



TWO HOURS WEST OF NOTHING

by Gabriela Stiteler

Gabriela Stiteler is a writer and educator based in Portland, Maine. She tells us that she grew up in Northwestern Pennsylvania on a steady diet of paperbacks from the Golden Age of detective fiction and classic noir films. Lately, she says, she's been thinking about how bad a person can be before they're irredeemable, a question underlying this, her first, published story.

It was two-thirty on a Tuesday, and I was slow-sipping a gimlet while folding laundry and watching *Antiques Roadshow* when the phone rang. There were only a handful of people who called now that Paul was dead and I was taking an extended break from work: my sister in L.A., my brother in Minnesota, and the odd friend checking in.

Lauren was in the third camp.

"Did you hear what happened to Joe?" she asked by way of greeting.

She was the only person I still talked to from home. Home being a small town in Maine covered in rust and regrets. It was two hours west and had a way of wrapping itself around a person and pulling down, like an anchor. Lauren made for the West Coast as soon as we graduated from high school and she didn't come back.

Not even for her mother's funeral.

Our conversations were measured and infrequent and I wasn't ever really sure what to expect.

"Joe?" I stopped folding the laundry. Joe and Lauren had dated from the seventh grade up through the minute she left town. Things with Joe had always been complicated.

Somewhere in the background, some sort of bell sounded and she swore. In high school, she had bright pink hair and three nose rings and carried a deck of playing cards with naked men. Twenty-some years later, she was a marine biologist who disappeared onto vessels for weeks at a time.

Life could be funny like that.

“Listen,” she said. “I’m about to ship out for a month and can’t talk now. But they say he killed his mom.”

I took a slow sip of my drink and considered. Joe’s mom, Rose, was a hell of a nice woman. I hadn’t seen her in twenty years but I could still picture her standing over the sink, slender, with that frosted-blond hair of a certain era and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. She had been a single mom working two jobs and doing the best she could.

And then there was Joe.

He was one of those people who set fire to good things, the things that made life worthwhile.

But even at his craziest, there was no way he’d have hurt Rose. He was soft for her, and everyone knew it.

“Not my business, Lauren,” I said, but I only half meant it. Since Paul died, some piece of me was hungry for the past in a way that was unnerving. I’d come unmoored.

And Lauren was stirring the pot.

“He confessed and is refusing representation,” she continued.

The fog that surrounded me after Paul’s death broke in one breath, and a sharp curiosity overrode what might have been apprehension.

“How do you know this?” I asked.

“People talk. Sometimes I lis-ten.” She sounded defensive, and I knew why.

The only other person she was still in touch with from back home was Ryan Wagner. Lauren had been half in love with Joe, and Ryan had been half in love with Lauren. After Lauren skipped town, Ryan knocked up a girl from our class and married her. Last I knew, he had two kids and a mostly unhappy marriage.

Lauren stayed away.

Ryan stayed married.

Ten years of practicing divorce law had taught me that an innocent enough trip down memory lane could land a person in a messy emotional affair. And messy emotional affairs impaired judgment.

Which was probably why Lauren had called me instead of digging around herself.

She must have sensed my disapproval, because she let the silence stretch for a minute. Then she said, “I don’t think Joe did it.”

My better judgment was telling me to let it go. Instead, I said, “How’d she die?”

“Pills.” The bell in the background sounded again, louder this time, and somebody shouted. “Look,” she said in a rushed voice, “. . . maybe there isn’t anything to do. I almost didn’t call. . . . But sometimes he listens to you.”

“I’m not going back,” I said, but my heart wasn’t in it. I wasn’t working, and I was bored out of my mind. And, if I was in the mood to be honest, I was lonely as hell.

Paul had left a gaping hole that I had mostly been trying to ignore. Hence the gimlets and the *Roadshow*.

“Look,” she said. “I got to go. Just ask around about it. Just go see. Just in case, will ya?”

And then she hung up.

Last time I’d gone back to the place we were from was for a funeral. Johnny

B., a nice kid a year ahead of me in school, had been driving drunk on St. Patty's Day and smashed into a car with two young mothers.

Everyone died.

Both husbands showed for Johnny's funeral with their kids. Pissed. Things got ugly, and nobody was at their best. Anyway, I drank too much after and burnt some bridges and wrote the place off. With my dad dead and my sister living out in L.A. and my brother in Minnesota, there was nothing to go back to.

But then again, my empty house and the hollowness in my chest and likely the gimlets that I had been slow-sucking since breakfast had me thinking. Why not? What else did I have going on?

I cranked up *Roadshow* and finished pairing the socks. Somewhere, the voice of reason in the back of my gin-soaked brain was reminding me the path to hell was paved with good intentions.

I dutifully ignored it.

* * *

It was two hours driving straight west to get to the place that had effectively raised me. Hometowns have a way of imprinting on a person, and I was no exception. I was from a place that consisted of empty strip malls and rusted-out cars. A place scarred and carved up and tough like the people who stuck around.

I'd looked up what I could about Rose's death before I left. All I found was an ambiguous obituary and an article tucked up into the local paper about Joe's arrest. She had cancer. The kind that ate away at a person. Sometime on a Wednesday she had swallowed twenty pills too many.

It might have been suicide and nobody would have blamed her.

Only thing was, Joe sat in the house with her upstairs. Dead. Not saying a thing to anyone for more than twenty-four hours.

And when questioned, he said, "I had to do it."

And he hadn't said anything since.

Two hours alone in a car was enough time to reflect on a lot of things.

There was one memory in particular that I kept stumbling back over.

It was from a November that was colder than usual and the lake had the illusion of having frozen over. Joe and I were walking down Peach Street sometime past when the sun had gone down. It wouldn't have been too late, because I had a curfew. Not that my dad had any way of enforcing things from his perch at the Legion.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Joe said. He was laughing.

I didn't laugh with him. I was old enough to know Joe was dangerous to a girl like me, on the precipice of all sorts of choices in life. He was my best friend's boyfriend, for Christ's sake. But I'd known him first and I'd loved him before I understood what it meant.

He was Lauren's boyfriend, but a piece of him belonged to me.

"Besides, the program they put me in means I can finish school faster. Graduate ahead of schedule," he went on.

"Yeah," I said, but it sounded empty. We both knew my faith had started to run out, and I imagine that little half-attempt at a yeah cut him more fiercely than a knife would have.

Little puffs of breath separated us. He smelled like the menthol he stole

from his mom's purse and the stash of Yuengling he kept under his bed and was carrying with him as we walked down the street. Him sucking on a warm bottle of beer. Me breathing in that frozen air.

"You talk to Lauren?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"She's pissed at me."

I tried to keep my voice even. "You showed up at school drunk off your ass and threw up on Mr. Len. After you said you'd get it together."

"Her bad for thinking I meant it."

"I guess." I didn't add that I'd wanted to believe him too. I just knew better.

We were coming up on St. George's, the church I'd gone to as a kid before my mom died. The church itself was made of red granite from Calais with a leaded stained-glass window above the pulpit that lit up from the inside. When I was a kid, I'd kneel and genuflect and pretend to sing along to the hymns and stare up at that window, at the green-and-gold scaled dragon that snaked around St. George, who clutched a shield in one hand and a lance in the other.

"Look at that," Joe said, staring at the window, looking almost reverent.

I didn't trust Joe's reverence. He had a tendency to destroy things that were beautiful. "Let's go," I said, turning to retreat. "I'm hungry."

"Didn't somebody say something about a thing of beauty being a thing to cherish?" he went on, pinching the neck of the bottle between his fingers.

I shrugged and started back towards his house, where I'd left my backpack. The ice under my feet crunched, like the delicate hollow bones of a bird.

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust," he said, and he hurled that half-empty bottle. Some combination of his anger and the cold and the angle hit the window just right.

I broke into a sprint at the sound of the glass shattering.

I passed the gas station and the boarded-up corner store that used to sell us beer and cigarets without asking too many questions. I passed the pool hall and the punk kids loitering in the gazebo.

The kids looked at me running. One of them said, "Hell yeah."

I was around the corner and up the front stairs to Joe's house. It was scrubbed clean, but almost entirely empty other than an old couch with velvet upholstery that smelled like cigarets and beer, a family picture of Rose, Joe, and Eric all smiling but a little sad in the eyes. The windows had fogged up and delicate ivory lace curtains dangled limply, yellowed with age.

"Annie?" Rose said from the kitchen. She was heating up ravioli from a can, a cigaret hanging out of her mouth. She possessed a washed-out sort of prettiness, like a watercolor left in the bright sunlight for too long. "Joe with you?"

Joe's little brother, Eric, was sitting at the table staring at me with those wide dark eyes, doing math. He was small for his age and the sort of kid who didn't make noise, like he was afraid of being noticed. The pencil he was holding looked bigger than his arm.

I swallowed and nodded. "Just behind me."

"How's your dad doing?" Rose went on stirring at the pot and not looking up, thin and gaunt like she was sick.

"Good," I lied.

"And your sister? She left, didn't she? Joe said she's at college somewhere?"

I nodded. “She left. She’s good.”

And she was.

“Good,” she said, turning back to the ravioli, avoiding the topic of my brother. Most people did. People had a way of surrounding things that were uncomfortable in silence and gay in a small town was uncomfortable. “You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you? He’s in a rough patch right now. He’ll sort himself out. I know he will. But he needs his friends.”

She didn’t mention Lauren. Rose didn’t like Lauren.

I felt Joe materialize behind me. He was tall and could make himself imposing when he wanted to. I stepped towards the stairs.

“Hiya, Ma,” he said in a voice that sounded fine. Just fine. He kissed the top of her head.

She didn’t look up.

“I got to get home,” I said, careful to keep the anger out of my voice. I could be pissed at Joe, but I wasn’t about to sell him out to his mom. “You know. Homework and stuff.”

“Sure you don’t want to stay for dinner?” She asked the question carefully, tiptoeing around my pride. She knew what dinner meant at my house. A fridge empty of everything except beer and pickles. At that time, my dad had a girlfriend of sorts who lived in the country and would come to stay with us from time to time. Janet. She was an okay lady who would bring us pickles and eggs and dilly beans. Like my dad, she tried to care for us in her own way.

But like my dad, she had other, bigger issues that sometimes got in the way.

“Next time,” I said. And I went up the stairs to find my bag.

Joe was behind me like a panther. He was stealthy when he wanted to be.

“You want to sink yourself. Fine. But don’t drag me down with you,” I muttered, but already my anger was fading.

He stared at me, half-amused and half something I didn’t quite understand.

I grabbed my bag and made for the door.

He stepped in front of me. “You need a ride home? I can take you in Ma’s car. Or maybe you want to stay?”

He reached out and touched my cheek.

I flinched. I was half in love with him, and maybe I always would be. Me, having an affinity for broken things. But I stepped around him and was down the stairs. Eric with his careful eyes watched everything from his perch at the table. Rose pretended not to.

The sound of Joe’s laughter followed me as I ran out the front door.

It was cold and dark, and the frozen bare branches on the trees were shining like crystals.

Just thinking about it twenty years later made me mad as hell.

* * *

Going to see somebody who is locked up isn’t as hard as it should be. Or maybe the place was empty enough and my timing was right. The jail wasn’t pretty, but then I suppose that was the point. It wasn’t big either.

I gave my name to the officer at the desk and tried to look as legitimate as possible. I’d worn a suit, my second skin when I was practicing law. But I hadn’t worn one since Paul’s illness, and I felt like I was playing dress-up.

The officer didn’t look old enough for facial hair, let alone a desk job. I was

tired and had been chewing on the same piece of gum for the past three hours.

He asked for my ID and said, "You're here for Joe, then?"

The question caught me off guard, and he picked up on it.

He added, almost apologetically, "It's either Joe or Ricky. And nobody comes for Ricky." He gestured at a small table with a coffee maker and a plastic bowl of those little sweetened hazelnut creamers. "Help yourself. Sergeant Golumboski will be with you when she's in."

Coffee was the last thing I needed, but I poured some into a Styrofoam cup and silently asked for forgiveness for contributing to the slow demise of the planet. I stirred three creamers in until it was the color of a paper bag and would be sweet enough to hurt my teeth. And then I settled into a metal folding chair, and I waited. There had been plenty of time to think through the details of what I wanted to say to Joe.

Somewhere, somebody was yelling and then laughing in the manic way a person who had fentanyl pulsing through their body might do. They started barking out commands, military-like. "One. Two. Three."

My money was on Ricky.

The kid at the desk turned the television up to try to cover the yelling. It was some cooking show where the competitors were handed four mystery ingredients and had to make something of it.

I sipped on the sweetened coffee. It was bad, but I kept on sucking it down, driven by my nerves and the need to do something with my hands.

After about twenty minutes, Sergeant Golumboski materialized and gave me the once-over. She was a sturdy woman with graying brown hair parted severely down the middle.

She called me back to a small, windowless office. It looked like a room used for interrogations and smelled like body odor and bleach. There wasn't anything on the table other than a box of tissues and a generic container of disinfecting wipes. The bright yellow packaging stood out against the dullness of the rest of the room.

She gestured for me to sit in one of the chairs.

I did, careful to keep my body language confident and controlled. I'd shed nervous fidgets early in my career.

She leaned against the door frame and smiled tightly, crossing her thick arms over her chest. I'd been prepared for irritation, scepticism, or even open resentment, but instead she seemed almost relieved to see me.

I glanced at the door.

"He won't talk," she said after a minute. "Didn't say a word until I went in to tell him you were here. And then he said, 'Damn.'"

She smiled again.

I waited.

"He won't say a word about what happened, and he's not giving us much of a chance to do anything other than lock him up. It's like he wants to go away for it." She was tapping her foot against the floor when she spoke, an angry staccato beat.

"You don't think he did it?"

"He confessed," she said, her face furrowing into a patchwork of rehearsed wrinkles.

As a rule, cops don't usually look around too much when people are thoughtful enough to confess. And if they've gone through the effort of charging a person, it's a hell of a lot easier if that person is guilty. Not that I blame them. In some cases, the expediency is worth it. Besides, the best cops I've ever met like closure. I guess they're hard-wired that way.

Joe's refusal to talk should have been a delightful little gift for this officer. Why, then, did she want to learn more?

As if she could read my mind, she added, "He's been here before. Sometimes just long enough to get whatever it is he put into his body out of his system. And we knew Rose pretty good. She was the one who would collect him. He lived with her. She'd come in and he'd melt, like butter. Nothing but regret. And love."

She hardened her expression. "I can give you thirty minutes. See if you can shake something loose. One way or another. I need more to sleep at night."

I nodded.

She pressed a button and the door swung open.

I had been prepared to see the Joe I knew from my memories. I was even prepared to see the Joe I'd seen ten years ago, drunk and stumbling down the road screaming at traffic lights and anyone who would listen. But I wasn't prepared to see the man who entered.

Instead of long strides, he shuffled into the room. He was slender and so pale his skin might have been transparent. At first, he had the look of a man addicted. Tired, wary, and caved in on himself.

But when he looked up at me, he had the same sharp hazel eyes and something in me seized the same way it had when I was a kid. It was like a low-grade nausea I associated with wanting what wasn't mine.

The officer slipped out of the room and pulled the door shut behind her. Of course, she was still listening. I knew. Joe knew.

"You look like hell," I said first.

He smiled and I noticed he was missing several teeth. "You don't."

It was the same easy sort of flirtation that had thrown me off my stride when I was a kid and didn't know better. He wasn't handsome, but he was dangerous and broken and a little bit lost.

He stared at me. "Come back for another friendly visit? Last time I saw you was Johnny's funeral. You on an every-ten-year plan?" His voice was the same, low and a bit rough around the edges. He wasn't letting up in his scrutiny of me, dragging his eyes from my shirt to my shoes. It was a slow appraisal intended to make my skin crawl.

And it worked.

"Something like that," I said.

He flicked a quick glance down to my ring finger. "Still married?"

"Widowed."

His expression softened. "Christ, Annie. I'm sorry. Paul was a man who might just have deserved you."

"I didn't come to talk about Paul," I said.

He waited.

"Rose is dead. They think you did it."

"That much I gathered," he said, gesturing at the room.

"But you didn't," I prodded, opting to go at it direct to throw him.

He let out a slow breath before rolling his shoulders back and staring at some point on the wall behind my head. "Slumming it to help an old friend, then? Well, you can stand in line. Golumboski hasn't given me a minute to put my head down without harassing me about what I know." He shouted the last bit as if he knew they were listening. Then he turned those green-gold eyes on me. "Stay the hell out of it, Annie."

He pushed his chair back and stood at the door. It swung open.

Sergeant Golumboski stared at me, as if to say, "See."

Joe wasn't the same kid I'd known in high school. But Golumboski was right. I needed something more than his confession to believe he did it.

* * *

There were three hotels in the area: a nice one by the country club on the lake, a motel at the point where the highway and the turnpike bisected the city that catered to junkies and the odd broke trucker passing through, and a mid-range place walking distance to bars and restaurants, with parking included.

When I'd come for Johnny's funeral, Paul and I stayed at the nice place on the lake, like we were born into money. Then again, Paul had been raised with two parents and a white picket fence and summer travel and winter ski trips. I'd spent my summers working at the strawberry farm and watering down orange juice to make it stretch until Dad got paid.

Thinking about Paul and that hotel on the lake had the familiar effect of a dull, twisting pain in my chest. And so I checked into the mid-range place, smiling pleasantly at the lady behind the desk. She didn't ask questions. I didn't provide any information. How many people my age snuck away to hotels to make love to people who weren't their wives or husbands? From the way the lady behind the desk was eyeing me, I got the sense that she figured that's what I was there for.

But even the thought of lying in bed with somebody other than Paul set my skin crawling.

There were two people I needed to see.

The first was Eric. Joe's brother. Rose's other, better son. Last I heard he was in insurance, married with a kid on the way. He would know something. Family always did.

But he hadn't been eager to get back to me.

The other was that mutual friend, Ryan Wagner. He was a good guy, even if he didn't have any business talking to Lauren. He was a contractor who bailed Joe out from time to time. He knew Joe. The city. And, perhaps most importantly, he'd still talk to me.

Eric hadn't answered when I called, but Ryan agreed to meet me for a drink at George's after he got off. It was walking distance from my hotel, which was a nice touch. Ryan was thoughtful like that. Always thinking about ways to make it easier for other people to move around in the world.

George's was a small, dimly lit place with a full bar, sticky at the edges.

Ryan was impossible to miss. A big, brawling sort of man who had taken care of himself over the years. As a kid in high school, he'd been quiet and serious and worked hard enough. It'd just been him and his mom. Ryan was the sort of man who took care of his responsibilities. His mom, his wife, his kids. Even his screwup friend from high school.

His hair was cropped and, even though he'd been working all day, his shirt clung to the starched and ironed tidy creases. He nodded at me in a steady, assessing sort of way instead of smiling.

I returned the favor.

I noted the wedding band glinting on his finger. He noticed me noticing.

"Going on twenty years now," he said by way of starting the conversation. "We almost separated for a stretch, but she talked me into seeing a therapist. We all got to work on ourselves, don't we?"

He was drinking water.

I asked for a gimlet and thought of Paul.

The guy behind the bar blinked at me. He looked like he was about twelve years old and had an arm covered with tiny tattoos, like a bathroom stall covered in graffiti.

Ryan shook his head. "Christ, Annie. Are we straight out of the society pages?" He turned back to the kid behind the bar. "Gin. Ice. Lime."

The kid nodded and got to it, making a show of squeezing lime juice from one of those green plastic containers into a dirty-looking glass.

Ryan had turned his full attention to me. "You look good. Maybe even better than you did twenty years ago."

"You look good yourself," I said, debating if I should crawl up onto the barstool or lean against the bar. "How are the kids?"

"One's in college and the other is graduating high school this year." He pushed his shoulders back and his chin up, and I couldn't have missed the parental pride if I wanted to. "Good kids. Nice. And hard workers. Did you and Paul?"

I shook my head and brushed off the comment.

He twisted his wedding ring with his thumb. "Sorry about that, by the way. Paul. Didn't know him well . . ." There was a hint of regret in his tone. Paul had come around with me twice. He'd been the sort of person to get along with everyone. "But he seemed like a nice man. He was good for you."

I felt an uncomfortable familiar lump in the back of my throat and swallowed it down. "He was."

The guy behind the counter had left the glass in front of me, garnished with an absurd little paper umbrella. It wasn't clear if he was mocking me or thought I was the sort of person who wanted drinks with little umbrellas.

As a rule, I try not to insult the guy pouring, so I opted to drink around it.

Ryan shook his head. For a half-second he looked like he had in high school, half amused and half too old for the antics.

I took another slow sip before putting the approximation of a gimlet on the coaster. "I heard about Rose's death."

I didn't miss that the atmosphere cooled off considerably.

"What about it?" Ryan said, rattling the ice in his glass.

"I'm just wondering if you think Joe had anything to do with it, is all."

Ryan's nostrils flared slightly, and he glanced at the door. It had been done quickly, but then I'd spent years watching people who were trying to hide things.

"Lauren called you, didn't she? I told her to let it go. She's like a glutton for punishment with him, isn't she? Like she can't help herself." Somewhere underneath the bitter bite to his tone was genuine pain.

I knew better than to say anything about Lauren. I softened my voice. "Come on, Ryan. You know Joe. He'd never have hurt Rose. He might be on a path of self-destruction, but he was like butter for her."

George's was starting to fill up with the dinner crowd. I was careful not to look around. I didn't want to accidentally catch eye contact with somebody I knew. I wasn't here to chase the past. Or at least, that was what I was telling myself.

Ryan gave me a once-over. "You think you still know him? He's a mess. High half the time, picking fights with kids in high school." He wasn't looking at me anymore. Not really. He was staring at the small scar at the center of my forehead. "Besides, Rose was really sick. Some people might even say her death was a mercy, her life being in the state that it was."

"You think she took the pills on her own, then?" I asked, taking another slow sip of what passed for a gimlet.

Ryan shrugged. "Could be. Maybe Joe helped her. Not my business."

I pushed my glass away and put some cash on the bar. "Sure thing, Ryan. I get it. Let sleeping dogs lie. I get it. Really, I do."

He stared at me for a second longer than was comfortable, and his expression went from cold to glacial. "Don't think you do, Annie. Rose is dead and Joe wants to own his piece in it. Christ knows he put her through enough when she was alive. Why make it messier than it needs to be?"

"Sure thing. Got it. Let some guy like Joe with no money and no resources take the hit for somebody else. That's justice for you." I stood up and Ryan did too.

"You think you can just stroll back and fix everything, don't you? Like if you decide to care you can repair all that's broken down in the last twenty years?" He didn't sound angry, just tired.

"It wasn't him," I said. But even then, I wasn't sure.

Ryan looked like he wanted to say more, but instead he shook his head slowly. "You aren't going to find whatever you're looking for here, Annie. And when you step in it over this, don't say I didn't warn you."

* * *

I'd just settled into my room when I got a text from Eric asking me to meet him at his place. The address he sent was in the burbs just south of the town proper. A place with dead ends and cookie-cutter houses built in the eighties lined up in tidy rows.

His was a yellow imitation colonial with white shutters. The sun was starting to slip down, but I could still make out the grass lines from the mower and those brown bags filled with leaves waiting by the curb.

Good for him, was all I could think.

He deserved his little house in the suburbs with a wife and a kid and a perfect lawn. They were things Joe would never have. But then, Eric's successes were as close as Joe ever got to something good.

Eric was sitting in the front by a blazing fire pit. He'd grown up and filled out. Taller, broader, but with those same dark eyes that seemed to follow me. He was wearing one of those sweater-fleece pullovers and leather slip-on indoor-outdoor moccasins.

He looked tired as hell.

"Hi," I said awkwardly.

“Hi, Annie. Sorry it took so long to get back to you.” He pulled me into a hug. He smelled like smoke and dryer sheets. “Can I get you a drink? A seltzer? Beer?”

I accepted the proffered beer and settled into one of the Adirondack chairs.

“I’d invite you in, but Jess is putting the baby to bed. You know.” His chest seemed to swell at the mention of his wife and child. He went from being that little kid perched at the table to a grown man.

I nodded like I did.

He went on. “Life changes when you have kids. Priorities shift.”

I agreed. Not because I had kids but because I’d thought the same thing when Paul died. There were some events that threw everything into motion. Or into a state of paralysis.

“Sorry about Rose,” I said and took a sip from the beer. It was hoppy and strong and I didn’t especially like it but I forced it down.

He slumped forward, a sudden sadness written clear as day across his features. “Thanks,” he muttered so softly I almost missed it.

“I saw Joe,” I continued.

His eyes met mine. “Yeah?”

I took another sip, buying time and waiting to see if he’d say more. What was Eric’s relationship with Joe? Were they close? Did he believe his brother killed Rose?

He curled the label of his beer bottle down and stared at the fire for what might have been two minutes, not giving anything away.

“What did he say?” he finally asked.

“He told me to stay the hell out of his business.”

That startled a laugh out of him and he shook his head as if Joe’s antics surprised him still. “That sounds exactly like something he’d say.”

The sun had dissolved behind the horizon altogether, and it was dark other than the fire in the pit and the distant streetlights. I could faintly make out the flicker from the television in what must have been the living room. It seemed Jess had put the baby down and was settling into a normal routine.

Eric was staring at me.

“Last time you were here was for Johnny’s funeral. If memory serves, you didn’t exactly enjoy yourself. Why did you come back, Annie?” His voice was soft, almost a whisper, as if he didn’t want to disturb anything. It reminded me of when he was a kid. How he’d always taken up the least amount of space.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t think he did it.”

When I left that morning, I had been certain Joe hadn’t done it.

Now I wasn’t sure.

I didn’t say anything else, letting the phrase dangle between the two of us. We sat like that, on the precipice of something, each waiting for the other to make a move.

It was Eric who broke the silence. “I don’t get it. He took advantage of you for years and yet here you are the minute he needs you? Mom was like that too. No matter what he did, there was always space to forgive him and help him.”

I considered what he said, the fire snapping out in little sparks. I’d always figured Joe let me be in the end because he knew he’d drag me under. I would

have let him. But maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe he was just a bad person who went around hurting other people because he could.

Eric was watching me. "He got Lauren pregnant. Did you know that? And then left her? Threw money at her to get an abortion right in front of Mom and me at the dinner table one night. Lauren was crying and crying. It was awful. She did it. Went alone. And then she skipped town. Never came back. Did you know that?"

I hadn't known exactly, but I guessed something was off. It was during the last dregs of that summer before college, and I was desperate to get away. My brother and sister were already gone, and things with Dad weren't great. Lauren showed up at my house one night after a long shift at the steakhouse where she waited tables, stiff and gaunt with sad, angry eyes. She said she was leaving, and the next day she was gone.

Eric went on in a steady voice, staring at the fire. It was as though whatever had been wound tight around him was loosening. "He stole money from Mom for drugs. Did you know that? He totaled her car and let her sink under the cost of the insurance. Did you know he stole cigarets from her right up until the end? He stole her jewelry and pawned it. And she smiled at him like it was okay? Like everything was going to be okay? Did you know that?"

The words were flowing from him like a torrent, and I didn't dare move, fearing that I'd be swept under if I did. I'd been around people in this sort of cathartic state of reflection.

I understood then, I think.

And I wanted him to stop before he said something he couldn't take back, but I couldn't get my mouth around the words.

"Did you know that I was paying her bills because he was taking her money?" He ran his fingers through his hair and his hands were shaking. "Years and years of me trying to hold everything together," he said softly as he tipped the bottle and the last of his beer trickled onto the carefully mowed lawn. "So many years of walking carefully and paying the bills and filling out the paperwork for doctors. Did you know she had cancer?" He half laughed, but it sounded so hollow it twisted at something in my gut. "She didn't have insurance. Did you know that? I was taking her to appointments, paying for it out of pocket. I missed going to my own baby's ultrasounds because I couldn't take more time off work. Tens of thousands of dollars went to pay for her coverage. And for her food. And last winter I found out she hadn't paid for heating. She went three weeks in the dead of winter with no heat. And Joe's still sleeping in that goddamn house. The one I've been paying for."

I didn't say anything.

He stared at me, his eyes haunted. "Do you think she wanted to die? She'd stopped getting dressed and taking care of herself. I'd come for her appointments and she couldn't remember the day, if she'd eaten, the last time she showered."

And I thought then about Paul, in those last weeks of his illness when he couldn't move or talk or laugh and when he was just staring at me with traces of that wry amusement. It had made me angry in the end, that look. Like there was some lovely little half-told joke between us. Half told and half dead. A joke I'd never be let in on.

Jess opened the door and looked out over us. "Eric?"

He ignored her and went on, “I think she wanted to die and was just waiting for Joe to go first. As long as she was alive, in this half-state of dying, he’d just keep taking and taking and taking. And I don’t have anything left to give.”

His wife, who almost resembled Rose, approached, rubbing her arms up and down to keep warm. She smiled at me cautiously. “You must be Annie.”

I nodded and forced a smile back. “Nice to meet you, Jess.”

I said it and I meant it.

Eric stared at the fire, unblinking.

“It’s cold,” she said, resting her hand on his shoulder. “You should come in.”

I said my goodbyes, and I made my way back to my car. I couldn’t get the image of his slumped shoulders and that perfect little house with his carefully manicured lawn out of my head as I drove back to the hotel.

That night, as I brushed my teeth, I thought about life and death and justice. I thought about Rose trying to do her best with two kids and two jobs and not enough of anything. I thought about Eric and that little baby and that perfectly maintained lawn. And then, I thought about Joe doing what he could, in the end, to do better.

Ryan had been right.

Whatever it was that I needed, I wasn’t going to find it looking behind me.

The next day was gray and frigid, like a proper November morning in Maine.

I checked out of the hotel and drove past my old house. I tried to remember what it had been like to live there before my mom died and things got messy. I drove to where my parents were buried and stared at their gravestones and thought about praying. I thought about Paul and wondered what it would be like when my memories of him receded, when the sharpness that sat somewhere inside my chest eased.

And then I got back on the highway and drove two hours home without looking back.

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