

## Hot Springs

Ellie's next to me in the backseat, yelling at Aiden to slow down. He ignores her, speeding down the dark forest road through pounding rain. Pink Floyd blasts through the speakers and I have a brief out of body experience. The urgency in Ellie's voice makes me feel bad for her – I'd feel bad for anyone who intentionally smokes up with an anxiety condition that gets worse, not better – so in solidarity against the idiots up front I take her hand. She leans back and closes her eyes, grabs it and squeezes. If Aiden could see he'd probably do something asinine like wolf whistle.

Next to him, Gail bounces around and squeals in the passenger seat, drunk but not high. I imagine Aiden driving into a boulder by the side of the road, Gail's head smashing through the front windshield. The car smells of alcohol, mildew, and Axe deodorant, which we've been using liberally since showers became scarce.

“Dude, seriously,” I say, but I can't get myself to speak above a whisper.

“Don't worry,” Gail shouts. “He's not as far gone as we are.”

“Oh my god, you have to hear this,” Aiden says to her, cranking up the music even louder. I stare in disbelief at the back of his shaved head. “They didn't tell her anything. They just started playing it and told her to sing as if the sky is falling.”

“That is so cool.”

Aiden finally pulls over by the side of the road. Ellie releases my hand and nearly falls through the door, vomiting on the ground. When she's finished, she slams the door shut.

“Is she okay?” Aiden asks absently as I grab a water bottle and follow her out.

The ethereal effect of the mist falling through the night is ruined by the bass speakers pounding unintelligibly from inside the car. At least the cold from the ocean isn't as severe as

where we set up camp earlier in the evening. The smell is different out here, too, away from the campsite.

As much as I want to find Ellie and calm her down, I find myself relishing the time alone. We've been on top of each other since we started on the road trip five days ago. Aiden and I have been camping plenty of times before, even covering parts of the Northern California trip we're on now, but the girls have never been. It's our first time seeing them out since they started college in New York back in September, and Aiden had this bright idea to take them camping. It was definitely a mistake.

Ellie's bracing herself against a tree, eyes closed as she holds her chest and breathes heavily. I hand her the bottle. While she chugs it, almost upchucking the water halfway through, I have a sense memory of the one and only time I smoked pot. I almost vomit myself, then.

Ellie finishes the bottle and hands it back to me. "Thanks, Benny," she says, gasping.

"He's a fucking idiot," I say, because he is.

Ordinarily she'd have appreciated the comment, but she's too worked up now. Her brown hair is everywhere, sticking to her cheek and haloing around her head in frizz. "I thought we were going to crash. I thought we would crash, and I would die, and we would all die."

"It's okay." I reach out and cradle her against me, only a hint of her throw up making its way to my nose. "We're here. He wouldn't kill us, he's not *that* crazy."

She sniffs and laughs. "This trip is too long."

"You can't get so worked up about them. They're not worth your time."

One glance back at the car reveals the two shadows in the front seat meeting over the gearshift. I can tell by now that Ellie wishes she had never invited Gail. Maybe she thought Aiden was sweet on her. It became clear pretty soon, though, that Aiden's focus was on Gail.

Maybe Gail was prettier or easier or more adoring of his glorious body, or whatever it is that makes him decide on girls.

Ellie breaks away from me and wipes her face. “You don’t understand,” she says. “It’s okay. But stop trying to convince me.”

We return to the campsite as the sky is changing from pitch black to deep blue over the ocean. Everything’s gray about this spot, from the Pacific Ocean to the sky to the sand on the shore about a quarter of a mile from where we’ve set up. Whenever we’re looking at the map and picking campsites, Gail pipes up and asks that we camp near water. She barely asks for anything, so even Ellie acquiesced. Hence the freezing cold we’ve been enduring despite it being August.

Crawling into the tent Aiden and I are sharing, I can hear Ellie already snoring across the way in the girls’ more rudimentary pop-up tent. They’d insisted on sleeping separately from us. At the beginning of the trip, when Aiden was just starting up with Gail, he’d implied that we should perhaps divide the tents a different way. I pretended not to catch on and he didn’t bring it up again.

Every time my sleeping bag unzips, I’m woken up by my shivering. Around three in the morning, I hear Aiden outside by the fire pit with Gail. They’re trying to whisper but she keeps giggling loudly. I’m about to say something when I hear them kissing.

“We have to go back to sleep,” I hear Gail say.

“Okay,” he says.

“I’m serious,” she whispers.

“Don’t go back to New York.”

“And what, not finish my degree? Don’t be stupid.”

Aiden sighs. I can hear a smile in his voice. “I want you to stay. I want to fall in love with you. I want to fall in love with you so bad.”

In the silence that follows, there are more sounds of them making out and Gail lets out a muffled noise. I raise my head so that I can see through the screen of the tent. In the dim light I just make out their silhouettes, and it takes me a few seconds to differentiate between the two bodies. Gail has one hand around the back of Aiden’s head, the other hand holding on to an arm that’s disappearing down the front of her pants. Aiden’s legs are spread for balance as he pulls her against him. Smiling like a fool, he shushes her even as he works his hand harder, more methodically, and her head arches back as her breathing gets louder.

“Stop ... we need to stop,” she says finally.

An unexpected thrill of pride runs down my spine when with obvious disregard he keeps going, until she can’t stand on her own and he’s practically holding her off ground. He shoves her head into his shoulder as her sounds crescendo and climax. Finally, they break apart and I put my head back down.

In the morning I open my eyes and see Aiden’s not next to me, which means he’s probably been and gone for his morning run. That guy has the energy of a puppy, nipping around at everyone’s heels in desperate bids for attention. Not a day goes by that he doesn’t grandly reveal his near-chiseled four-pack abs and shaped biceps. I still remember the look on Gail’s face the first time she saw Aiden without his shirt, and I hate them both for my jealousy.

I crawl out of the tent and see Aiden helping the girls get a fire started in the pit.

“Here you go,” he tells them. “You need to start small, with kindling, before you put more on.”

Gail's watching him, recording each step so that she can impress him later by getting it right. As soon as the kindling's lit, Ellie goes over to the bear box and gets out breakfast.

"I love this place!" Aiden gushes when he sees me. "Right here, everyone's starting to get gross and dirty, communing with nature – this is what it's all about!"

"Why are we building a fire?" I yawn. "Aren't we leaving? I can't feel my feet anymore."

Gail grins at me in greeting, her blonde hair up in a spunky ponytail, still in the tracksuit she slept in. In the tracksuit from last night. I mentally reign my mind back from picturing it where I stand.

I nod at Gail. I don't know her too well, but she doesn't seem particularly loquacious on a regular basis; now, since it's looking more and more like she chose Aiden over Ellie, she barely joins in conversations. I can't stand looking at her guilty face anymore, so I've pretty much been ignoring the fact that she looks like she should be on suicide watch, aside from when Aiden is talking to her.

"We broke the hot water thingy," Ellie says now from her position in one of our canvas chairs, feet up on the fire pit grill. "Gail's exhausted. She needs her coffee."

Breakfast is fried eggs and salami. Aiden pours from the Jack Daniels handle over the pan. We all sit around, not talking much. Ellie finishes first and pulls out the pack of Newports she bought at our last gas stop. As she lights up, Aiden looks at her with thinly veiled revulsion.

"You're smoking after breakfast?"

"Would you prefer I drink *during* breakfast?"

"Those are the worst ones, too. It's like you're inhaling crushed glass."

I glance over at Gail. She's got such a pained expression, I really feel like slapping her. Surprisingly, though, she reaches over to Ellie.

“Can I have one?” she says.

As she starts smoking – no inhale; I can tell – I see her guilt is momentarily assuaged, but whatever reprieve it brings dissipates in moments.

Once the Honda Jeep is packed up, we drive over to Fern Valley before getting back on the road. Rules of the car are as follows: Backseat shares with the four sleeping bags, air mattresses and air pillows. Aiden drives, except for an hour here and there when Ellie is allowed to take over because he’s tired and frustrated. Shotgun plays DJ, the tools being whatever radio stations we can get and approximately fifteen CDs that we amassed before leaving Los Angeles, since Aiden forgot to tell us the auxiliary doesn’t work for an iPod cable.

At this point, the circulation of CDs has thinned out to Ellie’s Radiohead and Led Zeppelin, three songs on Aiden’s Beastie Boys, Gail’s uneven mix (of which we refuse the Kinks, Madonna and Nicki Minaj but allow the Weezer, Phish and Simon and Garfunkel), three songs on my Red Hot Chili Peppers, and five songs on the scratched Mumford and Sons we mercifully found under the carpet of the car. The Floyd comes out on nights when Ellie’s too tired to argue.

I slowly tune in and out of the conversation from the backseat, distractedly realizing that it’s because I’m dozing off. By the time I’m fully awake we’re driving through mountains, heading up the state. Gail’s next to me in the back, consulting the itinerary she drew up before we set out. By tracking our progress through L.A., Big Sur, San Francisco, McKinleyville and the Redwoods, noting the changes we tell her that are to save time or increase the sights we get to see, she’s convinced she has a handle on where we’re headed. What she still doesn’t get is that Aiden and Ellie hardly did any planning, taking about thirty minutes the day before we left to

mark general areas we'd be in and possible activities, their only guide being researched campsites on a long, undefined loop up the coast and back down by way of Reno, Lake Tahoe and Mammoth Lakes. We don't bother to tell her because it's easier to give her a semblance of control over the situation.

"So we're going to Lassen Volcanic National Park?" Gail says now, reading off her packet.

"Umm, if that's what it says," Aiden says, in the flamboyant accent he affects whenever he's not paying attention.

"Hey Benny," Ellie interrupts. "Can you pass me the pretzels?"

"It does say that," Gail says to Aiden, focused on the itinerary. "What do we do there?"

"Isn't it a hike?" he says back.

"If you don't find a bathroom in the next ten minutes, I'm gonna pee in your car," Ellie says.

"On a volcano?" Gail asks.

"You wouldn't dare," Aiden says to Ellie, and I'm disgusted to note it's flirtatious.

"How are we hiking on a volcano?" Gail repeats, tone rising.

No one has the energy to answer her. Ellie tunes in to a country station and starts singing along to the song. I can see Aiden in the driver's seat smile over at her and join in at the chorus.

"What song is this?" Gail asks.

After a silence of about twenty seconds, Aiden finally says, "I don't know what it's called."

Snow embankments flank the road as we get closer to the volcano. In the parking lot, we open the trunk and dig out clothes more suitable for the cold and mud trekking. There's a weather-beaten board detailing the different trails. We've started out on a flat area of snow when Ellie just stops.

"I can't do it, it's too slippery," she says. She turns back and nearly falls over in her haste.

"Are you sure?" Gail says.

"Yes."

I'm about to keep going when I see Gail take a fall. Before she can blink, or cry, or whatever it is she does, Aiden's by her side. Seconds later he's tickling her and she's shrieking, jerking away and nearly falling down again. Grossed out by their behavior, I follow Ellie back to the parking lot.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, opening the car and laying out across the backseat, adjusting herself around the sleeping bags and inflatables.

"I think I'll just stay behind," I say, getting into the passenger's side.

"Fine. But let me sleep."

I follow suit and by the time we wake up, it's close to five and we're still alone. The cold cuts through as soon as we get outside the car, but it gives us a good excuse to stop thinking about how dirty we are and how much our breath smells by bundling into sweatshirts. Sitting on the hood of the car, we watch the view while Ellie smokes a few cigarettes. Eventually she goes into the back and pours some Jack Daniels into her canteen and we pass it back and forth for a while.

"Do you like your work?" she asks.



“Of course.” I wanted to be a scientist since I was a kid. The title is a little more refined now – I’m studying to be a molecular biologist – but I always knew what I wanted to be.

“That’s cool.” She waits a minute before adding, “I wish I could get excited about anything.”

I reach for the canteen and drain it. “Well, I hate everything else. So it’s a toss-up.”

She grins weakly. “Is this trip as much torture for you as it is for me?”

“I wouldn’t presume.”

Ellie nods. “I always admired you, y’know? You keep your cool. You’re respectful.”

I’m flattered, even though it’s coming from a bad place. “Thanks for not telling me while you were high or something.”

Blowing out a stream of smoke, Ellie nods again and stays quiet. We look out over the edge of the parking lot and I imagine myself somersaulting over the rocks to the trees below.

Aiden and Gail show up as the sun is setting, exhausted and wet from melting snow. While the girls go off to the bathroom, Aiden grins at me as he changes into semi-clean clothes.

“So you and Ellie, huh?” he says.

“Shut up.”

“What? What did I say?”

“Just stop.”

“Well, in case you were wondering, that was an awesome hike. Gail was super excited.”

“I wasn’t wondering.”

That night it’s cold again. We find a campsite nearby but still end up needing headlights so we can see enough to set up the tents. The girls discuss who gets the good sleeping bag;

ultimately, they decide the best way to preserve heat is if they lay out the bad one and spoon under the good one. We make dinner – chicken wings and artichokes cooked in Jack Daniels – and then light up a joint. Gail joins in this time, taking a hit or two more than she should, to show Aiden that she can.

Since I haven't been thinking about work lately, my mind wanders to the experiments I'd been running in the lab before we left on the trip, isolating DNA samples, which gets pretty formulaic around the fiftieth time you do it. I've been trying to get into the field of retinal degenerative diseases, so I can at least feel like I'm working for a higher purpose, but the going's been slow.

Aiden and Gail go off somewhere but I keep talking, eyes trained on Ellie sitting across the fire from me. Around the time my buzz wears down, I notice that it's been quiet for a while and say as much to her.

"I know," she says, stretching as she sits up in the blue canvas chair. "You trailed off somewhere in the vicinity of hydrogen bonds."

"I'd be an awesome high school chemistry teacher. If I could stay high all the time."

Ellie chuckles. I haven't seen her smile in seventy-two hours and I feel overwhelmingly sympathetic. "Where's the cookie dough?" she asks, rummaging around in the cooler. She finds the tub of raw Tollhouse that Aiden and Gail had laughingly brought to the checkout at the last supermarket, then settles back into her chair with a spoon.

"Say hello to trans fats," I say.

"Fuck you," she replies, shocking me.

"Hey, what did *I* do?"

"Stop acting like I'm more pathetic than you are right now. We're in this together."

Much as I'd like to walk over and slap the tub of lard out of her hands, I'm too worn out to get emotional about anything. "I don't see how that's connected."

"I'm an idiot for coming on this trip. I know that. But you don't seem to know that you're an idiot, too."

"I don't give a shit," I say.

I leave her and crawl into my tent.

The day before we're scheduled to roll back to L.A., we leave the desert in Reno and drive to Mammoth Lakes. The car unloaded at the campsite, we take a lackluster visit to the local brewery, after which we ask around and get directions to the biggest grouping of hot springs in the area. A few misinformed turns later, we finally find the parking and the long foot bridge. It extends over a good stretch of desert, twisting and turning, changing texture, off into the horizon on its way across to the hot springs. When we get there, a few people are already taking a dip and enjoying themselves, mostly older tourists with a few others who turn out to be natives.

"Finally!" Aiden says, sighing deeply as he lowers himself into the spring. He has an uncanny ability to seem completely absorbed in his own experience while simultaneously grinning at everyone in his vicinity. "I've been waiting the entire trip for this."

The water is slimy, full of algae and dirt as it travels through the pool we're sitting in on its way to smaller ones across. I can feel the oil soaking into my pores and making my skin slick. The only redeeming quality of the experience is the abnormally high temperature, which relaxes me for a few moments before I get used to it.

"My hair is going to feel so gross," Ellie says, pushing back wet strands as she comes to sit next to me on a greasy rock. We've come to a silent truce since our altercation.

“Can we come back here tonight?” Aiden says excitedly. He’s hopping out of the water and bouncing around from spot to spot, dunking in occasionally.

“Calm down,” I say, uncomfortable at the way other people are staring at him.

“We should for sure come back here,” Gail says.

That night we go out and we don’t bother to shower even though we’re technically rejoining civilization. There’s an Irish bar where we settle in with a range of beers, some of which we’ve already seen at breweries on our way here. Gail keeps ordering stouts, like she’s trying to prove some obscure point.

After that Aiden claims he’s fine driving and I’m not quite sure how he gets us back to the campsite. I’m done questioning him at this point. We light a fire and pull out the last dregs of food we have left in the cooler – mac and cheese, salami, beans, corn and the last of the cookie dough – and eat as much of it as we can. The Jack Daniels gets passed around as we watch the moist corn husks smolder in the fire, Ellie smoking yet again.

Aiden sighs contentedly. “I wanna go back to the hot springs. Who’s coming with?”

Both girls’ heads jerk up.

“Are you insane?” I ask. “You can’t drive.”

“I’m fine,” Aidan says, shrugging.

“It’s suicidal at this point. Just stay put.”

He gets up and stretches, tossing his keys in the air. As he walks to the car, Ellie gets up and follows him. After a second, Gail does too.

“Ellie?” I call after her. We make eye contact before she turns back, resolute. Not knowing if I approve of what I’m doing myself, I follow as well.

We can't find the turnoff right away. I don't even notice how long we've been driving until Gail starts suggesting that we just pull over on the side of the dirt road and drink some more. But either the darkness beyond the road scares Aiden too much to stop or he has other things on his mind, because he refuses to acknowledge her. For once he's silent, focused on finding the place we left just a few hours earlier.

After thirty minutes of searching, he turns down a road that doesn't look remotely familiar and we find ourselves back in the hot springs parking lot.

"Okay, let's go!" Aiden says, reinvigorated.

We start off down the bridge, wearing our headlights to shine a little on the wooden floor. Aiden walks in the lead, babbling on to Gail and Ellie about some other camping trip he's been on. None of it gets absorbed; I shuffle along behind them, head down so I can see the road, listening to the sound of our flip-flops hitting the small rocks.

The bridge is longer than I remembered. We walk forever, continuing on and on. I forget where we are or where we're going. Even out here, on the other side of the state from the ocean, it's freezing at night.

Finally I hear Aiden whoop up ahead and I know we made it. Immediately, Aiden strips down to his boxers and splashes into the hot springs, almost as though he's scared no one will go in now that we're here.

"Who brought the tequila?" he asks.

Gail hands it to him and then takes off her shoes uncertainly. "I think I'm just gonna put my feet in."

"Are you kidding? It's freezing out here, you *have* to get in."

He's right. Out here there's nothing obstructing the landscape from horizon to horizon, leaving us vulnerable in the middle of the desert. It also leaves the sky completely exposed, covered from all edges in brilliant, sparkling stars. I stare up, transfixed by the beauty of it and simultaneously wrecked. Gail takes off her pants and shirt, climbing into the springs in just her underwear and a tank top.

"Come on, Ellie," Aiden says as he pulls Gail down onto his lap. "Get in."

Once the other three are submerged, they start drinking straight out of the tequila bottle. I'm hesitant about joining, but they keep bugging me until I finally stick my feet in and take a few swigs myself.

"If you don't come in I'm gonna start splashing you," Ellie says, tugging on the leg of my pant.

"Hey!" I say, jerking it out of her grasp.

"Come on, then."

"Benny, you're gonna miss all the fun!" Aiden says from somewhere below me. It's so dark that even with my headlight I can barely see them. He's got an arm around each of the girls, who are looking off in different directions. "It's so good in here. Turn off the light."

Instead, I crouch down to rummage in Aiden's pants pocket for the car keys. Then I take off at a brisk walk back the way we came. I can hear the other three calling my name.

I fall asleep in the back of the car, for twenty minutes or an hour. I wake up to the sound of knocking on the window and I jerk upright.

Ellie signals impatiently from outside. I unlock the door and she climbs in beside me. It's strange to be sitting there without all the camping gear, though the musty smell of it lingers.

"Are we going back?" I say, yawning.

She shakes her head and then I see she's crying. I have a sudden surge of pity for her, a familiar emotion by now. But underneath it I realize I've also grown protective of her. I'm hurt that she's hurt.

"What happened?" I ask.

Ellie doesn't say anything, choosing instead to wipe her eyes and take a shuddering breath. Without warning she turns and lunges, her mouth looking for me but, in her haste, only finding the corner of mine.

I freeze. She moves her lips over to the center of mine and presses them there. On the hand that reaches under the hem of my shirt I can feel the sliminess and the algae, but then I'm overwhelmed by the smell of tequila on her.

When I don't react, she pulls away and sits back in her seat.

"Ellie, I ..."

"Stop," she says. "Forget it. It's fine."

She gets out of the car. She heads back to the bridge and I can't think of anything to say to stop her.