

Journey

She had given him a checklist on the off-chance he ever had to meet her father. He stood alone in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, reading off the memory of her wagging her finger at him in the car. “Okay, first of all, you gotta have a strooong handshake. If you fuck that up, we’re finished. Zip. Nada. Kaput. Phooey.” Loud steps approaching the door shook him from his memory. His heart was racing through his chest. Thanks, babe.

The man who opened the door surprised him a little. Despite them being together for nearly seven years, middle to high school, he had never seen her father in person. Emma’s father had a very calm demeanor. He stood before him in a dark blue robe that fell just above his ankles. The sleeves were rolled back to his elbows, revealing hairy, toned forearms. He was clothed in a loose-fitting, white tank-top and black sweatpants that still looked like finely pressed sheets against him. Alan swallowed hard. The man’s face was clean-shaven. He had large dark eyes and messy black hair against his caramel skin. “You must be Alan?” he said, extending his bulky arm. “You can call me Toby.” Alan quickly withdrew his hands from his pockets and thrust his arm forward.

“Yeah, that’s me. Nice to meet you.” He felt a jolt of electricity shoot through his body as the two men touched palms. Alan withheld a flinch as the man nearly crushed his hand. He countered, squeezing back with almost all his strength. Alan wasn’t scrawny by any means, but he felt like an ant in the presence of this man. He was a little under six feet, but Emma’s father still seemed like he had a whole foot over him. The handshake seemed to last an eternity and Alan felt relieved and exhausted when the man finally let go.

“Come out to the back. I’ll show you around.” Alan waited until the man turned around before he tenderly rubbed his squished hand. His mouth wincing as he painfully exhaled. Check. Toby led him inside and it again dawned on him just how wealthy their family was. Alan had never risked spending time in Emma’s house on account of her parents, a fear well-earned considering that’s how they were caught. He felt a cold anchor drag his heart into his stomach remembering the horror-struck face of Emma’s mother walking in on them, their naked bodies coiled together. The only other times he had ventured there was when he dropped Emma off on her street. The place was a mansion, or as close to one as Alan had ever seen. The front doors were made of dark mahogany, with shining gilded doorknobs. A staircase wrapped its way to the upper floors, hiding a sea of endless rooms. The floors were made of a cool, marble colored stone that made him feel uncomfortably dirty. He stopped and reached for the back of his shoe.

“Sorry, did you want me to-”

Toby half turned his head and dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “You’re fine. We’ll be spending most of the day outside.” He quickly followed the man before he could really ponder what that meant.

They walked through a massive kitchen towards the door to the backyard. Toby waved aside flowing curtains as he stepped through an open glass door. Alan followed him, moving through the fabric less gracefully. “Wow.” The backyard was practically as big as his entire neighborhood. Groves of trees lined the outskirts of the land like a natural fence. There were circles of rose bushes that paved a path to circle in the center of the grass. Around he noticed were five chairs and a fountain with three rungs of running water. The quiet flowing water and the chirps of birds filled his eardrums and the cool embrace of wind wrapped passionately

around his arms. It was so tranquil and calm, like a little piece of harmony had been captured in their home. “This is beautiful.”

“Isn’t it? Come, let’s sit.” The father led them through the rose garden and took a seat in one of the chairs. Alan sat across from him. He noticed that beside the garden was a small fire pit that was obscured from view prior. There was a bag of charcoal and a white lighter lying on the warm brick. “Oh, you can put your stuff down. Have you brought the materials I asked you?”

A pang of nervousness flickered through him as he slumped off his backpack and leaned it against the pit. “Yeah.” He leaned back in the wooden chair. The father hunched over to look at him, boring a pit into his chest with his gaze. Alan remembered the next point on the list Emma told him. “Number two, my dad can be a bit eccentric. It’s hard to explain, but he’s probably going to ask you some hard questions.” He remembered her face was sad when she said that. Despite her sadness, she had a way of looking at him in the sweetest way. “Just do your best, okay?” He jogged himself from his memory and stared back into the father’s stone-like eyes. “Is this the part where you hog-tie me and feed me to wolves?” He meant for his tone to have been more exaggerated, but it came out cloaked in legitimate worry.

“Hog-tie?” Toby raised an eyebrow. “Is that what you’re into with my daughter?” Alan suddenly sunk deep into his chair as warmth flared up in his cheeks. He scrambled uncomfortably as he struggled to find the words.

“N-no. We were just- I mean it’s not like we weren’t-”

The man cut off Alan’s voice with a hearty laugh and leaned into his chair. Alan found himself disturbed but simultaneously at ease. “Listen, I get it. Let’s not beat around the bush. Kids get like that at your age. Kids fuck.” A silence hung in the air after “fuck” like an old

lingering smell. Alan had expected this talk, the ole “What are your intentions with my daughter?” He half expected her dad to try him with some test of manly strength. But being outside, sitting in their garden, he hadn’t had the slightest idea of what this man wanted from him, or what this man wanted him to be.

“How much time have you set aside for the day?” Toby dragged a small chest out from under his chair. It scraped rather heavily against the ground.

“I mean, Emma told me to clear my whole day. So...” He sighed, eyes glued to the chest. “What’s in the box?”

“Please, don’t be nervous. I think this will be fun for the both of us.” Toby unlatched and flipped the chest open. “Have you brought the materials I asked you to?” he repeated.

Alan shot a glance to his backpack, still keeping a majority of his attention on the chest. “Yeah.” He reached for his bag and pulled it into his lap.

“Oh, cool. You can just take out the thermos.” As he finished talking, Toby then pulled out his own black thermos from the chest. Alan fumbled around in his bag. Toby had asked him to bring three things with him: a thermos, a journal, and something to write with. He pulled the thermos from his bag and passed it to the father. He took it in his hand, nearly wrapping the whole of it in his palm. “You like tea?” he asked him, as he began to pour the dark liquid.

“I like it enough,” Alan lied. He loved tea. He watched Toby pour in the tea and close both thermoses and shake them. He placed them back down on the table and then reached back in the chest, rustling around for something.

“Tell me, Alan, you’re 18 right? I’d bet you had your first drink already. Maybe smoked a bit too?” Alan swallowed. “Have kids your age taken you down the path of psychedelics?”

Alan could almost taste his surprise. A conversation about drugs was the absolute last thing he had expected out of today. Did Emma's old man really want the two of them to "trip" together? "N-No," he began. "None of my friends have really dabbled with those at all." He lied again, partially. A couple of his friends had done them during their senior trip before summer started. They'd offered some to him, and to the taunts of "Hey man, don't be a bitch!" he took some.

It wasn't a lot. The mushrooms tasted like dirt and tree bark. He didn't see any "crazy shit", but he could feel the cusp of something happening over the hours that befell him. He watched his friends as they hallucinated and babbled about the carpet being alive and wanting to venture past the chaperones and outside their hotel. He felt a gnawing disgust in him that night, and a pang of loneliness he didn't understand. He found a different room where his other classmates were drinking, and he drank until he threw up. He remembered the stain of Emma's disappointment as she held him. He remembered a hazy blur of her whispering sweet nothings in his ear as he passed out on the toilet while she flushed the alcohol and the mushrooms away.

"That's good. I don't think kids your age would know how to use them responsibly." He pulled two white, paper bags from the chest and laid them on the table. "Now, I know I keep calling you a kid, but you are an adult. I know it may have been a surprise, but this is something I am just 'offering.' If you wish, you are free to get back in your car and leave."

"I am?"

"You are."

"But what about Emma?" Alan found himself standing. "Wasn't this supposed to be some kind of test or something?" Toby smiled at him as he uncapped his own thermos. Slowly, he

emptied one of the white bags into his own drink. Alan watched as the dry fungi sloshed together in his cup. He shook up the thermos before setting it back loudly on the table.

“You seemed to have worked yourself up. I simply wanted to share an experience with someone my daughter has come to love very much.” Alan sat back down and looked at the man for what he felt was the first time. All of his features, his presence, his energy. The blue of his robes and the blacks of his hair. What would happen if he did shrooms with this man? What would happen if he didn’t?

Alan sat back down. He grabbed his thermos and uncapped it, and grabbed the other bag Toby had set out. He glanced at Toby again, who was no longer looking at him, instead sipping his tea, staring off into the mountains. He was really free to leave if he wanted. He felt himself start to get up, but his mind went against it. He didn’t know much about mushrooms, but he knew enough. Atrip was not supposed to be fun and games and hallucinating, but also a time to look deep within himself. Toby seemed like someone who knew what he was doing.

Alan poured the shrooms onto the table and crumpled the bag in his hand. He felt each one, before carefully placing it in his tea. They were all lighter than he thought, like leaves, and hollow. He noticed Toby had given him a lot of mushroom bulbs, to which he remembered a friend saying “these will fuck you up.” He put it in his tea and tightened the cap. “You gave me a lot of bulbs, you know?” he asked as he shook his thermos. “Don’t those have all the ‘juice’ in them?”

“I thought you didn’t dabble?”

“I might’ve dabbled a little.”

The man smiled. “The portion is fine for beginners. You’ll be fine. I’ll be here to walk you through it if anything happens.” Toby set his thermos back down and by the sound of the clang, Alan could tell it was empty. “The trip should last around five hours.” He turned his chair so his body was facing the mountains and the sun. “You should start feeling things in about an hour after you finish.” Alan opened up his thermos and took a sip of the tea. He was surprised to feel it was still very hot. The mushrooms almost felt alive, as he felt the soft, stick-like mush slink down his throat. After many minutes of pushing through uncomfortable sips and a nearly burnt tongue, he placed his empty thermos down as well. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and turned to face Toby. His eyes were closed but he knew he wasn’t sleeping. A faint rumbling shook his stomach. He looked up briefly at the sun. From how it looked, in five hours, the sun would be just about to set.

“Check.”

He hadn’t expected his legs to feel like jelly. Soon it felt like his entire body was full of T.V. static and he couldn’t tell if it hurt or not. “Is this supposed to happen?”

“Sometimes. Used to happen to me quite a lot.” It had been about an hour. Toby’s eyes were wide open now. He was staring out at the mountains beyond the roses. The sun had gotten slightly lower in the sky. “Have you seen anything yet?”

Alan groaned as he stretched his fingers and toes. He hadn’t moved from his chair. He reached for the bottles of water the father had laid out while waiting and drank half. He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath, trying to regain his bearings. The tingling of his static limbs seemed to be decreasing. He looked up again, staring at the clouds. “Wow.” There were

hundreds of them. All individual and perfectly shaped and filled with volume. They were like giant masses of dough. His senses seemed enhanced. Not only could he see them move with the wind, but he could feel them move too. They floated across the sky like a flock of migrating birds. “Do you see that?” But Toby was back in the rose garden, holding a rose he picked in his hand. He was smiling and looked back at him.

“Come over and look at these!” Alan hesitated but found his legs were working normally again and walked over. He moved past the fire pit and into the inner row of roses where Toby stood. The green of the rose bushes was incredibly vibrant. It was like each bush was glowing against the dark brick of the backyard path. They all seemed to move together in the breeze, like they were one, like they were all alive together. He kept staring until it dawned on him. The wind had stopped blowing. He took a small step backwards in shock. The bushes continued to move as if they themselves were breathing.

“Is this real?” The sensation was so bizarre to him. Other than his legs he hadn’t really felt the drug take its effects. He just felt like an average Alan on an average day. “I mean, this doesn’t feel like I’m drunk or high or whatever. But everything’s so…” Toby handed him the rose he was holding.

“Careful, there are thorns.” Alan took the rose slowly, wrapping his whole palm around the stem. He felt the sharpness of the plant push into his skin, but he felt no pain. Toby passed him by, walking back to his chair. He looked into the rosebud. It seemed to open and close, exhaling colors of pink and red like oxygen. The petals almost seemed to be vibrating, but in slow-motion. Like he was watching a small fire, and the embers wisp away.

He thought back to Emma. He had given her a rose on the day he had asked her out. He reached for his phone to take a picture of the rose for her, but stopped, afraid of what he would see, afraid it would be different.

“Toby, is any of this real?” he asked again. He let it hang in the air, not knowing what answer he really wanted. “I feel fine, but things aren’t fine? Everything is so bright and like a dream.”

Toby turned back at him. He seemed to have been looking deep into the mountains. “Even if it wasn’t real, would that make it any less important?”

For the next hour Alan journaled. He tried to capture what he could from his mind to the paper. He sketched flowers and trees and thoughts about life. “A rose is beautiful, but causes pain,” he etched next to a drawing of the pink rose. “We always talk about oneness with nature, but why is nature one with itself? Because nature does not feel pain.” Part of him thought it was cringy, but deep down he thought he was the next great philosopher. He closed his journal over the flower as a bookmark and then poked the thorn again. As much as he could pretend it didn’t, a thorn was a thorn, and the pain still hurt. He got up from his chair and laid down in the grass. He pulled at the blades, wondering if they felt pain. He thought back to Emma. He thought about the fights they had, about the pain he may have caused her. He wondered if the pain he felt was because they couldn’t understand each other. He wondered if they would stay together, if things would really work out if they tried things after they graduated. He closed his eyes.

“Come on! Stop fucking around this is serious.” Emma had practically punched him in the chest with the crumpled up paper. “I’m freaking serious. This is serious. My mom caught us fucking! My dad’s going to kill me and you’re just fucking laughing!”

Alan watched the paper fall down his chest as he stifled his chuckles. He had been laughing, but not at her. He felt all of this was absurd, an excuse even. Everything felt like it was going wrong and half of him wanted to let it. Things had been that way between them for a long time. He uncrumpled the paper and squinted at it, ignoring her bladed stares and the tears down her cheeks.

“First, you have to have a strong handshake.” He raised his voice high, mocking her pitch. “Second, my dad’s eccentric and might ask you some weird questions. Third—Emma, this is stupid.” His pitch fell to normal. “I’ll just talk to your dad, and things will be fine, right? There’s no point in freaking out about it.”

Emma looked at him, her eyes empty portraits. She had stopped crying. She wiped the tears from her eyes with her fingers, taking soft breaths. Alan looked back at her solemnly. She had always been the more emotional between them. He only got emotional when he felt like it was really necessary. Emma always hated him for that, said he was “too repressed.” Maybe he was, maybe he held back everything. All the problems they had, all the fights they went through. Maybe he was the one tearing him apart but he just didn’t know it. But now, all he knew then was, at that moment, Emma looked broken inside and he was the one that broke her. She lurched forward, grabbing the checklist with both hands. “Hey, let go—” She tore the paper in two, leaving him with just the first two boxes.

“Fine.” She crumpled half of the paper into her pocket and stuck it in her jeans. She undid the lock to his car.

“Hey, Emma wait! Baby, I’m sorry. I was just—”

“No. It’s stupid.” She leaped out of the car as he reached for her arm. He remembered feeling the air whiff past him as he just missed her hand. He felt his fist close around nothing. “Look,” she said looking back at him. “Just be at my house tomorrow at noon. If you care.” She spoke softly and defeated. She refused to meet his gaze. Alan began to speak, but she closed the door on him and walked up the steps to her house.

The memory bounced around his psyche like a screensaver, hitting the corners of his brain with painful satisfaction. He found his thoughts wander to Toby, and the kind of man he really was. What kind of maniac asks to do shrooms with his daughter’s boyfriend? They had only just met! His eyebrows furrowed. Admittedly, Alan was slightly relieved. Overall, this day had been much different than his anxiety had prepared him for. He felt like he had given his brain a bath. All the hard to reach places had been washed clean, like scratching an itch he could never scratch. But with everything clear, he was forced to come to terms with what was left. What couldn’t be cleaned with a simple drug, what he couldn’t wash away. He plucked at the grass again. It wasn’t the hallucinations that bothered him, it was what came after. Seeing things that “weren’t real” only reminded him of everything that was.

Emma was real and all that came with her. All her love and joy, and all the sadness and frustration and anger. Toby was real, and that confused Alan even more. Toby had a clear handle on this drug and was very much in control. There was no doubt in his mind Emma had shared a similar journey, perhaps the same day they had talked together. Where Toby tripped with her and

just let the weight of the unsaid loom over her. “What are you and Alan going to do?” A balled fist hit the grass, specks of dirt lightly filled his palm. He glanced back at Toby in the garden. His figure seemed to flicker like a flame, but it never wavered, like it could burn forever. Alan looked around again. The garden, the fountain, the house. The daughter of a man like that, it was no wonder Emma believed the world belonged to her. It practically did. Toby had a world so perfectly crafted that nothing could hurt her.

“Except me.” Alan rolled over on the grass to his side. Tears started to pool in his eyes. The crumpled half-checklist felt heavy in his pocket. A thought dawned in half his head. “Maybe that’s why she was such a bitch.”

Three hours had passed, the point to where Toby had said would be the “peak of his trip.” Alan paced the yard. Shadows chased his hands with each movement he took with them, leaving dark afterimages in his wake. He could change the color of the rose in his hand from pink, all the way to a dark crimson if he tried hard enough. He felt primal and connected to everything around him. Toby and he had spent the last hour lying in the grass around the edge of the fire pit, watching the clouds. The sun caked the sky in bright orange as it prepared to disappear behind the mountains.

The two men stared at the clouds and talked about the varied wisps and creations they could see. Alan wanted to see what Toby saw, but Toby told him that it was a fool’s errand. That a trip was called such because the beauty was in the journey, and that there truly was no proper destination. A jolt of annoyance flickered through him. He wanted to get to the point. He wanted

to know if, at the end of all this, there was really some “tough question” that Emma was so certain he would ask him. He wanted to be done with this checklist.

Alan sat down in the grass. He looked over at Toby. His robe had become a darkened shade of blue, darker than the color it was when he arrived. He looked upon the man’s face again for the first time since he arrived. Toby’s face looked at peace, and his eyes were just as full as when the trip began, but Alan still had a sense of unease. Perhaps he was projecting his own insecurity onto him, perhaps he was really sensing a hidden foreboding. Regardless, he had to ask, he had to know before the unknown ate him away.

“Did you want to talk to me about Emma? I was under the impression that you did.” Toby let the silence rest before he took in a deep breath and sat up on the grass. The wind had begun to pick up again and the sun was sinking lower. Both the men’s eyes were drawn to it. Alan stared at it, amazed and lost inside. Toby’s silence told him that he saw the same thing.

As the sun sank behind the orange sky in a sea of clouds, Alan’s mouth and mind were agape to see that there were many suns. Seven glowing lights floated overhead, each star drifting slowly behind their own dark cloud. He pulled his hair back. He felt a warmth glowing within him, flickering.

It reminded him of his last date with Emma. It was their anniversary. They had gotten sandwiches, a little picnic for both of them, and sat on a little cliff over the water on their favorite beach and watched the sunset. It was fun and warm, he remembered. They had fought.

He remembered that too.

The moment rested in his consciousness. He felt he stared at the sky for a lifetime. He placed his hand down again. He noticed the shadows that followed them were gone. Looking up

he felt a pang in his heart. Only one sun greeted his eyes then. “No, why? You saw that too right? That was beautiful.”

“Well, let’s talk about Emma then first.” The heavy stones of his eyes bored into him, sobering him from his state. He swallowed. He didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “You’ll be going away to college now, both of you right?” Emma’s list fizzled in his head.

“Yeah, we’re going to do long distance,” he replied, emptily. Things wouldn’t be too bad, he thought. A bus here, a train there. A plane ticket back home during long breaks. It would work.

“And you plan to stay together?”

Alan nodded. “Why? Do you not think it’ll work?”

Toby looked back at him for a moment, before finally, he stood. Just like that, for Alan, it was like a spell was lifted. The world seemed so much smaller again. He felt like himself, he felt cold. He wrapped his arms around himself. Toby walked over to the fire pit, his robe blowing back in the wind. He grabbed the lighter from the brick and lit it in his hand.

“Take advice from a man too old to make any more mistakes. Love is a lot like fire. It’s beautiful and warm, but can severely hurt the people involved if it’s not tended properly.” The light around him grew brighter with each passing motion. It was like Toby held a mini sun in his hand. Toby walked over to the chest and pulled a small tank of gasoline from its contents. He poured it into the pit, covering the old coals and embers. “You can capture it,” he said, lighting the pit. Fires ignited in golden orange, combing through the twilight. Alan could feel the heat all the way from the grass. Yet, the coals were old. The ashes burned away, evaporating into smoky remains. “But captured love will always die.” A heat from within began to grow within Alan.

“Are you saying I’ve captured your daughter?”

“I’m asking if you’ve both been captured by each other. Captured in the bodies of the ideals that you want the other to be.”

Alan felt punched. He stood up. The sun had almost disappeared over the horizon. Darkness started to take up the yard. A wave of true anger gripped him for the first time that day. “And have you asked her about this, huh?” He walked up to Toby, seething. Toby stared back at him, impassive. “Oh, I bet you have, haven’t you? You and your perfect house and your perfect garden and your perfect daughter!” Alan stared deep into Toby’s eyes, searching a crack or a lapse in judgment or just any sign that the big man would falter. But he saw nothing, nothing but his own reflection in his dark pupils. “You just met me! You don’t know a damn thing about me, or us. So why do you presume to know so much?” Alan felt heavy, weighed down by his anger. Toby said nothing, simply returning his gaze with a passive intensity. Alan looked away. He glanced down and snatched the lighter from the father’s massive fingers. He ignited it in his hand, burning past the shadows. “I’ll keep it ignited! I’ll burn it bright and strong, strong enough to keep us both warm.”

Toby walked back to his chair and sat down. He closed his eyes. “That’s well and good. If you can keep yourself warm with a captured light. But you saw what I saw. You saw and felt real warmth just then. Tell me, Alan, for the night can be very cold: Do you feel like your love now is enough to truly keep both of you warm?” A gust of wind blew by just then, shaking Alan to the bone with its cold. He cupped his hand around the flame of the lighter, but drew his palm too close.

He dropped the lighter to the ground, wincing at his burn. He brought the burned flesh to his lips and swiped the lighter from the ground. He stared at it with an angry melancholy, flicking it in his hand, trying to turn it back on.