

Remy just thought it was girl stuff. The usual three A.M. existential debate over the meaning of life and love, the pointlessness of the male sex, and where they would go if they never woke up. This type of modern, nihilistic atmosphere was normal at their monthly campouts, a tradition ever since Carla first signed the cast holding Remy's broken wrist together. It was a binding contract. A "I'm sorry you broke your wrist and I threw up on you, but I've literally seen your insides so now we have to be friends". God, she couldn't believe that was over two years ago. What a wild time. She also couldn't believe her ears when, for the first time ever, Carla asked to sleep inside.

Carla was an all-out kind of girl. When they camped, they *camped*. Bonfire meal, tent set-up, and only a radio as any other company. To be honest, it wasn't really her cup of tea. She'd rather be inside, drinking *actual* tea while watching TV. So, Carla being the one to flake? Apocalyptic. "What, are you scared of the grass? Wuss."

Carla tensed a little before shrugging. "I'm not gonna freeze to death because *you* want to turn everything into a competition."

"How dare you," Remy faked a little gasp. "You're just jealous cause I always win."

"Oh, yeah?" Carla lunged up from her position the porch steps of Remy's family home and loomed over Remy's five-foot-five with her six-foot-one. "How tall were you again, punk?"

She was tall enough to be able to tell that something was bothering her best friend. Carla looked normal to others, dark hair yanked up into a high-ponytail and brown eyes fiercely flint-like in the growing greyness of the evening. Yet, her face was shades lighter than her usual fawn

to tawny spectrum. She shivered here and there, even when there was no wind. ‘*Probably just girl stuff,*’ Remy thought. “It’s getting cold, wanna head inside?”

Carla’s face softened, “Yes, please.”

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They were still up when the morning showed, early enough for the chill to still be hanging off the shingles of the house and for the girls to be drowsy with sleep and truth. Carla, stoic and solid Carla, the quartz to Remy’s alabaster, was the one to bring it up.

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

“Hmm?”

“It’s gotten so quiet. The mountains,” she spoke quietly, like the last star to rest on the horizon.

Remy rolled onto her side to face Carla. “Yeah?”

Carla pursed her small, clover-petal colored mouth. “Yeah.”

She looked at Carla, sleepy-eyed and a little discomposed. Her friend had always been prone to thinking too much. She’d never been *scared* from it, though. ‘*I wonder if the clovers are still alive,*’ Remy mused. Maybe if she grabbed some, it would make Carla feel better. More instinct than thought, she shot up.

Carla flinched, “Jesus Christ. It’s too early to be moving that fast.”

Remy inwardly agreed because dizziness had twisted her insides up. “Carla. Carla!”

“What?” Her friend groaned. “Why are you like this?”

“I’m going to go outside real quick. I’ll be right back; do you hear me? Don’t move. I’m turning the radio on, too.” After turning it to the news channel, because Carla was a freakin’ nerd who liked to be ‘*informed*’, she slid on her flip flops and padded out onto the porch. Dripping frost and dewdrops clung to the greenery, causing the grass-blades and branches to droop. There was so much fog she wasn’t even sure she would be able to step through it. She wasn’t one to give up, however. With the energy of a sleep-deprived nineteen-year-old, she sprung off the porch and onto the ground. “Jesus,” she hissed. “That’s cold.”

Her feet were soaked, and the water was slowly crawling up her sweats. She tossed her short, curly brown hair away from her eyes and peered into the void that had taken over her yard. How many clouds had fallen to flood these lands? She walked slowly, wary of the field mice or stray trap. ‘*There haven’t been many mice lately. The traps are emptying, too.*’ She frowned. This wasn’t dire news for her, but Carla depended on the abundance of animals in the local area. At least, her mom’s income did. Carla could care less. The thought of Carla’s mom, enraged, brought a smile to her face. After a couple of yards, she stumbled onto a patch of red clovers and grinned before dropping to her knees.

A dozen or so broken stems later and only one incident slipping on the grass, she returned to the porch with a child’s bouquet clutched between her hands and a flower in her mouth. Carla was sitting up now, intent on the radio. Remy collapsed down onto the blankets, wet clothes and all, and teased the last bit of sweetness from the petals before spitting it out, “Hey.”

Carla paid her no mind. The dinky contraption before her was full of static and murmurs, but clear enough.

*“What have scientists discovered to explain this...this phenomenon? The Appalachian wildlife has been disappearing at an alarming rate, leaving local businesses and independent providers puzzled and in worry.”* It was a repeat from yesterday morning.

“They still haven’t figured out where they’re going?”

“West,” Carla replied softly. She grabbed a clover from the pile and shoved it in her mouth, speaking around it, “All they know is they’re going West.”

A new voice came on, younger and female. *“Everyone thought the West would be the first to go. The coast has already been slipping into the sea. California has been on fire for years. Conspiracy theorists have been anxiously watching Yellowstone sigh awake with wildlife on newly formed, magma heated hills. People have began fleeing, bit by bit, to the East. They have been stranding animals and homes alike -”*

*“How, exactly, does this answer my question, Dr. Stracke?”*

*“Here’s how: those animals coming over here are distressed. Howling, whining, and hissing. Pleading to stay. The stranded animals are content on the other side of the continent.”*

*“I don’t understand.”*

*“Of course not. Men have long since forgotten what it means to need to survive. Do you even remember what it means to watch which way the birds are flying?”* Carla clicked the radio off and silence filled the room. No songbirds crooning to their smaller, uglier sounding babes. No crickets in the grass nor vibrations in the air. Just a heaviness.

Remy let out a startled breath and decided, maybe, it was time to sleep. She scooted to her side and waited till Carla lied down next to her before doing the same. She wanted to ask her

if she was okay. If she needed anything besides the clovers crushed between them but she was suddenly so, so tired. “Night,” was all she managed to whisper. Maybe Carla whispered something back, she wasn’t sure. She’d ask her in the morning.

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Remy had met Carla at ‘Traps that Catch’, the local hunting store in their semi-hidden town at the base of the Appalachians. It wasn’t that they were both avid hunters and trappers, no, this was the twenty-first century, *thank you very much*. Carla’s mom owned the store. A generational thing that had, ironically, trapped Carla in its clutches. Remy was dropping by for a something to take care of the mice eating her bread but walked in without a dime to her name. She followed Carla around the store, whining and whining till Carla just threw the five dollar box at her along with making her promise that she’d help check the traps in the woods later that day as payment.

That very first day, Remy broke her wrist tripping over a rock and Carla threw up from the sight of bone splitting through skin. From there, their friendship blossomed. Remy supposed that there was a metaphor for that type of intimacy forming suddenly and so violently between them, but really, she just thought it was super gross. Still, Carla was her best friend, no matter the circumstances. Her best friend who hogged her place because she had no parents to kick her out and damn, Carla really hated her mom. Now, she couldn’t imagine living without Carla. How small and wounded she would become.

She thought all this while standing near a rescue scene a week after the campout. Two kids had fallen into the mouth of a cave that had not been there before. The police and fire department kept insisting that it was totally natural, that the opening had been there before, and

that it must've just been hidden and that's how the kids fell in. The locals, Remy and Carla among them, suspected differently. They were quiet among the mutterings of the crowd near the scene.

"It wasn't there before," Remy murmured. Carla nodded. "That's the blackberry spot. There were no caves." Around the opening of the mouth, roots were ripped and dangling. Everything was soft, as though it was a wound just opened. Imagine if they went berry picking that morning.

Carla, standing head and shoulders above most of the crowd, tried to peer into the cave. "It's so...black," she said. "Wait, I think I hear something."

Remy grabbed onto her arm. "What is it? Is it the kids?" The children's families were standing as close as possible to the tape, sobbing and clinging to one another. A barbie pink shoe laid a couple of feet away. Something in her chest collapsed and she turned away, looking up to Carla. She was coarse-skinned from days of working in the forest. Remy thought of herself looking more as a wild sprite, limber and plucky, in comparison.

"No," Carla breathed. "It's something bigger. A lot bigger."

Her skin prickled. She paused, trying to listen to what lay beneath the dim waves of sound coming from the crowd and excavators. Nothing. She furrowed her brows, "Carla, I don't hear any-."

A rippling of wind crested invisibly over the lips of the cave, forcing back both the officers and family. It was warm, smelling of decayed petrichor and an airless, ancient musk. Several people turned away, heaving. Remy included. Carla whirled and yanked her away from the crowd.

Remy gagged. “Dude, what the fuck?”

“They’re dead.” *What?* “Remy, those kids are dead. Did you feel how warm that was? Do you know how much warmer it must be for however goddamn deep that hole goes? And what could cause such a-”, Carla’s face paled to green.

Now far away from the crowd, they both breathe deeply. The air was much fresher but still warm with rot. “Is that what you heard?” Remy asked. “You heard that coming?”

Carla was silent a moment. “No. It-it sounded like something different. Kinda like a beating of something coming together. You know how when you’re fixing a clock and the cogs start to press together?”

Remy nodded. Woodworking and mechanics were a pastime for her. ‘Specially clockwork.

“It was like that.”

They squinted at each other before Remy succumbed to the need to point out the obvious. “But, it’s rocks. Mountains don’t move.”

“Everything moves, stupid.” When given a scowl back, Carla sighed, “I don’t know. Maybe it was some science thing. We’ll probably be able to listen on the radio about it in a couple of days.”

Carla looked taller and more tired, but in a stretched thin way. Like something was tugging at her on the inside so *damn* much that it was causing her to fray at the seams. Remy ran a hand through her coiled hair before whipping an arm around Carla’s waist, and laughed as she

squeaked in shock. “Come on, we gotta go check those traps of yours. We might’ve caught something this time.”

Carla groaned.

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“Fight me, you cowards!”

“Stop yelling at the sparrows! They’ve done nothing wrong!”

Remy scowled, kicking at the littered ground. “They won’t eat the bread crumbs.”

Carla shot her an incredulous look from her higher vantage point on top of the rocks.

“You’re so stupid.”

“I’ll fight you, too.”

Carla scoffed. “Look at your wrists. You wouldn’t even win against the sparrows.” Then she grinned smugly, flexing her own reasonably well-muscled biceps. “Bet you I could fight a tree and win.”

Remy turned away from the birds in the trees. “Oh yeah? Jump off that rock.” The rock in question wasn’t very high. Maybe four or five feet from solid ground, at the top of a pile Carla had labored upwards on for the past fifteen or so minutes. Except, *Miss. Fight-the-Mountains-and-Win* was afraid of heights. You might question how, when she’s on top of a pile of rocks flaunting her arms for all of nature to see but instead of standing or even lounging, Carla was face down, limbs clinging to the ragged edges of the boulder.



Carla began to look a little sick. “You’re cruel. No wonder the birds won’t eat your bread.” She slowly started to slide off the pile. Remy watched her for a little bit. She looked better compared to this morning. A little brighter.

She turned back to the forest-line and frowned. It was quieter than normal. ‘*The birds must have flown off,*’ she thought. The bread crumbs remained untouched just below the trees. Insects were crowding the edges of the many piles. Near them, the radio crackled and spat out sentences. She’d have to tune it up again soon.

*“I’m surprised you invited me back, Mr. Becker.”*

*“Well, Dr. Stracke, it was actually a tough decision but the you incited such an a spark between the listeners that they demanded we bring you back.”* The man sounded bitter about it. Like he would rather have anyone *but* her at the station.

Carla treaded over to Remy, playful attitude gone. Remy lurched over to turn the radio off but before she made it, Carla’s hand snapped around her wrist. “No,” she said, eyes intent and shoulders hunched, “I want to listen.”

*“It’s starting with the first mountain range, what scientists believe to be the oldest and what the local states will soon consider to be inconvenient. One clear night, across the Appalachian Mountains, the birds took the sound with them. A colleague of mine described it as blacking out the sky. Campers reported waking to utter silence. Towns spread out across the East coast shivered. Now, the grounded wildlife is fleeing. There have been bizarre sightings of squirrels clinging to the back of white-tailed deer, snakes and reptiles wrapped around the necks of hares, and even one spotted instance of a family of field mice riding the antlers of a lone moose. Now, tell me Mr. Becker, where are they going?”*

“...*West-*”, the batteries sputtered out, taking the transfixion with them.

As the tops of the trees began to swallow the sunlight, the wind cooed softly, threading through each girl’s hair. Remy’s coils flew around her face. Remy huffed and batted at her hair, “I don’t like this.”

Carla began to walk away. After a second, Remy scooped up the radio and followed. The bird-pole trap remained untouched above the crumbs.

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A couple of days later, Remy was finally home from a night shift at the local supermarket and could not wait to collapse on her bed. Chug a shit ton of water first because goddamn working made her thirsty. With those two desires on her mind, she kicked off her shoes and sidled into the dark kitchen. There was no point in turning on the lights just to make the electricity bill higher. She wasn’t *that* thirsty. She grabbed a conveniently placed cup, probably dirty, off the counter and put it under the tap.

“We need to leave.”

Remy screamed, whirled and threw the ceramic mug at the intruder, murderer, ghost, *whoever the fuck-*

“Ow, Jesus, Remy!”

“Carla?” Remy darted over and turned on the lights, bill be damned, and jolted. There were shards everywhere. The cup handle was on top of the table. Carla’s hand was pressed to her shoulder, eyes pink-rimmed. Red peeked through her fingers. The tap was still running. “Oh God, I’m so sorry!”

Carla sniffed and removed her hand. It wasn't bad, just a few scrapes and some bruising. But Remy wanted to hit herself. They never hurt one another like this. Roughhousing, yes. But this? Absolutely not. Carla's shirt eased her shirt off, hissing.

"Here, let me help-*fuck!*" Remy bent over and gritted her teeth. Below, the remains of the mug glittered. "Is this revenge? Letting me cut my feet on ceramics?"

Carla rolled her eyes. Her shirt was wrapped around her shoulder, acting as a makeshift bandage. "You're the one who threw it." Her throat was raspy.

"You're the one who broke into my house."

"You're the one who doesn't lock your door."

"A flaw doesn't automatically give consent to being taking advantage of."

They bickered the entire time it took to clean up the mess and their cuts and scrapes. It wasn't till about an hour later that they finally sat down. Carla looked tired. Her hair was greasy and shoved into a bun. There were smears of dirt on her hands and knees, travelling up each limb.

"Why do you want to leave?"

"I can't-I can't be here anymore. It's driving me crazy. There's something going on and I can hear it," Carla breathed in, "I can feel it."

She didn't understand. Carla's shoulders bunched up and her lips pursued. They sat in silence for a moment. They were nineteen. They couldn't just up and leave because one of them was *scared*.

“Carla-”, she stopped. Took a breath. Carla was – was irate to disbelief. Had reacted severely before to such responses. “Is it because of what that woman was saying?” Carla didn’t answer but she loosened a bit, eyes a little hopeful. God, how was Remy supposed to say that it was the ravings of a person who read too many apocalyptic theories? She scooted over and laced an arm through Carla’s. “Babe, it’s okay. The animals are just being animals, nature is being nature. Sometimes it gets freaky and holes appear out of nowhere.” She tried to say this as softly as she could, but Carla still turned to stone in her grasp.

“You’re not leaving.” It wasn’t a question. It was flat, a little lost.

Remy just moved closer till she was as curled around Carla as she could be. She was tired, and Carla must be, too. “Can we talk about it tomorrow, please? When we’re not exhausted and bleeding?”

A beat of silence before Carla sighed.

Remy shut her eyes and inhaled. Carla smelled like dirt, sweat, and days past mango conditioner. Gross. She shoved closer. Carla shifted a little, one arm reaching out. Remy felt the couch comforter roughly cover them both and smiled a little.

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When she woke up the next morning, it was with sunlight, warmth, and silence. She fell back to sleep. When she opened her eyes again, it was without Carla. There was still sunlight, fading warmth, and unnatural silence. But now there was also an absence, a groove in the cushions, a pressure in the air. She ignored it, rolled off the couch, and went about the start of her day. It was a couple hours later that she found herself cradling a cup of Earl Grey on the porch. The wind blew softly, stirring the steam from the cup up into the air. She closed her eyes. The

silence used to be nice. Now, it felt like a cliff to fall from. An emptiness where there used to be road. She opened her eyes and leaned over, switching the radio on. She meant to go to a music station but when the news came on, she froze, wondering if Carla was listening somewhere.

*“- sights of large animals, lately, contradicting the idea of all the wildlife fleeing. Wouldn't you say so, Dr. Stracke?”* Jesus Christ, again? Was it even legal to have the same person so many times on the station?

*“What animals are these?”*

*“Ahh...it doesn't say. Let me find the witness accounts-”* There's a shuffling noise. The radio cut in and out. She lightly pushed the antenna till it came back on. *“-like any animal I've ever seen. They're all described as having some types of-of botanic characteristics. How reliable are these witnesses?”* Remy rolled her eyes and took a sip of the tea. Probably some teens from the town, high out of their mind and taking advantage of the scare. She stared off into the distance and listened to the discussion. There were fallen nests on the ground. An empty trap under the tree, old as sin.

*“The ocean has withdrawn farther back away from the shores. The coasts have been waiting for a tsunami for days.”*

A tsunami in the East? Unusual. A snapping sound dragged her attention to the woods. Then another. Then more and more, over and over. *‘Something might actually be in the woods,’* she mused. The deer could be back.

*“...the flora shake from seemingly nothing...”*

A dark form snagged her vision. It was moving slowly, weaving between the trees. She froze. It was big. Bear-big. The crackling of twigs and branches became louder. She stood.

*“...with most of the animals having fled, you can hear the grounds trembling.”*

*“It’s gotten so quiet. The mountains. Yet, I can still hear something breathing.”* That’s what Carla had said, that very first night. Her chest tightened. It was still sunny, the wind still blowing softly. A beautiful day. The form trudged closer, growing bigger. It was behind a set of trees, now, just at the edge of the forest line. Just one large, overgrown yard away from her. She stepped back.

*“...The people are being left behind.”*

Skin that was not skin but something that hung loosely. It looked like scabs, peeling and tapering. Its arms hung, too long, so long they dragged behind and sometimes in front. It continued forward, pausing only slightly when a large cloven foot caught one of the arms. A section of skin scraped off. She could hear it panting. With every movement of the chest, it sounded like grinding, like a motor she had yet to fix. She choked, terror grabbing her around the throat. ‘Carla’, she thought, ‘Carla-Carla. What do I do?’

The mug slid out of her hands and the stagnant, unsteady rhythm of panting was broken with the shattering of glass. She slid back. It looked up slowly, *slowly*, and she saw milky eyes that should not be able to see and a jaw that would not shut all the way, jutting open from what looked like teeth. She saw a monster. And the monster saw her.

It started forward, as slow as it had been before but eyes so, so wide. She stumbled back, wincing at the pain in her feet, and fumbled for the knob. She could not turn around. Where was Carla? It got closer and closer, and the fear moved from her throat to her eyes, swelling up with

tears. The knob clicked. She lurched back, sunlight blinding her and slammed the door into a dimness not unlike the forest the beast emerged from.

She made to move to the kitchen, the phone, anywhere but fell to her knees. Her body trembled. Tears inched across her cheeks. Where was Carla? She could still hear the radio. A rackety buzzing noise that twisted into voices.

*“-Dr. Stracke, we are currently receiving...bridges twisted...highways...rubble...”*

What? She shifted to her hands and knees and began crawling to the phone on the kitchen table.

*“-a report...whole town of Grantsville has collapsed...more-”*. Something snapped. The radio became silent. ‘*Oh,*’ she thought, ‘*it’s reached the porch.*’

The phone was finally in her hands and she had Carla’s name flashing on the screen before she could even try to remember the number. She laughed through her tears. ‘*She’s okay.*’ She answered.

*“Remy! Thank god, are you okay? Are you crying?”*

Remy took a heaving breath, “Carla. Carla, there’s something outside. It’s on the porch.”

*“I know,”* Carla said quietly. *“I’m in the driveway.”*

She froze. How could she feel this much fear in such a small body? “Carla, don’t.”

*“I won’t.”* Carla breathed out, her voice shaking, *“I’m going to come around the back. Meet me.”* A click and then nothing but the panting outside her door.

Remy keeled, clutching the phone to her chest and tried not to sob. It was Carla. Strong, capable Carla. And she was Remy, a girl more wilding than respectable who's been taking care of herself since her family died. This should be no problem. The table almost toppled with the force she used to pull herself up, but then she was off. She ran into what felt like everything, and just as she opened the back door, the front splintered open with a bang causing her to scream.

“Remy!” Carla yanked her out of the doorway and to the side of the house.

Remy clung to her, gasping. “You took a shower,” she wheezed out.

Carla just gave her a look before pulling her up around the driveway. They ran as hard as they could till the house was no longer visible and Remy had to remind Carla that she wasn't as long-legged as her. “Stop-stop! We're far enough.”

Carla slowed to a stop. They were onto the road leading to town. She looked wound up. Everything about her was clenched. “We should've left.”

Remy stilled. The fear that chilled her flooded away with anger; unrighteous she knew but also unstoppable. “Why weren't you there, then? I said we would talk in the morning, but you left!”

“You wouldn't have believed me or listened!” Carla whipped around. Her cheeks were puffed and eyes hard. Remy could see her own frazzled, teeth bared reflection.

“We're nineteen! We couldn't just leave but maybe I would've listened if you had given me the chance.” This fight was wrong. How could have either of them had known?



Carla didn't respond. Instead, she kicked the ground before turning to the sky and screaming. Howling. A cry so frustrated, angry, and sad it brought the cold fear back to Remy's bones.

Remy stepped forward and wrapped an arm around Carla's waist, pressing her face against her back. The top of her head barely reached her shoulder blades. "Carla, what's wrong with you?" She said it as gently as she could, but knew it probably hurt.

Carla shuddered. "I don't know," she whispered.

They stayed like that for another minute, before Remy pulled away. "We should go. We need to find out what's going on."

Carla nodded. She began the walk down the road and after a pause, Remy followed. Her head raced. Was this even a real? Did she pass out on the couch after work? But her feet ached from the cuts of the shards and peeking from beneath Carla's tank top was the bandage on her shoulder. Around them, the wind began to blow harder, snarling. Far away, back towards the house and after Carla's cry, Remy thought she heard something howl back.