

Jerome

The Tesla glided along a road that imperceptibly lifted itself from the expanse of the Arizona desert, coiling around the mountain like a snake. With the day's remaining light, Athena could just make out the town's structures jutting out from the side of the mountain like haphazardly driven stakes. As they continued to climb, the road's once broad shoulders fell away steeply leaving it nearly cantilevering off the hill. Peering through the window over the edge of the unexpected precipice Athena felt like throwing up, she did not like heights. She kept her focus forward and slid in her seat as far away from the car door as possible. In the few minutes it took to get from the base of the mountain to the edge of town, day turned to night as though a switch was flipped. It was only half past seven but it felt like midnight. The streets were eerily devoid of any sign of humanity. No hipsters walking to dinner, no late night art shows, no groups of kids skateboarding around. Sebastian thought they had entered the "Twilight Zone" and that Rod Serling would come out at any minute to narrate their demise.

"Cleopatra's Boudoir", the shop they'd set out to find, was on the second street into town. Sebastian pulled over for a closer look. "It's closed" Athena said getting out of the car. Looking around it was hard to imagine that the store ever opened. A network of plumbing and electrical conduits held the crumbling brick and plaster building together like a vice. So many letters were missing from the shop's signage that it only said "Cleo a a s Bo o". The store next to it fared no better. Its sign was ripped in half and the blue Christmas lights that edged the window cast a deathly pallor onto a ceramic doll holding a dusty bottle of wine. "Well that was a bust." Sebastian said trying to sound sincerely disappointed. "Let's just go to dinner. What was the name of the restaurant we were supposed to try?" Sebastian asked getting into the car. "The Mile High Diner" Athena responded truly confused.

Despite their advanced age, the two women they met on the jeep tour of Sedona's red rocks less than an hour ago seemed sincere, even hip. "Jerome is a trendy artist town with great shopping and fabulous restaurants - well worth the twenty minute drive up the hill" they'd chirped almost in unison, smiling happily in

matching purple hair. They had spoken so highly of the small town that Sebastian had practically begged to come up suggesting that her need for adventure could also be fulfilled by simply going off her plan. "Live a little" he'd told her knowingly challenging her ability to "go with the flow". She was an extreme adventure seeker who did not like to change plans midway but she really didn't like getting called out in public. "Is this some kind of sick joke?" She thought eyeing her husband suspiciously. He appeared unconcerned that the place was completely abandoned as he typed their new destination into the car's navigation system. She wondered if he'd sabotaged this trip to teach her some kind of lesson. He'd long complained that he didn't think every anniversary trip had to be some kind of extreme adventure. "It would be awful to die while celebrating our marriage" he said. The prediction had almost come true when they were nearly run off the road during the jeep tour. Athena thought the man behind the wheel resembled the yoga instructor's man friend, if only because he wore the same stupid flat billed hat. They saw this man in passing as they left were leaving the resort. A tall man, in clay caked boots, jeans, sleeveless shirt and flat billed hat stood clenching and unclenching his fists as the yoga instructor spoke, wildly flailing her arms in every direction. Athena rolled up the window to keep from being seen but somehow they must have known it was them because he'd turned to yell that they were "shallow inconsiderate assholes". Athena was offended. She had paid good money for a private yoga session at an energy vortex but the thin, heavily lined, woman with long wiry gray hair was no longer fit for the role. Even her shirt and yoga pants fluttered in the slight breeze as though they were trying to get away from her. Still, they'd followed her to the clearing intent on completing the class but when she began having gas at every pose, Athena had had enough. Sebastian thought she'd went too far suggesting that she find some remedy for "her skinny smelly ass" while demanding a refund. "It was just like Sebastian to sides against her" Athena lamented, "he could be such a pussy". Sometime during the last nine years, he'd given up being a man and she'd stopped admiring him. All there was between them lately was a simmering anger "Ok. Got it. It should be further up this same road" Sebastian announced pulling the car away from the curb and continuing up the hill.

A short distance away, closer to the center of town, the Mile High Diner was also dark though neither of them would have walked in even if it was open. Everything about it looked haggard and cheap. The brick, once painted a vibrant shade of red, was sun-bleached to an unconscionable shade of pink; awnings, once black and white, had faded to grey and drooped against the windows like puffy eyelids; even the “modern” steel doors were dotted with rust and decay as though suffering from leprosy. A rankness hung around the building, a combination of booze and sex, like an old prostitute hanging on the corner looking for one last john. Sebastian burst into laughter. “Did you know about this?” he asked pointing to the screen. “You are sitting before “the best brothel in the wickedest town in the west”, at least it was in its hey-day”. Sebastian continued reading facts about the town although Athena only caught some words like murders and ghosts because her blood was beginning to boil. “How could she have been so stupid?” she thought pulling out her phone. She could not believe she’d let herself get talked into coming to this God forsaken town. She Yelped, “best restaurant in Jerome” and stared at the buffering circle in the upper left corner of her phone while the app searched. Sebastian bounced out of the car eager for a closer look at the former “house of ill repute”. He imagined women, breasts heaving over tight corsets, leaning out of upper story windows calling to the men passing below. It did strike Sebastian odd that not a single light shone from within any of the structures. “Don’t people live up here?” Sebastian wondered as a door creaked open from across the street. A neon sign over a recessed double door said “Spirit Room” and although not a sound could be heard from within, a man emerged taking up the entire frame of the door. Backlit so that none of his features were visible except for his size and girth, he stood motionless for some time until he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. In the brief flash, Sebastian thought he recognized him as the man from the resort although he couldn’t be sure. Athena had asked him to stop the car and confront him as he yelled obscenities at them but Sebastian kept driving catching a glimpse of him through the rear view mirror, mostly of the distinctive hat. On some level he agreed with the man and his girlfriend. Athena could be incredibly mean and hurtful. He didn’t mind her feeling a little pain in return sometimes. When they were nearly run off the road, Athena swore it was the yoga instructor’s boyfriend but

Sebastian had not been so sure. Athena liked to jump to wild conclusions and becoming outraged at the smallest offense. Now however, with this man staring at them from across the street he wondered if they were being followed. Unnerved, Sebastian got back in the car, stealing a quick glance before peeling away. Only puffs of smoke swirling around a flat billed hat were visible.

“So are we done with this town or what?” Sebastian asked sourly, the excursion was beginning to take its toll. “What?” Athena bit back, the app had still not refreshed. “Well, the store was a bust and so was the diner so I am wondering if that’s it or if we are supposed to do something else?” Sebastian stared at Athena defiantly, he suspected now that the entire trip was some kind of elaborate set up, like one of those escape room adventures except out in the open. It explained the deserted town, the bizarre jeep ride and even the farting yoga instructor. When she’d announced they were headed to Sedona Sebastian had actually believed that it would be a romantic trip in a picturesque setting but he should have known that Athena wouldn’t be happy unless it had some kind of sick twist. “I am looking for a place to eat, so relax” she said trying to control her burgeoning sense of disgust. He was starting to get petulant, he was probably hungry. Athena turned to him exasperated. “Where the hell are you going?” Sebastian pulled over slamming the car into park. “Look Athena, I don’t know what you are up to but I am not amused”. Athena was taken aback. “What are you talking about?” she glowered at him. Sebastian took a few deep breaths and backed down. He thought it might be true what they said about the vortexes and the energy was making nuts. The whole thing seemed too crazy even for her. Sebastian took a deep breath and said “I am sorry, I am probably just hungry. Any luck with the app?” Athena looked down at her phone disappointed. A few seconds ago with Sebastian’s brow glistening with sweat and his body tensed in fight mode, Athena thought he’d returned to the guy he used to be, the kind that didn’t take any crap from anyone even her. Her heartbeat had quickened sending adrenaline coursing through her body. It was intoxicating, arousing. “Why had he backed down so quickly? What was it going to take to get him to rise to the occasion?” Athena slammed the phone down and looked out the window. “I don’t know. Why don’t we try going there?” Athena answered half-heartedly pointing to a large structure glowing in the distance.

The five story Spanish style structure stood out against a backdrop of dark space. Awash in a flood of lights, its brightness served as both a beacon and a warning. Sebastian sat forward in the driver's seat, absently following the winding road, hands wound tightly around the steering wheel replaying the day in his mind. He could not decide if Athena was complicit in this misadventure or if she had been truly frightened off course. She did seem genuinely pissed at the yoga instructor and a little scared after the jeep tour but it did not make sense to drive up here to push him into proving himself to her after all these years. Had she really lost so much faith in him? Didn't she know he'd always protect her? "Sebastian where are you going?" Athena nearly shouted. Sebastian was roused from his thoughts to find that he'd driven out of town and was on a pitch black two lane highway heading towards Prescott. "Shit, I must have missed the turn off. I'll have to make a U-turn." He said whipping the car around shy of a blind curve. Athena screeching in panic and was about to yell that he was going to get them hit when a deep horn blasted behind them causing Sebastian to swerve towards the side of the road and skid over loose gravel before coming to a stop. The truck driver continued to lay on his horn as the semi barreled past them. "Wow, how was that for an extreme experience?" Sebastian asked giggling to suppress the panic and regret. He'd nearly killed them. Athena, pale and breathless could not speak, she was still gripping the door when she turned to him. For the first time in many years they had the same thought, "we are losing each other".

Sebastian eased back onto the road, watching the GPS more carefully to avoid missing the way to the massive structure on the hill. He spotted a driveway leading to a cobbled stone street that ran parallel to the main road before abruptly turning and disappearing up the hill. "I bet that's it" he said pulling the Tesla onto the narrow path. Bumping along the road for some distance they finally arrived at an expansive platform upon which Jerome's Grand Hotel stood in dazzling silence. The only evidence that they might have finally stumbled upon people, were the rows of neatly parked cars around the perimeter of the building. "Jackpot!" yelled Sebastian. "I guess this is the happening spot!" Athena nodded in relief.

Despite attempts to enhance the aesthetic of the imposing building, there was nothing “grand” about it except its size. The plum arched awnings over a smattering of windows did little to conceal that the structure had not been designed as a hotel but a hospital. Athena thought she could still see the men, for whom it was built, ambling around the grounds recovering from missing limbs, burns and life threatening wounds suffered while working at the copper mine below. Sebastian jumped out of the car and ran around to open Athena’s door. “He hasn’t done that in forever” Athena thought getting out. The certainty that each was diminished in each other’s estimation weighed heavily, momentarily pushing away their suspicions and fears. Sebastian looked around wondering what kind of town all met up at the same place. “I hope this place is good – I am starving” he said motioning towards a steep staircase. “After you my dear.”

Athena felt ill with the fear that their relationship was beyond saving. Consumed with guilt and regret, she followed Sebastian up the steps. When they reached the top, Athena halted crossing her arms across her body. “Are you kidding me? The place is called the Asylum. I am not going in there.” She said trying to sound sweet and playful. She felt her palms begin to sweat and a knot form in the pit of her stomach. “Oh come on” Sebastian mocked. “I will protect you from flatulence and its hitman” he continued smiling gallantly at his wife while inconspicuously looking around, hoping the man he’d seen just moments before had not followed them. A screen door opened and slammed shut behind them making them both jump. An inebriated young couple stumbled out, their bodies so entwined they looked like a single organism with two heads and four limbs that pushed and pulled at itself. The couple laughed as they walked past Athena and Sebastian eyeing them coyly as desire and urgency carried them down the stairs and into the hotel. “I am going in” Sebastian announced “looks like a fun place to me”.

Through the glass door in the foyer, Sebastian could see the restaurant was packed, loud conversations and laughter blasted out each time the door opened. Entering into the once elegant space, the raucous patrons stopped talking and turned in unison towards them as if on cue. Sebastian and Athena grasped at each other’s hand. Hours ago they had strutted into to breakfast basking in the attention of others but this

felt different, it was judgement not admiration making them feel exposed and self-conscious. Athena tugged at her yoga pants and top wishing they were not so tight while Sebastian unconsciously flexed his biceps as though in warning. A tall pale woman with long jet black hair and luminous red lips approached, she was dressed in black leggings and a red and white corseted dress that pushed her small breasts up to create the appearance of cleavage; a cross between an old time wench and a biker chic. Up close she was much older than she first appeared. "Two?" she asked grabbing two menus. Sebastian and Athena nodded following their ghostly hostess to a corner booth in continued disquieting silence. Athena slid in first followed by Sebastian. Once they were seated the crowd slowly began to talk among themselves again.

A hefty, heavily tattooed bald man approached the table. With legs too small and thin for his bulky body he looked ready to topple over. "Can I take your order" he asked breathlessly. "Two beers for me and a bottle of Pinot Noir for the lady" Sebastian said without looking directly at him, he was looking across the room towards the door where a man had just entered. Athena's eyes followed. It just a man, not their imagined pursuer and with that they both relaxed against the booth as though it was all they needed to confirm that it had been all in their heads. "Actually", Athena interrupted "bring me a double shot of tequila, neat." "Instead of the bottle of wine?" the man asked with a hiss. "No bring the bottle too...thank you" she responded, more curtly than intended.

Athena chugged the shot of tequila, the warm liquid filling every cell of her being giving her a false sense of calm. Taking a swig of her glass of wine, she looked towards her husband of fifteen years. "He is still so handsome" she thought feeling herself flush "If only I could be sure he still loved me" she thought sadly. Sebastian took his wife's hand in his and squeezed wondering what he could ever do to have her believe in him again. "Let me out, I have to go to the bathroom" she said scrambling over him. The two drinks had mixed quickly in her empty stomach and the room was beginning to sway. Giggling to herself, she bumped into a large man standing in the hallway. "Sorry" she mumbled without looking up. She moved to the right and the man moved with her. "Oh sorry again..."she said again this time raising her fuzzy gaze to meet his. A big man with a

flat billed hat stood in her way. "Oh my god it is him" she thought, throat constricting, heart thumping, her wobbly legs incapable of helping her get away. "This is it" she envisioned his large hands over her mouth, being dragged away un-noticed while Sebastian charmed the tiny breasted hostess with his good looks. Equal parts jealous and terrified, Athena turned to run and stumbled. The giant man caught her. "Are you ok ma'am?" he asked with genuine concern. Athena willed her eyes to focus and realized that this was not the man from the resort. He wasn't quite as big as she first thought and he had a gentle expression not the crazed look of the man who'd yelled at her. Thinking that maybe everyone around there owned a flat billed hat, Athena apologized for her clumsiness and continued to the bathroom laughing at herself.

Sebastian was not talking to the hostess who looked like she'd been here since it opened but looking at the menu as he downed his second beer. Although he was fairly sure now that the whole afternoon had been a misunderstanding and was pretty hungry nothing looked appetizing. He made up his mind that as soon as Athena returned they'd go back to the hotel and figure out a way to save this trip and their marriage. He asked the waiter for two more beers and gave him his card to close out their tab. He checked his watch to make sure she wasn't taking too long. If she wasn't back in a few minutes he'd go look for her. Tequila was a bad idea on an empty stomach and he hoped she wasn't already doubled over the toilet. The waiter brought over two more beers and the check. Sebastian was finishing the second beer as Athena returned all giggles. "Great, she's drunk" he thought standing up.

"Let's go Athena. I looked over the menu and I don't find anything appetizing or low cal. I don't think these people would know a head of kale if it introduced itself" he said calmly. "Sebastian, I really need to eat something" she hiccupped. She stood in front of him, hand on hip swaying from side to side. "Athena, you are drunk, let's go. We'll find something on the way back to the hotel" Sebastian grabbed her by the wrist to keep her from falling. "Let me go, I want to eat" she tried to jerk away. Her gripped her harder and started leading her to the door. "Sebastian. Stop. I want to stay. There is no one following us. We are just getting paranoid". Athena tried to free herself from his iron grip. "You are hurting me" she tried to whisper, not wanting to make a

scene but too inebriated to notice she was. They were out the door now, heading down the stairs. Sebastian pulling her down, Athena thrashing about trying to get away. "Stop Sebastian. God Dammit. Let me go!" she cried finally pulling free as they neared the car. She stood there panting, glaring at him when someone approached. "Hey ma'am. You alright?" It was the man from the bathroom hall.

Feeling light headed from the four beers he'd had on an empty stomach, Sebastian immediately thought, "SHIT, it's THE guy, the one from the resort, the jeep and the bar. The fucking guy HAS been following us". He pulled Athena behind him, accidentally tossing her to the ground. "Hey asshole. Are you following us?" Sebastian pushed him back. The man stumbled. "Yeah, I am following you. I saw you drag that woman out the restaurant. What? You think just because you are together you can push her around? Maybe that works in the city but not here you piece of shit." The man squared up against Sebastian, toe to toe, eye to eye. "You ok ma'am? Why don't you come on with me and leave this asshole here. He clearly doesn't know how to treat women." It was confirmed, the yoga instructor had sent him. Sebastian raised his arm and hit the man square in the face, knocking him down. He stood over him, "So it's true, that skinny bitch sent you. Did she expect me to just sit there and let my wife get shit on? She spent a lot of time planning this trip and it was nearly ruined by her noxious gas." Sebastian screamed kicking him over and over. "Then you ruin the jeep tour and follow us to this piece of shit town." Sebastian pummeled the man in the face and the stomach, finally kicking him in the groin when he was down. With eyes swollen shut, a few broken ribs and multiple contusions to his head and torso, the man rolled away from his attacker, wondering how he'd explain what happened to his wife.

Athena's forearms were bruised from scraping the asphalt as she slid on the ground and she had a headache from going head first into the car. Tequila gurgled in her throat, threatening to spew out. She was on all fours when she saw Sebastian beating the man with the flat billed hat filled with a rage and fury she had not thought possible. "He still loves me" she thought rising to her feet, painfully making her way to where Sebastian was raising his leg for the final stomp to the groin. She reached out for him gently, warmth and desire replacing her previous anger and fear. "Sebastian, stop. You got him. I don't think he's going to follow us anymore. Thank

you babe.” Sebastian turned around, drawing her towards him, kissing her urgently, his hands exploring her curves, wishing he could take her right there. Athena returned the attention, never more in love. All she ever wanted was for him to protect her, to stand up for her. He’d finally had. Sebastian sensing his wife’s deep admiration for him, felt loved and cherished again. He led Athena to the car, kissing her bruised arms, gently tousling her hair. When she was safely in, he got in the driver’s seat and pulled away, the Tesla softly purring on the road towards home. “Aren’t we going back to the hotel to get our things?” She asked confident that whatever he decided was right. “Don’t you worry about that, I’ll take care of everything. Right now I need to get you home where it’s safe. No yoga instructors, no jeeps, no men following us. Sorry honey but your anniversary trip blew” Sebastian’s tone was light, he felt better than he had in years. Athena smiled at him, “Next year, let’s just do a nice romantic dinner on our anniversary”.