thick, unruly brown hair pulled up into a grey beanie, like a reflection of the thin silver eyebrow ring that now sat half-raised. They were his friends, or at least they used to be, back when he was in college. He hadn't seen them in at least nine months, apart from social media.

“I knew it was him!” Parker gloated.

“Shut up,” Taylor said with an attempted eyeroll which fell flat considering the small smirk on her lips. “What’s up Wen? It’s been a while.”

Wendall tried to think of a response, but was distracted and so only gave a halfhearted smile.

“Always a talker.” Parker smirked. Taylor shot him a glare but he persisted.

“Who are you here with?” Taylor asked.

“Probably on a date.” Parker said, still laughing.

“To a gas station?” Taylor said, rounding her head to look at Parker fully.

“I’ve done it in gas stations...”

“I’m here with my Aunt.” Wendall interrupted, nodding his head towards Ruby, who had just exited the gas station.

“Looks a little young to be an Aunt...” Parker said, eyes hooked on Ruby.

“Well...only kind of.” Wendall clarified.

“A kind-of Aunt, huh?” Parker asked, prompting another dirty look from Taylor.

“I’ve known her for a long time...she’s been there for me for a long time.” Wendall corrected.

“Been there for you...in bed?” Parker said as he nudged Wendall’s arm through the half-opened window. His childish grin only died when Taylor punched him in the arm. “Ow!” he whined.

“She took me in when my mom kicked me out.” Wendall said impatiently. The two went silent, and Taylor put her best apologetic face on.

“Anyways, Wen, it was good seeing you.” Taylor said.

“You too.”

Ruby arrived to the car, looking questioningly at the two. “Who are your friends?” she asked Wendall.

“Ruby, this is Parker and Taylor, from college. Guys, this is Ruby.” Wendall said.

“Ruby, like your hair.” Parker noted as he took Ruby’s hand and kissed it.

“Ever heard of the labeling theory?” Ruby flirted. Taylor rolled her eyes.

“Oh, hey, by the way, we’re going to the Pink Sheep concert tonight, you should come.” Taylor said to Wendall.

“I can’t.” Wendall replied. *Fight for me, fight for me...* he thought, waiting for her smile to drop, her eyebrows to furrow and bring her eyebrow ring into the ray of sun lying across the middle of her face.

“Too bad. Maybe next time.” she said.

Wendall gave a fake reassuring smile. He wondered how they’d feel when they woke up the next morning.

Ruby pumped the gas while Parker kicked a skateboard forward—which had been obscured by the front of the car—and hopped on. Taylor walked alongside him, turning back only once to give Wendall a small wave. He wondered if she knew. She was always a perceptive

friend, bringing him beef and rice soup when he was sick, checking up on him after nights of burying himself in homework—even though she'd never had a reason to worry back then—placing her arm around his shoulder when he looked as though he'd float away. She hid all of it behind her sarcastic exterior—which Wendall figured was a sort of antithesis to Ruby—but she'd always been there for him.

Ruby got back into the car and pulled out of the gas station and Taylor shrunk in the horizon, like the rose Wendall threw on the night he graduated college. He had tried to stay focused on it, but it got lost in a blur of a thousand others, and before he could wonder where it had gone, Taylor was there, wrapping her arms around him, the smooth and slick fabric of the arm of her gown rubbing against his neck; she was laughing in his ear, and he was laughing too, bubbling with excitement and hope that was only mirrored by the glasses of champagne—plastic, of course, since they were college students only a day earlier—clicking together in Parker's studio apartment two hours later. He never found his rose again; it was lost in piles of identical ones, and in the following weeks, Taylor was too, a distant face only occasionally spotted in the turbulence of the adult world. But that moment—as Taylor pulled from the hug, her dark face and a sea of dandelion graduation gowns and caps and ivy regalia and tassels in chiaroscuro, roses raining from the sky and tumbling down the kinks in her hair—Wendall had hope his Business Statistics degree would land him a successful job, and he wasn't worried about the past, or the future, but absorbed in the unfurling petals of Taylor's teeth and a sense of accomplishment.

Wendall could see the scene as if it were playing out before his eyes. In one and a half hours, it would cease to exist.

“Hungry yet?” Ruby asked. Wendall looked out the window and found they had escaped suburbia; they weren’t quite in a city, but the buildings were growing taller and plainer. Some were flat, monochromatic, and forged with rough stone, lined with old, rail windows where businesspeople probably looked out and saw people like Wendall going by, unaware that he felt just as dead inside. Others were stores, and in one, Wendall saw a woman peeling back a *BACK TO SCHOOL BLOWOUT!* sign from the window, a stack of Fall sale posters behind her.

Ruby nudged him and he looked at her blankly. “You get distracted too easily.” she said. “Lunch?”

“Oh, no, I’m good.” Wendall answered.

“You nervous?”

“No. Ready.”

“Well you’re getting a last meal. If you want to choose you better hurry. Otherwise it’s my choice.”

Wendall sighed. “That’s fine.”

“Your loss.” Ruby said. She parallel parked and the two found a restaurant, a small, family-owned café, where the waitress sat them outside at a black metal table with two dead leaves curled up on its surface, which Wendall didn’t hesitate to sweep off onto the cement below. Wendall noticed that their table was missing an umbrella; all the others on the patio had either a red one or an orange one, but theirs was exposed.

Adjacent to them, children ran and splashed around in the fountains of a busy street corner, too young to be in school, but old enough that their mothers weren’t watching, instead

opting to sit with each other and laugh loudly about the latest work scandal. Wendall thought he heard more wind chimes, but it was only a street piano, on which a hunched old man was playing a jazz song. Wendall watched this distant world, separated only by a short, intricate, wrought-iron fence, and wondered how its inhabitants functioned.

“So why are you doing it?” Ruby asked after their food arrived.

“Because I couldn’t stand not to anymore.”

“But what if one day you wake up—” Wendall gave her a warning look, but she persisted, “—and everything is better?”

“You’re right. That’s why I’m doing this, to wake up. From a nightmare.” he tried to poke his fingers through the holes of the table as he spoke, but they were too big.

“You are awake,” Ruby said, taking his hand in hers, “you just need to open your eyes.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Wendall retorted.

“I’m serious. Come on.” She tugged his arm and stood.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“To have some fun.” He stood reluctantly as Ruby hopped over the fence.

“But our food...”

“...will still be there when we get back.” Wendall stood, linked with Ruby, her on one side of the fence and him on the other. This was pointless. Whatever lay on her side of the fence could only be an illusion. Still, Ruby was smiling, genuinely smiling, a strand of her hair blazed

across her face by the fall breeze, her black cotton work dress being tossed back and forth like a flag. She looked free, Wendall thought.

She tugged his arm again, a pleading look on her face, and Wendall gave in, lifting one foot, then the other, over the fence. She led him to the piano, where the old man was playing an upbeat jig. Ruby grabbed Wendall's other hand and at first they clumsily swing-danced, Wendall looking down at his feet as they rushed to keep up with Ruby's. Before he could prepare, Ruby lifted his arm into the air and spun him, causing him to stumble backwards, releasing the grip of her hand, and fall into the wall of a nearby store, dazed and half-crouched. He looked at Ruby's face and saw shock, but involuntarily the corners of his mouth curled upwards, like magnets attracted to his cheekbones, and Ruby's did too, and his smile grew as he stabilized himself. He was laughing. They were laughing. He approached Ruby and gave a playful push, before grabbing her hands and resuming the dance. He looked into her eyes, and when she spun him again, he was ready for it, lifting his hands and looking into the sky. Their dance became more free-formed as the two swung their arms around wildly and hopped around, giggling with exhilaration. Nearby patrons stared at them judgmentally, but they didn't care. They were free.

Eventually the old man's song ended and he turned and gave them an appreciative smile, which Wendall reciprocated by taking all the cash in the wallet and placing it in his hat. Smiles still on their faces, they finished their meal and returned to the car.

The buildings became smaller again, consumed by the Earth like graves in a flood, growing more sparse and desolate until they finally gave way to pastures and farms buried in rolling hills, like waves out the window as Wendall watched sailing by at sixty miles per hour. They drove straight until they couldn't anymore, until their path was blocked by a gate with a NO TRESSPASSING sign, guarding a cobbled path which sank down a hill and eventually gave

way to the coast. There were only two ways to get where they were going: the highway that emerged from the small town they had just eaten lunch in, which would have taken twenty minutes, and Memorial Road, which extended their trip to an hour. Wendall had been down this road many times; it was where he learned to drive, where Ruby had grown increasingly exasperated as he hurled and halted down the ten-mile stretch; it was the road he took every time he returned home from college in the city, because it allowed him to contemplate his future—he did a lot of that then, but now the future was only filled with dread—and think through any assignments he had due; and way back, when he was just a kid, it was the road his parents took him on to go to the Fall Festival downtown. Every year they got four pumpkins—one to grow on, as his dad would laugh—and his dad would carry two (which Wendall always hoped he could do when he grew up), and his mom one, and Wendall would resort to rolling his, prodding it with his pudgy arms, stopping to take a break every five pushes, until finally his dad would give in and grab the pumpkin for him. Then the entire ride back, they would tell each other scary stories, and Wendall would pretend he wasn't scared, but would insist on bringing out the night light, shaped like a duck, which he usually insisted he had outgrown, later that night. When they got home they would plunk the pumpkins down on the newspaper-lined kitchen table and carve them; his mom always carved his for him, but he told her what design he wanted, the result usually being a goofy face or a monster from one of his favorite cartoons. He always watched her hands—dainty but callused—and always with orange nail polish—slide the knife through the pumpkin, careful and exact. That was what he remembered most about his mom—her hands. Maybe it was because they were affected the least by her drug addiction. Her face grew droopier and her eyes emptier, her shoulders slumped, her abdomen withered, but her hands were always strong and feminine.

“Get ready to hold your breath.” Ruby exclaimed as she clicked on the left blinker again. She was referring to a tradition they had, since they were younger—any time they’d ride on this road together, they would hold their breath to see who could last longer. If one made it to the end, the other owed a dollar.

“It’s too long, I’d pass out.” Wendall said lamely.

“You used to hold your breath.”

“I used to have breath to hold.”

Ruby looked at him, eyes frowning, and hesitated a moment before giving up and turning onto the road. The car was shrouded by a sleeve of fall foliage, trees guarding either side of the road and casting a shadow over the edges. They drove for ten minutes until the car decelerated and Ruby took the keys out of the ignition.

“What are you doing?” Wendall asked.

“I can’t pass up taking a walk here, today. It’ll only be like twenty minutes.” Wendall watched as she undid her seatbelt and got out of the car without waiting. With a sigh and a check of the time on his phone, Wendall followed. He caught up with Ruby, who was standing to the right side of the road in front of a bench with a plaque that read, *Harvey J. Peters Memorial, 1901-1989*, in gold letters on a granite background.

Ruby stared at the bench thoughtfully for a minute, then said, “I think there’s a trail somewhere around here.” Sure enough, the two found a trail that pierced the column of trees lining the road and followed it until they broke through the other side, finding themselves at a cliff that formed the coast. Wendall looked down at his feet and saw sharp expanses of rock and

slopes of dirt that sunk into the water, which foamed and retracted calmly against the bottom of the cliff.

The two stood in silence for a while, gazing out at the wrinkled blanket of water that faded into the horizon. The sun, just below its peak height, glimmered on the water's surface, obscuring the reflection of the sky that delved deeper.

“You don't have to do this.” Ruby said softly.

“Yes, I do, and I am.” Wendall answered firmly.

“Wendall, I get it, you're sad, but—”

“I'm not just sad. If I were sad, I would cry, then be done with it. I'm broken, Ruby. I cry in the shower, before I sleep, in the car after buying groceries, all the time—”

“Wendall...”

“—I'm empty. I lie in bed every morning for an hour, thinking how every day I'm going to be tapped in the same, crushing cycle, and I can't endure it anymore—”

“Wendall.”

“—I've lost all my hobbies, I have no job, no future, and nothing that makes me happy, and I can't do it anymore, Ruby, I can't! I can't! I can't! I can't!” He kicked a rock and watched it tumble down to the water like the tears flowing from his eyes freely and moistening the dirt. His diaphragm seized with each iteration of, “I can't,” which he repeated until Ruby interrupted once more.

“Wendall. Look.” she said, still just as calm. Wendall looked up to find Ruby was no longer facing the water, or him, but the trees. He turned and was taken by them, instantly seeing what Ruby saw.

The trees unfurled from one end of his peripheral vision to the other, creating a skyline of branches and bunches of leaves, magnificent hues blending one, into another, into another; sour but healthy greens gave way to subtle golds which gave way to warm oranges and deep, prominent scarlets, and the lines of each leaf began to blur together until they weren't single leaves but splatters of paint dripped across a bright blue canvas, rooted into the rolling green hills jutting in multiple directions only by their wise and shadowed-brown trunks and branches. Wendall saw his mom's orange-painted nails running through his hair as her rouge lips glided over her teeth; she was whispering, whispering like the clatter of the leaves as the wind picked up and the slapping of the water a hundred feet below, whispering like the ghostly trace of Ruby's hand as she placed it in Wendall's, whispering like the tears coating Wendall's cheeks as they dried and were absorbed in his skin, whispering like the strand of brown hair that lied across his forehead, just low enough to be visible, forming an arc over the tops of the trees, whispering like the way Wendall became a tree himself, limbs growing to the sky silently and feet being grappled by the ground; her lips whispered in his ear then kissed him gently on the cheek then disappeared, but he still heard the echo, somewhere in the wind, fading as season gave way to season, he heard her whisper: “Don't do it.” The wind swept beneath him suddenly, more powerful but less violent, whistling in the synapses between branches, and filled his lungs until he was floating. His chest lifted, inflated and determined, and the stabbing in his throat stopped; the wind carried his limbs back to him, and he grew even taller than the trees, no longer made miniscule by their crooked branches, but equal to them.

There was a world lined by these trees, filled with strokes of these colors, and Wendall was in it. He belonged, in the embrace of the trees, and the warmth of the dirt, and the crescendo of the water and the symbiosis of all the life soaked up in it. Just then a leaf fell, lazily, lightly, into Wendall's outstretched palm. He clung his fingers to it and held it to his chest. He put it in his pocket.

Without words, without releasing hands, Ruby and Wendall made their way back to the car. Wendall sat straight up as they traversed the remainder of Memorial Road. He felt lighter than air as they entered the city, taking several turns until they sat before a building that had *Department of Mental Health* in bronze letters across its face. Ruby put the car in park and sat back in her seat.

“Wendall...” she said, refusing to look in Wendall's direction. “I care.”

Wendall looked at her, taken off guard, noticing her cheeks were growing to match the tint of her hair. Yet, there was a small smile shrouded in the embarrassment, one that showed more affection than Ruby had ever spoken towards him. She cared. Of course she did. She always had, from the time their mothers introduced them at a Christmas work party and they pummeled each other with snowballs, to the time his third year in college he showed up at her doorstep looking for a place to stay, to the time he sat her down on the first day of summer and told her he was going to end his life. She always cared.

“Hey.” he said with a smile. Ruby looked up at him. “Let's go home.”

Wendall didn't get back in bed when Ruby dropped him off at home, opting instead to search through job listings and dance around the house to upbeat music. Ruby got home, alone,

three hours later, and the two ate takeout together, laughing and flinging grains of rice at each other. Before she went to bed, Ruby hugged Wendall, and said, “I’ll see you in the morning.” Even when she entered her room and closed the door behind her, Wendall still felt warm.

He looked at the grandfather clock before entering his own room, tracing the indentation of the scuff mark before giving it a playful pat and saying, “Better luck next time, old man.” He wiped the fingerprint off the glass with his sleeve, revealing his green eyes, which seemed to sparkle in the glass.

He climbed into his pristinely-made bed and wrapped his limbs up in the sheets and lay, eyes fixed on the blank white wall across from him, as the day reeled through his mind. “I’m happy.” he whispered with a smile.

Gradually his body sank into the mattress and his limbs became scattered in the tangled sheets. “I’m happy.”

His mind steered towards the future, analyzing the few job applications he’d sent in. Doubt crept its way into his chest and shrunk his smile to a straight line. The darkness bore into his eyes, which wouldn’t stay shut.

“I’m happy…” he whispered. He didn’t know where he’d go from here.