

Corn

I felt a tingling sensation starting in my toes. I looked down at my sandal-clad feet hanging over the edge of the truck bed. They were falling asleep. I guess we had been sitting here for longer than I realized. I stifled a sigh and pulled my legs up off the white metal tailgate and into my chest, wrapping my arms around my naked knees. Shorts probably weren't the best idea. The sun was setting and the air was cooling.

I lifted my head and looked out. The wispy yellow-brown tops of the corn stalks were almost a perfect match to the sun behind them. My gaze was immediately trapped by the slender stalks swaying back and forth with each breath of summer wind that came by. The movement was unexpected but rhythmic at the same time. One of life's more beautiful contrasts. My eyes wandered down to the graying, cracked, asphalt street that lay between us and the corn. One of life's ugly ones.

"You cold?" Jace's voice seemed to hammer through my thoughts.

"No, I'm fine." A lie. I didn't want him to go all chick-flick on me with the awkward arm-around-the-shoulders move.

His eyebrows twitched in a strange way as he looked at me. "Yeah you are. Lemme grab my blanket." He grabbed the side of the truck and hoisted himself up carefully. I bounced with each step he took back to the toolbox. The lid creaked open and he pulled out a faded green, wool blanket. He turned back towards me with a jerk and I noticed his feet pointed outward. Stepping back to his spot on the tailgate next to me, he tossed the blanket in my lap. It felt scratchy on my bare legs.

“Thanks,” I said. I unfolded the blanket and threw it around my shoulders.

We were back to staring at the corn. The leaves that covered the stalks seemed big in comparison to the husks. They drooped down like a tired dog’s ears.

I stole a glance at Jace sitting next to me on the back of his truck. Even looking out into the sunset, his eyes appeared almost black—so dark that his pupils disappeared. Stubble covered his strong jaw line and some of his neck, but it was lighter than his dark brown hair. His nose looked like it had been broken before, but not too badly. I grew conscious of my eyes lingering a little too long. I quickly looked back at the corn field, starting to blush. Hopefully he hadn’t noticed. I hugged the blanket closer to my body, thinking. He was certainly handsome. Yet there was something intriguing and unsettling about him. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

The stalks continued their swaying dance, heavy with produce. The green stems were dimming into a grey color as the sun went down. Some people said that this corn would shoot up so fast that you could watch it grow overnight. I peeked over at Jace, whose dark eyes were still fixed on the field. I hoped he didn’t plan on staying that long. It was cold and conversation was scarce. It was a little strange for a first date, out here watching the corn grow, but I guess he wasn’t lacking in creativity.

“So…” Jace started, “You know some say that this corn shoots up so fast that you can watch it grow over night.” He looked at me expectantly. What he was expecting, I wasn’t quite sure.

“No kidding?” I replied, avoiding eye contact.

“Yup.”

More silence. More corn. The awkwardness between us was almost palpable. I decided to help him out.

“So are we gonna stay here all night?” I said sarcastically. As soon as the words left my mouth I realized how rude they sounded. “I mean—not that I’m...” I was going to say bored, but stopped myself. “I’m just—“

“Amy, it’s fine,” he said, smiling. “We won’t be here all night. Promise.”

I looked directly at him this time and lifted the corner of my mouth up in an attempt at a smile. The sun was almost down and it gave everything bizarre shadows, including his face. From where I sat, his pointed nose looked like a beak. My stomach tightened. I wanted to ask when we would be leaving, but I knew it wouldn’t be polite. And he probably wouldn’t have given me a straight answer anyway.

The minutes dragged on and I grew tired of watching the corn. Though they continually swayed side to side in an awkward sort of dance, there didn’t seem to be any amazing growth spurt happening. I looked to the right of the truck. Besides dirt and the occasional patch of grass, all I saw was an abandoned farm in the distance. About a mile away. I turned my head to the left and saw the same dirt and grass, this time accompanied by a ramshackle roadside fruit stand a hundred yards off.

Out of nowhere, my stomach made a deep grumbling noise. It burst through the silence like the bray of a dying donkey. I even thought I felt the truck move a little.

Jace’s head snapped around, a surprised look in his eyes. “Oh, are you hungry?”

“Heh. Yeah, I guess.” I hadn’t expected a non-conformist, sans-dinner date. It was almost nine o’clock and I hadn’t eaten since noon.

“Hold on. I’ve got some food for us.” I watched him as he made the short trek back to the tool box once more. His burnt orange t-shirt hung down off his chest as he reached down and pulled out a medium sized, blue cooler with a white lid.

“Wow. You’ve got everything in there, huh?” I joked.

“You could say that.”

He sat the cooler in between us and swung the lid back. There was a brief battle between coyness and curiosity, but curiosity quickly won; I leaned my head over the side of the cooler to see what food he had brought.

In the corner nearest me there was a red Tupperware bowl covered with an opaque lid. It looked like it contained potato salad. Or maybe macaroni. It was a yellowish color and I could smell a hint of mayonnaise. Towards the middle, in two large plastic bags, were turkey and cheese sandwiches on deli rolls. Next to the sandwiches sat two Coke cans, and in the corner nearest Jace there was a bag of green grapes. Just looking at the spread made my mouth water.

Jace pulled out a couple of plates and forks that were tucked behind the mystery salad. He handed me mine and started unpacking the food. I crossed my legs and moved the blanket to my lap, setting the plate and fork on top. My stomach made another unladylike noise. My eyes glanced down at my stomach than quickly up at Jace. He apparently hadn’t heard because he went on preparing the food. He popped the lid off of the red bowl. It was macaroni.

As soon as Jace had divvied up the last of the grapes and set them on my plate, my fork was in motion. The macaroni salad tasted fattening and delicious. I had a sneaking suspicion it was store bought, despite the Tupperware. After a few heaping forkfuls I lowered the plate and looked up at Jace. I was embarrassed to find he was already looking at me, twirling the fork in his fingers. The plate in his lap was still untouched.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I asked.

My words seemed to bring him out of a trance. “Oh, yeah.” He popped a couple grapes in his mouth and flashed me an awkward, food-impeded grin.

The unsettling feeling started to creep back. My stomach was knotting up. Something about the way he looked at me wasn’t quite right.

I grabbed my Coke from in front of me and popped the tab open. Making sure my gaze was nowhere near Jace, I took a couple of tiny sips hoping, with horrible logic, that it would calm my stomach. I set the Coke down and turned my attention to my plate. I opted to try the sandwich next. My teeth tore through the fresh bread with ease, but my tongue shrunk away from the meat once it touched my taste buds. It wasn’t turkey. It was ham. My jaw stopped mid-bite. I could feel Jace’s eyes on me. I quickly forced the sickly sweet meat down my throat and tried to keep a straight face as the aftertaste of ham overtook my mouth. I quickly ate some grapes. I bit into the skin and the tart juice spilled out into my cheeks. I ate the whole bunch that was on my plate, one by one, but after each swallow the taste of ham came sneaking back. The meal was getting worse by the second. All I really wanted was to go home. Away from the food, away from the corn, and away from Jace.

I closed my eyes, opened my mouth wide and covered it with my hand, feigning a yawn.
I hoped he would get the hint.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

I nodded my head and scrunched my eyebrows up and in, trying to look disappointed.

“Yeah.”

“Here, let’s lay down,” he said as he started to pack up the food.

Not exactly what I was hoping for. He quickly put our leftovers in the cooler, closed the lid, and set our plates and forks on top of it.

“Can I see that blanket?” he asked with his hand outstretched.

“Um...” I looked back out over the horizon, as if I would find some distraction. Some sort of answer. Some sort of hero to help get me out of this date. But all I could see was corn surrounding me in the darkness. I looked up at Jace. The right side of his mouth pulled into a half smile that I think was meant to be reassuring. My mouth consciously bent upward in return.

“Sure,” I said.

He grabbed the blanket from me and laid it out over the middle of the truck bed. He sat down on top of it, looked over at me and patted the space next to him.

I stood up slowly and took a couple of reluctant steps over to him. Before I sat down I motioned to the tool box. “You don’t happen to have any pillows in there, do you?” I asked, half kidding, half wishing.

“Nope,” he said as I got down on the blanket, “but you can rest your head on my chest if you want.”

“Oh it’s okay.” I said a bit too quickly.

“No, seriously. This blanket doesn’t have much cushion.” He was already laying down with his right arm out, waiting for me. I wanted to say no, but any graceful excuse seemed to travel down into my stomach instead of coming out of my mouth.

“Alright...” I muttered.

I lay down on my side and rested my head down on his chest with as little movement as possible. The smells of his deodorant and cologne overtook me at the same time. They swirled together and came blasting through my nostrils all at once. One smelled strongly of spice, and the other was a deep, rugged musk—I couldn’t tell which was which. For some reason it reminded me of a holiday party gone horribly wrong. I started breathing through my mouth instead, but then all I could taste was ham. I started to get dizzy. I put my hand up to my head to massage my temple.

“You alright?” I felt the vibration of his voice.

“Yeah. I’ve just got a headache-” I stopped short. Jace had grabbed my hand and had started to kiss each of my fingers, one by one. His lips felt cold and dry.

“Uh...” My mouth and eyes were frozen wide open. A sick feeling in my stomach started to grow and swell toward my chest. What had I done to make him think I wanted this?

Slowly, his grip began to tighten on my wrist and he started to force my hand down his stomach toward his belt.

“Hey, whoa!” I tried to jerk my hand back but his own hand shackled mine instantly.

Before I could react, he was on top of me. He grabbed my other wrist and slammed it onto the truck bed floor, the sound muted by the blanket. Both of my arms were pinned above my head, Jace holding them down. I started kicking my legs as hard as I could and in every direction, my eyes squeezed shut. This wasn't happening.

I felt Jace slam his knee into the inner thigh of my left leg. Hot tears started to fall back into my hair as I cried out in anguish.

“Please stop!” I managed to cough out.

The hard bone of his other knee went ramming into my right thigh. My legs were spread open.

“PLEASE!”

I opened my eyes and through the tears, I saw Jace's blurry face. Smiling at me. He jerked his head forward. I flinched and turned away. His mouth was right next to my ear, his stubble scratching my cheek.

“Go ahead and scream. No one can hear you,” he whispered.

He let go of my left arm, but I didn't have time to defend myself before he swung the backside of his right hand into my face. Each of his knuckles felt like shards of metal raking across my temple and over my nose.

“AHH!”

My hands flew to my face. It felt wet. I tried to open my eyes but blood was dripping down from my eyebrow. It felt like my cheekbone had caved in. I moaned and attempted to get up.

Jace shoved me in the chest. My head flew back and hit the truck bed floor. A sharp pain shot through the back of my skull. My thoughts were becoming less and less coherent. I was aware of a slight tugging around my waist then something getting caught on my sandals... Were those my shorts?

I lifted up my head and opened my eyes as best I could. Jace threw my shorts on the ground and reached up for my underwear. This was my one chance. With all the strength and willpower I had, I lifted my right leg back and kicked Jace right in the throat.

I felt his Adam's apple concave beneath my sandal. He made a strange noise and fell backwards into the cooler, knocking it over. The red Tupperware bowl went flying through the air, spilling macaroni, and I heard the plates tumble and crash onto the hard dirt. I clambered onto my hands and knees, head spinning, blood falling everywhere. I crawled to the edge of the truck bed. Climbing down, I immediately looked to see where Jace had fallen.

He was to my left, holding his neck, slowly standing up and turning towards me. I tried to back away but I tripped and fell over my own feet, kicking up a cloud of dirt.

Time seemed to slow down. He was coming right for me, a crazed look in his pure black eyes. My head was throbbing and my eyes couldn't focus. I was scooting back and frantically looking around when I caught a glimpse of something shining in the moonlight. I forced my eyes to stop swerving.

The fork. It was about 4 feet away from me, next to the spilled food.

I looked back at Jace. He was almost on me.

I lunged for the fork and snatched it up, but Jace anticipated my movement. He tackled me to the ground. Dirt filled my mouth—I could feel it grinding in between my teeth. My hands tightened around the fork and I pulled it close to my chest.

I jerked my body from side to side, scattering droplets of the blood from my face into the dirt. All I needed to do was face him. Jace’s arms started to tighten around me, but I kept thrusting my body back and forth.

All of a sudden, one of my shoulders smacked him in the jaw, distracting him. I flipped my body around, shut my eyes, took the fork in both hands and shoved it into his eye.

“AHHHHHHHHH!”

Warm liquid was spurting out onto my face and into my mouth. Coughing, I heaved his writhing body off me and scrambled away on my hands and knees.

“AAAARGHHH!” His screams pierced through the corn field like a scythe. I couldn’t take it. All I could see was blood and all I could hear were his screams. My heart still racing, I kept frantically crawling through the dirt until I reached the road. Then without looking back, I got up and started to run.

I ran. And ran. And ran. Until all I could hear was the uneven footsteps of my own sandals, and all I could see were the corn stalks, swaying in the moonlight.