
Marigold Inn

The moon had waned, and the two no longer having tables to busy or bus, rolled silverware. It was the prime of the night as far as they were concerned. Ruby's Buffett, a town gem tucked off the only main road in Millington, TN was closing, the last table of customers sitting over coffee and cheap cakes.

Christy rolled slowly, arthritis knobbing her fingers with dyed brown hair falling in her face. She was the oldest server there and hefty, with a bad leg. Heather was young but already lines creased her face. She rolled in sync with Christy, loving to hear her talk.

"So, you gonna take that bus up there and tell Stewart, are ya?" Christy asked in big breaths, as if talking itself were a chore.

Heather patting her pocket with money saved, "Yep."

"Does Stewart know it—that your coming?"

"Not yet, but we've been talking about every night. He's still at his aunt Connie's house. Oh, I really would have given anything for you to see how pretty that house was...built like a big cabin, remember me tellin' you?"

"You said it sat on about ten acres."

"Ten or so."

"Well, you sure went on about the last time you went up, so I imagine it will be as good as that," Christy said with a smile.

Shame silenced her. She hadn't told Christie what *really* happened the last time she went. But there it was—the truth smacking right in the face, with those words: *I imagine it will be as good as that.*

She had spent four days there on the cusp of Spring, mostly going back and forth to Walmart with Connie buying flowers—Marigolds—to plant, listening to her talk about how much she couldn't stand her husband, Clyde. He stayed in the basement, mostly, and when he did come out, he walked with shoulders rolled forward, like dogs tuck their tails.

The first night she was there, Stewart didn't come home. He had picked her up earlier that day from the bus station—while on his lunch break, dropping her off saying, "Connie will look after you until tonight," with his usual twisted grin.

The second night, he didn't come home. Heather was sitting quietly in the room Connie had set up for her, when she overheard Connie from the living room telling

Stewart, "You'd better get your sorry ass here after work and see this poor thing that's been sitting here waitin' on you—for what, only the Devil knows."

Heather, holding one of the bed pillows in her lap, fixed her eyes on its floral pattern, as Connie slammed the phone into its receiver.

Stewart didn't make it home until the wee hours of her last day there; Reading the small clock next to the bed, 2:12 A.M blared in red lines. Heather felt her heart drop into her stomach, when he opened the door to her room. He sat beside her on the bed taking her small, trembling body in his hands. She would later tell Christy that they had made love for hours, and that it was magical—but really it was done and over before she blinked good.

She did fall asleep, her head on his chest, taking in the smell of his sweat, but awoke to the smells of breakfast cooking—and him already gone. Stumbling into the kitchen, she saw Connie cooking eggs, bacon, sausage, biscuits and gravy.

"He just left," she said, seeing the look on Heather's face.

"You hungry?" she continued.

Clyde tip-toed into the kitchen, dressed like a cowboy, down to dusty leather boots. He scanned the kitchen.

"Right here, Clyde," Connie said, annoyed, handing him a cup of cup of hot coffee. Heather watched the steam rise off the top, turning into a line as he carried it away.

"I guess we'll get the last of those Marigolds in the garden today?" Connie asked, looking over at Heather.

Heather sat down, head down, sliding her hands in between long legs. "Sounds good, ma'am."

Stewart didn't return that night to take her to the bus, it was Connie who dropped her off. As Heather was getting on the bus, Connie called out to her, "You're a sweet girl. Leave Stewart, alone. He's a sociopath. He'll never do right by any woman."

Heather paused, and turned back to Connie waving her hands, bracelets clinking on her wrist. "What's a sociopath?"

"He ain't got any real feelings. It's all about him. Look, he's been that way since he was a kid. Look how he treated you. He knew you were coming. He could've taken you around, out to eat, but what'd he do? Let you sit there for four days like a fool."

Heather stood stunned, holding her mouth open like a cheerio until the bus driver honked his horn.

“You gettin’ on or not, Miss?”

Heather sat down on a full bus next to the kindest-looking person she could find. It was an older woman from India, who talked about her religion. Heather couldn’t make much sense of what she was saying but listened. The woman had just lost her sister to cancer, but believed that people never died, just born again over—and over.

The woman was convinced that she had once been a powerful landowning man, but because she did not give enough supplementations to God, she was reborn a poor Indian woman living in America. She did something right to be born in America, she said, but with a laugh added, “but to come back a woman, I must’ve really done something terrible.”

She asked Heather who she had been in her past life. Heather shrugged her shoulders, saying, “I believe in Jesus, so I guess I don’t get a second go-around.”

As they moved through the silence of Mississippi back to Memphis, Tennessee, dusk came. The woman had fallen asleep, her hands clutching a box of graham crackers, with the look of a cherub—chubby cheeks and all. Heather stared outside, mesmerized by the purples and pinks streaking across the sky. The colors soon bartered for darkness and there wasn’t much left to see. She hung on the few houses passed, some with lights on, wondering who lived there and what the people were doing inside. She thought about what the woman had said about past lives. She thought she must’ve done something wrong in her last life, too.

Before leaving that night, she ventured slowly into the manager’s office, like a new deer, checking the calendar. Her name was written in black ink with a red swipe, denoting that she would be off for the next several days, the slight pull of that marker had given her the grit to get through much of that month.

Ruby, the manager nearly bulldozed her down walking in the office. Her face, contorted in perpetual anger, asked, “Whata want?”

“Just checking the schedule.”

“You’re off, what’s to check? I ain’t paying you to stare at paper,” Ruby said, with thick hands on hips.

Heather slinked out of the office, facing Kniesha, another employee, who bared the same new deer look. As Heather walked away, she heard Ruby tearing Kniesha a new hide.

Christie called to Heather from the employee bathroom, asking if she were ready to go, ready for Christy to drive her to Memphis—to the Greyhound station, off Union Ave, so she could catch the night bus *back* to Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

"I am," Heather called, pulling her bag of clothes out of the breakroom, and swinging it on her back like a kit of potatoes. Christie met her in the employee hall, with the stance of a quarterback.

"You sure this is a good idea?" Christie asked, one eyebrow up, serious.

"Stewart is gonna be head over heels when he sees me."

Christie stood, frozen with her eyebrow up, "Okay, let's go."

The station was crowded with people and smells Heather was used to, only in concentrate.

"Rich people don't take buses," Heather heard a woman waiting in line at the ticket counter saying.

"They fly planes or sleep on train cars or pack up their new station wagons for easy street," the lady went on.

Her second time taking the bus and it all felt so routine: Stand in line, pay for a ticket, check in luggage, and wait. The clerk, annoyed, pointed her to line B.

Shuffling to the line, an older black man bumped her with his cane. He could barely see but kept going, talking as he went, "I'm sorry, sir, very sorry."

She could tell he was looking for someone. Later, she would see him on her same bus, sitting next to an older woman, their hands clasped together, and Heather knew it was her he had been looking for.

The bus was dead empty and would stay that way until they made it to Jackson, Mississippi. Heather hoped she would not have to give up what all Greyhound bus patrons pray in earnest for—two seats to yourself as people shuffled on the bus in what appeared to be a mass exodus from Jackson. She pretended to sleep so no one could ask her, "Can I sit here?"

The question never came. Instead, a middle-aged white man slumped in the seat next to her, with eyes wide. She pretended to wake up. He was overweight and that weight spilled into her seat. She moved as close to the window as possible, uncomfortable.

"Where ya headed?" he asked, throwing his hair back, then clasping it into a ponytail. Customary bus talk.

"Hattiesburg. You?"

"Yeah, I'm headed somewhere else. Somewhere I can hide," he said.

"Hide?" Heather asked, clutching her purse tighter.

“You gotta wire?”

“A wire?”

“Nawh, I can tell you’re harmless,” he said, dead serious.

“I got some Xanax,” She said, without thinking.

Heather opened her purse, taking out two Xanax, giving herself one and the man one. Hyde, a new server at Ruby’s had given them to her when she told him about her trip.

He said: “Take these Snow White and sleep through it. Don’t wanna be awake for no Greyhound shit.” He called her Snow White the first day they met, and she had been tasked with training him; it was an endearment she liked.

“Who are you?” the man yelled, throwing the pill down, jumping up from the seat.

He sat down next to a man a few seats up. Heather could hear him telling the man that there was a girl in the back trying to poison people with pharmaceuticals. She looked at the pill still in her hand, now afraid to take it, dropping it to the bottom of her purse.

The bus driver—an older white woman—called out to the back, “Folks, you best be behaving back there, now.”

The bus rolled into a wet, soggy, cooler Hattiesburg, Mississippi at the crack of dawn. A small gas station attached to a small diner served as the town’s bus station. Patrons waiting for the bus huddled under umbrellas and the roof ledge of the gas station to avoid the rain. A small girl stomped her feet in one of the puddles, glimmering with the colors of gasoline in it. Heather watched as the old man who had hit her with his cane get off first, with his wife—or what she assumed was his wife—in tow. An even older woman, in what looked like a Sunday dress and a black umbrella with a wooden handle greeted them both with a smile.

Heather watched them beaming and laughing from her table as she ate a hot biscuit with jelly, wondering what they were talking about. She then turned to watch the rain fall relentlessly on the pay phone outside. She needed to call a cab for a ride to the closest motel. Once there and settled, she would call Stewart.

Her heart fluttered at the thought of telling him she was pregnant. Stewart had always talked about wanting a baby, and how she’d make a great mother. Before he left Millington—and her, they had tried for a baby.

After a few months of trying, he turned to her one night, and said, “I guess I just can’t have kids.” “

Maybe, it’s me,” she said back.

“No, honey, you ain’t the only one. I’ve tried knockin’ up every girl I’ve ever been with. I want a baby. Lots of ‘em.”

Heather laid in bed that night, biting her nails, and praying to Jesus—begging him for a fertile womb.

The cabbie pulled up, and Heather ran outside, ducking the rain.

“Haven’t ever seen it rain like this. You?” The cabbie asked, rasing folds of skin on her forehead.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Climate Change,” she said, lighting a cigarette.

Heather looked out the window, not knowing what she had meant.

“Nearest motel, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So whatcha’ here for?”

“I’m here to see a friend. A good friend.” Heather said, pulling her purse to her chest.

The woman, late 30’s, dressed in army fatigue, grinned. “A man?” she asked.

Heather blushed. “Yes.”

“Why ain’t this man picking you up, instead of me?” The cabbie asked, eyeing Heather from the mirror.

“Well he doesn’t know I’m here. It’s a surprise.”

“Look, how old are you, anyhow?”

“Nineteen.”

“Men are pigs. You know, I shouldn’t say that and insult the pig. Men are worse than pigs.”

Heather looked out the window again, her hands clasped around her purse. “It’s really raining hard,” Heather said, not wanting the woman to feel ignored.

“Global warming, darling. These storms are just gonna get way worse, you know.”

“They are?”

“You bet your bottom dollar they are. This whole planet is fucked.”

The woman slammed one of her hands on the dashboard. "Agriculture, that's when it all started. That's when humanity took a road they never should've taken."

"Agriculture?" Heather asked.

"Yep. That's where it all went to shit."

Heather looked out the window again and remained silent until the cabbie turned into a small motel. It had a green roof and at the entrance two large pots with dying marigolds in them.

"Closest motel, Marigold Inn. Decent place, really. Bathtubs, even. Six bucks and ninety cents for the ride," the cabbie said.

"Thank you," Heather said, handing dirty money over.

"Hey look, don't let that sociopath push you around," the cabbie said, putting the money in a small pink purse shaped like an owl.

Heather walked away, stunned. There was that word again. *Sociopath*. She had heard it before on TV, about serial killers and stuff but Stewart had never killed anyone, she thought.

Inside, she felt like a new woman, taking clothes off—cold and wet, sliding into a steamy tub of water. She had neatly packed her makeup bag to include a bath ball. She got a set of them from her stepmother for Christmas last year. This was the last one. She loved watching them fizz and foam, making the water smell like lavender, leaving her skin smooth. She used her hands to skim the oils from the top of the water, and over her belly. Her stomach, just a few months ago, flat as a board now had a small pudge. She loved it.

She crawled out of the bath and into the creaky bed. It smelled like a mixture of mold, and cheap perfume. A clock next to the bed read 8:02 A.M. She would sleep for a few hours and *then* call him, she thought. She knew he worked until late afternoons on most days. Holding the small roundness of her belly, she thought of seeing Stewart again, of his face lighting up when she told him, and with this, she dozed into a peaceful sleep.

Suddenly, a rapid knock came at the door, jolting her awake. She jumped up, heart racing, running to lock the door. "How did I forget to lock the door?" She asked, looking out of the peephole to see nothing but an empty parking lot and the Popeye's restaurant that sat across the way. A woman pushed a baby stroller. She turned back to the clock. Her chest tightened. She took the yellow phone in her hand.

"Clay's AC, how can we help ya?"

She recognized the voice. It was Carol, Clay's wife. Stewart had talked a blue streak about her, said she used to be a police officer but quit her job to answer the phone for the shop after her lupus got bad.

“Is Stewart there?”

“He’s at lunch, baby.”

“Okay, can you tell him to please call The Marigold Inn, Room #122 when he gets back?”

“Alright, Sweetheart.”

Heather paced the room, her breathe hasty, she got dressed, putting on a pink skirt, and a white top. It was the only outfit she owned other than a pair of jeans, an old High School T-Shirt and her work uniforms. She stared at the clock and then the phone and back to the clock.

“Clay’s AC, how can we help ya?” Carol answered.

“Hi, is Stewart, there?”

“Honey, he’s gone for the day.”

“Uhm...did you give—”

The phone clicked. She called Connie. No answer. She called his best friend, who said he hadn’t seen Stewart in a week. She called Connie again. No answer. It was past nine o’clock before that phone rang, answered on the first ring.

“Hello? Stewart?” Heather gasped.

“It’s Connie. I saw this number on my call back—who’s this?”

“Connie, it’s me, Heather. Is Stewart around?”

“Don’t tell me you’re in Hattiesburg?”

Heather felt a lump form in her throat. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Does Stewart know this?”

“Yes, he told me to come. Do you know where’s he at? I’m at the Marigold Inn.”

“You know he comes and goes. If I see him, you know I’ll tell him.”

Heather pulled the Gideon’s Bible out of the little drawer next to the bed, writing on the front page, *Where’s Stewart?* On the back she wrote, *Heather Montley*; Montley was Stewart’s last name.

Sleep came in intervals, moments of peace ripped by more elusive knocks on her door. Giving up, too afraid to sleep, she sat up in the bed, keeping her eyes, heavy and worn on the flimsy door and lock. She cried softly, repeating Stewart’s name. She called him almost every other day from home, and could reach him, and yet here, now, he was like a ghost, she thought, anger gnawing her sides.

She held onto the hope that he would be at work tomorrow—Friday, “Payday. He’ll show up for payday,” she muffled to herself.

An oriental man in wide rimmed glasses in a yellow cab honked his horn outside her room. “Must be my ride,” she said, double checking her pocket for the hotel key.

“Lord,” she sighed, taking a chance, using her last seven dollars for a ride to Clay’s and back.

The small man did not speak except to say, “you have arrived,” as they pulled into a small lot, a sign reading, *Clay’s Air Conditioning*, written in blue block letters.

“Please wait for me,” she told the cabbie who nodded.

Carol smiled as Heather walked inside, a bell clanking on the door. She wore a too-tight red dress, and a bleached blonde wig, seated in a wood paneled room—at a desk cluttered, yet neat.

“I’m Heather, Stewart’s friend. I really hate to be a bother, but I really need to see him,” Heather said rubbing sweat between her hands.

The phone rang, and Carol, who looked nothing like Heather had imagined, put one finger in the air, politely. Heather stood as she talked. A door to the warehouse opened, and a young man walked in, dressed in blue coveralls. He handed Carol a piece of paper while looking at Heather, then turned back.

Carol hung up the phone, “Hey Mike.”

He turned around on his heels, putting two hands up, imitating a gun duel, “What’s up?”

Carol smiled at the antics. Heather stood stiffly.

“Do you know what’s going on with Stewart?”

Mike looked at Heather, then back to Carol. “He’s...Man I don’t know. He was supposed to come in today, but I haven’t seen him.”

“I know that, Mike,” Carol said, annoyed. “But why, what’s going on with him?”

“You’d have to ask your husband. I think the guy should be fired. If any of us pulled the shit he was pulling—half-ass showing up, we’d be fired.”

Carol crossed her arms in front of her, tapping long red nails on her arms. “I’ll take care of it.”

Mike stood until Carol waved him back to work. She then turned to Heather, who was trying to swallow back tears.

“I don’t know where he’s at sweetheart. I’m sorry.”

Heather sighed deeply, “Thank you,”

The cabbie honked and Heather pushed, then held the door open with her back. Carol stood up quickly, hustling to the doorway, “Hey, give us a damn minute, will you?”

“That cab’s gonna leave me. I gotta go,” Heather said.

Heather could tell Carol wanted to tell her something, so she hesitated. The phone rang again. Carol walked over, clicking her heels, picked it up, then slammed it down without a word. “Do you want me to pass him a message. I can do that.”

Heather looked down, then to the cabbie, then to Carol. The Cabbie honked again. “Tell him he has a baby coming.”

Heather walked outside, and as she climbed in the yellow Toyota, Carol called out, with a cigarette in her mouth, resembling an aged Marilyn Monroe, “he got me too.”

Heather rolled down the window as the cabbie drove off, wanting to ask what she meant, but Carol grew smaller, watching as the car took off, blowing cigarette smoke into the coolness of a December day.

Lying on the motel bed, Heather felt her stomach gnawing with acute hunger. The clock read 4:31 P.M. Hope of seeing Stewart hung by cheap threads. Stomach growling and nervy, her mind took to flights of fantasy, imagining Stewart knocking on the door with a bucket of chicken and biscuits from the Popeye’s, them eating, and laughing; Her earlier fantasies of lovemaking had evolved into eating.

By midnight her famine was so intense, she felt dizzy. She tore the room up looking for anything to eat, finding only a few packets of sugar next to a packet of coffee, and one coffee mug. She blended hot water with the sugar, drinking it.

Calling Connie one more time, just to see if he’d answer—Clyde answered, “Now, who in thearnation is calling in the middle of the night?” Heather hung up, without a whisper, lying back on the bed, letting tears roll from her cheeks, streaking makeup carefully applied from earlier that day.

“Just like last time” she said, monotone, staring at the ceiling fan, covered in inches of dust.

“No worse, at least last time, you showed up for a few hours,” she said, gritting her teeth, turning to lay on her side as hot tears burned her cheeks.

The same cabbie who had dropped her at the inn, picked her up.

“Headed back home already?” she said as Heather crawled into the car, dizzy and disorientated from having not eaten.

“Hey, you okay?” “You look paler than a sheet.”

“I’m okay.”

“No, you ain’t. What’s wrong with you?” You need to go to the hospital?”

“No. No. I’m just so hungry. I’m pregnant and just really hungry. I haven’t eaten in a while.”

“What? Honey, why haven’t you eaten anything?” Look, never mind. Here, let’s go to this Popeyes, and get you some breakfast. You like Popeye’s?”

“I only have a few dollars and I need it to get to the station.”

“Put your money up,” She said, jerking the cab around to the drive thru window of Popeye’s. She asked what Heather wanted, ordered it upsized, adding an apple turnover to that.

“Eat it up, baby girl. All of it. You’re feeding two,” the cabbie said, handing Heather the food. Heather ate as tears came. The cabbie reached around, dotting her eyes with a napkin.

“That bastard told you to get an abortion, didn’t he?”

Heather, full sobs now, talking with her mouth full, “Worse. He never even came to see me. Just ducked and dodged my calls.”

“Oh, honey, you’ve just been sittin’ alone at that damn motel starvin’ haven’t you? Well, let’s you get back on that bus and home. And then get yourself in college. How old are you again, anyways?”

“Nineteen.”

“What would you like to do? A teacher? A vet? What?”

Heather looked out the window. No one had really asked her this question. She knew what it was she wanted to be but was too afraid to tell anyone. She used to tell people when she was younger, but they’d just laugh. She even told Stewart once. He said, “Yeah, okay. Baby, that’ll be the day.”

Heather sipped the last of her orange juice, hearing bubbles in the straw. “I always wanted to be a librarian—I love the smell of new books and old ones, too.”

The cabbie smiled. “You’re young. Get a grant. A Pell grant from your local university and sign up for classes—after the baby is born, of course—if you keep the baby. You don’t have

to keep the baby, you know? Look, there's nothing stopping you, darling...well except for climate change, but hey, it'll be at least twenty years before it gets real bad. Okay?"

At the bus station, the cabbie told her as she got out, "I wish you luck. All the luck the universe can afford to offer."

Heather turned back. "Thank you. Thank you so much...for the food and everything." The Cabbie waved with a smile showing good teeth, and it was then that Heather noticed a small mood ring on her left pinky finger, same as the one she wore.

"Oh," she said, looking down to her own hand to take note of it. It was there, now a deep green. When she looked up, the cabbie was driving off.

"Oh," she said again.

On the bus, Heather sat next to a girl, maybe a little older than herself. "What's global warming?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders, mouthing, "I dunno," putting headphones in her ear.

A CD player sat on her lap. She moved her head to the music. Heather looked down at her hands, clasped. She opened them, laying them flat on her knees. She made up her mind to go to the library when she got back home.

She could find the answers herself, she thought.