

## Gone Days

There shouldn't be any light this late. It's Friday near midnight, no street lights for a mile, barely a handful of homes, and trees outnumber the people a hundred to one. I expect darkness like a blanket, but the night shimmers with a low glow along the northwest near horizon. Looks like someone lit candles on a giant birthday cake. Warm light like birthday candles, but the smell in my nose—like burnt rubber and wood and what else?

Something sits wrong. Jeanette turns toward Javi and I; our necks are stretched forward.

The three of us trade our walk for a slow run, then faster as we close the final few yards to my block. Rounding the corner, we see it—piss-poor, pea-green mobile home. On fire! It's there and half gone, in the clearing, lit up like a bonfire, and I'm tearing across the weedy yard.

In a heartbeat, I pound the wall hard on the half still standing. I shout: "Dad. DAD! Are you out? Get-up-get-up-get-OUT!" Did he slip into sleep on the couch, one of his menthols dangling from his fingers? I'm half-forming a prayer, but it's crowded out by panic as the windows glow orange like a predator's eyes in the night.

"Rosa, wait!" Javi's words reach me but I disregard them.

I fly up the four steps to the door and wrench it nearly off the hinges. "Dad!" My cry disappears into a hacking cough. Heat sears the air. "Shit! My hand!" I stumble backward into the railing as I register pain from the hot door handle.

Smoke billows out of the wide-open front door. I can see my father framed by the doorway, lit by licking flames. He is rummaging. In the upper cabinet, above the microwave. As though he has time and inclination to grab the Tupperware on his way out the door.

"Dad. Leave it!" He turns at my voice, sees me step toward the entrance. He lunges at me and shoves me away. I topple backward and the momentum sends me over the railing. Sprawled in the dirt I look up and see him, digging again. The cabinets are burning now. There is no time. Flames consume the roof inches above his head. Still he rummages. Five seconds longer. Then he seizes something and screams like a screech owl.

My father runs backward, staring at the object in his hands, then spins a one-eighty and runs forward. Out the door and over the railing I've just flipped over. He's in the dirt beside me, screaming and looking at his hands. They are empty now, and bubbling, the skin on his palms and fingers puckering and peeling and red and gone. A small metal box, a cash box, is in the dirt beside him, nearly glowing with the heat of the fire. I know: don't touch it, as I hear my father's screams turn to weeping and echo in my ears.

Javi sits dumbly beside the chaos; Jeanette is furiously fumbling with her phone to call for help.

\*\*\*

It's two in the afternoon and I'm oozing self-satisfaction. The day's drudgery is done. They can't cage my ass in a desk again for a long weekend I'm making longer, sneaking out early. I slouch out of the short afternoon shadows of Gambel oak hemming the high school's farthest field, certain I'm out of any teachers' sightline. I want to stay up and stay out—late—tilt time toward freedom.

I stash my backpack in a familiar, hollow-knotted tree and lope toward a ditch with just enough momentum to clear it, entering *my* prairie. Hardly mine by rights but claimed by my romping childhood. If knowing is a kind of owning, this patch of Missouri land is mine, sealed by mutual fondness I like to think. The trees bend in the breeze to greet me; bunnies aren't afraid to cross my path. Sun, rain, and stars have shed blessings on me here for years.

The greenbelt stretches in front of me only a handful of acres but with enough hidden nooks, trees, and wading pools to lose myself and loose myself. I make a circuit I've been traveling since I was ten. I remember when this was an impassable jungle to me, eyes barely clearing the height of the prairie grass. Now my canvas tennis shoes grip the slick rocks across the creek to a meadow of grasses grown tall enough this wet Spring to tickle and switch my thighs as I run. I find the old downed oak and scamper up its trunk to the one remaining branch, grown akimbo long ago and perfect for straddling. For old times' sake, I arch my back on an imaginary horseback ride, the rough tree-bark the only saddle I've ever sat on.

I take a moment to admire my stealth—the swift escape I managed while the cafeteria monitor harangued some hapless sophomore whose platter slipped, spilling milk and mashed potatoes across half a dozen sneakered feet. “When opportunity presents itself...” I say with a happy shrug. I savor a granola bar stowed in my back pocket, brush the crumbs from my hand, and lick the remnant sweetness from my lips.

Then I'm off again, ready for a foot-soak under the cover of Cottonwood. This is the perfect way to pass an easy hour, waiting for the distant shrill of the final bell to release my classmates to the weekend I've already made friends with.

Before the sun has inched across a slice of the day, I sense company coming. My friends know where to look for me, and soon their voices carry across the quiet like gunshots, scattering birds from branches. I hear them holler through cupped hands. I holler back, ready to release my

solitude. They find me ankle deep in the trickling creek, mud between my toes, crawdad wriggling between my fingers. I lower the creature into the water before the boys start feeling experimental.

Roy approaches me like an alpha wolf, eyes low but fixed on mine, feet treading softly to the creek's edge. He lets me lean into his lips, kissing me with a nonchalance that suggests he'll find affection elsewhere if I don't deliver it. "Don't sweep me off my feet or anything, babe," I chastise him for his indifference, catching an edge of cold in his typical passivity. He's my third boyfriend experiment of high school and shaping up to be the least successful.

Dylan and Jeanette are listening to Javi finish his gripe about a livid teacher slinging a pop quiz in our last period class. "And you," Javi now turns to me with gleeful accusation, splashing his still-shod feet into the water beside me, "are gonna have to beg her to let you make it up!" He yanks a fly-away strand of my hair right out of my head, so I wince and give him side-eye. "That's for leaving me alone with that ghoul. Whose answers am I supposed to copy when you're not there?"

Jeanette slugs Javi in my defense. "Don't pull her hair; that's so immature. Maybe try studying for once? I pulled off a B in that class last semester; I could tutor you."

Jeanette and Javi are as familiar to me as these acres of escape; we entered each other's lives when we were six. Living within about a half-mile of each other, it was inevitable that our orbits of childhood mayhem would align. We ran rampant under lackluster parental supervision—found sprinklers to run through, mud pies to make, and spare change from couches to pool for shared licks of cheap popsicles from the 7-11. We are better and worse than siblings to each other. Except that poor Jeanette has nursed a semi-secret crush on Javi for the past two years now, and he is happy to have her adoration without any real interest in sidelining his flirtatious and wayward ways. He comes out better in the deal for sure, with her there to nurse his ego after his latest flings fizzle out.

Dylan—who made our trio four when we were in 4<sup>th</sup> grade—opens his backpack, pulling out a big bag of half-gone Doritos to share.

Our huddle of five settles onto a dry patch of grass flattened over time by our periodic visits. Fingers slowly turn orange as snacking and gossip wile away the scraps of the afternoon. Plans are made to meet up in Dylan's basement after dark for a horror movie and root beer floats.

Roy declines. He won't make it. Feels like being home. Feels like being alone. In fact, he's going to scam and "catch you guys later." He is gone with no goodbye, no kiss or hug or nod in my direction. I surmise his interest in me has fully faded.

Enthusiastic was never a word I would've used to describe him, and what few conversations we shared were neither deep nor sparkling. Roy let me lean into our relationship like he let me lean

into our kiss this afternoon. He let me join him in his car on Friday nights when he pulled up honking. He never quite asked me out, never quite held me close, and now I think he's not quite breaking up.

It could be worse, I determine. He might have given me reason to surrender my heart.

I could be like Jeanette, jumping in with unreturned devotion to Javi. Or I could settle for easy openness like Dylan who is always glad just to be along for the ride and providing the snacks, glad to share with us the only single-family home among our crew for basement movie-nights and backyard hang-outs. Or I could fall into some tired side-by-side like Dylan's parents, no longer liking each other but hardly finding any alternatives likely to change them. Or I could fall in lust like my parents, leaving a kid as a dream-killing burden for someone to shoulder.

All my observations suggest love is the most dangerous thing to dare and rarely worth the bother. So hang you, Roy, and good riddance; you're more like a millstone, and I'm looking for wings.

On the half-mile walk home, Jeanette tries to sidle up to Javi as he bounds ahead intermittently. Dylan fingers the crumbs out of the bottom corners of the Doritos bag.

When Jeanette peels off to walk up the driveway of her family's duplex, I watch Dylan accompany her halfway, releasing her with an eager, "See you later?" to which she nods. Her nod shifts her bag down her arm, and he grabs it just as she does. They simultaneously lift it back up her shoulder, Dylan's fingers leaving orange Doritos dust on the strap she doesn't notice or doesn't mind. I take it all in with a sly grin and a sliver of hope. Some things never change, but sometimes they do.

"What's with Roy today?" Javi digs at me for info. "Is he on the rag? Did you slap his hand away last night?" he asks cheekily.

"It's no big thing; I think we're just," I falter in response, the unfinished sentence hanging in the air for a second. "Whatever. Bored, I guess."

Dylan pushes on my back with his shoulder, rejoining us, a friendly nudge as we saunter up the road. "Interesting people are never bored. You're not boring, Rosa. Roy's definitely on the rag, or just plain stupid."

"Thanks, Dylan," I say with a wrinkled nose and a thankful smile.

Javi, not missing his chance to capture a smile, begs, "You want excitement, I'll show you excitement!" And he grabs my wrist and twirls me twice before I can disentangle.

“Okay, Romeos. I’ll see you later. Please no cheap gore tonight. Pick something classy: *The Shining* or *The Ring* or something. Or else I *will* be bored.” I give the most serious glare I can manage, and the boys depart with promises, trotting up the road to their respective homes, each happy in his own way. Dylan lumbers toward whatever might fall in his lap, while Javi trips toward his next impulse. “Happiness is strange,” I say out loud to only myself, “and it’s a tease.” The sting of Roy’s rejection returns as I step up the planks to my front door. “Screw him!” I command to the universe as I yank on the door handle.

I slam the pressboard door against the feeble wall and lurch into the living room/kitchen combo of our home, fury in my face. I bash my backpack against the wall for emphasis, letting it fall to a heap on the floor. I work to expel my anger with deep exhales.

My father is already settled on the couch, the dim light of evening cut by the flickering tv. His work boots are dropping mud on the floor beside the door. His socked feet are crossed, toes curling and uncurling, on the coffee/kitchen/dining room table at the center of the carpet and linoleum space.

“Looks like Dylan and Javi are vying for your friendly attention,” he compliments on the scene half-observed through the window. “Two boys yankin’ on your arms and fighting for your favor sounds none-too-tiresome to me. You’ve got your pick, darlin’.”

I throw daggers with my eyes and huff, “In tug of war, the rope never wins.” I feel a verbal tango coming on; my dad and I can’t seem to resist sparring with our words, playing our hearts for each other like jazz instruments riffing. More fun than a shouting match and easier than hugs, with an emotional payoff somewhere in between.

“Beggars can’t be choosers, Rosa. Fought over is better than dropped in the dirt.”

“I’m not a beggar for boys, and I won’t be anybody’s rope.” Then under my breath but loud enough to be heard: “Ugh. I gotta get out of this place.”

“Then why don’t you?” he calls my bluff and bluster. “You don’t do any better than grouse at me all the live-long.”

“No place better to go. Yet.”

“Hell, every place is better than this place.”

“Well, I’m not riding a boy out of town. They don’t get good mileage,” I sneer. “I’d end up stranded in a smaller town on a worse road in a shit-hole uglier than this one. With boys, you don’t

get gone; you just take the trap with you. Trust me, I'm leaving, but I'll do it smart. When I go, I'm gone for good."

"Gone for good—that's a curious thought. Whose good? Yours? mine? Damn, babygirl! Nothing but hateful disappointment in that plan."

With that pronouncement, he soothes the socks from his feet, tosses them near enough to his boots for one more wear before washing, then massages the arches of his feet. "You just try and go then. You'll see what it's really like out there. You'll come back hat-in-hand, and maybe then you won't be so quick to disrespect my sacrifices—everything I've done for no one else but you."

"You mean, all this," I sing, taking in the room with a grandiose sweep of my arm, "is mine?" Venom drips from my gaze onto every surface: the television's rabbit-ear antenna, the shoe-scuffed and sun-faded coffee table, the cigarette-and-ash-dusted couch just waiting for one warm cinder to catch and burn.

From where I'm standing in the kitchen I can see the back of his sunburnt, balding scalp tilt left as he eases a pack of cigarettes from his back-right pocket. With a flick of his finger he lights a match head against the corner of the coffee table. He inhales his first smoke of the evening, scorching his taste buds to nothing—the pre-dinner ritual of a man who works on other people's cars in other people's garages for other people's profits. Decades of grease under his nails and nothing prouder to show for it than his still-running Ford, the very one I was conceived in when his head still had hair, and his heart still held dreams alive and bubbling like a volcano in his chest.

Gone days.

"Shee-it," he jaws at me, straining his head around so I can see his eyes soften. "We're both sour, sad sacks at the end of a hard, dull week. Settle in and have a slice of pizza."

I glance down and see a frozen pizza pulled from the freezer to the counter, waiting my arrival. I turn the knob to start the oven pre-heating, then turn my attention to the morning's cereal bowls still in the sink, loading them into the dishwasher while I wait.

"You'll turn that attitude into a paycheck yet, girl," my dad muses. "Someone's gonna pay you just to shut-up one of these days. But it won't be me. You're outta my league," he smirks at me, offering a reconciling smoke from the pack in his hand.

He gets another day with me in it—tangle-haired tornado igniting his life with worry and work. I ignore the offered cigarette as I always do. He births a sigh in his belly and delivers it into the world, fatigue curling toward the ceiling with the menthol smoke of his cigarette. Love and need aren't so far apart for some.

“Oh that is so wrong!” Javi watches the horror flick with animated interest, leaning closer to the screen from his spot on the floor. A big bowl of mostly ignored popcorn sits in the center of the couch. On either side of it, Dylan and I half follow his commentary. “Too dark. Slow, but in a good way. I love how they shift the time frame here. Whoah!” And in unison all three of us lift off our butts at a jump-scare.

Jeanette hides in an old recliner in the back corner of Dylan’s basement, concentrating on a cross-stitch project under a dim lamp, no fan of horror movies. Her root beer float is still half full beside her.

By the end of the movie it’s nearly midnight, my blood sugar has plunged, and my eyes are heavy. We all have the stunned look of roller coaster fanatics who rode one too many times. Ride’s over and we are over the ride. Javi clicks off the television. Jeanette gathers her threads as Dylan sucks the last of her float through her straw, clearing cups away. A mostly empty two-liter of root beer tucked under his arm, Dylan walks us to the door and says, “G’night,” quickly resting an awkward hand on Jeanette’s shoulder, which she doesn’t brush away.

“Homeward,” I heave myself into the lead, Jeanette and Javi closely in tow. I haven’t missed Roy a bit tonight, I muse inwardly.

\*\*\*

On Sunday afternoon, they finally let me see my dad.

Thirty-six hours in a bleak waiting room, friends in and out with ineffective comfort, trying to occupy me with tabloid magazines and vending machine snacks. Jeanette thinks to bring me clean clothes to borrow. Dylan has been helpful in giving his parents things to do—they’re so anxious to help—so they aren’t hovering. Javi has never been so quiet, twitchy in his discomfort with hospitals, but he stays.

The updates are clinical. First degree burns on his palms and second degree on the top of his head. Surgery yesterday to graft healthy skin from his thigh onto his hands. His scalp will heal with time. They clean his burned skin twice a day; “debridement” they call it. Bags of antibiotics will flow into his veins for days to fight a likelihood of infection.

I haven’t slept. When I close my eyes, I see him sitting in the dirt screaming and staring at his hands; then his head grows a wick which lights like a Roman candle, showering sparks down like a thousand golden tears.

Only seeing him will help to quiet the worst-case scenarios spiraling in my brain.

Finally, I follow a nurse into my father's hospital room. A man stands in the corner with a notebook in his hand, almost invisible in a suit the same beige as the walls. My dad is half-reclining in a hospital bed clothed only in an assortment of tubes and a white and blue paper gown. His hands, wrapped in gauze, are resting across his belly; his eyebrows are singed away to nothing, and he wears a gauze crown on the top of his head. He is awake and looking sheepish. When he sees me, he shrugs his shoulders and tries to joke, "Can't even manage the remote for myself, but it's a great excuse to keep callin' on the pretty nurses for help."

I open my mouth to laugh and tears come instead. I blubber til my nose is dripping. Uncertain if I can touch him, I stand by his feet and look around for what to do next. I spy a box of Kleenexes and lurch toward them, forcing my throat to close on my crying. With ferocity, I turn back to my dad and scold: "No more cigarettes. No more fucking cigarettes!"

"Sorry, babygirl. I know. You're right. No more."

"It's not gonna be that easy; you never get to scare me like that again! I'll think about forgiving you when it's been a month with no smoking." Then, to let him off the hook a little: "At least we're getting a new couch."

"Hah! There is that. Oh my. You tie me down, Rosa, you know that? Tie me right down."

A swift red curtain falls over my eyes. I feel myself the hard-born burden for the millionth time in my life. "Don't blame me! I didn't ask to be born!"

"Babygirl, you misunderstand." He moves a mittened hand over a large square of gauze on his thigh, looking confused as to how to scratch an itch. He is hopeless and in need of mercy. He lifts his gaze to me, daring to look me in the eye. I am flushed and vibrating, shifting between anger and deep-rooted love like a cuttlefish shifts its colors, and my eyes are brimming oceans. "You tether me to the world, darlin'. Without you I'da found some reckless way to leave it. Long time ago." I can tell he hopes it's enough, hopes I feel the truth of it, like a word spoken in church.

He tilts his head toward the hospital side-table. The cash box sits on it, closed.

"I can't find the courage to look inside. I need you to do it, Rosa. See if. See if it burned up inside."

Until Friday night, I never knew the box existed, let alone what could be inside worth risking his life for. I stretch out my hand slowly as if expecting it still to be hot. "What the hell could be so important," and I cut myself off, seizing it. The lock holds when I try to lift the lid.

My father glances down toward his chest as if looking for something. "Um. Check that big ol' plastic bag on the chair. Maybe it's there."



I pull at the bag's opening, smelling his smoke-saturated clothes. I plunge my hand in and feel around, finding a chain with a small key attached. I raise it in his sight and he nods.

Slipping the tiny key into the cold metal lock, I turn the tumblers and lift the lid. Inside are stacked many dirty bills, rubber-banded in several packets. I tip the small box into view for my dad, who releases his mitted, IV-tubed arms to the ceiling and rasps out a hearty, "Woohoo!"

"Dad. Holy shit."

"I wanted it to be more; I meant to save more. It's only about, I think, \$9,000. But that's community college for two years. Almost. By the end of that you'll have talked somebody into paying for what comes next. I'm sure of it! You're gonna be leaving soon. Christ what'll I do with myself?" he winces with more than the pain of the burns.

"Oh my god. Dad! You'll be getting ready for my visits. I'm very hard to please, you know. I want a new couch to sit on, and you have to cook me a decent meal. And I'm not coming home just to use the laundromat. Find a second-hand washer and dryer and fix it up. What's insurance gonna cover? My dad needs a new roof over his head!" I turn to the beige suit in the corner, but dad interrupts before the guy can draw a breath.

"Leave that for later, babygirl. I'm tired; I need a nap. Just lock that up and drive it over to the bank in the morning. The insurance man and I just need five minutes alone, and then I'm Rip Van Winkle. Go find some food, and I bet Dylan's parents will find a spot for you for a couple weeks while I get it sorted. Do me a favor and off you go, Rosa. I love ya, girl!"

"You too, Dad. I'll come back tonight?" My exasperation with him is matched by my surprise. Love and relief are bubbling fountains in my empty belly. I don't know how to find where the bandages and burns end and he begins, so I kiss his knee under the blanket and leave the room. "Love you, Dad."

I carry myself back to the waiting room to find Jeanette, Dylan, and Javi looking up at me, a feast of sub sandwiches and sodas spread out for us like a picnic.

Lurking in the corner, Roy lifts a Snickers from the vending machine. He winks at me as he tears the wrapper open, raises the chocolate bar in his hand and, before my hand can stretch out to receive it, takes an enormous bite.

With the finality of a verdict, I announce to him, "You can go," turn my back, and settle in with my friends for my first meal of the weekend. The cash box is locked and resting in my lap, a treasure chest holding my dad's past and my future.

*“Thought I was nearly done with her,” Rosa’s father casts aside to the suit, eyes agleam.*

*The man in the corner opens his notebook. “As I was saying before, the investigation concluded the fire originated in the kitchen. Looks like the oven was left on, eventually igniting interior grease and food debris. It spread from there.”*

*“Yeah. Okay then. Could’ve just as easily been one of my cigarettes. Can you go now? I need some sleep so I can dream up a next step.”*