

*Delaney*

I never would've done this before. Driving around at God knows what time, looking all over the city for one place that's open, even without needing anything in particular. This behavior was never me. I had neither the heat in my blood to put off sleep nor the spark in my heart to move without a destination.

She always had that. She always had what I didn't.

We hadn't spoken for over a year after that day. The last expression I saw on her face was pained. Back then, we fought daily at our most peaceful. There was always something. If it wasn't money, it was morals. If it wasn't being late, it was personal space. We would find anything and everything to fight about. It wasn't until five months after she disappeared that I'd ever find out why she'd get so upset.

I

"It's her tool, you know," her brother told me. He was one of my friends back in high school, when I'd go over his place every week just to see her with a different guy each time. He spoke in a tone that made each sentence an opera, each word a poem. His voice was much stronger than hers, which was more like a songbird, but they both spoke with unconscious confidence.

"She was always a little loopy, with the way she'd shut you out and then cry until you returned, never taking charge herself." I didn't know if he meant me personally or if it was a

general statement. “I’ve seen it with them all: Eric, Josh, Devin, Alex.” He started counting off of his right hand and when he reached his left pinky, he leaned his hand towards me.

“She’s scared and she hates it. Plus, you guys ended it the worst way possible,” he offered. His head shook and his leg quivered as he spoke. His words poured like honey as he enunciated each syllable with care. “Didn’t anybody ever tell you not to go to bed angry? Delaney was always like that, you should know. She probably didn’t know how to face you in the morning. I bet she stayed up all night thinking about what she’d say to you. She probably rehearsed it!” A grim smile crept onto his face as I could see images of her flash behind his irises. “And when she couldn’t come up with anything, she reached the idea that she should leave. Not saying it’s your fault or anything, it was probably just where her thoughts had gotten her when time was up. You get it, right?” I blinked a couple times to say yes, though her thoughts were clear as fog to me. His face fell again and he pulled the cigarette away from his mouth. The flickering lights pulled up the smoke as it danced between us. I watched it make its journey until it reached its horizon, overpowered by the bulbs. “She’s damn scared, that’s all.”

“Of what?” I asked him, hesitantly bringing my eyes back to his, finding it incredulous that someone would fight fear with isolation.

She had plenty of friends, best friends, even, ones that had been with her through all her meltdowns and all her highs. And I heard them speak about her. They worried that she’d fall back into old habits when her ribs started poking out again and she left her plates full. They worried that she’d regret her decisions when she talked of dropping out of school.

And I heard them talk about us. They were afraid she’d become codependent, that she’d be unable to live on her own. They were afraid that I meant too much to her – which is why she

left me, right? If she's ready to break all her relationships to go where she wants, what could she possibly be afraid of?

"Of what? Are you that blind, or are you consciously choosing to ignore the obvious?" I took a slow breath, and from his scolding stance he reassumed his casual, closed off position. My silence was my response. I asked again with closed lips.

"Of you, you troll." He took a drag of his cigarette before continuing. He held it in his hand like a pencil, crushing it between his calloused fingers. She held hers in the same way, but gentler. It always laid between her fingers like her paintbrushes did when she worked. After inhaling, he leaned back until his chin pointed to the ceiling. His pace picked up as he spoke and waved his cigarette in circles. "She's afraid of you and your judgmental looks and condescending voice. She's afraid of you and your high standards and your intelligence. She's afraid of your, um, your. . . ."

We sat in silence as he rubbed his temples and furrowed his eyebrows. Suddenly, he shot up and opened his eyes widely. He handed his cigarette to me and walked over to the dining table, a few yards from the couch. There was an envelope lying there, which he tore open on his way to sit again.

"She's afraid of your 'captivating eyes and tight hands.'" His voice changed as he read aloud from the letter. It sounded strained, like his voice box was shattered, like a bird that struggled to sing. "And of your 'messy hair and sturdy back.'" He reached for his cigarette blindly and I angled it so he wouldn't get burned. "Not to mention your 'comforting smile and ethereal laugh.'" "

He was seated at this point, legs crossed, cigarette back in hand. He inhaled the smoke once more before speaking. A cloud trailed out from his mouth with each word.

“She’s afraid of how she feels like she could do anything as long as you’re there. She’s afraid of how,” he cleared his throat and I could see his jawline flex as he clenched it, “for once, everything seemed to be okay. I was okay.””

## II

Eight months after speaking with him, she showed up at my doorstep. There was nothing romantic about it. It was late on Tuesday when she came back. She didn’t leap into my arms and I didn’t prompt her to. Even though we shared this house together once, she acted like a stranger, like a guest coming in for the first time. She looked afraid to break something, as if she made a resolution to tread lightly on the carpet we picked out together just over a year ago. She stood in my doorway, her body hard to see as her clothes blended into the night.

I didn’t rush her. I didn’t ask her anything. I didn’t ask where she’d been, how she’d been doing, what she’d been up to. I didn’t ask any of that. She uncrossed her arms and lowered them. She quickly and desperately pushed her hair out of her face as she lifted her chin. As she inhaled she closed her eyes tightly, and then opened them with a shaky exhale.

I watched her open her mouth and grip the bottom of her sweater, looking past me towards the home she must have remembered. Fog floated from her lips as we stood in tired silence. And just when she looked about to speak, her eyes met mine, and her jaw snapped up. She walked down the steps and into the driveway, past the flowers that bloomed from the seeds she had planted. I reached for the table behind the opened door and searched for the car keys,

unlocking the worn-in BMW. After the first click, she had already opened the door and slipped inside. She looked calm in the seat, like she had never been gone. It looked like the mornings I would drive her to school, or the nights we would go out for dinner. But I could see her cheeks cave in as she bit the inside of her mouth.

I put on my sneakers and traced her steps into the car. As I put the keys in the ignition, I tried to take note of how she looked. She had dyed her hair a dark brown which lightened up her face. There were light bags beneath her eyes and flakes on her lips. She wore a large sweater and carried only one purse. Her lips were parted slightly and her teeth trapped the tip of her tongue between them. Her emerald eyes moved rapidly between the armrest between us and the dashboard.

A ghost. That's what she had become. A ghost of the Delaney I knew -- the Delaney I thought I knew.

As I looked in the rearview mirror, she started sobbing. It was muffled as she whimpered into her sleeve. She folded in half, rested her elbows on her knees, and covered her mouth. I backed out of the driveway and into the open night.

### III

We drove around aimlessly, silently. She had stopped shaking after 13 minutes and now she rested her head on her palm as she looked out the window. The streets were empty, save for the occasional, fellow lost souls. We had reached the part of town that stayed up during the night to aid any spontaneous visitors. She moved closer to the window and started looking more intently at the shops. I drove around the center in circles so she could weigh our options. We

drove by the pharmacy, the bowling alley, and the bars before she touched my hand on the wheel. It was a casual touch, a way we communicated without going through the trouble of executing fathomable, accurate sentences. Her hand was cold and hard against my own. I turned to see what she was nodding her head towards and turned in to the parking lot, her hand still grazing my wrist.

We left the lot separately. As soon as I parked the car she had opened her door and began to make her way down the street. I grabbed her purse and my wallet before following her. The streets became a stage illuminated by flickering streetlights and twinkling stars. I watched her shadow grow and shrink as it swung around her feet on the sidewalk. When she reached the doors, she turned as if to walk in but then stopped. I could see a mass of unkempt hair turn my way as her shoulders lowered. I quickened my pace until I was jogging with quaking breath to meet her.

When we entered the store, we were instantly stunned by fluorescent lights reflecting off newly waxed floors. She walked towards the cereals as I grabbed a basket. By the time I found her, she already had 4 boxes in her hands. I took the boxes from her spindly fingers and placed them in the basket. We continued like that; she walked through the aisles and I carried her chosen items. I kept my eyes on her as much as I could. I was with her for the first time in over a year. I could see the pimple forming an inch away from the point of her eyebrows. I could see the scar in her eyebrow from when she fell off a tree. I could see the curl of her eyelashes, the spaces between her teeth, and the bones peeking out from beneath the collar of her sweater. I could hear the air enter and leave her nostrils, the shuffle of her feet against the floor, and the scratch of her nails on her scalp when she pushed her hair behind her ears. I felt her fingers brush

against mine just barely before pulling away. Just like that, we spent an hour in the store. We didn't utter a word.

#### IV

By the time we entered the house together, the sun had already begun its climb over the horizon. The holes in her sweater were visible, as were her ribs beneath the tattered fabric. Her hair hung low enough to sweep her hips. Her cheeks sunk in just above her delicate jaw. The tip of her nose deflated above sharp, thin lips. She had lost her volume.

When she reached the door, she ran her hand across the top of the doorframe and stopped at the left corner. Her sleeve fell as she reached up and I saw bruises and bones. She lowered her arm and held a rusty key. She used it to open the door, stepped in, and disappeared. It was a scene I'd seen a hundred times. I placed the groceries on the chipped coffee table, which was decorated with doodles and quotes. When I opened the closet to put away my shoes, I noticed the space beside them was filled with a pair of muddy oxfords.

I closed the door and made my way upstairs, turning the lights on and off as I walked. There was an orange light leaving my bedroom through the spaces around the door. I climbed into bed and nestled myself beneath the blanket. I pulled it over myself until I hit resistance. I slowly turned my head to focus on the opposing force when I saw her. The spaces between the curls of her hair glowed orange, illuminating a third of her face. Tears escaped her eyelids and fell into the pillow. As I watched her shoulder tremble, I could only hear her breaths and my heartbeat.

V

The morning was cold and the air was thin. My feet ached from where the blanket abandoned them overnight. As I lifted my head the joints in my neck creaked. My throat burned as I tried to speak through what felt like scrapes.

"Del?" Her name left my mouth before I could stop it, before I had even opened my eyes. It slipped into the room and through the early morning rays, and I dreaded the possibility that it would go unanswered.

But a groan answered. A groan, a shift, and a pull of the blanket left my top half exposed to the frosty air. As I lifted the blanket to reposition it, I noticed that the space beside me was filled with a pale figure framed in loose clothing whose breaths sounded like little whistles.