

Rain

On the way to the airport, she didn't speak to him very much.

"I'm losing my voice," she said. "It was like this when I got up this morning."

Ethan sat silently in the passenger seat, pretending to look at the scenery while memorizing her face. When she did speak, he imprinted the raspy sounds onto his brain for later use. For solitary nights in his apartment when he would try to figure it all out. Her voice took his breath away; long, slow vowels that dripped like honey, sinking to forgotten places within him.

After what she'd said yesterday afternoon, he wished his flight had left last night instead of this morning. After what she said, he just wanted to leave Charlotte and go home that much sooner. It didn't matter that she was right, only that it hurt more than he was prepared to deal with.

"You don't know me well enough to feel this way about me," she had said.

"Nobody falls in love in a week."

Nobody but me, he had thought, but said nothing.

The truth was that he was mad at himself. Last night, he had stood in front of the full length mirror in his dorm room and asked "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

He did not have an answer.

She did. She said, "You fell in love with this place and this campus and this program and when I walked in, I was the cherry on top of this cake."

She was speaking what he knew to be the truth, but his heart hurt in a way that it hadn't in years and this made him mad because he thought that he'd reached the point

where he could control these sorts of things. Last night, he realized just how wrong about that he was. Remembered that you could not control your heart, and that most of the time, you didn't really want to.

In the car, he turned to her and said, "Maybe I should've taken a cab." He did this quite a lot, offering other options after it was too late to change a course of action.

"Why?"

"You know, if this is awkward for you."

She looked at him, her blonde hair blowing in the breeze from the open window. Jesus, she was beautiful. How could I not fall for you? He wanted to say, but knew that there was no point.

"I already told you," she said. "I wanted to stop all of that other stuff before it got too deep, but I still want to be your friend. I still want to have contact with you between now and January." She smiled and he wanted to open the door and throw himself onto the interstate.

"Yeah, I know." He thought he sounded like an idiot. "Last night, after you went home, a few of us went to the bar. It was okay, I had a few drinks and I—"

"Drowning your sorrows?" She said this lightly, but it still felt sharp to him.

"No," he said. "Just having some beers and it went from there." He rubbed his face. "Everyone was asking about you. Everyone was, like, 'Where's Ainsley?' and all that. Someone actually asked me 'Where's your girlfriend' and I thought that was kind of weird, you know?" He tried a laugh to show how silly he thought it sounded but it came out weak and desperate.

She kept driving. He felt he should go on. Tell the story. He had to explain what happened to him with the girl from the bar but he didn't know why. It wasn't really any of Ainsley's business. Not after she basically dumped him that afternoon, although it wasn't like they were ever together or anything. Not like she was his girlfriend. Not really. Still, he felt guilty about what happened at the bar, and afterward. Uneasy.

"So, anyway, at the bar there were a bunch of people from the school." He said. "We started with beer and pretty soon we'd all ramped up to Irish Car Bombs." This was a lie. He'd actually started with high-octane whisky in an effort to stop conscious thought as quickly as possible. "You know, the ones where you take a Guinness and a shot of—"

"I know what an Irish Car Bomb is."

"Right. Yeah. You were there that night when...well, anyway, I ended up having a couple of those and hanging out with a few people from school. You know who I mean. That one girl from Fiction, from South Carolina, and that other girl, the one from Florida who's really from Central America somewhere."

"Yeah, I know who you're talking about."

"Yeah, well, we had a couple of Car Bombs and then we were talking about all this stuff. You know, the week, and how burnt everyone was. How tired everyone was of analyzing everything we'd read or written and all that. So, after a while, the South American girl, what's her name?"

"Shel. Shelly, but everyone calls her Shel." She said. "And she's not a 'South American' girl. She's not from Florida, either: she lives right here in Charlotte. We're in the same Poetry group."

“Right.” How perfect, they knew each other. Of course they did. There were only twenty-seven people in the entire writing program. Goddamn, what had he been thinking last night? He felt himself speeding up now, caught in the flow of adrenaline and wanting to get it all out in a rush before he changed his mind. He needed to tell her. After Shel dropped him off at the dorms last night he could still feel how thick her hair had been in his hands. How warm her skin was. The way the city lights lit up the clouds as they drove around Uptown Charlotte with the windows down in the early morning hours, singing songs along with the radio in blissful, drunken harmony.

“I like the Joni Mitchell version better.” Shel said to him, her hair and skin evoking images of white sand beaches, tropical jungles, Native American princesses. She was supposed to be driving him back to campus after the bar had closed, after they’d shared a few drinks and then, a few drinks more. She’d talked about her boyfriend, and living in Charlotte. Ethan talked about anything but what was really on his mind. During the drive to the dorms she had asked him “Are you hungry?” and then “Do you want to get something more to drink?” and although he’d said “No” he didn’t want to go back to an empty room either. When the entrance to the college appeared in the headlights he said “Don’t stop” and they passed by without looking. He watched the night air make tiny tornadoes of her hair as she turned the radio up. Through the fog of Irish whiskey and dark beer, he wanted her to keep driving. To take him somewhere and cover him with her mouth and long hair and brown skin and make him forget about himself.

“I bet where you live girls like me are a dime a dozen.” Shel said.

Ethan thought of all the women he’d known in California. Of moments shared both intimate and casual. Women whose names he couldn’t remember the next morning

and one or two that he couldn't forget no matter how hard he tried. But he had never experienced women like the ones he'd met here in this land of gentleman callers and asking permission before you kissed. He didn't think he ever would again. Not in his world.

"No one like you is a dime a dozen." He was slurring by this time, and struggled to get the words out.

He looked out the window and remembered what Ainsley had told him only hours before.

"I do care about you," she had said. "And if you lived two hours, six hours, even an eight hour drive away...but you don't, and I only know a tiny part of you."

Whether her voice broke from emotion or illness Ethan didn't think he'd ever know.

Shel patted him on the knee and turned the car away from the city, the scenery shifting. Warehouse districts and sports arenas. Nightclubs and police traffic stops, the city jail, and on past small streets, expensive cars, and thickets of tall, swaying trees. She was giving him a guided tour of the places she'd been with her boyfriend. The boyfriend of five years who'd left her two weeks ago, a fact she'd omitted from their conversation at the bar.

She drove down one of these side streets, pulled over and shut the car off. He looked at her but before he could say anything she told him to get out of the car. She wanted to show him something.

"Look at the trees," she said.

Shel had driven them to a secluded suburban neighborhood she liked to go when she needed to be alone. A place where she could feel without thinking. Dark, no streetlights, the road flanked on either side by a single row of tall trees whose branches intersected overhead to form a complete canopy. Ethan sat against the back of the car. Shel walked over and leaned into him, shivering in her short skirt and sleeveless shirt.

“Cold?” He said, because it seemed like the thing to do.

She turned and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her body to his while leaves dropped in the cool breeze. She laid her head on his shoulder, and he buried his face in her hair. It was so thick, thicker than any girl he’d ever been this close to. He wanted to touch it, to run his fingers through it to the back of her neck. She reached up under his sweatshirt, his T-shirt, against his skin where her arms felt warm and good and safe. He lowered his arms and wrapped them around her waist. He kissed her neck, tilting her head back and placing his mouth in the warm, hollow space beneath her jaw. But it wasn’t what he wanted. What he really wanted was to touch blonde hair. Ainsley’s hair. To kiss *her* soft, white skin, *her* neck, to wrap his arms around *her* waist, but she wasn’t here.

“We should go,” Shel whispered, her eyes closed. “It’s getting cold.”

He looked down into her eyes. Their lips moved, caressed, then stopped, both participants pulling away as if in shock. A mutual flinch; an unconscious reaction to an unexpected stimulus. A soft brush of skin, then her face, inches from his, their eyes locked, her dark hair circling them both like a thundercloud.

“We should go,” he said. “I didn’t mean to—“

“Yes you did,” she said, smiling slightly. “Come on, let’s go.”

They untangled themselves, got back into her car, and drove to the campus. His mind was spinning. Ainsley had shown him Uptown on Tuesday night. He'd been stupid enough to ask her out to coffee and desert and she'd accepted. Over cheesecake and espresso, they had told each other their heavily edited life stories. She mentioned her college love that she lost when she refused to follow him to a New England graduate school. He mentioned his divorce, but left out the more dramatic details because he was finally at the point where he could start forgetting that they had ever happened. It felt so natural, to both of them, so right. So when he kissed Ainsley after walking her back to her car, he thought that was right too. So did she, losing herself in the warm affections of someone a million miles from her own life. Later, on the bench next to the fountain, she felt differently.

"I'm really glad you kissed me," she said. "But I wish you never had."

Shel pulled up in front of his dorm and turned the radio down.

He felt a need to explain, to say something. "Look, that was just, I mean, I didn't want to, I mean, you're pretty, it's not that, but you've got a boyfriend and, y'know, I'm leaving and this is just really—"

"My boyfriend has nothing to do with it," she said. "It's not a big deal. Really."

His look told her that he didn't understand.

"It's just weird," she said. "You've been courting Ainsley all week, so why are you here with me?"

Ainsley. Jesus. Courting? Did people still use that word? Was that what he'd been doing all week. *Yeah*, he thought, *I guess it was*. What the hell *was* he doing in this car? With this girl? When did his life become high school again?

He got out of the car and mumbled something like “Goodnight” and maybe even “See you in January” but it wasn’t too clear to him now, the next day, riding to the airport in Ainsley’s car. Ainsley, the woman he had met only a week ago at the opening reception on the first day of the program. Ainsley, the woman who winked at him from across the room before he even knew her name and stopped his heart.

Ainsley, who made it very clear that night before he went to the bar that he was being ridiculous when he thought he was in love with her after only one week.

“So, are you going to keep going or what?” Her scratchy voice broke him out of his reverie. “Did something happen at the bar?”

“No,” he said. “It was just a bunch of us drinking, talking about school, you know, nothing that didn’t happen all week.”

He looked at her face, skin glowing in the morning sunlight.

“You didn’t miss anything.”

She offered him only a sisterly hug at the airport when she dropped him off. He made some lame statement about sending her an occasional e-mail and maybe even a card on her birthday (a date she had mentioned, casually, over coffee once that he immediately memorized).

The day before, at the end of their conversation, before he headed out to the bar in a mindless trance, she said to him, “This is for you, too. You never know; what if you meet a woman just like me except she only lives four blocks from you?”

He couldn’t explain that no one like her lived four blocks from him. He couldn’t explain to her that his California wasn’t the California of BMW convertibles, sunny beaches, and acres of beautiful women. He couldn’t explain to her that his reason for

going to this school was part of an elaborate escape plan. A plan to leave behind everything that he had ever known to become something new. He didn't want a woman just because she was smart or beautiful; he wanted someone to hold him in the dark and bathe him in her decency. To save him from himself.

He brooded on the plane to Atlanta, psychoanalyzed all the way back to California. He endured a long, dead wait for his bag at the luggage carousel, surrounded by people who spoke with the flat, toneless accent of a television newscaster; people who spoke like him. Then a hot, dry car ride from a friend who had picked him up and questioned him about the South all the way home.

“Lots of hot chicks, dude?” His friend said.

Ethan looked out the window, already missing the heavy clouds and pounding rain. He remembered that it started raining right after that conversation with Ainsley on the bench, when she said that she didn't want to do any kind of “long distance” thing with him. When she told him that she couldn't kiss him or hold his hand anymore because she had to guard her heart. When he felt the bottom drop out from beneath him.

“Yeah, lots of hot chicks.”

He had forgotten how empty his apartment was. No pictures on the walls, old furniture, no food in the fridge. He looked down at a watch still set to her time and wondered if she was sleeping already. He threw his suitcase on the floor and headed for the bathroom. Turning the shower on, he let the room fill with steam before stripping down and washing 3,000 miles of air travel into the pipes below. The thick air and hard spray from the shower brought back Carolina thunderstorms, driving rain, and Ainsley's face. He lay down on the tile until the water ran cold.