

*The Present*

Noel drove down the country highway with ease, steadily turning with each curve in the road. The dark of the night imposed a stillness on the East Texas roads that usually helped him think. The world out here was at peace. He could sneak along the road and catch that calmness by surprise with his headlights, stealing some of it for himself. Now, however, he shrank in it. Wisps of fog enveloped the road. At some points, he would slow down well below the speed limit faced with an misty opaque wall; at others, the clouds raised a few meters above the road, and his headlights would catch glimpses of the otherworldly ceiling.

His head rested in his hand as he drove, fingers running through his graying hair. His silver beard was scruffy out of apathy rather than style. He'd grown it in his thirties, at the request of his wife, Ava, but gave up on giving it the proper care years before she stopped caring herself. Had he shaved it a week ago she probably wouldn't have even noticed. *Too busy fucking around town*. Whitened knuckles gripped his steering wheel for a moment before relaxing.

It's the little details that scream the loudest. A new set of lingerie appeared even as Noel couldn't remember the last time they slept together. Notifications would ring from her phone before she would stealthily turn off her notifications. She didn't think he had caught that detail, but he had. He saw her quickly silence her phone out of the corner of his eye as he pretended to watch the game. Tonight, finally, he caught her in the very act. Noel was supposed to teach a pair of night classes at the campus but canceled them at the last second. He told his students he was feeling "under the weather," but he really just couldn't bear another damned discussion on 1984 and "the willing ignorance of our society in the 'Big Brother' complex that subversives our individuality." That was one of his favorite, eye-roll inducing comments made by one of his smuggest students. When he finally made it back home, a foreign car sat in his driveway. His own fucking driveway. Fiction traditionally dictates that the enraged husband will then kick in the door and shoot the adulterers in a fervent temper. A different mind prevailed, and Noel simply turned away and kept driving, all the way out to these peaceful country roads.

A town emerged from the fog. It was only 9:30 PM, but it may as well have been three in the morning in a town like this one. An emptiness fell upon the town with the rise of the moon. Street lamps cast a hazy light on its empty parking lots and nameless buildings. Traffic lights switched for no one, save for the occasional eighteen-wheeler or rogue car passing through the town. As Noel drove down the main road and lifeline of the municipality, shadows danced across his dashboard and downcast face. Up on the left, a sign surfaced from the fog. "Executive Inn"

stood in bold-faced letters on a sky-blue backdrop. *So it's still here after all.* Noel flicked on his blinker and pulled into the parking lot.

It was a quaint motel. The Executive Inn was built in a two-storied L-shape, cradling a modest pool between its arms. Its fresh terracotta and honey paint job was warm and unpretentious. A family, complete with grandparents, parents and children from the looks of it, bustled around the parking lot. *Interesting place for a vacation.* Noel parked next to the pool and walked over to the front doors, but a sign stopped him in his tracks. "LOBBY UNDER RENOVATION: Go to the Star Motel next door for room." He sighed and considered driving, but the cool night air suggested otherwise. He turned and walked across the grassy patch separating the two motels. Dew kicked up from the wild blades and wetted the bottoms of his jeans, but he didn't mind. The air was nice after all.

The doors to the Star Motel lobby opened by a sensor as Noel strolled in. An older, heavysset lady manned the counter alone. She lowered her book with a smile. "How can I help you, sir?"

Noel rested his hands on the counter, gazing at the paper sign advertising the various rates. Upon seeing the "Weekly" column, he chuckled and shook his head. "Need a room for the night. King-sized, non-smoking."

"Of course." The lady typed away at the computer. The printer whirred, and she retrieved a paper from its clutches. "Just sign here. And here please. I'll need your credit card as well."

Noel handed the plastic card over and glanced back at the Weekly rates. *Here we are.*

### *The Past*

Daylight spilled down through the windshield as Noel thumped his hand to the music. The upbeat notes of "Feathered Indians" bumped from his new 10" subwoofers and Rockville RVT-1 1000 Watt Peak Car Amplifier. Noel didn't necessarily understand those specifications, but the salesman sure sold it well. To Noel, its quality had even surpassed the promises of the man's cheap talk.

*"If I'd known she was religious, than I wouldn't have came stoned, to the house of such an angel, too fucked up to get back home."* He belted out the lyrics as he whipped into the parking lot. He peered under the visor to the ragged motel. "Why the Executive Inn," He smiled to himself. "You look even better in person."

The lime green Kia parked under the sign made him much happier than the broken down inn.

He backed in next to the Kia as she stepped out into the day. Shutting off his car, he stepped out grinning. "Fancy seeing you here."

Ava's dimples raised beautifully as she squeezed his torso. "Just a quick two hour drive. Gilmer sure is a beautiful town though, huh?" At 5'6, she was just barely shorter than Noel. Her black hair, chopped to the shoulders, defiantly rejected the light, reflecting it off with a glimmer. A ring poked through the side of her button nose in a subtle but similar subversion.

"Well I can guarantee you that of all the tiny East Texas towns between us, Gilmer is the *crème de la crepe*."

Ava's violent-frosted nails covered her mouth as she stifled a laugh.

"What?"

"Are you kidding? *Crème de la crepe*?"

"Well how do you say it?"

"I'm one hundred percent sure it's *crème de la creme*."

Noel's face scrunched up in confusion, until he shrugged with a laugh. "Okay, cut me some slack. I'm an English major, not a French major."

Her finger playfully jabbed at his chest. "I'm not forgetting that one."

Noel rolled his eyes and pushed her off. "I'll turn around and drive right back the way I came, mark my words."

"Oh right, sure." She grabbed his hand and pulled him to the front doors. "Now c'mon."

The couple strolled into the lobby. The decor seemed unusual for a motel lobby. Antiques dotted shelves held by oak strips that covered the walls. An old, dusty TV played a cartoon movie he wasn't familiar with. A small man with rounded glasses sat perched at the counter. "Welcome to the Executive Inn. What would you like?"

"We'd like a room please."

He peered down through his glasses. "Okay what sort?" The man leaned down out of sight, rummaging through a box. A piece of paper slid onto the counter, complete with the various rates.

"Uh.." Noel pulled the paper closer. "Just a room for the night please."

"Smoking or non-smoking?"

"Non-smoking."

"And I'm assuming one bed for the couple?"

A bit of red rose to her cheeks as Ava answered. "Yes, please."

The man prodded away at his keyboard and placed a waiver on the counter. "You're all set. Just sign the dotted lines." Noel scribbled his signature on the paper and paid for the room.

He got the room, she got the wine. "Thank you, sir." Noel said with a smile and nod as he took the key from the man.

"My pleasure. You're in Room 108. Have a good day!"

After retrieving their bags, the couple began to look for their room. The motel was in rough shape, to put it mildly, justifying the 1-star rating Noel had come across when he found it. Tan paint chipped from the walls, donned with drooping black tiles comprising a roof that clearly needed repair. The halls of the motel cradled a modest pool, caught between its two wings. Room 108 was nestled neatly between the two wings on the first floor, just below the staircase adjacent to the pool. The green light on the keypad illuminated with the wave of the key, and Noel plopped down on the bed. The room itself was similarly modest. Plain bed. Oak nightstand. Mirror above a sink area adjacent to the bathroom. Strangely, no TV. "Well what do you think?"

"I think the Exec Inn has seen better days." She joked, though neither of them actually cared. "How was your drive?"

Noel's arms stretched, brushing against the frame of the bed. "It was nice." He propped himself up on his elbow to look at her. "I've never minded long drives. Especially in the country. It's peaceful, you know?"

Ava dumped her bag into the desk chair and fiddled with her hair in the mirror. "No, I get it, but the drive from Oklahoma to UT gets to be a bit much for me. I'm over it."

Noel stood up and hugged his girlfriend from behind, looking into the mirror. "Fair enough. I'm a lot closer to school."

Ava rested her head back against his shoulder with a smile. "When do we go back again?"

"January 18th." He replied, brushing his hair down flat with his hand. "Honestly, I'm ready. It's way easier to see you when we don't have to take a road trip once a week to hangout."

She patted his arm and pulled away to open her bag. "Agreed." Rummaging through the clutter, she finally withdrew a bottle of wine and corkscrew. "And for all your troubles coming to see me, only the best wine for you."

"Oh Ava you shouldn't have. What kind?"

"Uh," she rotated the bottle to read the label. "Three Thieves California Cabernet Sauvignon."

"Mm. Exotic."

Holding it between her thighs, she popped the cork out. "Only \$8.99 at the local gas station. Can you believe that?"

“That much?” Noel grabbed the bottle and took a generous swig. “Wow. You can really taste the grapes.”

The pair took turns passing the bottle with jest, teasing and laughing and catching up on the past week’s events. They’d been together for seven months now, but neither of them counted the days. Minutes, hours passed, until they found the bottom of the Cabernet.

Noel threw his hands up, laughing. “I just don’t see the big deal.”

Ava slapped her hands down on the bed. “What do you mean ‘you don’t see the big deal.’” She mimicked him mockingly. “This new guy she’s talking to is literally a 5’6 Pete Davidson. As her best friend, I can’t allow this.”

“Alright, first off, great for him. Second, Pete got Arianna, so there has to be something to his whole look.”

“BUT PETE DAVIDSON IS FUNNY AND FAMOUS.”

Before Noel could reply, the blip of a police scanner outside caught his attention. “You hear that?”

Ava perked up to listen. “Oh yeah.”

Noel rolled off the bed to peer out the curtains on the window. Outside, two cops with baby blue, latex clubs stood talking to a woman in her late forties. A gurney rolled out of the room they stood by, donning a man with a portable suction device strapped to his mouth. “God.” Ava said from behind him as he closed the curtain. “I hope he’s okay.”

“Jesus, seriously. Didn’t look good.” Noel shook his head. “I would not want to die at the Executive Inn motel.”

Ava frowned. “Don’t joke.”

“No, I’m not. I’m just saying I hope he’s okay.”

### *The Present*

Back at his car, the Executive Inn parking lot was now empty. The dense fog left a thick blanket of dew on the gray paint and windows. On his back windshield, someone had drawn a smiley face and some indiscernible graffiti-style letters in the droplets. Unamused, Noel retrieved a hard case from his glove box and shut the door without locking it. As he walked up the stairs of the motel to his room, he couldn’t help but gaze at Room 108, just below the staircase, lost in the sea of still-untainted memories.

A strange mothly smell wafted to his nose as he opened the door. He kept the lights off as he slumped down onto the bed, dejected. The initial fury over Ava's betrayal had given way to pure grief. His heart and rage pushed him to rally against her, but his mind knew better. The truth burned so much hotter inside him than the adultery itself. For the first time in a long time, he paused as he thought back to where it all went wrong, when he naively assumed they could ride their passion through their wedding and onto the rest of their lives. He simply had not been man enough to hold on to her. Blind fury slipped back to the corners of his eyes as he buried his face in his hands, clawing at his skull.

The raw emotion was almost refreshing to Noel. The last time he had felt such a way was when he spotted an old college friend's name, printed in bold letters along the buckram-bound hardcover spine of a book at Barnes and Noble. As he turned the last page in his car later that day, he wanted to be critical. He *needed* to find a reason to hate it. Yet he felt nothing but admiration as he snapped the novel shut. He resolved to pick his writing back up that night after putting it off for so many years, but he picked up a bottle instead.

In the dark of the room, he looked back on Ava in a new light. She really had tried to encourage him to keep up the writing, but he took it for granted. All her words fell on deaf ears over the years. He only heard her when she went silent, and so then, his resentment grew.

*At 48, what am I supposed to do?* He thought as he stood to look in the mirror with hatred. He was the same age his father had been when he died. His formerly tight frame had succumbed to age. His belly pressed his shirt, and his shoulders slumped forward. Bags drooped from his tired brown eyes. Noel looked like his father before him. No wonder his son looked at him with the same unspoken pity he had given to his own father. All his life he had been filled with unbridled ambition and energy, ready to take on the world. All his life had led to this dank motel room in this forgotten town.

### *The Past*

"You remember the day I met you?" Noel chuckled as he drank from their second bottle of the night.

"Oh God. You and Dan were so cheesy."

"Hey, it worked right?" He laughed and handed her the bottle.

"You two literally came up to us and said 'Hey we're just trying to drink here, can y'all stop being so distracting?'"

"Yet somehow that line brought us together, huh?"

Ava smiled and eyed her boyfriend. “So when are you going to let me read one of these stories of yours, huh?”

Noel rolled his eyes and laid back. “Oh not again. Please don’t make me regret telling you about that.”

She wasn’t dismayed as she eagerly laid across his chest. “Come on, you said you write all the time. I’m sure your stories are amazing.”

He glanced at her. She clearly wasn’t budging. “Alright, I’ll make you a deal. If I ever get published, you can read that one.”

Those gorgeous dimples revealed themselves yet again. “Deal.” She picked up his arm and shook his hand. “So what makes you love writing so much anyways? I don’t know about you, but I hate writing essays.”

Noel laughed, running his fingers tenderly down her back. “It’s a little different.” He paused to think as he gazed up at the beige ceiling. “I don’t know. There’s nothing better than being able to put stories to a page and create interesting characters. It helps me think through life, you know? What could be cooler than someday becoming a famous writer and helping people think through life themselves with your own stories?”

Ava’s eyebrow raised. “Oh so you want to be famous, huh?”

“I mean, I know it’s a huge stretch, but how cool would it be to be remembered by thousands of people long after you’re gone.” He stopped again to collect his thoughts. “I don’t know. I’m just scared to grow old having done nothing with my life. I don’t want to be plain. I want to be remembered.”

He looked down from the ceiling to see Ava studying his eyes carefully. “You know what I think?”

Noel rubbed her back. “What?”

“I think you just need to live in the moment. You’re always so worried about the future, you forget about the present. I think you definitely have what it takes to become who you want to be, but if that’s all you worry about, you’ll be miserable.”

He looked into her bright hazel eyes. She was even smart too. “I love you.”

“I love you more.” She smiled, leaning down to kiss him. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and rolled on top of her.

The memories of wine and the girl he once knew faded back into the dark as he stared into the mirror. By god, he was smiling. His fingers danced across the rigid, grainy texture of his midnight case, before popping the latch open with a portentous click. His hand withdrew the sleek 9mm Sig Sauer P365 from its clutches. For such a small firearm, it sat heavy in his hand with an ungodly power. Solemnly, he turned and took a seat on the chair at the desk.

*What's the best way to do this?* His posture was poised. Shoulders pinched back against the top rail of the chair. Often the ill-fated put the barrel in their mouth, but this felt unorderly to Noel. He pressed the barrel up into the soft space under his chin. The feeling of the frigid end against his skin sent a warm wave over his body. This. This felt noble. He would opt out of this lost war with a blaze of fire, burning away his lost dreams and broken life. All on his own terms. He paused, reflecting on this end.

*But wait. The sweet lady at the counter.* His hand fell into his lap. She seemed so kind and happy. Would his neighbors call in to her at the sound of the shot? Would she be the first to walk into his grizzly ending? He could not stand the thought of his final act traumatizing such a pleasant elderly lady.

Noel thought for a moment and came to a solution. He could call 9/11 himself and report a gunshot in his room to the operator and quickly hang up. *How would they get into the room without the lady?* Scratching his chin, he reasoned through a plan. He could prop open the door so they would not need the keycard. They would know about the shot before it happened and get into the room without an issue. The perfect plan. Noel stood and opened the door. The cool air blew into the room. Kneeling down, he carefully placed his shoe between the door and the frame, grabbed his phone from the bed, and returned to his seat.

His busy mind brought him to another thought. Strangely, a new sensation shifted inside of him, dripping from his heart into a dense weight in his stomach. It wasn't overwhelming. In fact, it was only just enough to break through the numbness that possessed him. Noel grappled with this sensation in confusion until he recognized the long-gone emotion - pain. He was hurt by what Ava had done. Deeply hurt in fact. After all these empty years, he didn't think he cared since he had lost her long ago. Regardless, the woman he had loved at one time was with another man. *Do I still love her?*

Fragments of thoughts steadily fell into place as Noel looked back on the years through a different lens. She had always cared. He was just so consumed by his own shortcomings that he shut her out long ago. Ava had never cared about these achievements. Only he had. Noel wasn't a failure in her eyes until he began giving up on everything. Now, as he faced the



ultimate death of his writing dreams, his passions, his relationships, and the forty-eight years that had led to this moment, the only thing that still mattered to him was her and the kids.

*What if there is still time to fix this.* Wearily, Noel looked at the phone in his hand. He could call her right now and tell her how wrong he had been. It's no easy fix to mend a broken marriage, but he could start tonight with nothing else to lose. Still, he was tired of life, waking up day after day with nothing but reminders of his own failures. Who was to say he could even fix this?

An eternity passed as Noel determined his fate in that dim, unassuming room. The pines loomed over the town, their emerald shades snuffed by the fog and shadows, sheltering Gilmer from all the riches and indigence of the world beyond the trees. The children from the parking lot laid in bed, sound asleep. The traffic light switched to an electric green. The lady at the counter thumbed to turn the final page of her novel. All was quiet as Noel typed into his phone with trembling hands.

### *The Past*

The couple laid under the sheets in peace, Ava's head nestled into Noel's arm. He watched her nails trace gently across his chest.

"Have you ever heard of the many worlds theory?"

Noel took a deep, relaxed breath and tucked his hands behind his head. "No. What's that?"

Her fingers continued their dance. "I saw this video online describing it. Basically, electrons all move in one direction to make up the world we live in, right? It's been proven in quantum physics that these electrons can simultaneously be in two different positions, but as soon as we 'look' at them, we only see the one position. That one position is the whole world that we live in, but there are parallel worlds that we can't see where these electrons move in entirely different directions."

His chest bounced up with a laugh, interrupting the waltz. "Babe, you are already losing me."

There it was. That beautiful smile. "No, hold on. Listen. The video explained it better than I can, but based on physics, the theory claims that anytime you move or make one decision, there is an entirely different universe that is created where you make the opposite decision. Since the electrons and atoms can be in two different places at once, there are new worlds that branch off every moment that we never get to see. There's an infinite number of "you"s out there

where you are a totally different version of yourself based off of whatever choices you *didn't* make.”

Noel's brow furrowed. “I hate that.”

Ava flipped to rest on his chest, studying his face. “Why?”

“I mean if that's true then do we really have any control? There's always going to be another 'me' out there who does better or worse in the future. So then no matter what I do, I never really have control and nothing I do matters.”

“Exactly,” Ava beamed. “Isn't it amazing?”

Noel toyed with this idea for a moment before shrugging it off. No one can live a good life thinking that way, he reasoned. His entire life rested in the world beyond this room after all. She just didn't understand.

Before long, Noel's mind returned to more important things, like tomorrow's drive home and his latest little story about an obsessive artist's futile attempts at grandeur.