

Repeater

They were driving in silence.

Nolan Miller twisted his hands around the steering wheel of his Tercel at 11 and 1, eyes glancing over at Catherine every few seconds, turning over the words he'd say to fix this. They were headed down an especially quiet section of the old highway, headed out of town and toward Youngstown, back to Catherine's apartment. He probably should have saved the breakup for the last few clumsy minutes parked outside of her complex, but she'd made such a big deal about them moving in together, how important it was, how it would show her how committed he really was to this, that he couldn't hold the words in his hands, *I'm not really sure I'm into this anymore Catherine*, shaken out onto the table like dice, snake eyes.

He hadn't even put the radio on, the chugging hum of the Tercel underscoring their discomfort, ticked off by the steady clunk of some repair Nolan put off for months. Maybe he'd start counting them, one by one, each clunk getting him closer to an open passenger door, some sharp stinging words from Catherine, a slam, then a silent drive home. Or maybe he'd turn the radio on, cutting the silence with someone, anyone, some song that would make the air less thick and breathing possible.

"You mind if I turn on the radio?" Nolan said gently. Catherine's head snapped his way, eyes stretched thin into disgusted little slits.

"You're free to do whatever you want, Nolan," Catherine said. She'd chosen the notes in her voice that usually accompanied casually detached support: *Sure, we can see Gremlins if you want, Nolan. Sure, we can have pizza tonight, Nolan. Yeah, we can have sex if you want to, Nolan.* But tonight, the notes acquired blades that cut cleanly into him. He deserved it. She'd cared for their relationship like it was their child, putting in the effort for both of them. She loved

him, and if she didn't love him, she at least saw something of a future in him, which in many ways was worse. Love, at least, can stay in the present, but a future stretches out into months and years, and the more Catherine's future crept like vines into his, the more he wanted out. He was free to turn on the radio now, but the lacerating kindness from Catherine was a judgment about the freedom he exercised to shit on their future.

"Okay," Nolan mutters, turning on the radio. *Then you say -- go slow -- I fall behind -- the second hand unwinds --*

"Shit," Catherine said, folding her arms across her chest tightly, holding in, Nolan suspected, a good cry. This was the first slow song they ever danced to, at that party at Charlie's house, and she said *I love Cyndi Lauper* and Nolan said *me too*, lying, and she said *then maybe this should be our song*, and Nolan said, *I didn't know there was an 'our'*, and she said -

"Did you ever love me, Nolan?" She'd let the steel fall away from her voice, and all that was left was the hurt.

They were about to reach the clearing on the highway leading out of town where his father's gas station used to be before the elder Miller died and they tore it down. Not much survived here once the new highway was built, and what did manage to survive, only barely, shut down at five. Once the sun went down, life drained out of this stretch of the old highway and headed north toward the gleaming Hardees that had been recently re-done and the brand new Bed, Bath and Beyond. Nolan used to love this stretch of the old highway, but in the absence of his dad and the station, it just felt like loss. And now, this drive with Catherine, the end of yet another piece of an already limited life, would be added to the lot.

"No," he said. Better to be honest than nice. *If you're lost -- You can look -- And you will find me...*

“Well, *shit*, Nolan,” Catherine said, choking back a harsher flood of words behind it. *If you fall -- I will catch you -- I'll be waiting...*

“I didn't say I didn't *care* about you.” *Time after time...*

“Oh, well thank god for that, Nolan.” *Time after time...*

“It's just too much, you know.” *Time after...* “I have fun with you. I like you. But all this moving in together, it just feels like --”

White light snapped on ahead of them, bathing Catherine's face in the closest thing to daylight. She was crying. She was about to say something. She turned toward the light, now rushing to meet them.

“Nolan, watch out, watch out *watch* --”

They were driving in silence.

Nolan Miller twisted his hands around the steering wheel of his Tercel at 11 and 1, eyes glancing over at Catherine every few seconds, turning over the words he'd say to fix this. His heart was pounding, and the tips of his fingers tingled from the strength of his grip on the wheel. *Did I drift off for a second*, he thought to himself. *The light, the truck, did we --*

They were headed down an especially quiet section of the old highway, headed out of town and toward Youngstown, back to Catherine's apartment. He probably should have saved the breakup for the last few clumsy minutes parked outside of her complex, but she'd made such a big deal about them moving in together, how important it was, how it would show her how committed he really was to this, that he couldn't hold the words in his hands, *I'm not really sure I'm into this anymore Catherine*, shaken out onto the table like dice, snake eyes.

The radio wasn't on -- *just like in my dream*, Nolan thought -- and the chugging hum of the Tercel underscored their discomfort, ticked off by the steady clunk of some repair Nolan put off for months.

“You mind if I turn on the radio?” Nolan said gently. *I said that already*, he thought, *in the dream, in the whatever it was*. Catherine’s head snapped his way, eyes stretched thin into disgusted little slits.

“You’re free to do whatever you want, Nolan,” Catherine said.

“Okay,” Nolan mutters, reaching for the radio. *If it’s Cyndi Lauper, I swear --*

Nolan turned on the radio. *Then you say -- go slow -- I fall behind -- the second hand unwinds --*

“Shit,” Catherine said, folding her arms across her chest tightly.

Nolan’s head began to swim in the weirdness of it all. *I’ve done this before*, he said to himself, the center of his chest tightening with nerves. *She’s gonna ask me --*

“Did you ever love me, Nolan?” She’d let the steel fall away from her voice, and all that was left was the hurt.

They were about to reach the clearing on the highway leading out of town where his father’s gas station used to be before the elder Miller died and they tore it down. Nolan’s eyes darted to the clearing where the gas station stood, looking for something out of place, something different than what he remembered, but the view was the same, the sounds were the same, the clunk of the repair the Tercel so desperately needed, the rustle of Catherine’s coat against his seat as she adjusted herself. *What the fuck is happening right now?*

“No,” he said. Better to be honest than nice. *If you’re lost -- You can look -- And you will find me...*

“Well, *shit*, Nolan,” Catherine said, choking back the harsher flood of words behind it. *If you fall -- I will catch you -- I’ll be waiting...*

“I didn’t say I didn’t *care* about you.” *Time after time...*

“Oh, well thank god for that, Nolan.” *Time after time...*

“It’s just too much, you know.” *Time after...* “I have fun with you. I like you. But all this moving in together, it just feels like --”

White light snapped on ahead of them, bathing Catherine’s face in the closest thing to daylight. She’s crying. She’s about to say something. She turns toward the light, now rushing to meet them. *Where did that truck come from anyway*, Nolan asked himself.

“Nolan, watch out, watch out *watch* --”

They were driving in silence.

Nolan Miller twisted his hands around the steering wheel of his Tercel at 11 and 1, eyes glancing over at Catherine every few seconds, turning over the words he’d say to fix this.

They were headed down an especially quiet section of the old highway, headed out of town and toward Youngstown, back to Catherine’s apartment. Nolan could feel the panic rise up in his chest, thumping along with the clunk of the needed repair. *What’s happening*, he thought to himself. The third time around, he began to count off moments -- the rustle of her coat happening just as they passed that light pole on the right side of the road, the extra clunk against the road as they hit the pothole the town didn’t fix, the darkened lot of the junkyard, the clearing where his father’s gas station used to be before they tore it down -- with an inevitable quickness as though he’d planned each moment himself. Everything was exactly as it should be, as it had been, except him, except Nolan, whose head was on fire, who felt like the only thing out of place in the universe, who was the only thing aware that something was terribly, terribly wrong. *What the fuck is* --

“What’s wrong with you?” Catherine was looking at him. He thought he must look insane, eyes wide, breath deep and hollowed out, fists clutching the wheel so tightly his knuckles were turning white. “You having a heart attack or --”

This was different. She hadn't said this before. Nolan's mind grabbed at the novelty, pushing back against the swelling tide of his panic. The hum of the road lost its sinister edge, and Nolan relaxed back into the driver's seat, into the uncomfortable tension about the breakup, the bad timing, the long drive ahead.

"No, I just..." Nolan laughed a little. "The weirdest fucking thing." He looked ahead; the road was dark. No truck, no headlights. "It's like we kept going back over the same stretch of road, and there was this truck out of nowhere and --"

"Don't you want to turn on the radio?"

It was Catherine's voice, but it wasn't her voice. It was cold, and the cold of it crept across the front seat, through Nolan's skin and into his blood, icing over everything just below his surface. He turned his head to look at her in what little light there was on this stretch of the old highway at night. She was turned to face him -- *I didn't hear her move*, he thought to himself -- and her mouth was twisted into a crinkly little smile, her eyes a deep black that glowed and pulsed.

"Catherine?"

Catherine-not-Catherine cracked open its twisted smile, and exhaled a sound that was more a moan than a breath. The radio clicked on, full volume, as Catherine-not-Catherine began to slowly move from side to side.

"Did you ever love me, Nolan?" it croaked, a dusty sound that sounded nothing like Catherine. *If you're lost -- you can look -- and you will find me...* "Dance with me, Nolan," it said with a laugh. *If you fall -- I will catch you -- I will be waiting...* "You're free to do whatever you want, Nolan."

Catherine-not-Catherine reached out a hand that was no longer a hand but a spindly black collection of jagged bone and loose skin. It reached for Nolan as his heart stopped

beating, then the white light -- *time after time* -- and it was laughing -- *time after time* -- and it was starting to say something -- *time after* --

They were driving, as they had been, again and again, but this time the silence was gone and the car breathed with sound, the hum and the clunk bent in unfamiliar shapes, the Cyndi Lauper song at a deafening volume, distorted sound stretched across space, echoing back on itself. Nolan wasn't driving anymore -- the car sped down the especially quiet section of the old highway headed out of town and toward Youngstown all on its own -- and his body was turned to face the passenger seat, his back pressed up against the driver's side door. He was face to face with Catherine.

But Catherine was gone, and the Catherine-not-Catherine sat in the seat beside Nolan. The bright white light flooded in from every side, washing the car in something brighter than daylight. Nolan could see her, or what had been her, clearly, and this thing held her shape but had opened like a flower, dark petals of skin and vessel, hair and bone, blooming like a gently unwrapped present. Inside, the thing was something blacker-than-black, a space that seemed to go on forever, swirling and tossing and turning in on itself. From the center of the nothing, from the place where her heart was, the hand of jagged bone edged out to touch him.

I will be waiting, its dusty ancient voice whispered. *I will be waiting*.

Nolan pressed harder against the driver's side door, willing it to open, spilling him onto the asphalt, ripping his skin, crushing his bone, any sort of pain to end whatever this had become. But the door stood firm, and the hand of the Catherine-not-Catherine closed the distance until it placed a single bony appendage against the center of his sternum.

Suddenly he was somewhere else, at the bar where he'd met her, holding her close as they danced alone near a jukebox. He could smell the wine on her breath and the way she pushed her chest against him too tightly. Her left hand curled the hair against his neck in a way

that annoyed him, and she sighed with too much of her voice and not enough of her breath. He'd forgotten how much he didn't like her this night, the night they met. She was nice enough, but not right, and he knew that, even from the start, but he'd let the thing happen, the dates, the family meetings, the plans two months ahead, the Christmases, the Valentine's Days, the evenings on the couch, the weekend trips to Chicago, the tuning her out when she wouldn't stop talking, the imagining she was someone else when he was deep inside her, the path of least resistance that she saw as a life.

Catherine looked up at him, her eyes taking an extra second to focus in on him. "I like you, I think," she said.

"I like you, too," Nolan said, only this time, not like the first time, knowing he was lying.

"You're free to do whatever you want, Nolan," she said. He didn't remember her saying this.

"What?"

"You're free to do whatever you want, Nolan," she said again. And she said it again. And again. And the sound began to bend, and the details of the bar dissolved into white, and Nolan could feel himself being pulled into something, he didn't know what --

"Nolan, watch out, watch out *watch* --"

In the car again, on the especially quiet section of the old highway, headed out of town and toward Youngstown, the hot bright lights from the oncoming truck bathed Catherine's face in the closest thing to daylight. Nolan jerked the wheel sharply to the left, sliding off the road and out of the path of the truck, into the clearing where his father's gas station used to be before the elder Miller died and they tore it down, slamming hard off the asphalt into the dirt of the shoulder, sliding at high speed into one of the highway's light poles with a blisteringly loud crunch of metal, glass and wood. He and Catherine -- no longer the dark flowering

Catherine-not-Catherine, but the real one, the one with the freshly broken heart -- bucked forward with force, Nolan's chest meeting the steering wheel with a ferocious thud and Catherine moving farther, head slamming into the windshield, a whimper from somewhere deep in her throat, and blood on the glass, her forehead, down her face, onto her jacket, pooling into her lap.

She was dead by the time Nolan swam back into consciousness, the flashing red blue red blue of the police car cutting into the darkness, his eyes turning the hazy gray shadows into the outline of her bleeding body, the pain in his chest some uncertain mixture of the steering wheel, the crash, the things he should have said, the things he shouldn't, regret opening him up like a flower, dark petals of skin and vessel, hair and bone, the sound of Cyndi Lauper on the radio again and again and again.