

## Gone Days

On Sunday afternoon, they finally let Rosa see her father.

Thirty-six hours she's been holed up in a bleak waiting room, friends in and out trying to occupy her with tabloid magazines and vending machine snacks. Jeanette thinks to bring her clean clothes to borrow, which is something.

The updates are clinical. First degree burns on his palms and second degree on the top of his head. Surgery yesterday to graft healthy skin from his thigh onto his hands. His scalp should heal with time. They clean it twice a day; "debridement" they call it. Bags of antibiotics flow into his veins to fight likely infection.

She hasn't slept. When she closes her eyes, Rosa sees her dad sitting in the dirt screaming and staring at his hands; then his head grows a wick which lights like a Roman candle showering sparks, a thousand burning tears.

Only seeing him will help; only seeing him will quiet the worst-case scenarios spiraling in her brain.

Rosa follows a nurse into the room. A man in a suit as beige as the walls stands in the corner with a notebook in his hand, almost invisible. Her dad is half-reclining in a hospital bed clothed in an assortment of tubes and a white and blue paper gown. His hands, wrapped in gauze, are resting across his belly; his eyebrows are singed away to nothing. He is awake and looking sheepish as a child caught breaking rules. He shrugs his shoulders and tries to joke with raspy words, "Can't even manage the remote for myself, but it's a great excuse to keep callin' on the pretty nurses for help."

Rosa opens her mouth to laugh and tears come instead. She blubbers till her nose is dripping. Uncertain if he should be touched, she stands by his feet and looks around for what to do next. Spying a box of tissues she lurches toward them and closes her throat on her crying. With ferocity Rosa turns back to her father and scolds: "No more cigarettes. No more fucking cigarettes!"

“Sorry, baby girl. I know. You’re right. No more.”

“It’s not gonna be that easy; you never get to scare me like that again! I’ll think about forgiving you when it’s been a month with no smoking.” Then, to let him off the hook a little: “At least we’re getting a new couch.”

“Hah! There is that. Oh my. You tie me down, Rosa. You know that? Tie me right down.”

A swift red curtain falls over her eyes and Rosa feels herself the hard-born burden for the millionth time in her life. “Don’t blame me! I didn’t ask to be born!”

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There shouldn’t be any light this late. No street lights for a mile, barely a handful of homes; trees outnumber the people a hundred to one. But tonight the sky looks like someone lit candles on a giant birthday cake. Warm light like birthday candles. But the smell—like burnt rubber and wood and what else?

Something is wrong. Jeanette turns quizzically toward Ricardo and Rosa whose necks are both stretched forward.

The three friends trade their walk for a slow run, then faster as they close the final few hundred yards to Rosa’s place--piss-poor, pea-green mobile home. On fire. It’s there and half gone, in the clearing. Lit up like a bonfire and Rosa is tearing across the weedy yard.

Rosa pounds the wall hard on the half still standing and shouts: “Dad! DAD! Are you out? Get-up-get-up-get-OUT!”

She flies up the four steps to the door and wrenches it nearly off the hinges. “Dad!” Her cry disappears into a hacking cough, caused more by heat than smoke. The heat sears the air. “Shit! My hand!” she stumbles backward into the railing as she registers the pain in her hand from the door handle.

Smoke billows out of the wide-open front door. She can see her father framed by the doorway, lit by licking flames. He is rummaging. In the upper cabinet. Above the microwave. As though he has time and inclination to grab the tupperware on his way out the door.

“Dad. Leave it!” He turns at her voice, sees her step toward the entrance. He lunges toward her and shoves her away. She topples backward and the momentum sends her over the railing. Sprawled in the dirt she looks up and sees him, digging again. The cabinets are burning now. There is no time. The flames consume the roof inches above his head. Still he rummages. Five seconds longer. Then he seizes something, begins screaming like a screech owl, like a banshee.

Rosa’s father runs backward, staring at the object in his hands, then spins a one-eighty and runs forward. Out the door and over the railing Rosa has just flipped over herself. He is in the dirt beside her, screaming and looking at his hands. They are empty now, and bubbling, the skin on his palms and fingers puckering and peeling and red and gone. A small metal box, a cash box, is in the dirt beside him, nearly glowing with the heat of the fire. Rosa knows, don’t touch it, as her dad’s screams now turn to weeping and echo in her ears.

Jeanette sits dumbly beside the chaos; Ricardo runs back the way they came to find a phone, to call for help.

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“Waaaah! Oh that is so wrong!” Ricardo watches the horror flick with animated interest, leaning closer to the screen from his spot on the floor. A big bowl of mostly ignored popcorn sits in the center of the couch. On either side of it, Dan and Rosa half follow each other’s commentary. “Too dark. Slow, but in a good way. Oooo, I love how they shift the time frame here. Whoah!” They lift off the couch in unison at the jumpscare. Jeanette, in an old recliner in the back corner of Dan’s basement, nurses a root beer float slowly and works to forget herself in a cross-stitch project under a dim lamp, not a fan of horror movies.

By the end of the movie it is after midnight, their blood sugar has plunged, and their eyes are heavy. They have the stunned look of roller coaster fanatics who rode one too many times. The ride is over, and they are over the ride.

Ricardo clicks off the television. Jeanette gathers her threads; Dan sucks up the last of her float as he clears her cup away. Rosa wonders just how many more times she can spend a Friday night doing the same thing again, blurry repetitions devoid of newness, progress, wonderment.

A mostly empty two-liter of root beer tucked under his arm, Dan says goodnight at the door as his friends exit.

“Homeward,” Rosa heaves herself into the night and into the lead, Jeanette and Ricardo in tow.

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“Dammit!” Rosa bellows, slamming the pressboard door against the feeble wall. She lurches into the living room/kitchen combo of the mobile home, fury in her face. She bashes her backpack against the wall for emphasis and lets it slide to a pitiful heap.

She finds her father already settled in his spot on the couch, the dim light of late evening cut by the flickering television. His work boots are dropping mud on the floor beside the door. His socked feet are crossed, toes curling and uncurling, on the coffee/kitchen/dining room table at the center of the carpet-and-linoleum space.

“Looks like Dan and Ricardo are vying for your friendly attention,” he compliments on the scene half-observed through the window. “Two boys yankin’ on your arms and fighting for your favor sounds none-too-tiresome to me. You’ve got your pick, darlin’.”

Rosa throws daggers with her eyes and huffs, “In tug-of-war the rope never wins.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. Fought over is better than dropped in the dirt.”

“Asshole. I’m not a beggar for boys. And I’m nobody’s rope.” Then under her breath but loud enough to be heard: “Ugh. I gotta get outta this place.”

“Then why don’t ya,” he calls her on her bluff and bluster. “You don’t do any better than grouse at me all the live-long.”

“No place better to go.”

“Hell...Every place is better than this place.”

“Well I’m not riding a boy out of town. They don’t get good mileage,” she sneers. “I’d end up stranded in a smaller town on a worse road in a shit-hole uglier than this one. With boys, you don’t get gone; you just take the trap with you. Trust me, I’m leaving...but I’m not leaving stupid. When I go, I’m gone for good.”

“Gone for good; that’s a curious thought. Whose good? Yours? Mine? Damn, babygirl! Nothing but hateful disappointment in that plan.”

With that pronouncement, he soothes the socks from his feet, tossing them toward the door near enough to his boots for one more wear before washing, then massages the arches of his feet. “You just try and go then. You’ll see what it’s really like out there. You’ll come back hat-in-hand, and maybe then you won’t be so quick to disrespect my sacrifices--everything I’ve done for no one else but you.”

“You mean, all this,” she sings, taking in the room with a grandiose sweep of her arm as though in ballroom splendor, “is mine?” Venom drips from her gaze onto every surface--the television’s rabbit-ear antenna, the shoe-scuffed and sun-faded coffee table, the cigarette-ash-dusted couch just waiting for one warm cinder to catch and burn.

Rosa sees the back of her dad’s sunburnt, balding scalp tilt left as he eases a pack of cigarettes from his right back pocket. With a flick of his finger he lights a match head against the corner of the coffee table. He inhales with satisfaction his first smoke of the evening, scorching his

taste buds to nothing--the pre-dinner ritual of a poor man who works on other people's cars in other people's garages for other people's profits. Decades of grease under his nails, and nothing prouder to show for it than his still-running Ford--the very one his daughter was conceived in when his head still had hair and his heart still held dreams alive and bubbling like a volcano in his breast.

Gone days.

"Shee-it," he jaws, with softer eyes. "We're both sour, sad sacks at the end of a hard, dull week. Settle in and have a slice of pizza."

Rosa glances to the counter to see a frozen pizza waiting her arrival to be slid into the already-heated oven. She wonders which mold she fills in her father's mind--daughter or maid--and flings a sigh like a knife in his general direction.

"You'll turn that attitude into a paycheck yet, girl," her dad muses. "Someone's gonna pay you just to shut-up one of these days. But it won't be me. You're outta my league," he smirks at her, offering a reconciling smoke from the pack in his hand. He doesn't welcome her dream to leave but can appreciate that for one more day she hasn't done it.

One more day with her in it--young, tangle-haired tornado igniting his heart with wonder and worry. The thought births a deep sigh that fills the whole room with his breath, contentment curling toward the ceiling with the smoke of his cigarette.

Love and need aren't so far apart for some.

"Stop offering me your cancer sticks, Dad. I got class," she retorts with enough of a grin to indicate the peace is accepted if not the peace offering. "I'm going to Dan's after dinner," she informs him. "We're watching a movie. Me, Jeanette, Dan, and Ricardo. I'll be home late; don't wait up."

With dry eyes full of dreamed-of departures, Rosa manages the pizza into the oven, then turns her attention to the piled-high sink. She twists the hot water faucet to full capacity and waits

the two minutes it takes for hot water to arrive. She shifts dishes, gathers crusted silverware into bundles and drops them in cups of water, scrapes the remains of yesterday's dinner into the trash bin, and waits for the oven to finish their dinner.

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Dan, Jeanette, Ricardo, and Roy know where to look for Rosa. Their voices carry like gunshots, scattering birds from branches. They holler for her and she hollers back, ready to release her solitude. They find her ankle deep in the trickling creek. Mud between her toes. Crawdad wriggling between her fingers as she squinches her nose and tries to peer into what she hopes are eyes peering back. She lowers it into the water before the boys start feeling experimental. Their curiosity seems to always include dissection.

Roy approaches like an alpha wolf, eyes low but sure. He lifts his eyes to her and lets her lean into his lips. He kisses her nonchalantly. "Don't sweep me off my feet or anything, babe," she chastises him, feeling an edge of cold in his typical passivity.

Dan and Jeanette let Ricardo finish a story he's recounting of a livid teacher slinging a pop quiz at his last period class. "And *you*," Ricardo turns to Rosa, splashing with still-shod feet into the water beside her, "are gonna have to beg her to let you make it up." He yanks a fly-away strand of her hair right out of her head making her wince: "That's for leaving me alone with that ghoul. Whose answers am I supposed to copy when you're not there?"

Jeanette slugs Ricardo's arm in solidarity with Rosa. "Don't pull her hair; that's so immature. Maybe try studying for once. I pulled off a B in that class last semester. I could tutor you."

Ricardo answers Jeanette without looking at her: "Nah--I'm giving up on Econ; I prefer Psychology with Mrs. Schultz; I so enjoy how she fills out her sweaters," he winks at anyone bothering to look. His lusty teenager routine elicits a half-hearted eye roll from Rosa. Jeanette tries to hide her hurt as she unconsciously shifts her t-shirt hanging loose over her lackluster breasts.

Dan opens his backpack, pulling out a big bag of half-gone Doritos to share. Rosa balances on one submerged foot, shaking water from the other before slipping her toes into her tennis shoe, then repeats the process for the other foot. The group settles onto a dry patch of grass flattened over time by their periodic visits. Fingers slowly turn orange as conversation and snacking wile away the remnants of the afternoon. Plans are made to meet up in Dan's basement after dark for a horror movie and root beer floats.

Roy declines. He won't make it. Feels like being home. Feels like being alone. In fact, he's going to scam. Catch you guys later. He is gone with no goodbye, no kiss or hug or nod in Rosa's direction. She surmises his interest in her is fully faded.

Enthusiasm was never a word she would have used to describe his affection. He let her lean into their relationship like he let her lean into their kiss this afternoon. He let her take his hand when he presented it to her, let her join him in his car on Friday nights when he pulled up, let her imagine herself joining him when he talked about life on a military base like his brother. He never quite asked her out, never quite held her close, and now he was not quite breaking up.

It could be worse, Rosa determines; he might have given her reason to surrender her heart, and she begins to piecemeal new armor around her hope-dashed heart.

Worse things to be than alone, she reasons. She might be like Jeanette, jumping in uninvited with unreturned devotion to Ricardo. She might settle for easy acceptance as Dan did, glad to be along and provide the snacks, glad to live in the only home in the bunch with a basement for watching movies and a backyard for hanging out, might be willing to call convenience love. Or she might fall in lust like her parents, leaving a kid as a dream-killing burden for someone to shoulder.

All her observations suggest love is the most dangerous thing to dare and rarely worth the bother. She moves on with a closing thought: "Good riddance, Roy. At least we never managed to damage each other, right?"



On the half-mile walk home, Jeanette tries to sidle up to Ricardo as he bounds ahead intermittently. Dan fingers the crumbs out of the bottom corners of the Doritos bag.

When Jeanette peels off to walk up the duplex driveway of her home, Rosa notices Dan accompany her halfway, releasing her with an eager “See you later?” to which she nods. When Jeanette’s nod shifts her bag down her arm he grabs it just as she does to lift it, simultaneously, back up to her shoulder, leaving orange Doritos dust on the strap she doesn’t notice or doesn’t mind.

“What’s with Roy today?” Ricardo digs for info. “Is he on the rag? Did you slap his hand away last night?”

“It’s no big thing; I think we’re just,” she falters and the unfinished sentence hangs in the air for a second. “Whatever. Bored, I guess.”

Dan pushes on her back with his shoulder, nudging her along the asphalt. “Interesting people are never bored. You’re not bored, Rosa. And you’re not boring. Roy’s definitely on the rag. Or else he’s just stupid.”

“Thanks, Dan,” Rosa smiles his way.

Ricardo, not missing his chance to capture a smile, begs, “You want excitement, I’ll show you excitement!” He grabs her wrist and twirls her twice before she can disentangle from his grasp.

“Okay, Romeos. I’ll see you later. Please not Jason or Freddy again. Pick something classy: The Shining or something. Or else I *will* be bored,” and she waves them away. Both boys trot down the road to their respective homes, each happy in his own way—Ricardo tripping into his next impulse, Dan lumbering toward whatever might fall in his lap, both seemingly content.

“Happiness is strange,” Rosa thinks to herself watching them go. “Happiness--what a fucking tease,” she mumbles, feeling the sting of rejection return as she steps up the planks to her front door. The memory of Roy’s face floats in a red fog in her mind. “Fuck him!” she commands to the universe as she yanks the door handle.

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Rosa slouches out of the short early-afternoon shadows of Gambel oak hemming the high school's farthest field. The day's drudgery is done. Her ass won't be caged in a desk again, not for a long weekend she'll make longer by staying up and staying out, tilting time towards freedom best she can.

She stashes her backpack in a hollow-knotted tree and lopes toward a ditch with just enough momentum to clear it in one stag-like leap, entering her prairie. Hardly hers by right, but claimed by romping across the years of her childhood and youth. If knowing is its own kind of owning, the land is certainly hers, and sealed by mutual fondness; sun, rain, and stars have given their benediction over the years to a union of girl to place.

The greenbelt stretches in front of Rosa only a few acres but with enough hidden nooks, tall trees, and wading pools to lose herself and loose herself. She makes the circuit she's been traveling since she was ten. Her canvas tennis shoes grip the slick rocks across the creek to a meadow of grasses grown tall enough to tickle and switch her thighs as she runs.

She finds the downed tree and scampers up its trunk to the one remaining branch, grown akimbo long ago and perfect for straddling. For old times' sake she arches her back on an imaginary horseback ride, the rough tree bark the only saddle she's ever sat on. She swings her leg forward, imagining now she sits on a plane, on a podium, in a courtroom, at a desk in a high, windowed office, but the visions are flimsy and fade. She sits and sighs on a dead, fallen trunk. Rosa knows the first thrill of this place is long-gone to her, faded with wear. Still the familiarity is a blanket not yet too thin for comfort.

Rosa takes a moment to admire her stealth, the swift escape she'd managed while the cafeteria monitor harangued some hapless sophomore whose platter slipped, spilling milk and mashed potatoes across half a dozen sneakered feet. "When opportunity presents itself..." she

pleasantly reflects. She savors in stillness the granola bar she'd stowed in her back pocket, brushes the crumbs from her hand, and licks its remnants from her lips, tasting mingled sweat.

Then all at once she is off again, for a foot-soak under the cool cover of Cottonwood. Thus Rosa passes an easy hour before she hears the distant shrill of the final bell, releasing her classmates to the weekend with which she is already congregating.

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The swift red curtain falls over her eyes and Rosa feels herself the hard-born burden for the millionth time in her life. "Don't blame me! I didn't ask to be born!"

"Oh, babygirl, you misunderstand." He wants to itch the strange rectangle of red on his leg where skin was borrowed and grafted onto his flayed hands, but the damn bandages leave him mittened like a child in winter. He is helpless, and can only ask for mercy. He lifts his eyes with what courage he can drum up and dares to look his daughter square in the face. Rosa is flushed and vibrating, glowing before him like a springtime peony. He sees her shift between anger and deep-rooted love, making oceans of her brimming eyes. His heart is full to bursting, his hands be damned. "You tether me to the world. Without you I'da found some reckless way to leave it. Long time ago." And he hopes it's enough, hope she sees the good she gives him. Before she goes away, as she should soon, and far.

He tilts his head toward the hospital side-table. The cash box sits on it, closed. "I don't have the courage to look inside. I need you to do it. See if. See if it burned up inside."

Rosa, having never known of the box's existence let alone what could be inside worth risking his life for, stretches out her hand slowly as if expecting it still to be hot. "What the hell could be so important--" she cuts herself off, seizing it furiously. The lock holds when she tries to lift the lid.

Her father glances down toward his chest as if looking for something. "Um. Check that big ol' plastic bag on the chair. Maybe it's there."

She pulls at the opening, then sees and smells his smoke-saturated, dirty clothes from Friday night. She plunges her hand in and feels around, finding a chain and attached a small key. She raises it in his sight and he nods.

Slipping the tiny key into the now-cold metal lock, she turns the tumblers and lifts the lid. Inside are stacked many dirty bills, rubber-banded in several packets. She tips the small box into view for her father, who releases his mitted, IV-tube-tendriled hands to the ceiling, and from his throat a scratchy, “Whoo-hoo!”

“Dad. Holy shit!”

“I wanted it to be more; I meant to save more. I prob’ly drunk half as much away and I’m sorry for it now. It’s only about, I think, \$9,000. But that’s community college for two-years. Almost. By the end of that you’ll have talked somebody into paying for what comes next. I’m sure of it! You’re gonna be leaving soon. Christ what’ll I do with myself?” he winces with more than the pain of burns.

“Oh my god. Dad! You’ll be getting ready for my visits. I’m very hard to please you know. I want a new couch to sit on when I come home, and you have to cook me a decent meal. And I’m not coming to keep using the town laundromat. Find a second-hand washer and dryer and fix it up. What’s insurance gonna cover? My dad needs a new roof over his head!” She turns now to the long-ignored suit in the corner, but her father interrupts before the man can draw a breath to respond.

“Leave that for later, babygirl. I’m exhausted. I need a nap. Just lock that up and drive it over to the bank tomorrow morning. The insurance man and I just need five minutes alone, and then I’m Rip Van Winkle. Go find some food, and I bet Dan’s parents will find a spot for you for a couple weeks while I sort it. Do me a favor and off you go, Rosa. I love ya, girl.”

“Love you too, Dad. I can’t believe it. You’re the most irresponsible responsible person I’ve ever met,” she states with exasperation, trying to find where the bandages and burns end and he

begins. “Thank you, Dad. Really, thank you. I’ll check in on you tonight.” Rosa places a tentative kiss on his knee and departs.

“Thought I was nearly done with her,” he asides to the suit.

“I don’t like being part of your charade, sir,” the man reprimands, opening his notebook. “As I was saying before, the fire investigator concluded the fire originated in the kitchen. Looks like the oven was left on, eventually igniting interior grease and food debris. It spread from there. The couch,” he observes, looking up and meeting tired, happy eyes, “and the rest of the home, is lost.”

“Yah. Okay then. You can go. I gotta sleep so I can dream up a next step.” He knows now, his daughter lays a claim on him he’ll never escape. There is no graduating from her. Gone is the exit chute, gone the sign-off he thought would soon release him to deep drinking and cheap thrills in a life that can afford to be short.

All gone. For good.