I'll Be Yours For a Song
by dynamicsymmetry

Summary

In a small town where he doesn't expect to stay long, Daryl Dixon comes upon a girl walking by the side of the road at two in the morning, soaked to the skin. He could offer to drive her home. But he very much wants to not seem like a creep. He also doesn't want to just leave her there.

He has no idea what he's getting into.

Notes

This wasn't going to be a multi-chapter thing. Then Schwoozie got involved and started hurling ideas at me and that's what it became.

I'm not exactly in my own territory here, for two reasons. A) I write exclusively speculative fiction - science fiction/fantasy/horror/weird - and that's true of my professionally published stuff as well as my fic, so I've never attempted this genre (contemporary romance) before in any setting, and B) I don't know where this is going. I have some idea of later
events/developments but I have no idea about an overall arc. Never really do that either.

So this could be a disaster is what I'm saying.

A final note, for those who care: The initial one-shot which has become the first chapter of this was directly based on the story outlined in Josh Ritter's song "Kathleen", (I've been referring to this as the "Kathleen AU" on Tumblr and will probably continue to do so) and the album from which it comes - Hello Starling - will guide a huge amount of the mood of the thing going forward. It's a fabulous album and I'd recommend it hugely even if it had nothing to do with this.

Meta, edits, and general rambling about this whole mess can be found on my Tumblr. Info on a three-part paperback version can be found here.

ANYHOO here we go.
“I can take you home.”

It takes him a few seconds to realize he’s said it. Then there’s a mild spike of panic, because what exactly does he think he’s doing, pulling up next to Hershel Greene’s youngest daughter in a battered pickup, and it’s on the long road leading back to the farm and it’s got to be about two in the morning and she’s soaked through, blue sleeveless dress sticking to her upper body and her long legs, sticking everywhere. And he’s not a creep, and he’s not even really looking at her like that, but he realizes, as soon as he delivers that offer, that a creep might be exactly how he’s coming off.

Well, shit.

She looks at him, hugging herself, but she doesn’t stop walking, and he’s trapped between wanting to shrug and head off and staying and trying to convince her and probably looking even more creepy. Because what is she, seventeen? Sixteen?

She’s wet. That’s what she is. So he can either be a creep or a jerk.

“It’s gotta be a couple miles, c’mon.” And why doesn’t she have a ride, anyway? Why the hell is she walking? Dress like that, looks like she was out somewhere. Something happened.

She looks at him again, still walking, and he can see she’s shivering, and in that moment he decides he’d rather be a creep than a jerk.

“What do you want?” she asks finally, and she sounds more tired than angry. Tired and annoyed, and he doesn’t think the annoyance is truly directed at him. Doesn’t feel that way, anyway.

He starts to say something, stops, realizes he doesn’t have much of a response to that. I wanna take you home is self-evident and he’s already said it, and something about how it sounds in his head wouldn’t, he thinks, help his case. So instead he takes a breath, feeling a little helpless and more than a little awkward, and says, “You look cold.”

For a moment nothing. Then she stops and he stops a second later, the engine idling, and to his intense surprise she’s almost smiling.

“Yeah, ’cause I am.”

So he comes out and says it, since she’s halted and she’s actually talking to him. “I ain’t a creep or nothin’.”

She cocks her head, and he allows himself to think that she’s kind of adorable like that. “No, huh?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I kinda think that’s the sorta thing a creep might say.”

He shrugs, again feeling very helpless. He saw her once, delivering some feed to the farm—not a great job but it’s good enough for the moment until Merle decides he’s sick of this hayseed town and wants to move on again—and it was only for a minute or so but something about her made him feel helpless then, too. He’s never had a Thing for much of anyone, never felt what he would call real
attraction, and he doesn’t think that’s what this is, but it’s something, and he would be stupid to pretend it isn’t.

“I’m just sayin’ I can drop you off. I’m headed that way.”

“I can’t get any wetter,” she points out, which he supposes is true, and which he doesn’t think he can argue with, except for one thing.

“You could get drier.”

She sighs and looks down the road in the direction she was going, looks back the way she came. Empty. He’s been driving back toward town for a good hour or so, hasn’t seen anyone. And there’s no lightning, no thunder, but the rain is coming down in sheets and it’s only coming down harder.

She seems to reach a decision and steps forward toward the truck. “Sure you ain’t a creep?”

He gives her a crooked little smile. “Pretty sure.”

She sighs again. “Alright.”

She’s dripping all over the seat when she climbs in; somehow inside the cab she’s wetter than she had been outside. He cranks up the heater, leans back, rummages behind the passenger’s seat and produces a rag which he thinks is mostly clean. She gives it a skeptical look but takes it from him and begins to towel off her hair.

So he starts driving again.

Okay.

“The fuck you doin’ out there, anyway?”

In the periphery of his vision he sees her shoot him another look. “I was takin’ a walk.”

“Uh huh.” He gives her a look right back; he guessed when he first saw her that she had an attitude in her—not acidic or sharp but that she could push back when pushed, which he has exactly no problem with. It’s likable. “Lemme guess, you were out somewhere and someone flaked on you.”

She doesn’t answer immediately, wiping at her face; she’s not wearing much makeup, or she wasn’t, but now it’s smeared around her eyes. Again he thinks, somewhat against his will, adorable.

“My boyfriend got drunk,” she says finally, and again there’s that tired exasperation, and he feels a degree of irritation on her behalf. “Told him not to, he did it anyway. He was my ride.” She pauses, then says, softer, “Daddy would’ve killed me if I came back with him like that. Even if I wanted to. I didn’t,” she adds, and she sounds a little defensive. “I don’t feel like gettin’ wrapped ‘round a telephone pole.”

“Dick move,” he murmurs, and she laughs softly.

“Yeah.” She pauses, then studies him with a little more curiosity. “You were out at the farm, before. Couple days ago. Daryl, right? Daryl Dixon?”

He nods. Doesn’t say anything else. There isn’t a lot more worth saying.

But she persists. “You’re new.”

He gives her a half shrug. “Passin’ through.”
“So you ain’t stickin around.”

“No.” He glances at her, frowning. “Why the hell you care?”

“Why the hell you care if I care?”

He huffs a laugh. He’s feeling more comfortable now. She’s throwing back everything he decides to toss at her, and that’s just fine, because it feels friendly. She doesn’t seem like she’s about to mace him or leap out of the truck and roll down the embankment. He must be coming off better than he thought.

“Why aren’t you stickin’ around?”

“Never do,” he murmurs, and he decides not to mention Merle, because he doesn’t want to talk about Merle, because when he gets back into town he’ll probably have to peel Merle off a sticky bar floor and possibly pull someone off him. Drop a few punches. Not his idea of a fun time, but it’s what he does. This isn’t a Good Girl, he thinks, because she doesn’t feel like that, but she does feel like a nice girl, a nice person, and he’d rather not toss that shit into the ring.

Make things even more awkward than they are.

Either way she seems like she’s ready to cease persisting, because she falls silent, gazing out the window, and there is a flash of lightning some distance off, lighting up a long run of trees down a hill.

“You’re Beth.” He finally seizes on the name, and she nods, not looking at him. “Kinda out late, aren’t you?”

She shoots him a sharp little smile. “You my chaperone, Mr. Dixon?”

“Just sayin’, girl.”

“Mama and Daddy don’t know. I snuck out.” Back to tired. Whatever she was feeling when she did it, whatever teenage excitement, it seems to be gone. Washed out of her. “Feelin’ kinda stupid about that now.”

“Yeah, well.” He could say something like now’s when you gotta do the stupid shit, except a: he never stopped doing the stupid shit and he’s perfectly aware of that, and b: it makes him sound…

It makes him sound as much older than her as he probably is.

“I thought it’d be fun,” she says, quiet again, and it’s frankly strange that she’s still talking to him, this guy who is himself strange, who came upon her in a strange way, and this is all strange and a little dreamlike. Unreal. He’ll get back to town and do that peeling and maybe some necessary punching, and maybe tomorrow this won’t even seem like it happened, but the girl is talking to him, and he wants to listen. “It’s the kinda thing Maggie does. My big sister. Or she did. She’s gone now, got her own place. But I guess I…” She trails off and looks down at the rag in her hands, her damp hair falling around her shoulders and hanging in her face.

He sort of wants to reach out and tuck it behind her ear.

“I just wanted to see,” she says, and falls silent again, voice dropping under the deep hum of the engine and the dull roar of the heater.

“You had a shitty night. It happens.”
“Happens to you?”

“Mmhm.” Then he adds, in a rush of honesty that he thought he had been trying to avoid, “Happens a lot.”

“Oh.”

Silence for a while.

“My daddy stopped drinkin’,” she says finally. “That’s the other reason he’d kill me.”

“You don’t seem like you got lit.”

“I didn’t. Just watched everyone else do it. They kinda turned into jerks, most of ‘em. They try too hard.” She sighs. “I don’t know why you’d try that kinda thing.”

“All kinda reasons.” He’s his own species of quiet now. He didn’t want to think about those reasons, not with her sitting next to him, but there’s something insistent about her presence even if she isn’t saying anything. He can see how it might get annoying, but right now it’s mostly okay. Shouldn’t be, but it is.

“I wanted to dance,” she says, and now she sounds almost dreamy. “I like dancin’. Singin’.”

And now he could say something, and he’s not sure he should. Feels an impulse, intense and intensely odd, and he’s not sure where it’s coming from. The rain is drumming on the roof and the wipers are swiping back and forth, making a whimpering noise, and all those other sounds of a truck probably on its last wheels because the guy he’s working for is too damn cheap to replace anything properly, but he wants to listen to something new, something not the radio. Her voice is low and pleasant and somehow musical in itself, and maybe he wonders what it would sound like. Maybe.

“You get to sing?”

“No tonight.”

“Why don’tcha sing somethin’?”

She looks at him, clearly surprised. Even a little confused. “Really?”

“Yeah, you heard me. Go on and sing somethin’.”

She hesitates, then squeezes the rag and laughs. A small laugh, surprise still in it, but also a kind of pleasure. Like she’s happy to be asked. Unexpectedly.

“Alright.”

So she sings something. He doesn’t recognize it, but it’s sweet, and there’s something about her voice that’s pure in a way he doesn’t have any idea how to describe. Pure and smooth and practiced, and natural, like it’s something she doesn’t have to work at, like it comes out of her like breathing. Like maybe it’s something she’s always done, and maybe she’ll go on doing it, no matter how much the world changes her. He listens, and he falls so deep into it that he almost rolls past her house, until she goes quiet and touches his arm.

And he jumps slightly.
He cuts off the headlights and turns slowly up the drive, and as he does he realizes the rain has stopped and the moon is breaking through the clouds. Everything is dripping, puddles shining, and it’s almost pretty. She’s still soaked, still a mess...

But she’s pretty too. She is. Pretty and young and not ruined by anything, and he’s never seen anything quite like her.

He’s close to the house when she touches his arm again. “I can walk from here.”

“You sure?”

She laughs softly. “You wanna get me killed after all?”

“Alright.” He stops, idling again, and she seems like she’s about to get out, but then she doesn’t, and he’s about to ask her what she’s doing when she lays a hand against his cheek and turns his face to hers and kisses him.

Not deep, not hard. Really it’s not much of anything. But he closes his eyes and lets himself sink into it. Her lips are sweet with some sort of gloss that’s clung to her in spite of the rain, and she smells like fresh water and soap and maybe a touch of perfume. Light. Not cloying.

She pulls back, and when he opens his eyes she looks surprised again, but she’s smiling, eyes shining, and he can see in her the kind of teenage daring she was hoping to find. Without meaning to, he’s given that to her.

And he does what he wanted to, his own kind of daring, and he reaches up and tucks a loose, damp strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Thank you kindly, Mr. Dixon.” She opens the door and climbs out, nimbly avoiding a puddle. He watches her, how she moves with a slightly gawky grace, something that’ll become real grace when she gets older. She’ll be beautiful.

She already is. Not adorable. Not pretty.

She’s beautiful.

A few feet away she stops and turns and she’s smiling at him again, wide and happy. “You ain’t a creep,” she says, and gives him a little wave. “I’ll see you.”

Speechless, he waves back.

She heads across the yard then, moon lighting her up, catching her hair. She vanishes into the shadows, but he sees one more glimpse of her, climbing up the side of the house—a drainpipe, maybe, or a trellis. She moves easily, and he watches her until she slides into an open window and is gone.

He pulls the truck around, still quiet as he can, lights still off. Merle is probably waiting for him at that bar, ready to be peeled. And he’ll probably let Merle convince him to get drunk, and he’ll pass out and wake up the next morning feeling like shit and drag himself to work in this shitty pickup, and sooner or later he’ll leave and head to the next place Merle gets it into his head to go.

But he has this. The taste of her lips, and her singing in his ears, and it’s sort of perfect. A perfect thing, out of nowhere.

Yeah, he’ll see her again.
He’ll make sure that happens.
your face was turned up into rain as you watched me

Chapter Notes

Couple things.

A) I've aged both Beth and Daryl up very slightly from how I was originally planning this (sorta kinda s2), though there's nothing in chapter 1 that established things either way. Beth has just turned 18, and this is set at the very end of summer as she's entering her senior year of high school. There are a number of reasons for this, which I'll be talking about at some point soon on my Tumblr when I talk more in general about what I intend to do here and why. This means that Daryl is a couple of years older as well. In terms of age/how he looks, refer vaguely to s4.

B) I write in a very cinematic fashion in my head, and for me this has taken on all the look/aesthetic of Friday Night Lights. Josh Ritter may be doing the songs for this thing, but the instrumental stuff is Explosions in the Sky all the way. You know. If you care.

Daryl doesn’t think of himself as a prophet.

He’s wrong about a lot. He looks back at his life and he thinks it would be fair to say that he’s been wrong about most things. He gets it into his head that something is a particular way, and then it turns around and it isn’t that anymore. He wants to believe something, he almost does, and it bites him in the ass. He has faith in something, almost to the point of certainty, and it collapses. Sometimes it feels like he’s being purposefully fucked with. He tries to just not do it anymore. Predict things. It’s way better to take it moment by moment, see where he is when the next one is over.

But he was right about two things.

He wakes up feeling like shit.

And what happened the night before doesn’t feel like it happened at all.

He stays where he is, sitting up on the ratty sofa in the shithole one bedroom apartment above the garage of the feed-&-seed, which his current asshole boss—name of Elmer, and boss is a polite term for someone shoving very little money at him under a table—has tossed at them for the purposes of sleeping in. He’s pretty sure it was recently used only for the storage of things designed to attract the maximum amount of mustiness. He can hear Merle snoring deafeningly in the bedroom. Which means Merle hasn’t choked on his own vomit in his sleep, which is good.

Daryl supposes.

His head is throbbing like someone is punching it from the inside, every single particle-wave of light is far too bright, his mouth tastes like the bottom of an ancient ashtray, he knows he doesn’t smell all that good...

And there was this girl.

There was the rain, and the road, and then there was the moon and puddles and before that a song, and there was this fucking girl.
He rakes a hand into his hair and stares at nothing, and for the moment he forgets about his head and his mouth and everything else in favor of this thing that feels at once like a dream and like one of the most vividly real things that’s ever happened to him.

Well.

He has to attempt to shower, he has to get dressed, he has to make sure Merle doesn’t seem likely to die while he’s gone, and he has to stumble downstairs and do whatever the fuck the guy wants him to do so he can get paid, so he and Merle have money for booze and Merle has money for drugs until they wander on down the road to wherever else they’re going next, because so it has gone and so it goes and so it ever shall be, so help him God.

But there was this girl.

Fuck.

In the next fifteen minutes he’s moderately showered, has grabbed a stale donut from a days-old box on the counter of what they kindly think of as a kitchen, has checked one more time to make sure Merle is alive, and is heading downstairs to the store to do whatever the guy’s cooked up for him to do today.

And he’s not thinking about that fucking girl.

Morning—such as it is—is occupied by cleaning up the stockroom. The stockroom is filthy and full of mice, and Daryl wanders around with a broom and watches them scurrying around and doesn’t do a whole lot about it. If it was allowed to get into this state, Elmer must not care terribly much about it in general, and probably won’t notice if Daryl leaves it in mostly the state in which he found it. He clears away a lot of the loose seed, anyway. Sweeps up some straw. The mice...

He likes them. He has no real qualms about killing them, and he would do so if he cared enough, but he has nothing against mice. They’re living their lives. They’re doing what comes naturally. They are, he supposes—as far as it goes—free.

He drops into a crouch, broom in hand, and watches them for a while. They’re sleek, well-fed, not afraid of him.

Somewhere overhead, Merle is probably stirring. Rousing himself to what passes for consciousness. Taking a little snort of crystal, maybe; he doesn’t use it to the point at which Daryl would start becoming seriously alarmed, but he says it wakes him up, gets him moving, and he’s not nice when he’s had it—not that he’s particularly nice anyway—and Daryl knows that things there are on a long, slow decline. They have been for years. Maybe for a lot of both their lives. They didn’t start at a very high point, and since he picked Merle up from his last stint in prison and they started moving—in no particular direction, just sort of in ever-widening circles—things have been slipping lower and lower.

He’s keeping himself together. Mostly. But Merle is slowly falling apart.

He knows this. He also knows there isn’t much he can do about it. Merle does what Merle wants. Merle doesn’t listen. Merle talks about being older, taking care of his baby brother, but Daryl is well aware that more and more of the time he’s taking care of Merle.

Isn’t he working now? Isn’t he pulling in the money? Not dealing drugs, which increasingly Merle isn’t equipped to do? Not B&E jobs, which Merle occasionally talks about doing—with great enthusiasm—but which both of them know he would probably fuck up? Get caught? Get hauled in? Have it discovered that he broke his parole almost two years ago, get locked up again and maybe not
get out this time for fifteen years? Twenty?

Get old in there?

Daryl tells himself he doesn’t want that. That he’d do anything to keep that from happening. To his big brother. To the only one who was ever there for him.

Most of the time he manages to believe it.

Most of the time he imagines that he’s content to keep moving, because it’s safer that way, and anyway he was never good at settling anywhere, and who knows, maybe if they keep moving they’ll get the fuck out of Georgia, of which he’s frankly beginning to tire.

Once or twice he’s tried to talk Merle into that. Cut west, check out Alabama, down into Florida, maybe... Fuck, north to the Carolinas, north might be a nice change. He doubts Merle would be into north, probably better luck dangling something like Miami in front of his nose, though Daryl thinks Miami sounds kind of like his half-articulated idea of Hell for a whole bunch of reasons. But nothing so far.

Just circles. Just... this.

At least he knows this.

He lights up a cigarette, smokes it down to the filter, crushes it out and leaves it for the mice to do whatever they want with it. He gets up and goes back into the main store, doesn’t perceive Elmer anywhere around—his heavy, vaguely asthmatic breathing and his tendency to throw things onto and off of shelves when he wants to move them being somewhat hard to miss—so he heads for the door, swipes at a rack of dangling windchimes on his way past and sends them into a clanging mess of sound. He turns the OPEN sign to CLOSED and steps out onto the pavement.

It’s raining again.

He stands for a moment, head tipped slightly up. The rain is heavy, though not as heavy as it had been the night before, and the sky is low and sullen gray, stubbornly holding back the sunlight. It’s Sunday morning, and Main Street—in which he’s standing—is closer to empty than not. People in church, people sleeping in. The street itself is like so many other main streets he’s seen in so many other crappy little towns: a few stores—clothes and household goods and a Kroger further down with its shopping carts crowded haphazardly in the parking lot. A music store that boasts of its willingness to buy CDs and which looks like it’s on its way out. Cafe. Non-chain coffee shop and its Starbucksian nemesis across the street. Bar. Other much shittier combination bar-liquor store way down at the far end, which contains the floor off which he scraped Merle the night before and which possesses the parking lot in which he narrowly missed taking a punch shortly after.

Two churches. First Methodist. First Baptist. Whatever.

He’s already soaked. He doesn’t want to go back inside. He doesn’t want to go back up to the apartment. They don’t own an umbrella. He starts to walk.

Just for a moment—a weird, crazy moment—he thinks about walking all the way out of town and continuing down the road and just... not stopping. Just leaving.

Or maybe there’s someplace else he could go.

He stops across the street from the First Baptist Church and ducks under the awning of a pharmacy, palms water and his wet hair out of his eyes, checks to make sure that both his pack and his lighter
are sufficiently dry, and lights up another cigarette. The wet in the air makes the smoke even thicker, and there’s something about it that he likes. He exhales a long stream of it and leans back against the brick, feels his clothes hanging heavy on his body, and doesn’t think about very much for a few minutes.

Service is over. People are streaming out through the white double doors, opening umbrellas, running for cars. He watches them, half focused—families, friends, good Christians, good people of the community. He blows smoke in their general direction.

And there’s the girl.

She’s crowded under an umbrella with a boy who might be her boyfriend or might be her older brother—brother, Daryl thinks, because the kid doesn’t appear at all hungover and there’s something about the way she’s pressed close to him that looks more like siblings than anything else—and she’s laughing at something. She’s also accompanied by a pretty, older dark-haired woman and a white-haired man who might be her grandfather but who, he guesses, is actually the potentially murderous Daddy.

He doesn’t look murderous. Not especially.

And there’s her. She’s wearing a white summer dress with a slightly flared skirt, for which it’ll be too cold in another few weeks, after early autumn rain gives way to chilly wind. Her hair is tied back except for the strands that hang around her face, already wet.

She looks happy.

He thinks—for a moment—about her in church, hymnal in hand, singing in that voice he got to hear the night before, and something in him twists into an ache he doesn’t fully understand.

Families and friends and good Christians, and her.

She’s heading toward the parking lot at the side of the church when she turns her head, looks across the street, and though she’s at a good distance he feels her eyes lock onto his.

Her smile freezes for a second, but it doesn’t fade.

This girl.

He taps ash onto the pavement and gives her a little nod. After a second or two she returns it, and it’s slight because she probably doesn’t want her family to see—he realizes suddenly—and she should be too far away for him to see it, but he does.

He wants...

Fuck, he doesn’t know what he wants. To talk to her, maybe. Talking to her was... He has no idea when he last talked to someone like that. Just talking. She didn’t want anything from him but a ride home, and she hadn’t even wanted that, initially, though she’d taken it when he offered. Talking to her about nothing at all had been nice, and talking to her about herself had been nice, and listening to her sing had been really nice.

And the kiss had been nice. That’s yet another thing he genuinely doesn’t know when he last had. And maybe never a kiss like that. Ever.

But mostly he just wants to talk to her.
He forgot, a long time ago, what *lonely* means. Mostly because you forget the words for things you feel all the time. You lose the ability to describe the basic elements of your own experience of existence.

But then you catch a glimpse of something else and suddenly articulation becomes possible.

So she nods, and for the tiniest fraction of a second her smile widens.

Then she’s gone.

He stands there for a while and smokes the cigarette down to the filter. Drops it into the gutter. Turns and heads back to the store, where Elmer will have deliveries of chicken feed to a couple of the more distant farms for him to make.

Not her farm.

But maybe soon.

Maybe that, too, might be nice.
It’s another day before Daryl goes back to the farm.

The rain continues all through the rest of Sunday and throughout Monday, not in a steady, hard pound but in varying amounts at varying intensities, and Daryl—to pass the time—finds himself trying to come up with as many different words to describe it all as he can. He mentally converts the few nouns into verbs for easier use.

Spitting. Dripping. Trickling. Misting, at its lightest. Soaking. Pounding, of course, and hammering, but there’s also sheeting, which works well when the rain is heaviest and a sudden gust of wind pushes a line of it down the street like an enormous wet curtain. Drumming. Hissing. Lots of good sound words. It rattles on windowpanes. Taps on umbrellas. Spatters. Splashes. S supplementationes, even. Onomatopoeias.

Daryl doesn’t know what an onomatopoeia is, but if someone explained it to him he would appreciate the concept.

All Monday, Merle doesn’t leave the apartment, but given that the weather is shitty as hell Daryl can chalk it up to that and not get too annoyed about having absolutely no space or privacy to himself. Merle doesn’t even want to go drinking, claims that he hated the place, but Daryl suspects Merle was invited to not come back. Which, okay, there’s the other place—which admittedly looks a little too nice for them—and there have to be other places outside town that would work. But Merle doesn’t want to go searching for them—preferring to slowly go through can after can of PBR on the terrible couch—and that’s fine with Daryl. He hates driving in the rain, especially in a wreck like that pickup.

Merle had a bike, once. Once upon a time in a faraway land. There lived two brothers.

Sitting around doing nothing and watching Merle get high is a known quantity, and it seems like it’s just about as good as anything else.

So the rain continues into Tuesday, and on Tuesday morning, just as it’s beginning to let up and the sky isn’t looking quite so low and dark, Daryl fills the back of the pickup with bags of pig feed and takes the long road out of town toward the Greene farm. Window rolled down, radio on and tuned to a scratchy, distant station playing only 90’s alt rock—because for some bizarre fucking reason the tuner is stuck on it and refuses to be moved—and he’s got a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth and he doesn’t even care about the rain anymore, and he doesn’t hate driving in it right now.

It’s good simply to be out of there. Even with the Gin Blossoms’ lead statically singing that he’s found out about him.

It’s not far but it feels far—not in an entirely bad way—and he’s damp by the time he pulls up the long dirt-and-gravel drive. Hershel comes out of the barn to greet him, followed by the boy Daryl had guessed was Beth’s brother, and Daryl flicks the butt of the cigarette into the dirt and gets out to
help them unload. The dirt is far more mud at this point than anything else, slushy puddles of standing water everywhere, and he knows he’s going to be spattered almost up to his knees, but he doesn’t care about that either. It’s nice to not care, and for once in a way that feels more like freedom than plain apathy.

And it’s a nice farm. He’s really noticing that for the first time. Something almost postcard about it. Farmhouse in good repair but showing just the right amount of age, equally old barn and silo, large yard with thick-trunked old trees, distant outbuildings, wide fields. He guesses it’s a lot to work for just a family with two kids—three, remembering the absent big sister—but probably Greene takes on hands for the busiest parts of the year.

He thinks in a very idle way about autumn rapidly oncoming. But of course he’ll be gone by then.

They finish unloading quickly, carrying the stuff into a shed adjacent to the barn, and the boy—Shawn—heads up to the loft to pitch hay down to the horses. Greene comes up to him and holds out a few bills with a nod and something that isn’t quite a smile, and then the whole business is concluded and Daryl realizes that he’s going to have to go back to town and get back to far less enjoyable things.

Well. Maybe he can take his time driving back there. Take a detour. A longer way. The main road is straight and direct but there are side roads too.

He’s walking back to the truck, drenched now and still not caring—though his clothes will start getting uncomfortable before long—when she comes out onto the porch, dressed in a loose blue top and ratty jeans and old cowboy boots, her hair pulled back. Like before, only messier. He stops with his hand on the open door and looks at her, and she gives him a wave—like that night. Her in the moonlight, dodging puddles, wet and smiling and pretty.

So he gives her a nod.

She seems as heedless of the wet as he was when she comes down the porch steps and out into the rain—because at this point maybe people just don’t care so much about wetness as pervasive as this has become. Greene is heading back toward the house and she catches his arm, bends her head up close to his and says something. Even at a distance Daryl catches sight of the dubious expression that crosses his face, the way his gaze flicks up to the truck, to Daryl, but finally he nods, a little tight-lipped, and it occurs to Daryl that although she had been worried about Daddy killing her, this is a Daddy’s Girl, and she probably knows how—even in a very gentle way—to get a lot of what she wants out of him.

She didn’t strike him as manipulative. Not at all. Though admittedly he hadn’t talked to her for long. But she also struck him as someone likely to stand her ground with certain things, and also as someone who can be convincing when she wants to be.

So she’s coming toward the truck, pushing wet hair out of her face, giving him a small smile. “You goin’ back into town?”

He shrugs, and she cocks her head, her smile slightly more amused. “That a yes?”

He grunts. He doesn’t feel bad about the direction in which things are going, but this is also unexpected, and he doesn’t feel especially talkative. “Yeah.”

“Can I come with you?”

He arches a brow. “Why?”
“’cause I wanna go into town? Can’t take the truck, Shawn’s gonna need it.”

Daryl looks up and past her. Greene is standing on the porch, leaning on the railing and watching the two of them. Watching him. Not with any particular suspicion, but watching him, and Daryl supposes that’s appropriate, because here’s a man clearly well into his thirties—closer to the end of them if he’s honest—being asked to give his teenage daughter a lift.

He’d probably be watching pretty closely too, if it was him.

So he looks back at Beth and shrugs again. No reason not to, he guesses. It’s not that far. “Alright.” He nods to the passenger’s side. “Get in.”

She does, settles herself, and as he turns the truck around and starts back down the drive she reaches behind the seat and finds the rag she used before, pats at her hair.

Daryl glances at her as she does. She’s wearing little flower earrings. Gold heart on a chain around her neck. A small collection of beaded bangles on her left wrist. He’s not sure why he notices these things, but he does, and he files them away.

Little bit of quiet. The radio is now playing the Goo Goo Dolls. *Put your arms around me, what you feel is what you are and what you are is beautiful.*

“What’s in town?”

“Nothin’. Just wanted to get outta there for a while.”

Something hits him. She’s got to be in high school. “Why ain’t you in school?”

She gives him an *are you kidding me* look. “’cause it didn’t start yet. Won’t for another couple weeks.”

He huffs a laugh. Wonders if he should make conversation, which he sucks at. He wonders why he feels the need to do so at all. “What year you goin’ into?”

He wonders why he feels the need to ask that.

“Senior.” She sighs, sighs like there might be something behind that answer. Something not exactly positive. This is mostly incomprehensible to him; this isn’t part of his experience. He doesn’t know what might be behind a sigh like that, for a girl going into her senior year of high school.

He never made it that far. Never made it past freshman. Barely got even that much.

“You don’t sound so excited.”

She shoots him another look. “You ever get excited about school?”

“Nah.” Not going into more than that. He’s not prepared for that conversation. Not prepared for that particular can of half-rotten worms. He thinks back to the other night, thinks about how he didn’t want to talk about Merle, how he didn’t want to tell her about any of that and his reasons for it, and he wonders what exactly is happening here.

She leans back in the seat, gazing out the window. He lights up another cigarette, rolls the window down, and this time the look she gives him is faintly exasperated. “Can you not?”

“You wanna jump out?” He gives her a tiny crooked smile. “I can slow down to, like, ten miles an hour. You roll when you hit, you probably be okay.”
She laughs, a soft, vaguely sardonic little sound, and rolls down her own window, letting rain *mist* onto her face, making her skin glisten. The rain has let up for the moment but he knows it won’t last. “Whatever.”

The Goo Goo Dolls have been replaced by Pearl Jam. Now and then Daryl wonders what a station like this is doing out here in rural Georgia and then he decides he’s not in the business of questioning things. That’s probably not a good road to go down. The world doesn’t make sense. It never has.

The rest of the drive is pretty much in silence. He pulls onto Main Street, and by then the rain is heavier, and cars—the few out there right now—are moving slow but still crashing through puddles and now and then making people on the sidewalk jump back and glare. “Where you want me to drop you?”

“Up here.” The coffee shop, he sees. The non-chain one. He slows, starts to pull to the curb, and just then she touches his arm. He almost jumps, like last time. He’s never been entirely comfortable with being touched, and especially not now. Not her. He sort of wishes she wouldn’t.

“Come in with me.” He looks at her like he’s sure he didn’t hear her right. “Huh?”

“You drove me, let me buy you a coffee or somethin’. You gotta be back there now?” He doesn’t. Or he thinks he can get away with it. *Get away with it.* That’s a very odd way to think about this. He looks at the coffee shop—the less than skilled stenciling, the chalked sign out front promising free bagels with any drink order from eight to eleven. Not many people inside. Dry. But he’s a mess. He’s muddy, hair hanging in his face, and his clothes are *not* in good shape.

But she’s kind of a mess too, and she doesn’t seem to care about either of them.

Hey, free coffee.

Alright.” He cuts off the engine and starts to open the door, then stops and looks back at her, that crooked smile involuntary and persistent. “You're kinda fuckin’ weird, girl.”

“I know.” Her own smile is positively sunny as she opens her own door and hops out onto the pavement. For a few seconds he watches her move with that same slightly gawky grace he remembers from that night. Then he follows her inside.
came in from the weather though not yet together

Chapter Notes

So this is one of those situations where I'm like "I'll update like once a week!" and we all share a hearty laugh.

Pro: It’s before eleven, so there are free bagels.

Con: The only bagels have raisins in them. Daryl doesn’t like raisins. But the bagel is free, and free is something to respect, so he picks the raisins out of it and goes to work on it anyway. He doesn’t have to see Beth’s face to know that he’s amusing her again. He’s not certain he completely hates that.

He likes her smile. In less than two hours total time spent with her he’s come to that conclusion and it feels like a solid one.

His coffee is also technically free, and it’s black and strong like a smack in the face, which he appreciates and which he doubts he would have gotten from the across-the-street nemesis Starbucks. He’s never been in here before—it’s not the kind of place he would normally go into—but he likes it okay.

In his head, Merle is making faces.

Merle can fuck right off.

Beth apparently does like raisin bagels, and she’s still spreading strawberry cream cheese on hers when she leans forward slightly and he senses that she’s about to say something.

He looks up, piece of freshly raisin-free bagel in hand. No cream cheese. He doesn’t get cream cheese.

“So where’re you from?”

He frowns at her from beneath his hair. He knows this is one of those questions people ask, and sometimes they’re really asking and sometimes they aren’t, and he’s not sure which this is, but she looks like she’s actually interested, and that means the stakes are higher, and that makes him less sure what to say, and it’s just remotely possible that he’s overthinking this.

So there’s a familiar dodge. “Why the hell you care?”

“Why the hell you care if I care?” She gives him a little smirk. “I bought you a coffee, you owe me.”

“I drove you, we’re square.”

“C’mon.” She cocks her head to one side, still with that smirk pulling at the corner of her mouth—softened now. “It’s just a question. What is it, some big secret?”

He looks at her for a few seconds, then lowers his head and goes back to work on the bagel. “Around.”
“That tells me a lot, Mr. Dixon.”

“Still not sure why I gotta tell you anythin’, girl.”

“Alright, so we could sit here and be totally quiet. That wouldn’t be awkward.” She sits back and takes a bite of bagel, and when he glances up at her again she doesn’t look frustrated or exasperated. She simply looks amused.

She genuinely wants him to talk to her.

Well, so did he. The other day.

“Kinda near Atlanta.”

“We’re kinda near Atlanta right now. You wanna narrow it down at all?”

“Nope.”

“Okaaay.” She does sigh, just a little, but he gets the distinct sense—without looking directly at her again—that she’s thinking about this more than anything else. Thinking around corners. His corners. Like he’s something she’s trying to find her way around. Get open. Like he’s a puzzle.

This is something else he’s not sure he completely hates. As far as he knows no one has ever found him interesting enough to try to figure out before. But there also isn’t a whole lot to figure out. He just doesn’t feel like talking about it.

“So you, what, just kinda drift around?”

“Mostly.”

“So you’re a drifter.” She sets down her bagel and picks up her drink—not coffee. Hot chocolate, whipped cream. Little chocolate shavings on the cream. Like her jewelry, he noticed this, noted it, filed it away. “You’re like... literally a drifter.”

“Guess so.”

“What’s that like?”

“Quiet.” He realizes immediately after he says it that it’s ambiguous as to whether he’s describing what it’s like or telling her to do something, and he elects to leave the ambiguity—except neither is true. It’s not quiet, what he does. Frequently it’s a lot louder than he would prefer, a lot louder than he would choose. He likes the quiet moments because they don’t come all that often.

And he doesn’t want her to be quiet. He hasn’t since she started talking. Hasn’t since that first night. He’s simply not certain how to talk to her.

“Lonely?”

That word again, a word that jabs him in the gut. It’s not a word to which he ever would have attached himself, not something to which he would have drawn a connection. But she asks, and while he seems to be able to avoid specific things—if not gracefully—he doesn’t think he can lie to her.

He’s never been a particularly good liar. Though in fairness it’s also a skill he’s never tried to cultivate.
“I got my brother.”

So there it is.

But it’s also not exactly an answer.

“You got a brother?” She takes a sip of her hot chocolate and thumbs whipped cream off her upper lip. “Where is he?”

*On the couch, drunk or high. Unless he decided to wander back down to that shitpile he got kicked out of, try to either score or make some deals. “Around.”*

“Around,” she echoes softly, and there’s something about that softness that catches his attention and twists something in him. Something like a warning and also not like it at all. He looks up at her again, right at her, and really takes her in. She’s damp but drying, her hair in wavy blond tendrils around her face, her shirt no longer clinging to her frame. She looks extremely together, more together than he thinks he has possibly ever been, and she also looks like she’s seeing right through him.

Maybe not seeing everything. But enough. He doesn’t want to talk about his brother, his brother is a sore subject—she knows that. She’s keenly aware. The only question is what she’ll do with the information.

What she does is she lets it drop, and that’s when he realizes that she’s not only a little pushy and a little daring and very perceptive.

She’s kind.

Yet another thing he doesn’t know what to do with.

“Don’t talk a lot, do you?”

“You do.” He doesn’t quite smile.

And she *does* smile, that same sunny smile she gave him when she got out of the truck, and there’s no pretense about it, nothing artificial, and this is yet another revelation, though in truth it doesn’t surprise him because he already sensed it on such a deep level: there’s not a single particle of artifice in this girl’s entire being. What he sees with her is exactly what he gets.

So if she’s smiling at him now, she means it.

“I guess we balance each other out, then.”

He doesn’t have anything at all to say to that, but she isn’t making him feel like he needs to. So he looks at her for another moment or two and goes back to the bagel, and when he’s done with that it’s just the coffee and her and her whipped cream and sprinkled chocolate, the soft hum of what passes for an incoming lunch crowd in a coffee shop in a small Georgia town, the rain outside moving from a spatter back to a drum. She’s half looking out the window and as far as he can tell she’s not looking *at* anything at all, and he takes the time to watch her without being watched.

She looks young, but there’s something in her that doesn’t *feel* young. Something deep. He can’t quite get a handle on it.

“I should get back,” he says quietly, and she starts a bit, as if she was off wandering somewhere and he’s grabbed her and pulled her in.
“Yeah. Okay.” She pushes a few strands of hair behind her ear and gives him a smile—smaller but no less warm. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Thanks for the coffee.”

He’s just getting to his feet and turning when something presents itself in his mind and he turns back to her. “How you gonna get home?”

She looks up, again appearing almost as if she had left and he called to her. “I... I can call Shawn, he can come get me.”

“From the farm?”

She nods.

“Ain’t that kinda outta his way?”

“’s not far, you know that.” Her eyes narrow suddenly—not with any suspicion, not exactly, but like she’s onto something. “You offerin’ me yet another lift, Mr. Dixon?”

He shrugs. He thinks about saying no. Saying no would make a lot of sense. Maybe he should say no.

But he doesn’t.

“Ain’t it kinda outta your way?”

Saying things has been hard for him this entire conversation. Which things to say, how much, whether there’s anything to be said at all. How honest to allow himself to be—because if he starts talking honestly he’s going to have a hard time stopping, because he is how he is. But she asks that question, a perfectly rational one, and he could ignore it or look for a dodge or say Okay, whatever, never mind.

And instead he’s honest.

“I like makin’ the drive. I like...” He sighs. “I don’t like bein’ here.”

A world contained in five words, only one of which is more than one syllable. Simple, unvarnished, every one of those syllables a truth.

She hesitates. For a minute—and it’s actually sort of an awful minute, and that throws him for something of a loop—he’s certain she’s about to turn him down, because she has a lot of her own reasons for doing so. He’s sure. It would make total sense to tell him no.

Instead she smiles, a smaller version than the others. And yet somehow the warmest of any of them.

Because he’s given her something, he realizes later. Given her something she was trying to get out of him the entire conversation. No dodges. No single-word answers. No question-volleys of his own.

Just the truth.

“Alright. What time you get off work?”

“Four.”

“Meet you outside the store at four?”
He nods. Then he pauses another moment, wondering if he should say something else, until he feels like things are getting awkward again and there’s really nothing at all to say. So he gives her another nod, shoves his hands in his pockets, and leaves.

And he meets her outside the store at four.
fools in the rain if the sun gets through

Merle is waiting for him when he gets back. Merle is sporting a black eye. Merle is sitting on the couch, pupils extremely dilated, watching *Pawn Stars* with the sound off. Merle seems oblivious to the black eye, and the look he gives Daryl when Daryl walks in suggests that Merle isn’t entirely sure what time of day it is.

It’s almost six and it’s still raining.

Merle jerks his head in Daryl’s direction and appears vaguely disgusted. “You’re drippin’ all over the fuckin’ floor, brother. Jesus, whatcha been doin’?”

That Merle cares about the ratty yellowed carpet and also cares about where he’s been strikes Daryl as the slightest bit funny. He heads past Merle without a word and goes into the bathroom, gets a towel, stands in front of the dirty mirror and rubs at himself.

His clothes... They’re a lost cause. He strips them off-

And pauses, staring at his reflection.

He doesn’t look at himself all that much. As far as he’s concerned there isn’t much to look at. Guy in his late thirties, nothing especially remarkable, but he knows in a kind of distant way that he’s in good shape, strong, guesses that’s better than not being. Faded tattoos. Hair that some people might think needs cutting. Always needs cutting. He always lets it go, because he doesn’t care, because he has no reason to do so.

Scars. Lots and lots of scars.

He shakes his head and goes into the bedroom to rummage through the dresser they share—when they bother to put stuff away at all, which of course Daryl does way more than Merle anyway—and finds some stuff that’s mostly clean.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Merle calls from the other room. “The hell were you? Thought you got off at four.”

So Merle does know what time it is. That’s pretty good.

“I was—” And then he realizes that—just like he hadn’t wanted to tell Beth about Merle—there is no way in *hell* that he’s telling Merle about Beth, and there are any number of reasons for that, not least of which is that Merle would give him a metric ton of shit for it. He would say things about why his baby brother was driving this little *teenage dream* around, and he would make some pretty crass suggestions about it all, and—worst of all, and Daryl doesn’t completely understand why—Merle would say stuff about *Beth*, about who she is and what she’s like and why she wants to spend any time with Daryl at all, and if Merle starts down that particular road he thinks he might end up expanding Merle’s single black eye into a matched pair.

It’s not even about defending her honor. He doesn’t have any reason to give a shit about that, and anyway he doesn’t think Beth would feel the need to have anyone defend her honor. It’s just...

He just doesn’t want to hear that shit about her. He likes her. She’s nice. It would piss him off. That’s all the reason he needs.

“How the fuck you get the shiner?” he asks instead, because if he comes back with a question of his
own there’s every chance—Merle being in the state he seems to be—that it’ll be a distraction and Merle will let the whole thing go. And Merle should maybe feel defensive too.

“Went out to try to make us a little money, little brother. Some guy got fresh, that’s all.” Pause. “He’s lookin’ a lot worse’n me, tell you that much for sure.”

Daryl stops, leans both hands on the dresser’s top, closes his eyes in a sudden ecstasy of exasperation. He’s going to have to keep talking about this, he understands. This is something he’s going to have to keep talking about, because his big brother doesn’t get it, even though his big brother is the one who should get it, because his big brother is the one who got picked up outside a state penitentiary and his big brother is the one who had the brilliant idea to break parole.

His big brother makes bad decisions. Bad decision after bad decision.

And not for the first time Daryl thinks, in a voice that isn’t his own, He’s going to go down and he’s going to drag you down with him. He’s already sliding.

He goes to the kitchen and gets a beer out of the fridge, goes back into what passes for the living room, lights a cigarette and sinks down into the threadbare easy chair across from the couch. “Bro, you can’t get picked up or nothin’, you know that.”

Trying to be gentle. It doesn’t matter. Merle gives him a blearily irritated look and throws an empty beer can at him. “Why dontcha mind your own business, man? You gonna start readin’ me some kinda riot act? You get to be Dad when I wasn’t lookin’?” Sudden flash of meanness, there and quickly gone again, and Daryl doesn’t think Merle really meant to go there but Merle has an arsenal and when pushed, Merle employs it.

Merle notices, notes, files away. Merle has an excellent memory for detail.

Daryl knows they have that in common.

He pops the top on the beer can. “Just sayin’.”

“Yeah, well, you ain’t just sayin’ nothin’ I don’t already know.” Merle sounds surly now, but at least he’s recognizing the sense in what Daryl said, and that’s also encouraging. “Anyway, don’t we gotta get cash from somewhere?”

“I’m workin’. Get paid Friday.”

“You’re makin’ shit, little brother. Ain’t nothin’ in an honest day’s work, you know that.”

Daryl shrugs. The truth is that he doesn’t have any good argument for that. Not for the money side. There are other sides. “Got the truck. He let us have this place, ain’t chargin’ much rent. Cheaper’n a motel. You complainin’?”

I’m the one doing the work, you piece of shit.

I’m taking care of you.

“Man, whatever.” Merle sighs, and for a moment or two he actually appears both sober and melancholy, and it’s times like this when Daryl feels a surge of what he’s feeling less and less these days, which is a desire to make this man happy. Make this man not look like that. When he got Merle back he thought things might be good again—before the parole-breakage, before the wandering in ever-widening Georgian circles—but the more time he spent with Merle, the clearer it became that something was Wrong with Merle, and it wasn’t the drinking and it wasn’t the drugs. The drinking
and the drugs were like a blanket over what was really truly for real Wrong, and that thing—whatever it was—was something Daryl couldn’t reach. Couldn’t fix. God knows Merle would never have talked about it.

But Daryl thinks he might have some idea.

Because they had the same father. Didn’t they?

He’d like to reach it. He’d like to fix it. He’d like to try. Maybe if he could, things would be good the way he hoped. He sure as hell can’t just walk away.

But there was the drive from the farm, and there was the drive back to the farm. Little spots of brightness. Little good things in the last few days, and he wants to keep them for himself. He thinks he deserves that.

First time in a long time he’s thought he deserved anything.

“I’m gettin’ sick of this shithole,” Merle says, and Daryl starts. He glances down, realizes the cigarette has burned down a good bit and it’s ashing onto the floor. Not that it’s doing the floor any real harm. He reaches down for the empty can Merle tossed at him, intending to use it for an ash repository—and then processes what Merle said, and its implications.

He grunts, trying to keep the degree to which he cares about this from showing. “Ain’t so bad.”

Merle shoots him a look. “Fuck you talkin’ ‘bout? It’s a shithole, man. Ain’t nothin’ goin on here. Figure we could move on in a few days.”

Daryl studies him, cigarette forgotten again, and feels something clutch slightly at his middle. “I told you, bro, I get paid Friday.”

“So?”

“So it’s Tuesday now.”

“So we wait till Friday, then we cut out. That’s a few days, ain’t it? You can even give notice, really do this right. That make you happy?”

Daryl frowns and looks back down at his hands, lifts the cigarette to his mouth and inhales deeply. He doesn’t like this. He doesn’t like any of it. He doesn’t like being here. He hadn’t been lying to Beth about that, though he hadn’t articulated it that way even to himself until he said it. It’s true. He looks around the room, thinks about it, and although he can’t really think of any reason why he should care what the hell she thinks, he imagines her walking in and seeing it and he feels a hot flush of shame.

Somehow, he wants her to think better of him than that.

“I guess,” he says softly, and it’s simply because he can’t think of anything else to say. Can’t think of any argument, any excuse that would keep them here for a little longer.

But he’s already trying. He’s already thinking about it.

By Friday it’s possible that he might come up with something.

“Alright, then,” Merle says, apparently satisfied with the conversation, and he cranks the sound up on the TV. Big Hoss is getting skeptical about a Gibson whose owner swears to heaven and back
belonged to and was personally used by Jimi Hendrix.

Daryl gets slowly and quietly drunk and passes out to the dulcet tones of the theme song to *Deadliest Catch.*

~

The next afternoon the rain has stopped and he has off from work, and around one—as he’s wandering back from the cafe after wolfing down a roast beef sandwich—his cell rings. He’s confused by that, because it’s not Merle and it’s one of those prepaid things and no one else has the number—except that’s not true, because he remembers the day before, and he remembers what he did.

He gave Beth his number. Right before he dropped her off at home.

“Hi!” She sounds cheerful. Very. He stops and takes a breath and wonders why he feels so weird about this.

“Yeah?”

“You wanna come by the farm?”

“Yeah, nice to hear from you too. Look, you wanna come by the farm?”

Um. “Why?”

“No reason.” Still very cheerful, but more than that. She sounds, he realizes, like she’s Up To Something. Like she’s got something planned. And while ordinarily—with anyone else—he can see himself getting impatient with this, now it actually...

It makes him want to say yes and be there. A lot.

“Yeah, I dunno.”

“C’mon. I got somethin’ I wanna show you. You won’t be sorry.”

He remembers how convincing she can be. Remembering it is no defense whatsoever. He sighs and scans the street as if it could provide him with some guidance, thinks about that pickup and her riding in it and the Gin Blossoms on the radio, and he decides he can make his own damn decisions without the aid of his surroundings.

“Alright, look, gimme... I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“Great.” He can hear her smile through the phone. “See you.”

Half an hour later he’s pulling up her drive to the sound of Robin Wilson singing about Allison Road, and she’s coming down the porch steps to meet him, smiling, giving him that wave.

He waves back.

He’s already not sorry.
but there's another one who brings me to your door

She directs him up the road past the farm heading away from town, and from there onto a side road that turns to gravel pretty quickly, cutting into thicker woods, and right about then he’s sure she’s Up To Something.

For one thing she hasn’t said much, though the cheerfulness he heard on the phone and saw in her when she came out to meet him doesn’t seem to have faded. She’s just been looking out the window—rolled down to admit the breeze, because the day is getting hot and all the wet rising out of the ground is making it humid—and humming along with the radio.

He’s pretty certain she’s too young to know a lot of these songs. But he likes listening to her hum. Humming isn’t usually a good thing to listen to, but she does it well. Tuneful. A little edge of that sweet voice he heard the first night and hasn’t heard again.

But otherwise she’s being quiet. Okay, he can be quiet too. He likes quiet. It comes naturally to him. He lights up another cigarette and she doesn’t even make a face at him. She doesn’t look at him at all.

So he—to the extent that he can without slamming them into a tree—looks at her.

He realizes that this is the first time since that night where he’s seen her hair when it wasn’t wet and tangled. It’s still tangled, in a way that appears more windblown than anything else, pulled into a ponytail high at the back of her head. She’s made one small braid to the side, and unlike the rest of her hair it’s neat, careful, something somehow almost elegant about it. The wind pulls at her, pulls at the edges of her pastel green tank top, and when she lifts a hand to push loose strands out of her face the bracelets on her wrist click softly.

She’s changed them. Not all of them, but there are some beads there that she didn’t have before.

She’s not wearing any makeup at all that he can see.

So something else he knows, in an absent kind of way, is that she’s pretty in several different states of appearance. Her prettiness is versatile. Variable in nature. She might be pretty basically all the time.

That’s interesting.

The sun is heating things up, heading well into the hottest part of the day, but the shade is cool, and the trees are bending low, pressing in closer. Far to the right he can see the golden edge of a meadow, but they veer away to the left and it recedes, and the road takes them deeper. It’s barely even a service road anymore. He wonders if anyone uses it much.

This started weird and it’s getting weirder, but he doesn’t mind.

But he does have questions. They start down a slight incline and he shoots her another glance.

“You wanna tell me where we’re goin’?”

“Nope.” She smiles at him and looks away again, fingers drumming on the edge of the door. Not to the music now but to some beat only she seems to hear. He didn’t expect anything, but he was curious to see what form no would take. What he got, among other things, was that smile, so it was definitely worth asking.
Over the grumble of the truck and the rattle of the gravel off its sides and undercarriage, he hears something rustling in the brush some distance away. Wonders what it is. He didn’t plan on doing any hunting while he and Merle were here, but he does have the crossbow back at the apartment.

He really doesn’t want to leave after Friday. But he hasn’t yet come up with a reason to stay. Aside from the obvious. Which he can’t present to Merle and expect to get anything but trouble, and then leaving anyway.

“You said you were gonna show me somethin’.”

“I am. Don’t get impatient. Ain’t like it’s goin’ anywhere.”

So whatever it is, it’s stationary. Not like that’s a huge jump, but it’s a clue. It’s in the woods—he assumes—and it’s not moving.

That doesn’t exactly narrow it down.

“You at least gonna tell me how much further it is?”

She gives him a look, one brow raised and a smile still tugging at the corner of her mouth. Her front teeth are very slightly crooked. “Not that far.”

He blows a stream of smoke out the window and the breeze carries it away. Beneath it he smells crushed green things, damp soil, old wood, water. Maybe he doesn’t know where they’re going, maybe he doesn’t know a lot of things, and maybe later he’s going to have to come up with some sort of story for Merle about where he was and what he was doing...

But he can’t think of anywhere else he’d rather be.

And then thinks about Merle and coming up with a cover story, and something else hits him. Because she’s out here with him, by herself, and that’s...

“Your dad know you’re out here?”

This time the look she shoots him is a touch sharp. “Why the hell you care?”

“Why the hell you care if I care?” This seems like it’s becoming a catchphrase of theirs. A catch-exchange. That’s cute. “cause I don’t want him gettin’ the wrong idea and comin’ after me with a fuckin’ shotgun, girl.”

She hasn’t turned her face away from him, and now that raised brow is raised a bit higher. “What’s the wrong idea, Mr. Dixon?”

So that’s awkward. He looks away, looks back at the road, and he actually thinks about the wrong idea and something in him gets extremely uncomfortable. So far he’s been thinking about that mostly in vague terms to the extent that he’s been thinking about it at all, but he doesn’t think Greene is likely to do the same.

“Nothin’. Look, just—” He breaks off and slows to guide the truck over an especially deep dip in the road. It’s getting rougher the further they go and the shocks on the thing are pretty much shot. “He know, or not?”

She doesn’t answer, teeth catching her lower lip. He glances at her long enough to see that, and he thinks about her sneaking out and the teenage daring that made her do it and the same daring that—he’s sure—made her kiss him the way she did, and the way her eyes danced after. Dodging puddles,
graceful in the moonlight with her wet dress clinging to her. Climbing up the trellis back to her room.

She’s out here with him and Daddy almost certainly doesn’t know.

She’s a nice girl. But she’s not a Good Girl.

For the first time—except maybe not really for the first time—he thinks that might genuinely be a problem. For him.

This girl might get him into trouble.

“He don’t know, does he?”

“He’s out workin’.” When she returns her focus to him there’s a kind of stubbornness in it, almost like she’s challenging him to make a thing out of this.

“Your mom?”

“At the store. With Shawn.”

“So it was just you back there.” Just for a moment he forgets the road—and really, road is being charitable at this point—and stares at her. “So you’re out here and nobody knows.”

“So?”

“So I could be a fuckin’ serial killer or somethin’, Greene, Jesus.”

“Already said you weren’t a creep,” she points out, and while the stubbornness remains, there’s that smile again, like sun trying to edge clouds aside. “Anyway, if you wanted to serial kill me I think you coulda done that already.”

He huffs a laugh—because she has him there. He could have. And he thinks if he was inclined that way, she never would have gotten in the truck with him to begin with. Because he’s not a good liar, and because...

Because she can see right into him. So apparently she saw something she trusted.

Something she liked.

“Anyway,” she adds, looking out the window again, “you’d have to catch me first. And I’m fast.” She does smile—not at him. At the trees and the sun flickering through their branches. “I’m faster than you’d guess.”

He thinks maybe not. He thinks his guess might be a good one.

“What’re you gonna tell ‘em?”

“Mm?”

“Well, bout where you were.”

Her smile this time is for him, small and warm. She’s happy to be here too—he can see it, and he knows her well enough now to know she wouldn’t pretend. She asked him to come out here because she wanted to be out here with him, and there isn’t any other idea to it than that. He doesn’t think she wants anything else from him. And he doesn’t think she thinks he wants anything else from her.
From the start, the nicest thing was just to occupy roughly the same space.

“I’ll think of somethin’.”

“Somethin’ that won’t get me killed?”

She lays a hand over her chest, solemn. “Cross my heart, Mr. Dixon.”

“You wanna stop callin’ me that?” He turns his attention back to the road. It’s started dipping downward again, and the water he can smell has a fresher, cleaner edge to it. He’s pretty sure he can hear it too, though it’s distant. A stream, maybe. Or a creek.

“What should I call you?”

“Just... Daryl works fine. Just Daryl.”

“Okay,” she says softly. “Daryl.” And again there’s that light touch on his arm, and just as he’s looking at her—a little startled but not as much as he would have been before—he also sees that the road is branching, and while the right branch swings back up again, the left continues down toward what does indeed appear to be a creek—water moving quick over dark rocks and shimmering in the light, a sharp meander bending out of sight.

And something else through the trees, still some distance away. Old wood, old stone. A structure. He can’t quite see it, other than that it’s there.

She nods at it. “Down there.”

He already knew, was already turning.

The road isn’t a road anymore, and he can see that the way ahead is suddenly a lot steeper. It’s actually becoming dangerously muddy, and it’s not long before he pulls them to a stop and shakes his head, leaning out and surveying the ground. “‘less you wanna push this thing back up the hill, we’re walkin’ from here.”

“Alright.” She swings the door open and climbs out, stretching, glancing around. Not as if she hasn’t been here, but just... looking. Like all of this is very much worth looking at. Like there’s something about being here that gives her particular pleasure.

He slams the driver’s side door closed—doesn’t bother to lock it, no one in their right mind would steal it and he doubts there’s anyone else out here anyway—and walks around to her. She turns to him and he really feels—in a way he hasn’t before—how much bigger than her he is. Not in a bad way. Not in a way that feels wrong or dangerous. And it’s not like they haven’t stood face to face before, and it’s not like he didn’t know she was petite. But there’s something about it now that sends it right into his gut and into the part of his brain that governs and dispenses instinct.

He likes it. For some reason. He can’t recall ever feeling this way before.

“So where to?”

“Down here.” She turns and starts heading down the way they were already going, the dirt track sliding down toward the water, moving slowly so as not to slip in the muddy bits. Bemused, he follows her, and he’s half aware that he’s keeping an eye on her, gauging distance, ready to attempt to catch her if she falls.

It’s not something he has to think about. It’s the instinct thing again.
It’s not a long way. The ground levels out again, though it gets even muddier, and the trees back away, and they’re standing in a patch of slightly mushy grass that ends in a rocky bank. The creek, he can see now, is almost more of a small river, probably not deeper than his waist in the middle but flowing swiftly. The branches have thinned out as well, and wider shafts of sunlight break through and catch nodding clusters of white and yellow wildflowers, raise the color of the grass to an almost aggressive glow. It’s a lawn, he realizes, or it was. He guesses it would be almost impossible to tell for anyone who didn’t know what they were looking at, but one thing that was beaten into him from an early age was how to read a landscape, and this has all the appearance of something that was, at one point in the distant past, cultivated and cared for and maintained.

And he can see why, and he can see it immediately. A line of flat, almost overgrown stones lead up to it—a path. Once. There are walls—flat gray stonework that looks as if it might have been laid by hand—and little else. No roof. But a wide doorway, just the hint of an arch, and here and there what must have been the exterior wall is high enough to suggest a second and long-fallen story. Beyond the door are other walls, a series of them—rooms, maybe. Further in, the ruined stack of a chimney. Grass all throughout, as far as he can see—grass and more wildflowers, and vines twisting green fingers through the stones. Perhaps holding the whole thing together just as much as tearing it apart.

A house, maybe. Or this close to the river it could have been a mill.

Even with the chuckling sound of the water over the rocks, it’s very quiet.

“So,” Beth says, and turns to him, and there’s something about her expression that’s almost expectant. Almost... Maybe even the slightest bit nervous. Like she’s not certain what he’ll think. Like what he thinks of it matters to her.

“This is what you were gonna show me?”

“Uh huh.” She glances back at the ruins, slipping her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “I come down here sometimes, just gettin’ away from everything. It’s a long walk, but it’s not too bad, and I don’t think anyone else even knows about it. I never find beer cans or bottles, so I don’t think anyone comes down here to drink or anythin’. Never seen a single other person.”

He looks at her, and he looks at it, and he tries desperately to find words for what he’s feeling. It’s sudden and overwhelming, and it seems entirely out of place somewhere so essentially peaceful. Because he’s understanding. Understanding what it means that she wanted to show this to him, if she’s never seen anyone else here, if she doesn’t think anyone else knows about it.

Anyone else.

He can’t be sure, and in fact it would probably be stupid to assume, probably be the height of presumption, because she has a family and friends and a boyfriend... But he is sure. He’s sure all the same.

He’s the first person she’s brought out here.

And what the fuck is he supposed to do with that?

“You just said you didn’t like bein’ in town. So I figured... I mean, this is about as far from town as anywhere I ever go, and it’s nice, and I... I dunno, I thought maybe you’d like it.” She definitely sounds nervous now, and that’s so strange, because before this moment he would have seriously doubted such a thing was possible.

He steps forward, closer to what was once the front path. If he lets his eyes unfocus just a touch,
the place rather than sees it, he can just make out where a garden might have been, to the right of the
door. A patch of flatter ground, overgrown but overgrown in a way that suggests the presence of a
about this place, except that it was and is there. But he can feel it. He can feel it everywhere. This
place is ruined, but it’s far from dead.

He can see why she comes here. He can see that very clearly.

“I do,” he says softly. “Like it. I do.”

“Good.” She moves past him, and just as she does he catches sight of her face and the smile she’s
wearing is wide and pleased. She reaches back and touches his forearm, little more than a graze of
her fingertips. “C’mon. There’s more.”

Of course there is.

In what seems to be becoming something of a refrain, he follows her through the door.
It’s bigger than he thought.

From outside it seemed big, those walls, the way he could see more of them inside, half fallen and worn away but recognizable as a structure. As structures. If this was a house, he can now see that it was an oddly large and complex one for the space it occupies, so he’s leaning more toward a mill. Maybe a combination. Dating from the Civil War, maybe. Maybe even earlier. It feels old, and as she leads him on he thinks again about how it doesn’t feel dead, about how it feels very much alive and it doesn’t actually have much to do with the life crawling all over it and filling up its corners and carpeting its floor, decorating it with color, cloaking it with green.

He’s always been most comfortable outdoors for a variety of complex and profoundly psychological reasons, but he’s also from a place where ruin means something different, and where age is a different shape. Where time doesn’t always run in this kind of direction. He stops in the center of what must once have been a large room and looks up, all around, sure now that there was at least a second additional floor, and he feels slightly disoriented.

He’s never cared about getting out of the country, but he knows about ruins elsewhere, old shit, hundreds and even thousands of years, and he wonders if those things feel like this. Haunted, but not in a bad way.

He doesn’t think like this. Ever. What the fuck.

She’s stopped just ahead of him and she turns back to face him, one hand holding her other arm, and she no longer appears nervous. She appears curious. And waiting. Like now that she knows this is going well, she wants to see the finer points of how he’ll react.

He wonders if she has more complicated reasons for bringing him here than just doing him a favor.

He wonders if he’ll work up the courage to ask.

“What?”

He shrugs. He can barely articulate this to himself; he’s not sure how he’s supposed to talk about it to her. “Just lookin’.”

“Look all you want.” Little smile. Soft. She’s pleased with all of this, like he thought before. Pleased with his reaction. Pleased with him. “Like I said, not like it’s goin’ anywhere.”

“Been here for a while.” That’s sort of close to what’s circling around the inside of his head. A while. Technically correct even if it’s insufficient to capture the essence of what he’s feeling. Sensing.

“Yeah. I dunno how long. I haven’t asked... Again, like I said, I don’t think anyone else knows about it. Kinda wanna keep it that way.”

He nods. He knows how people take places like this and trash them. Fuck them up, fill them full of junk, and he has a vague idea of what motivates that. A kind of resentment. A kind of primitive nihilism. Wanting to hit back at something without knowing what, without a clear target. Swinging wildly, throwing punches wide.

He won’t admit it to her, especially not here, but he’s been there. Been one of those people. He’s done those things. He’s been angry at everything. Still essentially is. But this makes all that anger feel
very far away.

Anyway, more and more of the time he’s just tired.

He wants to go to one of the walls. He wants to lay a hand on the stone and feel how rough and cool it is. He wants to be connected to this place in a way he isn’t, just standing here. There’s a significance in the tactile, in the act of touching, and while touching people and being touched by them isn’t something with which he’s comfortable, isn’t something he likes—and only partly because most of the time he’s touching and being touched via punches and kicks—it’s easy to touch things. It’s easy to feel them under his hands, easy to understand them that way. Comprehension through the skin, through nerves. Texture, temperature, solidity. Density.

This place is dense.

He wants to touch, so he does—walks over to the wall and lays a hand on it, closes his eyes, and he knows she’s watching him and he doesn’t mind. He doesn’t mind whatever she’s thinking, and the truth is that it’s not that he doesn’t care. He does. He just knows she’s not laughing at him, and she’s not judging him. She doesn’t think it’s crazy or stupid. If she brought him here, and if he’s the first person she really trusts enough to do so, there’s no way she would think it was crazy or stupid.

And standing here, hand on cool stone and gentle roughness against the pads of his fingers, his head caught in a patch of warm sun, smelling the mud and the grass and a creek running high with days of runoff, and her a few feet away...

He feels safe.

She makes him feel safe.

That’s mildly remarkable.

He opens his eyes and looks back at her, and when he sees that she’s still smiling he returns it with one of his own. Small, but he feels it, he knows it’s there, and it feels good. He never smiles unless he means it, and he never smiles with intention. He’s not capable of doing so. If a smile comes, it comes out of a place in him that contains no thought and only that same instinct that made him watch her as she went down the muddy incline, made him ready to catch her if she fell.

“You really do like it, huh.”

No sense in pretending he doesn’t. He nods.

“Ever been someplace like this before?”

He shakes his head.

“Good,” she says, and her smile stretches into an honest grin. “So I’m special.”

He cocks his head, feeling a pleasant wave of amusement. “Guess so.” He steps away from the wall, dropping his hands and looking up again. Little rush of wind and the spreading branches overhead—to one side, because the other side is bank and then water—sway and break up the sun. “You said there was more.”

“Yeah, there is.” She nods toward the far end of the room, another doorway and more stone beyond. “This way.”

He follows her further in.
There actually isn’t a whole lot left to see of the structure itself, but the last doorway—impossible to tell for certain if it’s front or back but to him it feels like back—opens out onto a wider patch of ancient lawn, somehow having escaped being overgrown by shrubs and brush even though it’s mostly exposed to the sun. She heads out into the middle of it and turns, swinging her arms slightly. “So this isn’t it, but isn’t this great?”

He supposes it is, though he’s not sure what great means in this context, and anyway great isn’t a concept with which he’s on especially close terms. It’s interesting. It feels good. As with the rest of the place, he likes being here.

“I think this was a yard or somethin’ but I don’t know what for. Animals? I guess if this was some kinda big house maybe that would make sense?”

“I think it was a mill.”

“Huh.” She glances around as if this possibility hasn’t occurred to her before. “Guess that makes sense too, what with the river an’ all.”

“So what’s it?”

She laughs. “God, you’re so pushy.”

“You’re talkin’.”

She gazes speculatively at him. “Know what, I think you could do with some pushin’.”

Now it’s his turn to laugh, a little bark of a thing. “The fuck you talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Nothin’.” She raises a hand and makes an extravagant beckoning gesture, like a bad tour guide. “This way, Mr. Dixon.”

He rolls his eyes but her back is already to him, her hair dancing with her movements and with the breeze, shining in the sun. She’s shining in general, he notices. She’s bright. Everything about her is very persistently bright.

She leads him back into the trees.

There’s a path. Not a people path, he can tell, though it’s clearly used by people—her, he supposes, and only her. It’s a deer path, leading down to the water’s edge, and for once and somehow it’s not that muddy. A few more minutes and the trees thin out again, and they’re right on the bank, the water high and close and running fast, sparkling on the surface but cloudy with sediment. He’s looking at it, so for a few seconds he misses what she wants him to see until she gently touches his arm—

And this time he doesn’t spook. Doesn’t shy away.

He turns, and sees what she brought him out here for.

It’s not really all that great, except it sort of is. Not stone but marble, actual marble, a semi-circle of it carved into two long benches and remarkably free of moss and lichen, though water and age have stained it in places. In the center, bisecting the thing, is a fountain—or what was once a fountain, when it still ran. A wolf’s head spout, wings to either side. The wolf’s lips are pulled back and muzzle wrinkled in a snarl, and the wings are clearly the wings of an eagle. Or some big raptor. Probably an eagle, though. It would make the most sense. Though it strikes him as a bit strange that it’s a wolf.
It can’t be that old. But something about it feels old, older than the rest of the place. Secret. A place of some kind of power.

He stands and looks at it for a moment, then turns his attention to her. Once again she’s watching him, not the thing.

“This is it?”

“Yeah.” She doesn’t sound nervous now. She sounds secure in his opinion. His approval. “Neat, huh?”

“Mhm.” He won’t argue with that. It is neat. And yet another place unlike anywhere he’s ever been.

She moves past him to one of the benches and sits down, looks up at him and pats the space beside her. After a moment, he does as he’s bidden and joins her, gazing out at the water, at the trees, at everything, feeling the cool of the marble under him and against his back, and though she’s not pressed right up against him he can feel her warmth against his bare arm.

She radiates.

“Whaddaya come out here to do?”

She shrugs. “Think. Sometimes I write. Sometimes I sing. Sometimes I just sit’n listen and I don’t really do anythin’.”

He glances at her, curiosity piqued. “Write? What, like... stories or somethin’?”

“Oh, not like that.” She laughs softly. “I just got a journal. I write stuff that’s happened. What I think about it. What I feel.”

This is an alien concept to him, though he’s aware it’s a thing some people do. “How come?”

She frowns slightly—thoughtful rather than irritated by the question, and maybe even surprised that he’s asking. But willing to answer. “I dunno. It’s just somethin’ I’ve always done. Sometimes if I’m havin’ trouble with somethin’ it helps me think about it... Y’know. Clearer. Sometimes I can figure it out.”

“Ever show it to anyone?”

She gives his arm a little shove with her shoulder, and he does flinch this time and hopes she doesn’t notice.

She really is very warm.

“You can’t show people stuff like that. That’s the whole point. It’s just for me. Don’t you know about it?”

He shakes his head.

“Huh.” She cocks her head, looking at him, and her gaze is penetrating and to deflect it he roots around in his pocket for his cigarettes and lighter. “Where the hell are you from?”

He sighs as he opens the pack, pulls one out, lights it and inhales. He could just keep refusing to answer this question, but he has the distinct sense that if he does, she might drop it at the time, but she’s going to just ask it again later. She’s going to keep asking until she gets an answer that satisfies
“Mountains. Up north.” He rolls a shoulder. “Piece of shit place, don’t matter.”

“I’ve been there. It’s pretty up there. Blue Ridge.”

He looks at her like she’s just suggested he actually comes from the edge of one of the larger lunar craters. “You kiddin’?”

“I mean...” She appears a little chastened. She recognizes that she’s hit somewhere sore. And it is sore, and he’s not entirely pleased that she asked or that he gave in and answered, but he does appreciate that she realizes what being asked and answering has made him feel. “The part I was in was pretty. I guess probably not all of it is.”

He leans forward over his knees and blows a stream of smoke at the water. “What were you doin’ there?”

“Vacation.”

He grunts. Of course. She looks like a girl from a family that takes vacations.

“So what’re you doin’ here?”

“Toldja.” He gives her another tiny, crooked smile. “I’m literally a drifter, remember?”

“You and your brother.”

“Yeah.” He hesitates for a moment—he has absolutely no reason to say anything else and he probably shouldn’t—and then he goes ahead and says it anyway. “Been doin’ that for a while. Just kinda movin’ around, jobs here and there. Not settlin’ down.”

“Ever want to?”

*Maybe.* “Nothin’ to settle for.”

“Don’t mean you don’t want to.”

He sits back and looks at her, feeling a mix of faint exasperation and amusement and something that might, he supposes, if he had to put a word to it—if someone put a gun to his head and said *name that fucking emotion or you’re fucking dead*—be some species of vague affection. “You seriously callin’ me pushy.”

“Like I said, maybe you need pushin’.”

He makes a sound somewhere between another sigh and a laugh. “What the fuck, girl?”

Now her face is serious. Not deeply so, but whatever she’s got fixed in her mind, she’s holding onto it, and possibly she’s given it a fair amount of thought. Which would make sense. He doesn’t think she just brought him out here in a burst of mad impulse. He can see her being impulsive—she did kiss him, he didn’t dream that—but not about this.

About this, he thinks she would take some time and some care.

“‘cause I don’t think you talk to anyone like this and I think maybe you need to.”

He stares at her, cigarette hanging loose between his fingers. Just... stares. He was expecting honesty,
even bluntness, but not on that level. Not to this extreme. And she’s this teenager, and she’s thinking things like that, saying things like that, shoving her nose into his business—and so what if it’s a cute nose, and where the fuck did that come from—and he just doesn’t...

“What are you, a fuckin’ shrink?”

She shakes her head. “No. It’s just pretty easy to see.”

*Easy to see.* He’s not sure he likes that.

He’s also not sure she’s wrong. Because he likes this. It’s weird and unexpected and it’s kind of uncomfortable, and it’s also new and she keeps throwing newness at him before he has any time to adjust to the previous round, but the fact remains that she told him he wouldn’t be sorry, and he’s not.

He likes it. He does.

He makes a *hmph* noise and looks away.

But she doesn’t say anything else. She just sits in silence with him, and it’s not uncomfortable silence. It’s not even truly silence. There’s the water and the breeze, the whisper of leaves, a dove calling somewhere not too far away. Rustle of squirrels. They sit and the sun starts to lower, and at last he murmurs that he should take her home, so she nods. And he does. Still in silence, they head back through the ruins and up the slope to the truck, and the ride back to the farm is silent too.

At her suggestion he lets her out some way up the road, out of sight of the farm, so it’ll appear that she was out walking on her own. She doesn’t seem to feel guilty about this, so he doesn’t either. There was no *wrong idea.* They were just talking. Talking and then not talking, and it was nice.

He’s halfway back to town when he goes into his pocket, opens his pack, and realizes what he’s done.

The butt of the cigarette is in there, smoked down to the filter. He didn’t toss it away there. He kept it.

He kept that place—*her* place—the way it is. He kept it special.

He flicks it out the window, and the rest of the way home he does a lot of thinking.
I'm hopeless. Hopeless. So hopeless.

btw I wrote some meta if you care about what's actually fucking going on behind the scenes with this

It's Thursday and he still has no idea how he's going to keep them there.

Keep himself there, because that's what it comes down to, and he's beginning to feel on a very basic level that he hasn't been honest with himself for a long time and it might be time to start.

On the drive back the day before, he didn't go the direct route. He took detours. Drove around for a while and watched the sun go down. The thing is, once he lets go of how he doesn't really like the town and he doesn't like the apartment or the job he's doing or even Merle a lot of the time—he learned a long time ago that there can be a pretty big difference between loving someone and liking them—he does like being out here. He likes the fields. He likes the trees. He likes the light on both—and the light on the gold of the meadow he drove past, birds exploding out of the grass in early evening flocks, breeze rippling everything, and he thought about her hair, how the wind and the light touches it, and for the moment he didn't think about how strange it was to fixate on such a small detail.

Small detail that doesn't feel small.

It's a warm evening, but there's already a softness in the air that foretells autumn. The hard edge of the summer heat is fading. They're falling into the last days of August, on the cusp of a transition, and he hasn't felt change so keenly before. He's been living year after year, almost forty of them, and it's been a long time since he experienced that time as a collection of periods with any delineation. It's all been one big blur.

All kind of one big nothing. A delineation would imply meaning and there just hasn't been a whole lot of that in general.

Being honest. Being honest here, he hasn't been happy for a long time, and in those ruins, sitting next to her in rustling silence, he thinks maybe he was close to that. Reaching for it. For that hour or so, he was free.

Watching the brown wooden posts of a fence blur past on the left until they almost looked like a single solid line, Semisonic drumming through the shitty speaker—were you ever so bright and sweet—he thought about an old monster movie, a shambling blockhead Frankenstein’s Monster, little girl with flowers, unafraid, and a rough questioning mumble that was almost funny.

Friend?

He laughed then. He doesn't laugh very much. Wind grabbed him and tugged his hair back and laughing felt like the most natural thing in the world.

He doesn't do friends.
Got back to Merle, muttered an excuse, tried to not seem happy because he would have to explain why, dragged him out, found a biker bar about fifteen miles out of town, played some pool, got sort of drunk but not that drunk because he needed to drive and he needed to keep a handle on the situation, watched Merle try to cheat, watched Merle get into a fight, struggled to care. Felt like an asshole. This is his big brother.

This doesn’t feel like his big brother anymore. This feels like a child he’s trying to control and can’t, and he never wanted to be a parent.

God, anything but that. That would be so horrible.

Home. Infomercials at four AM. Passing out. He doesn’t sleep anymore.

His last thought before he fell away from the world was that he was starting to slide too, he could feel it, feel himself desperately trying to hang on, looking at Merle and seeing himself, looking at both of them and seeing something so much worse and thank God neither of them has a kid, thank the good fucking Lord...

He’s getting scared. He doesn’t want this.

He wants out.

~

Then it’s Thursday and he still has no idea how he’s going to keep them there.

She shows up a couple of hours before he gets off work, and he’s not surprised to see her. Not anymore. She didn’t call him, she didn’t text, and he wouldn’t honestly expect her to. He’s pretty sure by now that she shows up without warning him that she’s coming because she doesn’t want him to spook and run, even internally, and that girl is so worryingly perceptive. He should be scared about that too.

Instead she finds him toward the back, restocking birdseed, and she has two cups from the coffee shop and she holds one out.

“You like black, right?”

He looks at her for a moment, then nods and takes it. Because what else is he going to do?

She leans at her for a moment, then nods and takes it. Because what else is he going to do?

She rolls a shoulder, hefts a bag. “After a while you don’t notice.”

“I think I’d keep noticing.” She pauses. “It’s different from the farm. Y’know? We use manure fresh from the source. Not just, but.” Smile in her voice. “This smells like chemicals.”
He wouldn’t argue with that, so he doesn’t. And now that she’s pointed it out he’s noticing it again.

“I had a really good time yesterday.”

He glances back at her, sees her still smiling at him over the rim of her cup, and he feels something desperate clutch at his middle. Good thing. He’s positive there are parts of this he doesn’t understand, but he doesn’t need to understand them to understand that this is a good thing and it’s reminding him what being happy feels like, and he doesn’t want to leave it, and it’s unfair to be made to feel like he has to. Like he has no choice.

“We didn’t do nothin’.”

“Yeah, we did,” she says gently. “You know that, c’mon. You don’t have to do somethin’ big to do it. You can do somethin’ just doin’ nothin’ much at all.” She pauses again, and when she next speaks she sounds thoughtful. “I dunno if that makes a lot of sense.”

He grunts. “Don’t make no goddamn sense at all.”

“You’re in a mood.”

He shoots her a look. Clutch. God, this is so unfair. “So what?”

“Why?”

One minute she feels like she’s somehow even older than he is, and the next she’s asking questions like a pesky little kid and she won’t quit. It’s exasperating, but it should be more exasperating than it is. “Nothin’.”

“Don’t nothin’ me. It’s somethin’.”

“You wanna let up, Greene?”

“No,” she says simply, and there’s a kind of forceful chipperness in the word, and he thinks again about how this is a Daddy’s Girl who doesn’t seem to be all that spoiled but who has learned that she doesn’t have to take no for an answer, and she hasn’t made a habit of doing so. “I brought you coffee, don’t be a jerk.”

“Didn’t ask you to.”

“You still shouldn’t be a jerk. Cut it out.” He feels her foot connect lightly with his calf. “Drink it, it’s gonna get cold.”

He almost tells her no, almost tells her to just fuck off, because he is in a mood, has been since she came in, and it’s not because he wasn’t happy to see her.

It’s because he was.

He leans his hands against the shelf for a moment and just looks at her. She looks back, and she’s wearing the expression of someone who does indeed possess full confidence in the prospect of getting exactly what they want if they just push enough.

So he sighs and takes the coffee and turns around to face her, leans back again. If Elmer makes a thing out of it he’s on a break, and the truth is that he’s beginning to get the feeling that Elmer is a little afraid of him and wouldn’t mind seeing the back of him.

Yet another reason he probably won’t be here come Saturday.
“What’re you doin’ this weekend?”

Well. That’s awkward. He shrugs. “Why?”

“No reason.” And he’s mildly pleased to discover—or maybe just to be reminded—that he can read her pretty well too, and he can tell now that she’s just the slightest bit nervous about something and she’s working up to it. “I mean... Well, you know that coffee shop.”

“The one we was just in? One you just came from? No, I got no idea.”

She wrinkles her nose at him. “You’re bein’ a jerk again.”

He takes a sip of coffee at her.

“Anyway, they got this open mic night thing on Saturday, I do it sometimes. Thought maybe. Y’know. Maybe you wanna come. If you got nothin’ else goin’ on.” She takes a breath and adds, “It’s better than it sounds.”

He remembers how she sang. He remembers that he asked her to and she did. He remembers that, and how it was unexpected and it made him feel strange but he didn’t hate it. Yet another new thing. Listening to her sing, headlights and the rain, then the moon later. Smell of that tiny hint of her perfume.

He doesn’t think it sounds bad at all.

He sighs and looks away. “I’m gonna be gone.”

“Oh.”

He must be mistaking the disappointment there. He must be. Why the fuck would she care enough to be disappointed? Clearly she doesn’t dislike him, maybe she even thinks of him as kind of a weird sort of friend too, but why would she care?

She cocks her head. “How come?”

He’s only watching her out of the periphery of his vision. He has to answer her, and he doesn’t want to say my asshole brother is making me and I don’t know how to stop him. So he just says, “Not gonna have this job after that.”

“You ain’t found nothin’ else?”

Of course she isn’t going to just let this go. He shrugs yet again.

“Alright.” She’s quiet for a minute, and when he looks back at her she’s staring down at her cup, at her hands, her brow slightly furrowed. She’s not looking at him, so he can take her in without feeling so awkward. Her earrings are different. Tiny silver stars. This time she’s wearing a leather wrist cuff in addition to a couple of beaded thongs, little blue glass, chipped here and there. She likes switching them up. Something about how she likes switching those specific things around catches his attention in a decidedly odd way. Odd because it’s not that unusual. He imagines. A girl would like switching up her jewelry.

But it still feels like something. He still notices it. Notes it. Files it away.

She lifts her head. “But if you were here, you’d come?”

He has no idea why that’s relevant to anything, which means—he supposes—he has no reason not to
answer, and do so honestly. “Guess so.”

“Alright,” she says again, and she pushes away from the shelf. Her brow is still a bit furrowed, and once more he senses that she’s Up To Something. Which...

He would very much prefer to not feel anything about that at all.

“I’ll be seein’ you,” she says, and then she’s gone before he can think of a response. So he just stands there for a minute or two, watching the space she just occupied, and thinking about the precise phrasing of that.

*I’ll be seein’ you.*

It sounded like more than a goodbye. It sounded like a statement of fact.

It sounded, if he’s doing the honesty thing, more than a little like a prophecy.

*I’ll be seein’ you.*

He finishes the birdseed, then there’s more shit that he mostly sleepwalks his way through, then he gets off work, there’s the bar outside town, Merle once again trying to cheat at pool because he just doesn’t know when to quit, a narrowly missed fight but hey, a missed one, and on the way home Merle talking in a vague kind of way about how he’s looking forward to getting out of here, how they should take off right on Friday night, find someone headed out of town and thumb a lift, and actually now that they have some cash it might be worth seeing if Elmer will part with the piece of shit truck, and God he does miss that bike, fucking impound, that was a crying fucking shame is what it was.

And what the fuck is this on the radio, can Daryl fucking turn this shit off?

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today is the greatest day I’ve ever known
 can’t live for tomorrow, tomorrow’s much too long
 I’ll burn my eyes out before I get out

 I wanted more than life could ever grant me
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Daryl isn’t overly fond of Billy Corgan’s voice. But he cranks it up anyway. Way up.

*I’ll be seein’ you.*
no one put me in this hell, I lit a fire underneath myself

Chapter Notes

all my notes are just pleas for someone to help me escape this thing

none of you are helping, why aren't any of you helping me

But by morning all his hope has dried up.

He watches Merle slip into unconsciousness around three. Around four, when he’s pretty sure he’s stone cold sober, he gets up off the couch and leaves the TV flickering and silent, walks down the rickety iron stairs on the side of the building—gripping to cracked and chipped brick and it shakes and each time he goes up or down it he half expects it to fall—and goes around the side, gets in the truck, pulls out onto Main Street and heads out of town.

The moon is still up, though it’s sinking. It’s cool, quiet, that kind of odd, almost supernatural stillness that comes only in the small hours. He drives up the long straight road and past the farm, and he doesn’t slow. Doesn’t at all. Doesn’t look up the drive at the farmhouse, at the side where he knows her room is. Doesn’t look for a light.

There certainly isn’t a moment of total, wonderful madness where he imagines pulling over and getting out, walking up the long drive in the moonlight, up to the trellis, climbing up, tapping on her window. He definitely, definitely doesn’t think about that for one single second.

So much for honesty.

He heads past and further up, to the place where the woods start to crowd in. He doesn’t have to search for the service road turnoff. Take him somewhere once and he’ll find his way back there every time. He bumps along over the dips and the gravel and the places where the gravel turns to dirt and then to mud—mud even now, because the ground was saturated and it’ll take days of hard sun to fully dry it out—and he watches the moon-dapple through the trees, fluttering like moths across his face and his eyelids. The meadow he turns away from looks like white witch-hair. The trees darken and deepen, and finally he gets out and walks down the long, steep hill, sliding just a bit here and there.

The water is lower but still high. Its sound and its reflected, refracted light collect him and carry him down to the ruins.

He moves slowly through them, his eyes half closed, letting their shadows and half-perceived shapes and colorless stone drift over him. All their crumbles and fallings. By now he feels like he’s dreaming, is half sure he is. Like that night was a dream, so unreal the next day. Like finding her like that, such a chance and so improbable, her voice and the feeling that she was giving him something, spinning it out of the air and herself. Her lips and her wet hair under his fingers, the way she smelled, the sweet taste of the lip gloss she left on his mouth.

He stops in the main room where he stopped before and touched the stone and she smiled at him, and he clenches his fists and he wants to scream, but something won’t let him. This is a quiet place. A peaceful place. This is her place. Maybe he shouldn’t even be here without her.
Maybe he doesn’t have permission.

He bites at his lower lip and keeps moving.

Out into the wide lawn, which the moon has turned into a grassy pool of light. Her standing in the center of it, swinging her arms, grinning at him and at the world. *Isn’t this great?*

Yeah, it really is.

There isn’t a single place in him that doesn’t hurt, and in a way he doesn’t understand and doesn’t know what to do with.

The deer track is just as clear to him now as it was during the day and he follows it all the way down to the bank, to the little clearing, and he stands with his hands loose at his sides and stares at the marble. It had been pale and mostly clear in the daylight but now it positively glows, and in a way nothing else does. Again he thinks about it as a place of power, maybe something old far beyond anything else here. Magical. Stupid, so fucking stupid, he’s not a kid, and even when he was he never believed in that shit, but he stands and looks at the snarling winged wolf, and he lets the belief wash over him.

Just for a moment. Because right now he doesn’t have anything else.

It’s not real. It’s stupid. But he fixes his gaze on the wolf and he lets himself do it. Commit to whatever this is. Not like it matters. By tonight, if Merle has anything to do with it, this place and everything it is will be receding into the distance and gone.

So the great thing about it is that he has nothing left to lose. That’s a kind of freedom.

Shitty kind, but still.

*Please. Something. Just let something happen. I don’t care what, just anything, because I’m not ready to do this.*

*I just got here, I just found it, it’s not fair.*

Merle, tired. Old. Merle, sober, knowing—Merle like he hardly ever is and like Daryl wishes he would be all of the time, because if he can’t have the Merle of his vaguely realized pre-parole-breakage fantasies, this might be the next best realistic thing.

*When the fuck was life ever fair, little brother?*

Yeah.

He sits down on the bench beside the fountain, lays a hand on the wolf’s head. Traces a finger over its wrinkled snout, its eyes, its savage teeth, its outspread wings.

*Just you and me, bro.*

He looks out at the running water, the rocks shining with wet. Moonset, almost. Dawn oncoming. He feels like a condemned man. That’s beyond ridiculous. This is a girl he’s actually known for barely a week, even if he saw her before then. This is a girl he still barely knows. She’s eighteen at the oldest. He is literally old enough to be her father, and he doesn’t understand her, and he doesn’t understand what she’s doing to him, what she’s making him want, and it’s not fair that she’s making him want it when he has hours left to be in her general vicinity and then he’ll probably never see her again. And even if he did.
What exactly did he think would happen if he stayed?

Where the fuck did he think this might be going?

_How’s that honesty thing working out for you?_

“God fuckin’ _dammit,_” he whispers, and lets the breeze carry it away across the water to wherever.

And then, because he’s out of options—at least options he has the balls to grab for—he goes home to the home that isn’t a home and never was and never will be.

Goes home to wait.

~

He hasn’t given notice. Hasn’t wanted to. Maybe he was in some variety of denial. No maybe; he was in denial. Okay, we can be honest to that extent: he was in some _major_ fucking denial. Like if he looked the other way and hummed loud enough, cranked up that stupid broken cursed radio, it wouldn’t actually happen.

/save tonight, and fight the break of dawn
/come tomorrow, tomorrow I’ll be gone

Hey, Eagle Eye Cherry? You can dive off a fucking bridge is what you can do.

But he’s dragging himself downstairs—hasn’t slept at all, feels like the shit Merle might scrape off his shoe after he’s done scraping Merle off a bar floor—to inform Elmer that he and Merle are moving on and attempt to open negotiations about the truck, when his phone rings and it’s another number he doesn’t know. Not Merle.

Not Beth.

He’s confused. But it’s just as he’s hitting the little green phone button that he realizes who it has to be, at least the rough outlines of what’s going on, and who’s probably behind it.

_Girl._

She’s fucking with his life. They have reached the point where she’s reaching into his life like some kind of capricious little goddess, winding it around her fingers and fucking with it because she _can._

And that right there is a slightly awkward image.

He sits down on the third step from the bottom. “Yeah?”

“Mr. Dixon?” Soft voice but strong, real backbone to it, just the faintest hint of a quaver of age. He knows it by now. _Daddy._

“Mr. Greene?” Be polite. Be polite to Daddy, because _now you’re probably in trouble, like you weren’t before._

“Morning, son. Listen, I know you’re employed elsewhere at the moment, but—”

Yep. _Yep._ _Fucking hell, girl._

“—I have some work out here I could use your help with. You know the old silo to the side of the barn?”
“Yeah.”

“Be honest with you, it’s just about ready to come down. I don’t need to completely rebuild the thing, but it’s almost to that point, and Shawn and me, we’re just not up to it by ourselves. We have a neighbor we can call in favor from, but even then... We could use a extra hand. You seem like decent enough folk, at least so far.” Just a hint of a smile on the other end, small and wry, and he thinks he knows at least a little of where Beth gets it from. “You up for it?”

He closes his eyes and slides a hand into his hair. No. No, he is not. He’s not up for it at all. Not any part of it, not in any way.

He was nearly done saying goodbye. This feels almost cruel.

“I dunno, I mean...”

“Give you twelve bucks an hour for your trouble.” Another smile. “You’re unskilled labor, Mr. Dixon, I wouldn’t try negotiating me up from that.”

He sits in silence for as long as he thinks he can get away with it. Thinking. Thinking desperately. Wondering why this is something he feels the need to think about at all. This should be a easy answer. This should be a no-brainer. It should not—in any way, shape, or form—be a brainer.

He’s just not sure which answer should be the easy one.

Twelve an hour. He’s making less than minimum wage here, and the one benefit is that the government isn’t taking a cut.

Thinking desperately. Wheels turning so fast they’re almost spinning. Stall Merle. Dangle the money in front of him. Talk about being in better shape when they leave town. Way better shape. Take the truck, maybe even something better than that. Still shit, because they’ll still have next to nothing and it’s not like this job can possibly take all that long, but something, anything, just any bargaining chip he has.

“Mr. Dixon?”

“Yeah. Uh. Yeah, I... How long you think this’d take?”

“All four of us, all working at full reasonable capacity? Five if you count Beth? A week, probably. Maybe two.”

Two. Full capacity. Full days, at least for him, if he dumps Elmer. Full days at the farm.

At the farm with her.

“Yeah. I can do that.” He pauses, takes a breath. “When you wanna start?”

“Come by later this afternoon and I’ll give you a look at what needs doing. My daughter says you get off work at four?”

My daughter says.

GIRL.

“Yeah. Yeah, alright. I’ll be there.”

“Great. We’ll look for you.”
Call ends. Little red screen. He looks at the phone for a moment, then flicks it shut and looks at it again. Looks up at the mid-morning sun, clear blue sky—a day like there’s never been rain in the entire history of the world. Soft buzz of a sleepy little town in the process of rousing itself into a Friday slouch.

He thinks about the snarling winged wolf in the moonlight, the stupidity of a child’s prayer to a magical world that doesn’t and never did exist. There are no fairies, no gods, and there’s no magic. He knows better. He knows better than a lot of people ever possibly could, or would want to, because he’s prayed so many times to be saved and nothing has ever come through.

No fairies or gods or magic.

But—apparently—there’s Beth Greene.
I reiterate: it's very troubling how none of you are rendering me any assistance in not writing this thing.

So after that some things have to happen pretty goddamn quickly.

For about ten minutes Daryl doesn’t move. He sits where he is, the phone an oddly grounding little weight in his palm, and he gazes at nothing much at all and he thinks. About time. About money. About the fine art of talking to people, which has never exactly been his forte. About the finer art of convincing them, which is... Well. Yeah. About how many balls he can afford to keep in the air at once, about how to keep a roof over his and Merle’s head if he does indeed dump Elmer like a shitty boyfriend. About how to keep the truck if the man who lent it to him isn’t paying him for the stuff he had it for.

He needs the truck. He needs a ride. He needs a way to get to her.

Also the farm.

He rakes a hand into his hair again and shoves it up and away from his face. It was already longish, already hanging in his eyes, but it’s getting longer and he supposes sooner or later it’s going to start bugging him, and this is a thing he focuses on so his brain can keep working without being disturbed by the rest of him.

Cars pass. He’s never really noticed it before, because it’s always what’s been all around him for literally his entire life, but all the cars here are American cars. Like... All of them. Nary a Toyota or a Honda in sight.

Little tiny details. Yes, stay out there and shut up. We’re busy in here.

He’s going to see her again. This afternoon. At four.

And then something else, something that has the effect of focusing him very suddenly and very sharply and—in fact—the effect of getting him onto his feet and moving, because now some things need to happen.

He’s going to be here tomorrow night. In this place in which he doesn’t like being, and within which he was praying to a goddamn moonlit winged wolf god to be allowed to stay.

Nothing is making much sense at all anymore.

Elmer wouldn’t be asking for rent for another week. Assuming he doesn’t want to be an asshole, that will remain the case. The truck... Might be willing to wrangle an IOU there. Greene is known to Elmer and must therefore be known to be a good man, straight shooter, trustworthy, and if Daryl says the guy is paying him twelve dollars an hour to rebuild a silo, no one will question the veracity of that. In the right place, at the right time, it’s as good as credit. Or it could be. Keep paying rent. Get the truck. Offer to keep doing odd jobs, maybe. He’s already proved that while he might have a deadbeat redneck asshole brother, he himself is merely a redneck asshole who’s also pretty reliable.
most of the time. It’ll work. He’ll make it work.

And yes, Elmer is just the tiniest bit afraid of him. He hadn’t considered that useful. He had considered it a problem. He might want to start being more creative about things like that from now on. A little more optimistic. Glass half full and such.

He is actually losing his mind.

But apparently Beth fucking Greene is willing to manipulate the universe to keep him here.

He slips the phone back into his pocket and heads into the feed-&-seed. He’ll talk to Elmer and he’ll make it work. Then he’ll talk to Merle.

And that will be the interesting part.

~

Elmer makes faces at him. This is inconvenient. He could have given Elmer more warning. Puffs a bit, blows annoyance. Daryl stands there and lets him do it and thinks about hippos surfacing in a swamp, belching green water everywhere and peering around with their piggy little eyes.

All that three AM Discovery Channel.

Staying quiet and waiting until the man blows himself out seems like the smartest strategy, and in fact it turns out to be. Elmer satisfies his own honor and listens in grudging silence to Daryl’s proposal, and gives in. Yes, okay; they can keep the place. Daryl can also hang onto the truck for now. Rent is going up by a couple hundred dollars to make things even. Daryl will be available for shit whenever he’s not at the farm, and if he tries to get out of it he and Merle are out on their sorry asses—no truck, no roof, nothing.

That’s going to mean Daryl doesn’t spend a lot of time with Merle.

There is no problem with this. No downside to speak of. Not one he can see.

Deal. No, no shaking on it; Daryl doesn’t offer and Elmer doesn’t demand it. They do not like each other. That’s fine; they don’t have to. Business is concluded. Daryl has fifteen minutes to shower and get his shit together and then he’s back down here until three-thirty.

Fine by him. It’s Friday and there isn’t a lot to be done. Elmer might well close up early and then he can knock off early as well. Maybe get out to the farm early too. It might look good to be early. There might be a number of advantages in that.

So he goes back upstairs.

Wonder of wonders, Merle is in the shower. So he can’t use it anyway for the moment. Daryl makes an absolutely foul mug of instant coffee—thinks with a pathetic kind of longing about Beth and the very strong and the very hot cup she brought him the day before—and waits, leaning back against the dirty counter, eyeing the pile of dishes in the sink neither of them have worked up the motivation to do, all that crusted canned chili and store brand mac-and-cheese. Yellowish and brownish.

If they’re going to be staying here at least another week, he might actually take the initiative to get this place cleaned up. Some.

Merle comes out of the bathroom naked, rubbing at his head with their one extremely distasteful towel, and stops, looking blearily at him. Daryl looks back and takes a placid sip of coffee. It’s a
good idea to be placid here. A reed in Merle’s gale. Bend, be standing at the end of it.

He knows how to weather ugly storms. He learned early.

“Wassup, brother?”

Daryl considers briefly, then decides what the hell, dives right in.

“We’re gonna be stickin’ around a few more days.”

Merle blinks at him, nonplussed. “We’re gonna be...”

“Yeah.”

Now Merle has processed, and he’s no longer nonplussed. He’s surprised and irritated, and his face twists into one of those ugly frowns that always seems poised to break into an equally ugly laugh, and possibly violence of some kind—usually verbal. Daryl doesn’t genuinely expect Merle to hit him over this. Or to try; Daryl is pretty good at dodging him these days and, if necessary, taking him out of commission long enough to defuse things.

Merle’s pupils aren’t dilated, so he hasn’t had his morning bump of crystal. That also helps.

“We already talked about this, Daryl.”

“No, we didn’t. You was talkin’ ‘bout it. I didn’t wanna, I don’t wanna now, and I picked up a job somewhere else and I’m gonna do that first. Then we can talk about goin’.”

That’s... That’s actually the most bluntly he’s stood up to his big brother in months. Not pushing, not weakly arguing for something, not trying to placate Merle into changing his mind. Just telling him. This is how things are going to go. Like he has the ability to essentially make this decision for the both of them, which he’s only just truly realizing is the case... and which he now suspects Merle has known for a while.

And more than that.

_I don’t wanna._

What he doesn’t want. What he wants. Like it matters.

And then—and this is creepy but it’s exactly what happens and he’s not going to pretend it doesn’t—her voice. Her voice in his head, very clearly.

_It does matter._

Merle’s eyes narrow. “What fuckin’ job?”

“Farmer outta town needs help doin’ some construction. Asked, I said sure.” Okay, sort of placating. He can’t avoid it, not completely. “Payin’ twelve an hour. That’s almost twice what I was makin’ before, man.”

“We keepin’ this place?”

Daryl nods. “I took care of it.” He pushes ahead without giving Merle a chance to cut in—which he can tell Merle is prepping to do—and raises his voice a bit to block it even more solidly. “You suck it up, tough it out a little longer, we’ll be in a lot better shape when we do leave. You know it.”
For half a minute Merle looks like he still intends to argue. Then he harrumphs and rolls his eyes and heads into the bedroom to excavate some clothes. Daryl stays where he is, waiting for something further, and after another minute he gets it in the form of a sullen growl briefly muffled by a shirt being tugged on.

“Dick move, baby brother. Dick move makin’ that decision, not talkin’ to me. Oughta put you on your ass for it.”

_I’d like to see you try._ A weary thought. No challenge in it, no satisfaction in knowing Merle almost certainly wouldn’t be able to. He wouldn’t like anything of the kind. It would be stupid and pointless and he has a lot of other things to do right now. He doesn’t answer.

“But I guess—” Voice approaching again, Merle coming back into view dressed in a ratty once-white tank and a pair of old camo pants. He stops in front of Daryl and grabs the mug from his hand, takes a huge swallow and grimaces. “I guess it don’t matter either way. Just don’t you pull that shit again, man. That _decidedly_ ain’t cool.”

Merle needs to appear to be in charge. Merle needs to be one of those kings in England or wherever, doesn’t mean anything anymore but people still act like he does. Daryl is happy to allow this. He’s also happy to relinquish the wretched coffee, and he pushes past Merle and heads for the shower.

“No move, bro.”

Whatever he says. As long as he doesn’t say anything that means anything in the end. Which is how Daryl can see things being now. What just happened, when he said no, when he said _I don’t wanna_... He’s thinking as he strips off his clothes, as he turns on the weak lukewarm spray and slides under it, tilting his face up. He’s thinking about what that shit really meant, and how it had been this _moment_ , only a sentence or two, but it hadn’t been. It had been bigger.

Everything feels different now. He’s not sure he totally likes it. Because once he had this idea of how things might be if some particular things changed, and that idea turned out to be wrong in every important respect, but he held onto it anyway. Held onto it like he needed it, because he kind of did.

Like a kid believing in magic and fairies.

Now that idea is dying. Decaying. Falling apart, like a dead thing walking around and rotting without the good sense to lie down and be dead. This is never going to be okay. This is never going to be what he hoped for, what he wanted. What he hopes for, what he wants...

He’s just going to have to search for that somewhere else.

So at three-thirty he’s in the truck pulling out of town, and part of him is heavy, because he can’t forget this. He can’t forget what this means. What it is. What’s happening here. At least, the part of it he understands.

Because there’s that other part.

And when he pulls up the drive and parks, gets out, Greene and his son are standing in the yard next to a pile of boards, and _she’s_ sitting on the porch steps, his capricious little life-fucking-with godess, her hair pulled back and braided, and when she waves at him the bangles on her wrist flash in the afternoon sun.

_Girl._

The thing with Merle, the death of that dearly and desperately held fantasy... and this.
Even if he wanted to turn back now, he knows he couldn’t.
he tumbles on by luck or grace

Chapter Notes

quick note: I usually try to respond to comments but sometimes I'm very bad at it, so let me just say to everyone commenting THANK YOU O M G I appreciate it so much, I love knowing that people are enjoying this and I hope that continues to be the case

At first he thinks Greene must have done this as a favor to his daughter, but when he thinks about that it’s actually pretty weird for a whole number of reasons, and—as Greene takes him to the silo and together they survey the wear and tear, the places that need basic patching and then the places that need almost complete reconstruction, talk about how the next few days should go and formulate a plan of attack—after a bit it becomes clear that the man genuinely kind of likes him.

Which is also pretty weird. He’s uncertain what cause he’s given Hershel Greene to do that.

It’s almost six when Greene lets him go, but he doesn’t feel like leaving. It’s a warm afternoon in late summer, the sun lowering and turning everything a rich gold, and after he’s confident he won’t be literally chased away he wanders into the barn and finds Beth brushing one of the horses. The horse in question is a pretty chestnut mare with a white blaze, and he stands for a moment, admiring.

The horse. Admiring the horse.

He clears his throat, but she’s already looking up and toward him, smiling faintly. She doesn’t stop brushing.

Today the bracelets on her wrist are soft gold and green. They match the landscape outside. He looks at them, swallows, looks away.

“Hi.”

He gives her a nod. He realizes he’s glad she wasn’t with them before. He would have had a hard time focusing, and it might have been noticeable. Then he remembers Greene had implied on the phone that Beth would be helping them, and what he feels can’t exactly properly be called worry, but.

But.

“Got everythin’ settled?”

At first he guesses she simply means the job, but then he wonders about that, because he didn’t go into the specifics of the issues with her, but he’s sure she sensed there were more of them than just moving on. He nods again, but his eyes are slightly narrowed.

“So you’re gonna be out here tomorrow, and then you can meet up with me at the coffee shop later.” She pauses. “Shawn’s gonna be there. Kinda wish he wouldn’t.”

“How come?”

She stops brushing and strokes a hand over the horse’s glossy hide, rolls a shoulder. “I dunno. He
just kinda... He hovers. He’s overprotective. He’s not even that much older, but it’s like he thinks I’m gonna get kidnapped or somethin’, like every moment. He doesn’t even like Jimmy that much. It’s weird.”

Daryl doesn’t perceive this as a problem. He’ll tell himself that later on. He’ll tell himself more than once. Because there’s no reason for it to be a problem. Shawn has no reason to be concerned about this. He thinks about them alone together in the ruins, about the first night in the truck, but he didn’t do anything. Didn’t think about doing anything.

Except that thing with her hair.

In any case, she kissed him.

“Anyway, he likes hearin’ me sing and he has this girl he’s meetin’ up with, so.” She passes a hand over the mare’s nose and murmurs something Daryl can’t make out.

Without entirely meaning to, he moves closer. Close beside her. He reaches up and lays a hand against the mare’s flank—feels the soft smoothness and the warmth, the rise and fall of her ribcage, the steady pump of her heart. And he thinks about Beth riding—because she does, of course she does—swift, her hair flying, graceful in that way he knows she is. He thinks about that, and he doesn’t mean to do that either, but he thinks he might like to see that sometime.

He glances at her, and he’s not totally surprised to see that she’s looking at him. He takes a breath. He’s not sure he should ask this question, but here he goes anyway.

He’s been doing a lot of that in the last few days. Wondering about something, uncertain about it, and diving into it before he knows what’s happening.

“Why you want me there?”

“’cause I like you,” she says immediately, and smiles at him—wider. He stares back at her; maybe he shouldn’t be shocked when she’s blunt like this, not anymore, but he is. He really is. She’s not afraid of saying that. She’s not afraid of what she might hear back, and she’s not afraid of freaking him out. And freaking him out...

He actually doesn’t know if anyone has ever said that to him. Ever in his life.

But even if he has no idea how he feels about it, he’s not exactly sprinting for the door.

“I like you,” she continues, “and I thought you might kinda like it. You asked me to sing before. Seemed like you liked it then. I thought so, anyway.”

Is this the first time either of them have made a direct reference to that night? To what happened? What they both did? How it felt, what she thought, at least this explicitly?

He thinks it might be so.

He shrugs. He’s not going to argue with that. It would be a pretty stupid thing to argue with.

She looks at him for a few seconds longer, and it’s the kind of gaze that makes him squirm. It basically is making him squirm. Which isn’t so great. He’s not positive he wants her to know she can do that to him. But that’s probably a lost cause. Probably she already knows. He thinks this with a species of resignation—but not with any particular unhappiness.

“So,” she says, moving past him to put the brush away. “You can be there. And I think I can get you
free coffee. So you’ll owe me again.” She flashes him yet another smile. “Don’t say you didn’t ask for it. Don’t matter.”

No, he supposes it doesn’t. He turns to her, hands slipping into his pockets, and mostly against his will his own smile is pulling at the corner of his mouth. Just like he can’t ever make himself smile, he’s never been all that good at keeping them back. They come. They mostly control him.

“You ever let no be no? Like, at all?”

“You didn’t say no. You said you’d come if you were here, I pretty much think that’s a yes. Now you’re gonna be here. Unless you turn Daddy down after all. That wouldn’t be very polite, would it?” she adds thoughtfully, turning back to face him with her arms crossed over her chest. “Then again, you are a jerk.”

Shit, he’s smiling. He can’t help it. He’s smiling at her, and he’s not even sure why it should be such a thing right now, except it is. It absolutely is. Smiling at her, it’s sort of a big deal at the moment. Not least because she’ll see it. She’ll see it, and she’ll draw some conclusions. He’s not certain what conclusions she might draw, but something about the vague possibilities is vaguely worrying.

“Not a creep, though.”

She tilts her head to one side. “Nope. Definitely not a creep.”

Then there’s silence. There’s the soft whistle of a sudden gust of wind in the loft above, and the mare lets out a quiet sigh. He looks at her and she looks right back, and he notices her bracelets again. The little heart on the gold chain around her neck. Her braid. The tank top she’s wearing—dark blue and loose, and the looseness and the way it hangs on her has the effect of making her appear even smaller than she is. Smaller and more delicate, the neckline accentuating her collarbones, even though he knows that delicacy has to be a lie. She’s a farmer’s daughter. Farm this size, Greene would have been putting her to work. In terms of physical strength she’s probably a force to be reckoned with.

He’s thinking about these things. And he realizes his gaze has been moving over her, and she must have seen it. And he thinks about someone walking in right now—Daddy walking in right now—and while this is of course perfectly innocent, he’s wondering if the man might see it that way.

If he’s going to work here, if she’s going to be with him a good bit of the time, he’s going to have to be careful. Some part of him knows this. Before, he was thinking this girl might get him into trouble, and she may well do so, but he would frankly like to avoid that kind of trouble.

He would like to avoid getting chased off the farm by an irate father brandishing a shotgun.

But the thing is that he likes her. He likes being around her. That’s weird, and he’s sure a lot of people might look at it and think it was totally about something else, that he wants something from her, but... He just likes her. He likes the way she makes him feel.

Like he’s worth being around.

“Alright,” he says quietly. “Alright. I’ll be there.”

This time her smile is tiny and warm. “Okay. Good.” She nods over her shoulder at the barn door. “I gotta get back in, help Mama with dinner.” She looks like she’s about to go, and Daryl’s getting ready to mumble some sort of faintly awkward goodbye and move to the door himself, when she stops and gives him a speculative look.

“You actually gotta go?”
Confusion. “Huh?”

“You got somewhere you gotta be?”

He starts to say something like my brother, something about Merle—and then he stops. Because you know what? Merle is a fucking adult. Merle is a grown-ass man. Merle has years on him. If he’s not back for a while, Merle can fucking deal. And if he has to come up with an excuse, that will be the easiest thing in the universe. He has an entire list of them.

It’s possible he’s been accumulating some. General ones. Just in case.

But then he realizes he has no idea why she’s asking, and that’s something he should probably know. “I mean... No. I guess not. Why?”

“You should come have dinner.”

No. Oh, no. Nonono. He’s starting to formulate a protest, wondering why he wants to formulate a protest, scrambling internally, twice as confused as before, but she’s already heading out the door with the confident strides of someone who has reached a decision about something and feels very good about it and doesn’t intend to be budged.

“C’mom up to the house. Maybe you can help too.”

He stares after her. She is giving him no choice. None. She’s this tiny blond teenage girl just deciding things about what he’ll do and where he’ll be doing it, and she’s giving him absolutely no say about it. Any of it. He wonders if it’s even occurring to her to do so.

He wonders if he cares all that much.

So he follows her up toward the house.
The inside of the farmhouse is every bit as bright and clean and airy and pleasantly old as the outside. Daryl stands in the entranceway gazing at the wooden bench to his left, glossy with age and under which sit pairs of shoes laid out in a neat line, at the polished wood floors, at a few family pictures on the walls, at the equally clean and bright rooms he can see beyond, at his boots, his hands—thinking about how he doesn’t fit here, doesn’t fit at all, because his clothes are ratty and his hair is hanging in his eyes and he needs to wash his hands and he has dirt packed under his ragged fingernails.

Feeling like this is all probably a big fucking mistake.

But Beth is unerringly, relentlessly cheerful, and she moves forward into the front hall with all the confidence of a girl used to successful convincing. She glances back at him and nods her head toward the wide entrance to what turns out to be the dining room—large table made of the same dark wood as the bench, side table, cabinet full of crystal—and into a sunny kitchen beyond, where her mother is standing over the sink peeling potatoes.

He stops moving when she does, goes back to standing there and feeling awkward and out of place. He’s good at that. Right now he’s going to stick to his strengths.

Beth goes up to the woman and kisses her on the cheek. “Hey, Mama. Whatcha need help with?”

The woman leans into the kiss, smiles, and Daryl feels a pang of something he wasn’t feeling before, with Greene. With Hershel. This nice woman. This nice family. He’s in their home, and it’s a nice home. It would feel good to be in if it wasn’t for the tightness in his gut, and now he recognizes that it isn’t about feeling out of place. At least not completely.

It’s about this being the first time he’s been in a place like this and seen its people up close. How they are with each other. The family who’s produced this girl. She goes in no fear of anything. She’s confident of the world and her place in it. Not arrogant; from the beginning he’s sensed pretty much none of that in her. She’s not arrogant, and maybe only a little spoiled in a youngest-daughter kind of way. She’s confident that she’s loved. Confident that she’ll come home to these people and they won’t be drunk and she won’t be screamed at or hit.

A piercing realization, a thing that stabs into his chest like an icepick: Beth Greene is brave in a way he will never be.

He’s always assumed things might be too late for Merle. Now he wonders if things are mostly too late for him.

But Beth is saying something, turning to him, and so is her mother, drying her hands on a dish towel. He saw her from a ways away that day outside the church, but this is his first time really seeing her up close, and she is indeed pretty in the way older women are, a deep prettiness, her hair pulled neatly back into a clip and her eyes warm.

They focus on him, move briefly over him, and he sees a flash of skepticism. But it’s not mean. She simply isn’t sure about him.

He feels a brief and undesired pang of resentment. It’s not something for which he should resent her. He wouldn’t be sure about himself either.
“Hi,” he says, and he’s not sure what else to say.

“Mr. Dixon?” Half a question. She isn’t moving toward him and he doesn’t know what that means. Beth is glancing from him to her mother, and while there’s no anxiety on her face, she does look sort of expectant. Like there’s more she wants here. More from him. So he gives Mrs. Greene something between a shrug and a nod.

“Yeah. Uh. Daryl.” He scans around, mostly because looking away takes some of the pressure off, and mutters, “You got a nice house.”

“Thank you, Daryl. It’s been in the family a long time.” She hesitates. “Beth says she invited you to stay for dinner?”

He shrugs again. He wishes he could say That was her, that was all her, I was ready to leave, she just completely took over and it was very weird, I can leave now if you want, I’m sorry, also it was her damn fault. But of course he says none of this. He merely stands there and returns to the awkwardness. Familiar territory. Retreat there, await further instructions from the commander.

Good sweet Christ, what is his deal.

“Well, that’s fine, I know you were out helping Hershel? Yeah, we shouldn’t send you away without feeding you first. Shawn is still out taking care of a few things—maybe you can help out here too? If it’s not too much trouble?” She gestures at the counter to the left of the sink, where a pile of green pods sit in a bowl. “We’re having a roast. You know how to shell peas?”

He doesn’t. He nods.

“Good, that means I can get some laundry off the line before it gets dark. Beth, you can take it from here?”

“Mnhm.” Beth is already taking the peeler from her mother, plucking one of the potatoes off the cutting board by the sink. Mrs. Greene kisses the crown of her head and heads for what Daryl assumes is the back door, giving him another faint smile.

Beth glances back at him, a potato in her hand. “You gonna get to it, then?”

He hesitates, looking from her to the counter. He thought she was going to get him into trouble and she has, but he has the self-awareness to know that this particular trouble was all him. There was a right thing and a wrong thing to say there, and he went right for the wrong thing, and now he’s stuck.

He lowers his head, doesn’t quite look at her. “I don’t,” he mutters.

Beth cocks her head, brow arched. “I didn’t get that.”

A rush of exasperation, which is helpful, because it makes him feel a little stronger and a little more on top of things. He raises his voice, and only afterward thinks he might have been overheard. “I don’t actually know how to shell no fuckin’ peas. Okay?”

Beth stares at him for a moment, blinks, then breaks into a soft laugh. “Why the hell didn’t you say so?”

He shrugs, makes a noncommittal noise. I’unno.

He does know, and he’s back to totally blaming her for it.
She sets down the potato and the peeler and moves over to that side of the counter, beckoning him. “C’mon, I’ll show you. Ain’t hard.”

As has been the case this whole time, he supposes he doesn’t have any other choice. He crosses the room to her and stands beside her, gazing down at the bowl full of pods. She reaches up and pulls open a cabinet full of various kinds of pans—he recognizes a couple he thinks are probably for baking bread—and produces a colander, sets it down beside the bowl.

“She picks up one of the pods and holds it so he can see, breaks off the end, grabs a tiny string thing and tugs in a single practiced motion. The pod sort of comes unzipped and opens neatly. She flicks the peas into the colander and tosses the pod into the sink, then looks back up at him. “You try.”

He does. It’s clumsy, but she’s right, it’s not that hard, and he thinks he gets it.

“That’s it.” She leans against the counter, watching him, clearly bemused. “You never shelled peas before? I mean, it’s not that weird that you haven’t, but.”

He gives her a look. “Glad you ain’t judgin’ me.”

“I never judge you. Name one time I judged you.”

He can’t. He gives her another look and goes back to the peas. “Ain’t you got shit to peel?”

“How old are you?”

He stops again and this time the look he gives her is—he can tell—utterly and openly bewildered. And he’s positive she can see that he’s uncomfortable. He has no idea why she would hit him with that question, now of all times, and she’s just...

Why? Why is she like this?

Why doesn’t he hate it?

“What the fuck, girl? Why you askin’?”

“cause I wanna know how many years you haven’t been shellin’ peas in.” She gives him a little smirk and hops up to sit on the counter next to him, swinging her legs a bit—something that should be childish and yet, with the way she’s doing it, isn’t. “C’mon, why wouldn’t you wanna tell me? You embarrassed or somethin’?”

Back to the peas, because it gives him something to do with his hands, and for some reason he feels like he desperately needs that right now. “Why the hell would I be embarrassed about that?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m wonderin’.”

He shoots her a glance from beneath the fringe of his hair, something a bit less than a glare. “How the fuck old are you?”


He sighs. He’s pretty sure this is yet another thing she’s not going to let drop until he tells her, so what the hell. “Thirty-eight.”

“Really?” She sounds honestly surprised, and it twists something in him, because why? Why would that surprise her? What did she expect to hear? Was there something she wanted to hear?
He completely fails to open one of the pods the way she showed him and has to dig at it with his thumbnail.

“What?”

“I dunno, you just don’t act like it.”

He lets out a softly incredulous laugh. Because incredulous is how he’s feeling at this point. All of this is taking on the sense and logic of a vivid fever dream. “How the fuck do I act, then?”

She doesn’t answer. He tosses down the pod he’s working on and turns to her, and that’s when he realizes how close she is, how sitting like this her face is pretty much level with his, how he can smell fresh hay on her and that same soap from the first night—mild and clean and not heavily floral or heavily fruity. And the sun through the window over the sink is catching her hair, her eyes look very large and very bright, and—this is crazy, this is absolutely insane, it’s more fever dream logic and he shouldn’t because it would be so fucking weird and actually kind of creepy and he’s sure she would kick him away from her—he wants to lean in even closer to her, centimeters from her warm skin, and inhale deeply.

Pull her into his lungs and keep her there.

Fuck.

He finally does glare at her. “Go peel your potatoes, why don’tcha.”

She looks at him for a moment, her expression completely unreadable, and for the span of a second he thinks she might be about to do something. He has no idea what, but something. He can see the wheels turning swiftly behind her eyes.

Then she pushes him lightly back with a hand on his chest and hops down. “You’re still bein’ a jerk,” she says amiably. “Just so you know.”

He does know.

Better a jerk than a creep.

The rest of dinner is prepared in silence, except for when Mrs. Greene comes back in to check on the roast in the oven—which, Daryl wouldn’t mind admitting, smells fucking amazing—and she doesn’t talk to him much, though what she says is perfectly pleasant and cheerful. And dinner is mostly the same way, in the big dining room, and the food is, as he suspected, amazing, and for the most part they leave him alone except for some abortive attempts at small talk—which he fields as best he can, but he can’t do much about not being good at it.

Beth talks a lot more, with what feels to him like particular intent, and it’s not very long before he realizes what she’s doing. She’s cutting in before his short answers—to questions about what he’s doing in town, where he came from, other general things—become too awkward, steering the conversation away from him. It’s subtle. It takes him a bit but he does get it.

She’s saving him. She can tell he’s not comfortable with the attention, and she’s lifting it off him. And what he feels then is a rush of gratitude so immense and so profound that it almost clenches in his chest.

He thought before, when she laid off her own questions when it became clear to her that she was
getting close to something sore, that she was kind. But he’s beginning to see just how kind she is.

Other things: He’s pretty sure his table manners aren’t as bad as he was afraid of. He remembers napkins exist and how to use them. Shawn might be overprotective, but as far as he can tell Shawn isn’t yet giving him any form of Death Glare, even though he’s sitting next to Beth—which she arranged and which no one seems to mind, which he thinks is strange, but.

Well.

Hershel says grace at the beginning of the whole thing, and they all hold hands. Mrs. Greene on his left, her hand soft and smooth and cool...

And Beth on his right. And her hand can’t possibly be that warm but it feels like it’s burning him.

It’s a relief to let go of it.

Dinner ends. Ice cream; he begs off and says he has to get back, thanks so much, he hopes it wasn’t an inconvenience, and he actually feels like he’s being pretty goddamn polite, and that’s good, because...

Because he wants to do this again. For a lot of reasons. He wants them to like him. He wants to come back. It’s something new, it’s a family who feels safe with each other, the house feels good to be in, and all of that kind of hurts in fact, but it also feels like...

The hurt isn’t bad. He doesn’t completely dislike it.

And there’s her. Honestly. Yes. There’s her.

Out to the truck. Mrs. Greene gives him some leftover roast to take back with him. They do like him. At least a little. Or if they still aren’t totally sure about him, they’re willing to give him a chance. Because the thing is, they feel like the kind of people who might default to giving someone a chance, as long as there’s no clear reason from the start not to.

But when he walks out the door he knows Beth might follow him, and he violently doesn’t want her to. Because they’ve already trod the line of a fair amount of strangeness tonight, and if she pushes it, if she pushes it, if she does more along these lines...

They might decide they’re really not so sure about him.

They might decide they don’t like him so much.

But she doesn’t follow him. He sees her at the door for a moment, and then the door is closed and he’s opening the driver’s side door, tossing the wrapped roast beef onto the passenger’s seat, turning the truck around and heading down the drive. The sunlight isn’t yet completely gone but the stars are already showing here and there, and he looks at them as he drives. Radio on, quietly.

    you’re just like an angel
    your skin makes me cry
    you float like a feather
    in a beautiful world
    I wish I was special
    you’re so fucking special

He turns it off. Sort of hard.
Chapter End Notes

Song is "Creep" by Radiohead.
Beth isn’t around a whole lot the next day. That’s good.

Also not.

As arranged, he comes over bright and early around nine—which means that for once Merle is on his own on a Friday night, and very annoyed that his brother and wingman is refusing to join him. But like the reed he can be, Daryl bends in Merle’s gale, and after his brother slams the door and stomps down the outside stairs so hard Daryl is half sure they might finally rip out of the wall, he has a beer and lies on the couch in front of the muted TV and tries to sleep.

Actually sleep. Not pass out. Sleep. Like a normal fucking human being, which he isn’t, but one of the things dinner with the Greenes suggested to him is that pretending to be such a thing may indeed be possible. Maybe, if he tries really hard, he can pull it off. For a while. He wants to.

He wants to for her. He feels like she went to bat for him a bit. He doesn’t want to make her look bad. He doesn’t want to embarrass her.

But it takes him a while to fall asleep. The window is open, and he keeps thinking he smells that soap she uses drifting in to him on the breeze.

So the next day he’s not late and he brings a prearranged load of lumber with him, and they unload that and work until noon—him and Hershel and Shawn—and break for sandwiches and lemonade on the porch. Beth brings them out. Smiles at him. Kisses her father on the temple and goes back inside without saying anything.

And he remembers he’s going to see her tonight, hear her sing, and he feels like he’s carrying a secret around with him. Something small and bright and warm.

Even if it’s not much of a secret at all.

Around mid-afternoon, the neighbor Hershel mentioned—name of Otis—comes over and they work until five—not going with any particular speed, which Daryl is grateful for because it’s a hot day and while heat has never gotten to him in any major way he’s feeling it now. But as the sun starts to progress toward the horizon the heat abates a little, and on the way back to the truck—saying he can’t stay for dinner, and in truth he wants to, but he also wants to go back to the apartment and shower and make a level effort to get his shit together—he stops by a rain barrel next to the side of the barn and bends over it, scoops up a couple handfuls of water and pours them over his head. It’s cooler than he expected—feels fucking wonderful—and he shakes himself like a dog and straightens up, swiping his hair back from his face, water running down his collarbones and back between his shoulderblades and sticking his tank top to his skin.

And of course he turns and she’s there, carrying a pail of chicken feed and staring at him. And something about the scene is so fucking cliché that he almost laughs.

He is aware, in a very dim way, of the distinct possibility of oncoming disaster.

“You still comin’ tonight?”
He feels strangely exposed. It’s not a big deal, shouldn’t be, but he feels somehow more undressed than usual. Shirt sticking to him. She can see a lot of him. Bare arms is one thing, but.

But what the fuck, seriously. She doesn’t seem weird about it. He nods.

“Good. See ya then.”

And she turns and she’s gone, leaving him standing there, still dripping, breeze cool on his skin, staring at the place where she was as if she’s still there.

Brown leather around her wrist today. Brown with what looked like brass studs. She can wear so many different kinds of things there and somehow all of them are so essentially her. He kind of wants to ask her about it, though what he would ask, how he would phrase it... He doesn’t know.

But it might be nice to put her on the spot for a change.

~

The coffee shop is crowded—no surprise there, Saturday night in a town where it looks like the biggest entertainment going is probably high school football—and by the time he gets there the tables are all taken and a reedy boy is up on the tiny platform stage with a guitar which is marginally in tune and a voice to match. Daryl can make out every other lyric and together they add up to a whole lot of feelings, so he basically tunes it out.

They have good coffee. He remembers that. He goes up to the counter, starts to order some, and the girl there gives him a quick look and an equally quick smile.

“You’re Daryl, right? Apparently we owe you one on the house.” She turns to the pot and shoots him a smirk over her shoulder. “Beth’s house, anyway.”

Girl. But she did say. She also said he wasn’t going to have any say about it, not that that’s surprising in the least at this point. That he was going to owe her, again. And if this is about strategically trading favors, he’s not confident that’s a game he can win. It seems like she plays it very well.

He glances around the place—the small tables, a few couches and armchairs toward the back—and he doesn’t see her, or Shawn. He turns back to the girl just as she hands him the coffee, raising his voice to be heard above a sudden spike in volume. The reedy kid is singing about dead grass and lonely roads and a persistent lack of rain.

“Beth—she come in yet? You see her?”

“Not yet. She’ll be here in...” The girl glances at the clock behind her. “Any time now, actually. There’s one more after this one, then her.” She hesitates, and from the way she looks at Daryl, he’s pretty sure she saw something on his face worth addressing.

Only question is what.

She nods at the kid on the stage and leans in, a sardonic smile pulling at her full mouth. “Yeah, he’s... He really believes in himself. Y’know? I guess that’s what matters.”

Daryl takes the coffee, gives the girl his own faint smile, and retreats to an empty space in the back of the room, leaning against the wall and trying to maintain a comfortable distance from as many people as possible and watching the door.
The reedy kid departs, accompanied by a smattering of applause, and is replaced by a tall, powerfully built redheaded girl with a banjo. She plays pretty well, and her voice—while not exactly what he would call sweet—is tuneful and strong in a pleasantly rough kind of way.

He’s enjoying that for what it’s worth, though he’s mostly ignoring the words—when Beth comes in carrying a guitar case, and something in him seizes up.

She’s not wearing the tee and jeans she had on earlier, though she’s still wearing the cowboy boots. Instead she’s wearing a sleeveless knee-length dress all patterned in speckled purples and blues and whites, and her hair is braided and piled on her head in a loose coil, tendrils hanging around her face. Little makeup. Not much. Less than the first night in the rain, though in fairness the rain had probably washed a lot of it away by the time he found her. Leather cuffed around her wrist.

She’s beautiful.

This is the first time he admits it to himself. He saw it that first night, but this is the first time he truly admits it, turns and faces it, recognizes it for what it is with a clarity he’s never had. This realization, this thing he understands because he no longer has the option of not doing so—it’s right in front of him, looking toward him and waving, so bright it’s as though all the rest of the light is being sucked out of the room, and for a fraction of a fraction of a moment he can’t even breathe.

He’s never seen anyone so beautiful. He didn’t even know what ‘beautiful’ was.

She’s not alone. Two boys are with her. The first is Shawn—and Shawn gives him a look which isn’t exactly warm. Not cold, not challenging, and not—he thinks—even all that specific to him. It’s more of a boilerplate you’ve been in the general vicinity of my sister, I’ve seen you in the general vicinity of my sister, I’m fully prepared to murder you if necessary kind of look—even though Daryl could probably just about throw him across the room, even if there isn’t a tremendous difference in height.

The second, he guesses, is Jimmy. Jimmy is a handsome kid, seems about Beth’s age, nice smile, arm around her, reaching down to help her with the guitar case.

And Daryl bristles.

Only for a second. It’s intense but it’s gone almost as fast as it comes—sharp and unexpected and deeply instinctive, and it’s disturbing. Very. He’s never felt like that, not about something like this. Not in this context. Not in this situation. And as he watches Jimmy and Beth move up toward the front of the room—Shawn sliding into a seat next to a girl with bobbed brown hair and large dark eyes which light up as soon as she sees him—he thinks it’s not even about Jimmy. It had nothing to do with Jimmy. He doesn’t know Jimmy. He doesn’t care about Jimmy. It might as well not have been Jimmy at all. It could have been anyone.

It’s about where Jimmy was. It’s about the space Jimmy occupies.

He stares after them, the coffee forgotten and cooling in his hand, and he hurts. Hurts—for a second—like someone has driven a fist into his stomach, without any warning and for no apparent reason. A confused, surprised hurt.

Suddenly he doesn’t want to be here anymore.

But he’s not moving.

The girl with the banjo gives the room a brilliant smile and a cute little bow, and steps down into the crowd. There’s a lull, a rise in the volume of conversation, and Daryl is considering using the break
to sneak out and try to come up with some kind of convincing excuse for the next time he sees her, when she climbs on stage, tuning up the guitar, and he knows he’s not going anywhere.

She says something. Her name, maybe. She smiles and it’s radiant, and she’s clearly so happy to be up there—maybe the tiniest bit nervous but also fully in her element. She’s standing there like someone who knows they can do something, do it well—not with any ego but simply with the objective knowledge that comes with genuinely being good at that thing. Taking pleasure in being good at it, and taking pleasure in doing it at all. For the thing itself.

*You get to sing?*

*Not tonight.*

*Why don’tcha sing somethin’?*

*Really?*

*Yeah, you heard me. Go on and sing somethin’.*

So she does.

There’s energy to it. It starts with a flurry of strumming, not hard—because he doesn’t see her doing that, it’s not a *her* thing to do—but firm, and immediately her voice is accompanying it, strong and sweet and filling the suddenly quiet room. And even if he wanted to tune it out, he couldn’t. It commands attention.

```
birds beneath my window
dusting their wings upon the lawn
I hear them in the morning light
giving last amen to a migratory song
they’re never looking ‘round for me
their eyes are on the sky or the ground below
but I’d rather be the one who loves
than to be loved and never even know
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There are these moments.

Daryl doesn’t read romance, doesn’t watch romantic movies, has never considered himself a romantic person in any way, shape, or form. The world has been beating him up pretty much since he was old enough to walk around in it, and that kind of treatment doesn’t leave a lot of tissue soft enough for romance. Everything is scars and muscle. But he’s aware that sometimes people have these moments, that they might really *exist*, where you look at someone and the rest of the world just disappears. It’s just fucking gone. It doesn’t matter, it’s inconsequential; to the extent that things like water and light and air exist at all, they’re a life support system for this person—this one person above all other persons.

There are these moments where you look at someone and you can see only them, and you never want to see anyone else for the rest of your life.

Daryl Dixon has empirical confirmation of the existence of these moments, because he’s right the fuck in the middle of one.

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I’m underneath your window now
it’s long after the birds have gone to roost
and I’m not sure if I’m singing for
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the love of it or for the love of you
but I’ve flown a long way, honey
hear my confession then I’ll go
I’d rather be the one who loves
than to be loved and never even know

She finishes. The room applauds. It’s not deafening applause, but it’s solid, a few cheers—clearly, if people have come here specifically to hear people, she’s one of those people—and she stands there beaming, looking down at the guitar, slightly flushed. Thanking them. She’s settling herself to start something else, picking at the strings, and that’s when he goes for the door.

 Doesn’t look at her. Leaves the coffee on someone’s table when he passes them and shoves the door open, practically throwing himself out into the night.

A couple of blocks up the quiet street he stops in front of the dying music store and turns in place as if he’s searching for somewhere to go, almost pacing. Everything in him is clenching, releasing, clenching again. He feels almost sick. He half falls against the brick, fumbles for a cigarette, lights it with shaking hands.

For the briefest of moments, he thinks about leaving. Grabbing the truck, tossing the few possessions they have into it, grabbing Merle, going. On the road. Not looking back. Not stopping until they’ve crossed the state line—all state line. It’s bad out there. He knows what’s waiting for him out there. He knows where he’ll very likely be headed out there. That long, slow downward spiral.

There’s nothing good for him out there.

But he’s not sure he can take what’s in here. Not anymore.

This girl—this capricious little life-fucking-with goddess—she used her considerable powers to keep him here. Because she likes him.

He wonders if she has any idea what the fuck she’s actually done.

Chapter End Notes

The song Beth sings is the lovely "Snow is Gone" by Josh Ritter.
I draw you close with every breath

It’s raining again by the time he goes home.

It blows in hard and suddenly, gusts of wind shaking the trees and flapping awnings. No one is around, no one to run for cover. Empty street at two in the morning, not even any cars to speak of, and when lightning spikes through the clouds overhead and thunder immediately cracks the sky open in its wake, he looks down and sees the hard outline of his own shadow, there for a fraction of a second and gone again.

For the time it takes to blink, he’s thrown into light. Then it’s over.

He’s an idiot. He’s a sad, sick idiot and he shouldn’t even be here. He should have been gone yesterday.

The town itself is small, but there are plenty of residential streets and he wanders up and down each one, gazing at dark houses with lawns, cars in the driveways, some with toys in the yard, most of them in pretty good repair—more normal families, happy families, and he has never felt so keenly in his life that he doesn’t belong somewhere.

She’s at home. She was probably home a long time ago. Sang her songs, lit up that whole fucking room, went back to her big bright house and her beautiful bright family and her bright perfect life. Kissed Jimmy goodnight, and when he thinks about that he has to stop walking, almost doubles over, for God’s sweet sake, and he thinks about how her lips tasted and again he thinks sick, sick.

He’s twice her age, and he doesn’t fit into her bright perfect life. He doesn’t fit at all.

But she seems to think he does, at least a little.

He’s angry. He’s furious. He’s soaked. He’s actually a bit cold—the rain has brought cool wind with it and he’s not dressed for the weather. He hugs himself and walks some more, tries not to think about things, thinks about everything. Everything he can get his head around, which he knows isn’t nearly all of it. Because he knows on some level—on a fuck of a lot of levels now—what this is, but he doesn’t have a word for it. Doesn’t have the vocabulary. He knows boys with girls, going out, getting married, having some very ill-advised kids, generally fucking their lives up—he thinks about that and about the horrific bullshit he saw when he was growing up, and he thinks about Jimmy and about how Jimmy looked at her, and nothing against Jimmy, Jimmy is probably a nice kid, especially if Beth likes him, but Jimmy did fucking not look at her like he’s feeling the way Daryl is feeling.

Jimmy looked like he likes her. A lot, but yeah.

Daryl thinks about not seeing her again and he thinks he might literally fucking die.

And he shouldn’t. Because he’s a fucking creep.

But he can’t just cut and run. He wants to, wants to desperately, but he also doesn’t want to, at all, and anyway he can’t. He’s made some deals here, and he’s promised some people things, and maybe he’s a coward and maybe he’s a creep but some part of him is persisting in being maddeningly ethical, and he can’t do what he should probably do and go.

And he can’t because he just can’t, because right now it feels too late for that.

He stands in the rain and looks up, and realizes he’s walked all the way back to the coffee shop. It’s
dark. Silent. It doesn’t even look like the same place.

Maybe he should have stayed. Somehow. Stayed and maybe it would have been like a vaccine. Maybe it would have inoculated him. Enough exposure to Beth Greene and maybe he could have built up a tolerance.

Oh, that is fucking hilarious.

He lowers his head and rain runs off the ends of his hair. He’s a mess. Standing out here isn’t doing anything. It’s two in the morning. He should go home.

He does.

Merle is there. Merle has a slim woman with long black hair and a cheap looking bra and stockings fallen halfway down her legs bent over the sofa, and he’s going at her like he could go for a while. He’s calling her some extremely impolite names.

He doesn’t see that Daryl has come in. Daryl watches them both for a minute, wearily, then turns around and walks back out again. He sleeps in the truck and wakes up feeling like the absolute frozen bottom of Hell, and it’s still raining.

Merle and the woman are unconscious on the bed, both snoring. Daryl barely gives them a glance. Showers. Brushes his teeth. Changes. He’s not sure what any of this is for. He’s not sure why he gives a fuck. Not sure why it ever mattered to begin with. He gives Merle and the woman one more look before he leaves and thinks about the very few times he’s been with someone—drunken, awkward, fumbling sex that he didn’t even particularly enjoy and barely remembered after, sex like he was doing some kind of a job—and he thinks Is that really all?

Is that really all there is?

He goes back out into the rain.

Sunday morning. Quiet street. People in church, people sleeping in. He’s come full circle, he realizes. One week, a single week, and it’s ending right where it began. A night. Her. Everything changing in the rain. Now she’s there and he’s here—she’s singing in church with her family all around her and her hymnal in her hand, and he’s walking up the street and ducking under an awning and trying to light a cigarette.

And he can’t even do that. There’s water in his lighter.

He does laugh, then, and it’s a dry, hollow sound. It’s an old sound. He told her he was thirty-eight and so he is, and she seemed surprised and he doesn’t know why, said he didn’t act like it and he doesn’t know what the fuck that means, but right now he feels fucking ancient. He feels like he’s been walking forever. In a loop. Stuck. And he didn’t know it until this week—which has become its own hellish little loop—and he has no idea if he’s getting out of it after today but somehow he doesn’t think so.

So of course he stops in front of the First Baptist Church. Because there are Rules in this sort of situation and they demand to be obeyed, and apparently Daryl is absolute shit at saying no to things.

He feels distant. Numb. Like he’s not even completely here anymore. Like he’s watching himself from somewhere else. One of those near-death out-of-body deals. He supposes that might be appropriate.

Would you get over yourself, for the sake of every fuck in existence.
The doors open, because of course they do.

As has been the case this entire time, he could and should walk away. He could and should leave. He could and should under no circumstances remain here, because if there are Rules to this there’s also a logic which underpins them, and that logic is a fucking meat-grinder at the end of a conveyer belt, and he’s standing on it even though he could just step lightly off and be done with the entire thing.

And that is all a tremendous fucking lie.

The second he stopped to ask her if she needed a ride home he was completely screwed.

She comes out with her family. It’s like he’s literally gone back in time. Under an umbrella with her brother, laughing at something he’s said, happy, preparing to hurry to the car. Go home. Be normal. Be oblivious—because whatever else has happened here, whatever else she’s done, he doesn’t for a second believe that she realizes what’s happened to him, and he doesn’t for a second believe that she meant for it to happen. This is on him. Maybe he was trapped, maybe he feels like he had no choice, but it was on him. Every step of the way.

Just like he could look away now. Because she’s wearing that white dress with the slightly flared skirt—maybe the same one, maybe a different one that only looks kind of the same—her hair pulled back like always, that little braid, gold and silver bracelets, and she’s so simple, not fancy at all, not trying to be anything other than what she is, no self-conscious vanity about any of it, and she’s so beautiful he wants to cry.

And she looks up and sees him, her eyes lock with his, and for a second he thinks he might actually do it.

She freezes. It’s not like before. There’s something darker on her face now—confused. Unhappy. Disappointed?

He does glance away. Somehow. It’s like ripping his eyes right out of his head, but he does it. And when he looks back she’s vanished around the side of the church into the parking lot, and after a moment—moving on numb legs, letting them take him wherever they care to—he pushes away from the wall and starts down the street again. Rounds a corner and starts to head off down a more deserted side street that ends in a vacant lot full of weeds and brambles, which feels pretty much right.

Just walk some more. Just do that. It’s not like it’s exactly working out for him, but it’s not like it’s working out worse than anything else is.

“Why’d you leave?”

It’s his turn to freeze.

He has to have imagined that. He feels like he’s been imagining a lot of things lately. Everything feels imaginary. He stands for a few seconds, wavering, squeezing his eyes shut, and turns.

She’s standing there. Soaked. Hair hanging around her face, dress plastered to her skin. The little bit of makeup she was wearing is starting to smear around her eyes. She should look every bit as much of a mess as he feels, but instead she’s still beautiful and instead he still wants to do the whole crying thing, because of course, that’s how this goes.

So of course she saw him leave.
He stares at her, blinking water. He’s so mad at her, Christ. “Why the hell you care?”

“I asked you to come.” She’s not sticking to the script. Damn, that was kind of their little thing. He kind of enjoyed that, thought maybe he could enjoy it even now. “I cared, I wanted you to be there, I asked you to come. You said you would, and then you just cut out.”

He almost takes a step back. Reeling internally. He expected a lot of things, but he didn’t in an eternity of years expect her to be as annoyed as she seems.

“Maybe I had to go for somethin’, you don’t know.”

“Oh yeah? What’d you have to go for?” You were doing this thing where you ruin my life and I was having trouble dealing with it. He is terrible at lying. Terrible. He can usually manage it with Merle, or he can usually manage a dodge around the truth, but he doesn’t even have to do that all that much, and looking at her now, those eyes and how they pierce him, he knows there’s no way in this world or any other he’s ever going to be able to lie to her.

He’s screwed. He’s so completely screwed. And he still thinks he might cry, because she’s still so beautiful.

So he doesn’t answer at all.

“So you just left. Just like... for no reason. You didn’t even text me or nothin’.” She crosses her arms over her chest. She’s so wet. He wants to do something about it. He has no idea what. He has no coat, he has no umbrella, this is so fucking stupid. “God, you are such a jerk.”

But he’s trying so hard not to be a creep, why doesn’t she understand that? He wants to snarl at her, yell and maybe throw some things. Not at her, just in general. Instead he’s standing there, and he can tell each second he says nothing to her is only making her angrier.

So he does say something. It bursts out of him, sharp, terse, and it’s that sharpness and that terseness that makes him feel like he hasn’t completely lost control of everything.

“I still don’t even know why you gotta care that much. Why the fuck’s it matter?” He manages to take a step toward her, fists clenched, summoning a little aggression while every remaining sane part of him is banging its head against the inside of his skull in utter JESUS FUCKING CHRIST WHAT ARE YOU DOING despair. “Yeah, I was there, I left early. Why the fuck, girl?”

“I saw your face,” she says softly. She hasn’t backed up. Doesn’t seem at all thrown by him. Not at all alarmed. She’s right where she was, planted, holding ground, and he feels like she’s a wall he could throw himself against again and again and never so much as chip a piece out of. “Somethin’ was botherin’ you. What happened?”

He half turns, turns back, lost in an ecstasy of nearly hysterical frustration. “It’s none of your business, girl, Jesus. The fuck you want from me?”

“How about you give me a straight answer about somethin’ for once? God, Daryl, it’s not even that hard a question.”

She could back down. Normally he thinks she would. Just turn around, disgusted, and walk away. That would, on her part, be her own smart move. He can’t believe she hasn’t done that already.

And then it occurs to him that maybe he’s not the only one caught in this loop. Maybe he’s not the
only one stuck. Maybe he’s not the only one feeling the pressure of forces he can’t hope to understand.

She’s bothered by the fact that he left. She’s bothered by it a lot.

She wanted to show him something. She wanted to show him the ruins. Share that with him. She wanted him to share dinner with her family. With her. She wanted to bring him coffee, talk to him. Ride with him. She sang to him. She wanted him there the night before because she thought he would like it, sure, but she also wanted him there because she wanted him to hear her sing.

She sang for him in the truck. Only for him. Because he asked her.

She likes him.

Now he looks at her and he can actually see it in her eyes: she’s hurt. He hurt her feelings. Somehow it meant a lot to her for him to be there, and he left after one song, and she saw him do it, and he hurt her.

None of this makes any sense.

“You could’ve texted me or somethin’,” she says. Quiet again. The disappointment is back, and somehow it’s worse than anything else. “Just... You could’ve done that.”

He could have. It would have been easier to lie to her that way, and he could have. But he was too busy freaking out.

He shrugs. It’s all he has.

“What’s goin’ on, Daryl?” Still quiet. But there’s something almost pleading in it. She really wants him to tell her, really wants it. She’s been able to read him like a book since she met him. He can’t hide anything from her at all, and he’s freaking out again, and she can tell, and it’s beginning to become contagious.

What’s going on?

Isn’t that a question and a half and then like thirty other questions.

“Beth...” If she’s pleading when she looks at him now, he looks back and tries to implore her, cram into his expression every particle of the force of the begging he would do if he could. Fall to his knees and grope at her skirt. Grovel. Please just drop it. Please just let it go. You let everything else go, mostly, please just let this go too.

She steps closer to him, arms still wrapped around herself. Shivering a little. Like that night. She was cold. He cranked up the heater for her. He has no heater now. He has nothing to cover her with, nothing to give her to dry herself off. He has nothing.

He has nothing but himself.

She’s very close. He could reach out and touch her.

I ain’t a creep or nothin’.

She gazes up at him. “Daryl, just—”

The world breaks in half. On one side is the part of his life prior to last Saturday. All that long stretch of painful, pointless, Bethless life. In the middle is this week—this beautiful, awful, wonderful,
terrifying, churning vortex of insanity.

After this is everything else.

He closes the remaining space between them in a single motion, hand against her waist and pulling her in, palm against her jaw and tilting her head up. He can see, in a blurred instant, a flush in her cheek, strands of damp hair stuck to her forehead, her eyes wide, her wet lips parting. He can see these things and they’re lit up, brighter than bright, as lightning shatters the sky above them.

Then there’s only her mouth.

Not like before. Not quick or soft. He can’t be soft, because nothing in him is soft, because he’s all muscle and scar tissue, and he wants this.

God, he wants this so much.

She stiffens, and he’s sure she’s going to wrench herself away, maybe kick him in the balls, and he would completely deserve it. He’s exactly what he told her he wasn’t. He’s a fucking creep. He’s a creep, and the appropriate thing for her to do is wrench, kick, turn and run.

She stiffens.

Then she surges.

Her lips were already parted. Now they part even more—like they’re inviting him, encouraging him—and she pushes herself up on her toes and combs her fingers into his hair, drags him down against her as she presses up to meet him. Maybe she was cold and shivering but now she’s this little flame in his arms, burning into him, and the hand against her waist becomes an arm around her, pulling their bodies flush.

She lets out a soft moan against his mouth and he has no idea why his head doesn’t fucking explode. That would make about as much sense as anything else at the moment.

Because he’s standing in the rain in a deserted dead-end street a few yards from a vacant lot and kissing Beth Greene, and she’s kissing him back. Maybe she’s a goddess. Maybe she’s just a girl. Maybe she’s both, and maybe it doesn’t matter, because he’s kissing Beth Greene and she’s kissing him back, and he has no idea what comes after this break in his life, this dividing line, this ultimate delineation. No fucking idea.

But he knows he has this.

Girl, he thinks as her hands slide deeper into his hair, tugging. Tugging him down. Closer. More. Her mouth, her whole body, the heat of her. All of it. Everything.

Girl.
and I keep me in a vacant lot in the ivy and forget-me-nots

Chapter Notes

Right now writing this at all feels like defiance.

Time is a weird thing.

He knows this. He’s always known it. From his earliest memories, it’s been fluid. Things bleed into other things, and he remembers stuff and it’s out of order. It doesn’t match up. Life can take on the most profound dreamlike qualities, and it can slow and it can speed up and it can stop entirely.

Pain helps this process. Pain fucks with time. Pain sticks you in a moment and keeps you there, plays with you. Pain is a cat and it takes you and makes you its little bitch of a mouse. Works you over until you’re nice and soft and ready to eat, and if you live you come back with just a little more of you carved away. Aged. Dead and decayed. He knows that when you suffer, you become a walking dead thing. At least for a while.

Time is just so fucking weird.

And it turns out it’s not only pain. Not only that at all. Because Beth’s hands working through his hair and the taste of her, how she feels pressed so hard against him, her skin and the rain running over them both and still that smell on her, soap and something else so uniquely her, and he knows he’s never felt pleasure like this. Never. This is deep pleasure, better than even the best of the few shitty fucks he’s had, or the few times he’s gotten drunk and actually enjoyed being so, or his own goddamn hand—which, like fucking, always feels a little bit like doing a job.

This is... God, he feels so good. This feels so good.

This feel so right.

And it’s not.

So time melts into the rain. More lightning, more thunder, but it’s distant. She does have powers, after all, and she’s made a pocket in the world just for them, and she’s keeping them here. He thinks he could stay here forever. No more eating or sleeping. Just this. Drink the rain, feed on her, sleep curled up inside her.

He’s out of his mind. Completely. His mind is the puddle under his feet.

Well, that’s not exactly news, is it?

But then there’s a skip. A jump. He falls out of whatever it is, and she’s still pressed against him but her hands have slipped out of his hair and she feels tense and her mouth isn’t on his anymore.

And she pulls back and it’s all gone.

“‘I should go,’” she murmurs. She isn’t quite looking at him, so he can’t see her eyes, can’t read her like he’d like to, but he’s pretty sure she looks scared. “‘They’ll be...’” She glances up at him, hugging herself again. Cold. He wishes he could run his hands over her arms, feel the goosebumps rising.
Warm her until they’re gone. “They’ll be wondering where I got to.”

Searching for her. Finding her here, with him. Knowing, just looking at the two of them, what they’ve been doing.

And then he would never see her again. He knows this too.

But he thinks God, don’t.

And of course she turns and walks away and he’s still standing there like an idiot, because he is an idiot. He’s probably the biggest idiot in the entire fucking history of the entire fucking world.

He watches her until she’s gone around the corner. Church steeple in the rain, white against gray, just visible over the roof of buildings. He’s not certain why he focuses on it for a moment, but he does. It’s stabbing at the sky. Daring the lightning.

Billy fucking Corgan. I wanted more than life could ever grant me.

He turns around and walks into the wasteland and the weeds, the vines, runs his hands over them. Stops and tips his head back and lets rain run into his mouth like he’s trying to rinse it out, get rid of her before she poisons him.

But when he licks his lips he can taste her. That same gentle sweetness.

Full circle. Maybe now he’ll be able to get out of the loop.

But he really doesn’t think so.

~

So time is fucked up again and the rest of the day is sort of a blur.

He goes back to the apartment. Once again Merle bitches at him about dripping on the floor. The woman is gone but he can still smell cheap wine and sex everywhere. He’s fairly certain they were also smoking crystal. There’s nothing he can do about that, it’s already done—just like a number of things—so he dries himself off and collects what clothes he can carry in a torn trash bag and he heads out into the rain again, which makes the drying-off he did so utterly pointless, and he goes to the town’s one laundromat.

It’s empty, which is fine. He sits next to a pile of year-old issues of Newsweek and People and dozes to the sound of the thumping dryer.

Time is fucked up. He’s been drifting through a week without much sense of any of it. It feels like it was a lot longer. Once he saw this movie about this kid who drops into this other universe when something doesn’t go the way it should—Merle thought it was boring and stupid but Daryl honestly kind of liked it even if he didn’t understand the entire thing—and it feels a little like that. Like the instant he stopped for Beth something split off and now he’s lost.

Tangent, that’s it. Tangent universe.

Who knows. Could be. Right now anything seems possible.

He takes care of the stuff he needs to do and ignores everything else. And the next day the rain has stopped and the sky is clear, the wind fresh, and because there’s nothing else to do he goes back to the Greene farm and tries in the span of half an hour of driving to get his shit together to the point
where he thinks he can see her and not completely lose it again.

It already feels like it didn’t really happen.

*So maybe do it again and try to make it stick,* some treacherous part of himself whispers, and he clenches his teeth and tightens his hands so hard on the steering wheel that his knuckles stand out white as bone.

Hershel comes out to greet him with a cup of coffee, and tells him he’s running behind this morning, and Daryl should give him about twenty minutes. Coffee? Coffee appears to be another thing, some manner of refrain. A running gag. He smiles and hopes it doesn’t appear too sickly. Sure, coffee sounds good. Not inside; he’ll have it on the porch, he wants a smoke before they get started. Hershel looks very slightly disapproving about the cigarette and Daryl remembers what Beth said in the truck the night he picked her up—Daddy doesn’t drink. Daddy might think ill of more than once substance. Daryl makes a mental note not to smoke around him any more than he can help, and then realizes that it probably shouldn’t make any difference.

He shouldn’t have any attachment to these people. He shouldn’t care too much what they think. Not anymore.

The coffee is good. Of course. He doesn’t think these people produce anything that isn’t. The mug in which they give it to him is a souvenir thing with a picture of the Blue Ridge Mountains and a quote from John Muir.

*The mountains are calling and I must go.*

Fuck you, John Muir. You don’t know shit.

He sits and smokes. Drinks good coffee. Looks at the truck, the barn, the field beyond, all gold and green pressed against a naked blue sky.

He doesn’t want to leave, and he realizes that there are actually a few different reasons for that. This place is pretty, and he hadn’t noticed that before this week.

Maybe a lot of places he’s been in have been pretty, and he just never noticed it at all.

Hershel comes out with Shawn. Otis will not be joining them today. They get to work, and the sun gets high but not all that hot. Daryl works until his back and arms ache, like if he does enough with his body he’ll stop feeling the ghost of hers pressed against him. Like that field. Like that sky.

He doesn’t see her. Maybe she’s not even there. He hopes she isn’t, because the thought that she might be hiding from him, purposefully staying away, makes him feel simultaneously relieved and sick.

He wishes he could decide *how* he feels. Pick a feeling and stick to it. Even if it sucks.

They work until five. Once again he turns down dinner. He’s starving—he didn’t eat much of the sandwich Mrs. Greene brought him—but he just doesn’t think he can. Doesn’t think it would be a good idea. Maybe Beth wouldn’t be there, maybe it wouldn’t be a total nightmare, but he thinks about holding her hand while Daddy addresses the good Lord and thanks him for everything there, and he feels like he would be telling some kind of lie. Simply by being there at that blessed table, under that roof.

And freaking out. That would also be going on. He’s really, really tired of freaking out. It takes energy, and he doesn’t have a whole lot of that now.
God, the way her mouth tasted. Tastes. She still has that mouth. It’s still there. It exists.

He is not equipped for any of this.

And of course she’s waiting by the truck.

He doesn’t stop walking. He just looks at her, and he wonders if he looks as haunted—as hunted—as he feels.

She was avoiding him. He has no way of knowing that but he does.

“Hi.”

He nods at her. He’s not sure what her face is doing. It looks like it might be doing three or four separate things simultaneously.

“Look, I...” She sighs and pushes her unbound hair back from her face. It’s falling all around her shoulders in loose golden waves. The field and the naked sky. “I don’t want this to be weird.”

Well, it’s a little fucking late for that now, girl. He nods again.

“What happened...” She drops her voice. He doesn’t want her to lean in closer to him but she does, head tipped back to gaze up at him, and he feels big and clumsy and like he might do something stupid and very unfortunate like tip over and fall on her.

“What happened, it can’t...” She’s having a lot of trouble finishing sentences. Then again, he’s having no luck at all getting them started. “I have a boyfriend.”

Who almost definitely would not die in a goddamn fire for you. “Yeah.” Oh, look, a word. That’s good. That’s a good start.

“So I can’t—we can’t do that again. Okay? I don’t wanna make you think— I like you,” she says, rushing. Like she’s hurrying to patch something up. He realizes she’s trying to not hurt his feelings too much and that’s awful. “I like you a lot, I had fun with you. You think we can, y’know, stay friends?”

Oh my God, she’s doing it, she’s actually doing the Friend Thing. All of him curls up inside himself and whimpers. This is the worst thing. This is actually the worst thing that has ever happened to him.

It’s not. That’s not even funny. That’s not even remotely true. But for a while she made all those worst things feel like maybe they didn’t matter so much, like maybe they were genuinely in the past instead of riding around in his head all the time, and that was nice. That was a nice thing. He doesn’t want to lose that.

And she doesn’t owe him a goddamn thing. And if she wants to be friends he wants to be friends with her, because he wants that. He wants to feel that way. Even if it’s awful. Even if it hurts. He thinks it would probably hurt less than having nothing to do with her at all.

Maybe at some point it won’t hurt so much.

“Alright,” he says, very quietly, and she nods and gives him a tight, awkward little smile and leaves him there.

It’s only after she’s gone into the house and it’s too late to call her back that he wishes he had told her he was sorry. Because he did it. He did it that second time, and she didn’t ask him to, and he
shouldn’t have. It was a mistake. It was a stupid mistake.

But God, it felt so good.

He gets in the truck, heads down the drive. Town is to the right. To the left, the woods. The creek. He almost turns that way.

Then he doesn’t.
with a lightness in my step and a song in my bones

Chapter Notes

This song. Trust me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friends, maybe. Okay.

Next couple of days are days off. Hershel needs to do some other work around the farm; things have honestly been getting neglected, and this isn’t the most pressing thing he has to deal with. Daryl offers to keep working on his own, but when he makes the offer, standing near the barn and watching—trying to be unobtrusive about it—as Beth leads one of the horses out through the doors and toward the pasture beyond the far side of the house, he doesn’t mean it with all that much sincerity, and he’s fairly certain that Hershel can tell.

She gets that from somewhere, that ability to see right the fuck through people, and he’s getting hit with it no matter where he turns.

So Hershel calls a temporary halt. Take a day. At least one. Daryl has informed him that he’s still nominally employed by Elmer; this will give him a chance to get a little work done there. Like it’s a favor to him. Probably Hershel thinks it is.

Beth heading out to the pasture, hair a blond cascade at the back of her head. The graceful line of her neck—how the fuck can he see that at this distance? His eyes hate him. Every part of him hates him. He’s well acquainted with self-loathing, and he’s well acquainted with regarding his own body—and mind—as an enemy, but this seems so particularly unfair, because all he wants to do is stare at her.

So yeah, this is a favor. It really is.

He gives Hershel and Shawn a goodbye and agrees to be back on Thursday or Friday—whatever gets decided, they’ll let him know—and he gets in the truck and heads back into town.

That night he goes out with Merle and he gets drunker than he’s been in a very, very long time. Throwing up in a ditch on the way home while Merle leans against the side of the truck and takes swig after swig of Irish Rose and laughs at him, he thinks he’s pretty much a redneck asshole piece of shit, but at least he knows it.

Better to know that. Better to know that and leave her alone than to be completely unaware of it and press his case and be a terrible person and make her hate him too.

The next morning—really it’s afternoon, he doesn’t wake up until almost one—he looks at himself in the bathroom mirror and notes that the flesh around his right eye is a wonderfully rich shade of purple. He doesn’t remember how it happened. Apparently it did.

So there’s that.

He does some work for Elmer. He very firmly doesn’t answer questions about the eye, but Elmer doesn’t ask, so his firmness is ultimately of no consequence. He does some basic stuff around the store, makes a couple of deliveries, and he starts to feel better. Not good, but better. Things have had
some time to sink in. Scab over. He’s not quite so raw. Maybe he was angry at her before—an awful, sick kind of angry which wasn’t truly angry at all, not even close—but he didn’t resent her then and he doesn’t resent her now, and the anger is fading. He can go back to work. He can be around her and deal with it. He’s pretty sure.

He believed her when she said she liked him. He still does. It’s hard to, and he’s surprised that he manages it, but he does. He doesn’t think she talked to him and brought him coffee and took him to her ruins and wanted to sing for him just because she felt sorry for him or something. He doesn’t think Beth Greene runs on pity. He doesn’t think that’s her particular fuel.

And she can’t help what she is.

She can’t help her own perfection.

It’s Wednesday. That night he doesn’t get drunk. He drops Merle off at a juke joint a couple of miles out of town where they have poker games and goes off by himself. Not for any specific reason. He just wants to spend some time alone. More time alone. He feels like he’s doing a lot of that, even when he’s not actually alone. Sinking into his own head.

Then again, he’s always spent a lot of time there.

When someone is hurting you, that’s something you can do. He learned how to do that in his earliest days. Someone hurts you and there’s nothing you can do about it; okay, you remove yourself from the part of you that feels the hurt. You leave your body where it is and you take your mind somewhere else. You learn to regard your own body as this piece of meat you ride around in. Maybe it’s there, but you feel no special attachment to it, and it doesn’t matter what happens to it so long as it keeps running and gets you from place to place. Like a shitty old car.

Like the truck. Cursed with music.

He was never a poet and he doesn’t want to be one now.

She’s not hurting him the way he was hurt then. Not at all. There’s no cruelty in this. She doesn’t want to make him feel like nothing, like worse than nothing, like this hateful little thing undeserving of anything other than pain. She doesn’t want that at all. Everything she’s done for him has been with the intention of making him feel good, and that’s extraordinary, because she’s done it without expecting anything in return except for him to accept her kindness.

She’s a sweet girl. He doesn’t think there’s a single mean bone in her body.

God.

Parked on a completely empty stretch of road, open fields on both sides, he lies in the truck bed and stares up at the sky. The stars are scattered glass chips across a dark road caught and illuminated by invisible headlights. The moon is rising. Somewhere he hears an owl. Cool breeze across the fields and over his skin and through his hair—it smells like autumn. Summer is dying. Soon she’ll go back to school, finish up her senior year, graduate... Then what? What happens to a girl like Beth Greene in the world? The world outside this, the world to which he has no access and never will? She goes to college, maybe. Dates. Gets married. Maybe Jimmy, or maybe she meets another Nice Boy from an equally Nice Family and she has a kid or two, a house, and maybe she goes to Atlanta or something or maybe she stays in the country or a small town, or maybe she leaves Georgia entirely. Gets out. Gets free.

He’s never been out of Georgia. And he doesn’t think she would regard it as getting free of anything.
This is home to her. This isn’t an endlessly circling thing she can’t break out of.

In college, what would Beth Greene major in? What kind of job would she get, after? What kind of house would she want? What would she put in it, how would she decorate its rooms?

What’s Beth Greene’s favorite color? What’s her favorite food?

What would she name a daughter? A son? Which would she rather have? How many? Does she care?

Where would she go on vacation? What would her Christmas trees look like? What does she want for Christmas? What does Beth Greene look like coming out of church on Easter Sunday, her dress and her hair and her subtle little pieces of jewelry? Will she go to prom this year? Of course she’ll go to prom. What will she wear? She said she likes to dance. He’s heard her sing but he’s never seen her dance. What does Beth Greene look like when she’s dancing?

He wants to know the answers to all these questions. He tries to imagine them, but all he comes away with are vague and unsatisfying flashes of imagery and sound. These are his fantasies, and he can’t even have them properly because he cares too much about the real thing.

He wants to know everything about her.

That’s kind of creepy. He’s being kind of creepy. He’s being creepy by himself, but even so.

He moans softly and closes his eyes and lays his forearm across his face like he’s hiding from something.

His body feels very far away.

~

She texts him the next morning, close to noon. Two words. He sits on the couch in last night’s clothes and looks at them for a while.

come over

This continues to be extremely unfair.

He showers and changes and heads over.

There doesn’t seem to be anyone around when he pulls up the drive. There are no vehicles that he can see. He knocks on the door but there’s no answer, turns around and stands on the porch and wonders if he imagined the whole thing. But he checks the phone and it’s still there.

come over

This is perplexing.

“Over here.”

A little ways away. He moves to the edge of the steps and looks, and there she is under one of the big old trees in the yard, guitar in her lap. He feels a twinge of something but it’s not all that bad. It’s manageable. He’ll be okay.

He goes over to her and stands, looking down. She looks back up at him and smiles, and it’s not tight or uncomfortable. It’s warm.
“Hi.”

“Hey.” He clears his throat and glances around. “Where is everybody?”

“Mama went to the store with Shawn. Daddy had to run out to see a neighbor, got a cow’s not doin’ so well.”

“Why’d you want me to come out?”

She shrugs. “I dunno. Kinda bored, maybe. I have stuff I gotta do, but.” She leans back against the tree. “I don’t feel like it. Summer’s almost over. I wanna do all the doin’ nothin’ I can.”

He gives her a faint smile. Very faint, very small. Very felt. All the pain is gone, suddenly—melted away like snow—and he’s just happy to be here. It’s a little strange that she texted him and not Jimmy, but that’s not really his business and he’s not going to poke it too hard. “Yeah, doin’ nothin’ ain’t so great when it’s all you do.”

She arches a brow. “You do a lotta nothin’? Seems like you’re always workin’.” She nods at the ground. “Sit down, lookin’ up at you is weird.”

It is weird. He sits, crosslegged, and pulls up a couple blades of grass and begins to shred them between his forefingers and thumbs. “Sometimes I’m workin’. Sometimes not.” He smiles again, tiny and crooked. “Drifter.”

She makes a quiet noise—not quite a laugh—and lifts a hand, points at his face. “What happened to your eye?”

For a second or two he’s actually confused. He had forgotten about it. He pauses his grass-shredding until he gets it. And he could lie, maybe, but again—he sucks at lying at the best of times, and lying to her straight-up doesn’t work. So he opts for the next best thing and gives her the assumption from which he’s been working.

“Fight.”

“Over what?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t remember.”

“Were you drunk?”

Absolutely no judgment in that question. Not that he can detect. No judgment, no distaste. She’s just asking. And he wants her to think well of him—God help him, he still does, wants her to think he’s better than he is—but he can’t help this. And there’s no point in being upset about it anymore.

So he nods.

She gives him a small smile. “Might not wanna do that so much.”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly the kinda thing you plan.” He pauses, looking at her and down at the grass again—pulling up more of it—and he remembers the night before and all those questions and how badly he wanted the answers, still wants the answers, how badly he wants to know who this girl is, this girl who’s cut him open and hollowed out a place inside him for herself, and he realizes that there’s a technique he can use to get those answers and have them and know them. Keep them. Maybe.
“You ever been lit before?”

She shakes her head. “Never even had a drink.”

He’s surprised, and he doesn’t try to hide it. He figured by eighteen pretty much everyone would have at least given the whole thing a shot. “Nothin’?”

“No.”

“Ever want to?”

She shrugs. “I dunno. Never seemed worth it, I guess. Daddy...” She hesitates and sighs. “Daddy had a problem. Has a problem. He can’t drink at all. There’s no in between for him. Either he doesn’t drink or he drinks so much he can hardly stand up. Or that’s what he says.”

He cocks his head. Some things are a little clearer now. “You know that don’t have to be you, though. Like... That ain’t your problem. Right?”

She breathes a laugh and leans forward, her fingers stroking across the strings at the neck of the guitar and raising a soft, lingering sound. “Daryl Dixon, you tryin’ to get me drunk?”

“Tryin’ to expand your horizons, girl.” He’s honestly not sure what he’s doing, but it’s so much easier than he thought it would be, and it feels nice. Like it did at first, just being around her. Confusing, and he sort of can’t stop studying her and the fine, neat lines of the single braid in her hair, but it’s okay.

It’ll be okay.

“Think my horizons are wide enough.” She’s still smiling, but then it fades and she’s quiet for a moment. “I’ll do all that stuff when I go to college. Probably. I dunno. I don’t really care.”

“What college you goin’ to?”

She gives him a half shake of her head and strokes her fingers over the guitar strings again, this time with more purpose. She makes a couple of chords and he watches her hands move. They’re slender. Delicate. But clearly quite strong. “I dunno. I don’t think I’m goin’ right outta school. I wanna think about some things first.”

“Like what?”

“Like what I’m gonna do. I know, I know.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m supposed to know that already. But I don’t. I got no idea. Lookin’ at everyone else, seems like they’re makin’ plans just ‘cause they think that’s what they’re supposed to be doin’. But I don’t wanna do somethin’ just to do it. I wanna know what I’m doin’. I wanna know why.”

He’s never heard anyone talk like this before. Never in his life. For a minute or two he merely stares at her, torn blades of grass cool and slightly moist against the pads of his fingers. Then that smile again, pulling at his mouth. Pulling at all of him. Around her, he’s discovering, part of him is always a smile. “You’re kinda fuckin’ weird, girl.”

He’s said this before. And before she smiled at him, wide and happy, and she said—

“I know.”

She fingers the guitar strings again, plucks and then strums, her other hand moving against the neck.
“You cut out before. I ain’t mad,” she adds, before he can say anything. “You wanna hear somethin’ now?”

He doesn’t. God, he so does. Everything in him tightens up for a few seconds and he nods, because what the fuck else is he going to do? Once again, probably completely without meaning to, she’s trapped him.

That keeps happening. You’d think he’d have more of a problem with it than he does.

There’s no more preamble. She starts to play and sing and he sits there, hands motionless in his lap, whole body still, and he listens. Her voice drifts up through fresh late summer air and lingers in the branches overhead, almost like an echo caught in a large room. Maybe it was sweet in the truck and maybe it was even sweeter in the coffee shop, but here in the shade in the early afternoon it’s the sweetest it’s ever been. She sings one song and finishes and slips right into another one, effortless as breathing—the kind of thing he’s thought before. Music is in her, deep down. Permeating. She sings like she can’t not sing.

He wonders if you can be born with something like that. If it can lie inside you, waiting like a seed, and emerge when it’s time.

just where it now lies I can no longer say
I found it on a cold and November day
in the roots of a sycamore tree where it had hid so long
in a box made out of myrtle lay the bone of song

the bone of song was a jawbone old and bruised
and worn out in the service of the muse
and along its sides and teeth were written words
I ran my palm along them and I heard

He listens to her and it seems like her voice carries the time away, and he’s happy to let it go. Because this is okay.

This is more than okay.

lucky are you who finds me in the wilderness
I am the only unquiet ghost that does not seek rest

Chapter End Notes

As linked at the beginning, the song in question is "Bone of Song" by Josh Ritter.
I'm over my head, out of her head she sang

Chapter Notes

Once again I'm completely failing at responding to comments, so let this be a general thank-you; I read all of them and I love all of them, seriously, they give me life so if you've left one I am so grateful and you are my favorite person.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything is a little bit easier after that.

For a few days.

He's okay with being friends. He genuinely is. He thought he wouldn't be, thought it would basically destroy him as a person, but that afternoon, sitting on the grass and listening to her sing, he knew it wouldn't. What happened... She was right, it was a mistake, and no matter what he feels about it, it's definitely better if it doesn't happen again. Because... Reasons. Lots of them. If he cared to do so he could make a whole list of them but it's enough to know they're there.

She's a nice thing, the first nice thing in... In his memory, really in all of his memory, and he can have that just by being around her, and he won't die. And in fact, if he lets himself want this too much, want it the wrong way, it'll ruin the whole thing. Because he won't get it, because he'll get frustrated, he'll get upset, it'll hurt more and more, and in the end he'll leave anyway—because he knows that too. She's bought him some time. They bought some time together. But only a very finite amount.

And there's less and less of it every hour.

On Thursday afternoon, when she finished singing, they sat on the porch and she brought out lemonade and some almond cookies she baked, and of course they were amazing, and they sat and he smoked, and neither of them said anything. There didn't seem to be anything to say. He still had his questions, he had all those things he wanted to know about her—he still does have them—but it didn't seem like the time to ask them. She sang and then the silence swept in to fill where her voice had been—peaceful afternoon silence which really isn't silent at all. Breeze shaking the leaves of the old trees, birds, chickens in the distance muttering to themselves as if they were pissed off in a general way about something. Farm noises.

They sat in that silence and it was enough. He doesn't need to talk to her to feel what she has, what she is. Just being with her is enough.

Just occupying roughly the same space.

He knew that day when he first drove her into town that one of the things he likes especially much about her is how she doesn't make him feel like he's doing something wrong by being quiet. How silence isn't something that needs filling.

Silence is worth something in itself.

So they sat in that silence. And then—too soon—he had to get up, had to go, because regardless of
what actually is or isn’t going on here, if her father or her mother and brother came back and found
them together, on a day when he’s not working, it was going to look kind of strange. Maybe it would
be all right—they do seem to like him for sure now—but he wasn’t in a mood to risk it. He wants
them to keep liking him.

For however long he has left.

He drove home. He had a cookie. It was a gorgeous afternoon, bright and again with that hint of
autumn freshness in the air, in the wind sweeping across the fields and rippling everything there was
to pull and push, stroking it all, and he turned up the radio and almost sang along. Almost. He
doesn’t sing, ever, so he didn’t, but it was a near thing.

    and I wonder
    when I sing along with you
    if everything could ever feel this real forever
    if anything could ever be this good again
    the only thing I’ll ever ask of you
    you’ve got to promise not to stop when I say when

He got back into town. Merle was in a good mood. He had won at pool the night before—won in the
sense of cheated and no one caught him so they had some extra cash to throw around. Threw it at
some pizza and slightly less shitty beer. Watched Keeping Up With the Kardashians, to which Merle
has an odd attachment and which Daryl has elected never to ask him about. He knows he would get
Kim’s ass as an explanation, but he’s not certain he entirely buys that.

Daryl has no feelings about Kim Kardashian’s ass one way or the other.

Daryl drank beer and ate pizza covered in about fifteen kinds of meat and didn’t think about any part
of Kim Kardashian at all. He didn’t even really see the TV. He saw the flickering light and the blurry
movement of shapes and he thought about the dappled sunlight scattered across Beth Greene’s hair.

He knows he’s fucked. Completely. He also thinks it might be okay to be fucked is all.

“Not such a bad idea, baby brother,” Merle murmured not long before he slipped into
unconsciousness. “Stickin’ around a while. Not too bad at all, actually.”

Merle never says anything nice about him at all unless he’s in an unusually good mood. Those are to
be treasured.

There are a lot of things here he feels like treasuring.

Back to work next day—Friday. It’s yet another gorgeous day, still blown clear by the rain, and
Daryl is still feeling good when he pulls up in the truck and climbs out, catches sight of Beth in the
garden at the side of the house de-insecting the tomatoes and becomes a bit heedless of the fact that
Hershel is standing right there about twenty yards away and waves. She waves back. Nothing to
worry about anyway. He knows her. She knows him. That’s all. No reason he shouldn’t wave.

He’s completely fucked and probably always will be and his heart is this mangled thing half hanging
out of his cracked-open chest, but that’s okay. He’s okay.

No, in fact he is. Daryl Dixon is extremely good at being in the middle of less than ideal situations
and forcing himself to be okay. And of the less than ideal situations he might be in, this is one of the
more ideal ones.
They aren’t getting right to work. Hershel hands him a cup of coffee. That John Muir mug again. At least it’s a big mug. Daryl sits down on the steps and Hershel sits down beside and above him. Daryl doesn’t smoke. Nevertheless, he’s into being polite.

He’s better at it than he thought he would be.

“Figure we got about another half week,” Hershel says after a moment or two. “Maybe more like a full one. You’re still okay with sticking around that long?”

Daryl shrugs, gives Hershel a small nod, because it’s better than lunging around and yelling *YES I WILL STICK AROUND AS LONG AS EVER.*

So now this thing has an expiration date again. It always did, but now it’s a solid one. It’s a bit ahead of time. He has a chance to get used to the idea. Deal with it. Going back out there, being back in that world. Away from this nice family and their nice house and this nice thing he’s found—this girl who isn’t at all a Good Girl but who is definitely a nice girl. He never thought this was going to be a forever thing, this friend he’s made.

This strange, uncomfortable, wonderful friend.

He has time to get used to the idea, ease himself out of it, disconnect. He’ll be able to say goodbye to all of this. He’ll be able to say goodbye to her and leave and get on with whatever passes for his life these days.

It’s hilarious how he’s so bad at lying to everyone else but he basically has a PhD in lying to himself.

“Where are you going after this?”

He doesn’t expect the question, is lost in ruminations regarding lying and being okay and being completely not at all okay, and he jumps slightly and glances over at Hershel, hoping Hershel didn’t notice. If Hershel is half as perceptive as his goddamn daughter, he did. Hopefully he’ll chalk it up to your average uninteresting daydreaming.

Daryl shrugs again. “Dunno. We’ll see.”

“You have anywhere else you have to be?”

Something is going on here. Something is approaching. Daryl looks at him again and tries to ignore the sudden tightness high in his stomach, just under his diaphragm. Threatening to get in the way of his breathing.

“I mean... Nah, not really.” Sip of coffee. Because this is probably nothing. Probably nothing to get excited about. And there’s the lying thing again. “How come?”

Hershel makes a thoughtful noise and stares down the drive toward the road, or possibly just into space. Daryl waits in silence and wishes—for about the millionth time—that he could decide what exactly it is that he wants.

With how intensely he seems to want it, you’d think it would be easier to get a little clarity.

“Well, I’ve been watching you the last week or so. You’re a good worker. You don’t screw around.” Hershel shoots him a small smile. “With Shawn, you might be surprised what a problem that can be sometimes.”

Daryl isn’t sure if he should return the smile. So he settles for almost doing it. It would be a fake
smile if he actually tried, anyway, and he still isn’t any good at those either.

“He’s a good boy, he’s just a boy. You see?” He continues without waiting for a response, hands wrapped around his steaming mug. “Almost September. Normally around this time of year I’d be looking into taking on a hand or two. Was going to do that anyway, but with you here... Might be enough. And I already know I can depend on you.”

He looks at Daryl again, gaze steady and keen and clear. “Would you be interested? Might even be able to pay you more. If nothing else it would be steady work for... Well, a while.”

Daryl is expecting internal panic. Certain it’s coming. But it doesn’t come. Instead there’s merely a kind of stillness, a stillness that almost feels like resignation and isn’t really that at all. Part of him knew this was coming, the same way he knew he would kiss Beth in the rain. Part of him knew, since he first set foot on this goddamn farm, that he might never get away. That forces would conspire to keep him here—Beth, or something else. And in fact he doesn’t think this is Beth. Maybe before it was Beth, sure—no maybe about it, it absolutely fucking was—but this is Hershel. Hershel and the seasons. Both probably just as immovable. Just as inevitable.

And it’s his own damn fault for being dependable.

Out there felt like a trap. It is a trap. He’ll go out there, leave all this behind, and everything will go right back to the way it was. Him and Merle and a stretch of road with no signposts, no mile markers, no turnoffs or crossroads, no end in sight.

And that road will slope gently downward, and it won’t ever go back up.

But in here is a trap too. A more painful one in a lot of ways. He’s okay right now, truly is trying to believe he might continue to be so, but a deep and far more honest part of himself suspects very strongly that whatever okayness he’s managed to grab hold of might be entirely unsustainable.

If nothing else, sooner or later he’s going to have to answer to Merle. Sooner or later, Merle might not be the only one he’s answering to.

In the end it’s not that hard to make the decision.

~

Beth is riding the chestnut mare when he makes his way to the paddock at the end of the day to say goodbye to her.

He leans on the fence, lights a cigarette. She walks the horse over when she sees him, dismounts in a single graceful movement and comes to him. “Hey.”

He exhales smoke carefully away from her. “Hi.”

She cocks her head. Her hair is tugged back into a simple ponytail, strands as usual flying free around her face. Heart necklace. He wonders if she ever takes it off.

Cross on a leather cuff around her wrist.

He still wants to ask her about that.

“What’s up?”

“Your dad talked to me.”
“‘bout what?”

“‘bout stickin’ around through the fall.” Inhale. Exhale. The breeze carries the smoke away, spiraling it up into the air. Toying with it. He remains calm. He’s been calm all day. This, he thinks, he might be able to sustain. For a while. “Helpin’ with stuff.”

“Yeah, he usually takes on a couple of hands.” A small smile breaks across her face like a sunbeam. Like an actual fucking sunbeam, Jesus Christ. “He asked you?”

She really didn’t know. It wasn’t anything to do with her.

Except for how it was.

“Yeah.”

“What’d you say?”

He studies her with particular care. Calm, all the jitteriness beaten down by whatever this is, he can see her more clearly. The outlines of everything are sharper. She’s genuinely surprised—pleased, but surprised. She didn’t ask Hershel to do him a favor. She definitely didn’t. He was reasonably certain before but he totally is now. As far as she knew, when his work with the silo was done he would be gone.

And she was ready to let him go. She wanted to keep him company, drag him out of the gray pit she could see he had been deep in for a long time, give him a little color. A little light. And she wanted to do that for him because that’s what she does—he strongly suspects. She sees color and light everywhere, and when she sees someone standing outside of that blessed rainbow glow she wants to pull them into it, or extend its reach to them.

That night in the truck with him, that first night in the rain, she had—for some reason—determined to save him. For a few days. Maybe simply to show him that something else was possible. There hadn’t been anything more in it than that. Not for her. She was ready to let him go.

The kiss in the truck was teenage daring. The kiss in the rain was only a mistake. His mistake. His single ill-advised lunge across a line he never should have crossed. That’s all. There might be a hundred thousand things and people here to blame. But she isn’t one of them.

She’s just a very sweet girl.

And he’s so completely fucked.

He also has to answer her at some point.

“Yeah. Said I would.”

Her smile widens a touch. The mare nudges her shoulder as if annoyed that she’s being ignored, and Beth strokes a hand down her nose. “That’s great. He pays real well.” The smile almost slips into a grin, and while the calm remains, something twists at his middle. Not entirely unpleasant. Bittersweet. “And Mama’ll keep cookin’ for you if you keep comin’ to dinner.”

He nods. He will. He’ll do these things because he doesn’t really have a choice anymore.

“See you tomorrow,” he says quietly, and she gives him her own nod, still smiling and stroking the mare, and he turns and goes.
But he doesn’t get into the truck immediately. He leans on the open door, smoking the cigarette down to the filter, and watches as she rides around the paddock in the late afternoon sun.

He wanted to see her ride.

It’s pretty much as unbelievable as he pictured.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics are "Everlong" by the Foo Fighters.
to leave you there by yourself chained to fate

Things generally proceed as normal on Saturday. He comes back out reasonably early—he was moderate with the drinking the night before, beat Merle off him when Merle tried to push, and this time Merle was the one puking his guts up in the ditch—and he barely has a hangover. There are some clouds rolling in and for the latter half of the afternoon they hang around, obscure a lot of the sun, but they don’t promise rain and Daryl is glad of the relief. It’s getting warm again. Warm, and the air is taking on a thick quality. A storm is coming. Another one. Maybe not tomorrow or the next day, but soon. This late in August, this close to September, the last of the heavy summer storms roll through and through with relatively straightforward regularity. Easy to predict.

Daryl wonders if there’s something about storms and Beth Greene. If he should just call in sick or something if it rolls in after Sunday. If it might be safer.

He doesn’t stay for dinner. He goes home to an empty apartment—fuck knows where Merle is—and in the living room he stands for a moment, keys still in his hand, and looks at the crossbow in the corner.

He hasn’t used it in a while.

He gets it, gets back in the truck, drives about ten miles outside of town and parks in a turnoff where it should be relatively obscured from the road. He takes the bow, takes a breath, heads into the woods.

Back when he was first learning how to do this—learning to hunt, learning to track, learning exactly how to placate his father and how to appease him and how to avoid pushing his buttons and how to dodge and protect his head and vital organs when the first three things failed—he could lose himself in it. In the hyperfocus, in the precision. Almost in a trance state. Almost self-hypnotism. He gets into the woods and feels the weight of the bow in his hand, feels the world, lets it fill his senses, and everything else goes away. What’s left is a puzzle spread out all around him—what happened? How long ago? How many, what direction, where did they go and where did they come from? What were they doing? He can survey everything in front of him as a thing to be made sense of, where the stakes are nothing more than knowing what he’s looking at.

Catching, killing—these things are ultimately incidental. What really matters is the knowing.

Now he stands just inside where the trees cluster more thickly together, where the remaining low light of the afternoon fades into deeper shadow. For a moment he closes his eyes and he pays attention to whatever isn’t sight: the smell of decaying leaf litter and damp wood, torn moss, bruised vegetation and dry needles. Brown smells, green smells. Smells have a color and a texture; it took him a while to figure that out and sort it all into something that made sense, but they do. Blood isn’t red but instead a sharp, thin orange-yellow, edged like a knife blade. Cut grass is a brilliant yellow on the edge of green, soft and cool and a little rough. The warm, musky scent of a live deer is like the hide of a fawn, mottled brown and gold and white. It’s curved, round, dense and smooth.

And sounds. A blanket of them. Rustling leaves, in the trees and on the ground—and he knows how to tell the difference between breeze and insects and small animals and larger game. Birds, in all directions and at all distances. Sweet and complicated songs and rougher cries, territorial and otherwise communicative. The rush of cars in the distance. No burble of water but somewhere in here there has to be a stream. A creek. Something. Not the same as the one by Beth’s ruins—he’s the better part of twelve miles in the wrong direction for that, and he means to be. But there’s one here.
And when he opens his eyes: disturbed leaves. Trodden ground. Depressions and places where the dirt has been kicked up.

Something large but moving lightly. Not slowly but not at any great speed. Taking its time. Out for an evening stroll—evening is the time for these creatures. He’s chosen just the right when and where.

He starts to move through the trees with the bow a grounding weight in his hands, quiet as he can, eyes everywhere at once. Everything everywhere at once. That hyperfocus. In it, he’s perfected. His mind takes on the narrow, sharp simplicity of a predator. It’s not happiness, it’s not about that... But in the times when he needs it, it’s a kind of relief.

This was something he was good at, from early on. He doesn’t know if he genuinely has any natural talents, but if he does, he supposes this might be one of them, and he thinks he can take a degree of pleasure in that. In being truly skilled at something. In being able to do it almost effortlessly.

Like her. Like her music. Like the songs in her bones.

But he doesn’t want to think about her right now. He came out here to get away from that. He came out here so he could stop.

He’s uncertain how long he tracks. The track itself is fresh—he guesses he’s no more than half an hour behind the thing and in fact he might be a good bit less—and he follows it with no real difficulty. There’s no focus on anything outside the present second. Everything that matters is contained within it.

The sun breaks through the clouds and lowers, long shadows through the trees, orange-red beams that make him think of that blood-scent. That’s the only way he can mark the time. Soon he won’t be able to see anything. But he can only do what he can do.

It’s all he’s ever been able to do.

And he’s not far behind at all, because he comes on it very suddenly, standing on the crest of a rise about thirty yards away from him.

He freezes. The wind is right; if it hasn’t seen him and hasn’t heard him it shouldn’t bolt, though it’s raising its head and flicking its ears, scanning around. Young deer—young doe—still small with white flecks spotting her flanks and a shaft of sun lighting up the slope of her back. A little gawky, but there’s clearly strength and speed there, and there’s going to be more as she grows. Too young to mate, but she will. December, maybe. January. Before spring.

She will.

Because the bow is in his hands and he thinks she would be an easy kill but he’s not going to shoot her. And not merely because he’s not set up to deal with a carcass and he hates leaving a kill behind.

So instead he just watches her. Watches her lower her head again, grazing, nosing through the leaf litter. There might be others nearby but he doesn’t see them, doesn’t hear them, and the track was only of one. Only her.

She’s beautiful and he can’t kill her. Merle would give him a barrelful of shit for it, his father would probably give him a hard cuff across the head if he was lucky, but they aren’t here and he can’t do it and he doesn’t want to. It was enough to track her, find her, see her like this. See her living. See something in these woods that is, and living this way. Unconsciously. Simply. Not second-guessing, not worrying, not afraid in the way people are afraid. The way he’s afraid, almost all the time. None of that. All instinct.
He watches her and he feels an ache deep in the core of him that he can’t define. Like he’s seeing something forever out of his reach.

He hisses, sharp and sudden. She jerks her head up, ears pricked, and he doesn’t have to do it again. White flick of her tail and she’s off, bounding through the trees, down the opposite side of the slope and gone.

He stands for a while longer, crossbow held loosely in his hands.

This may or may not have helped. He’s not sure.

He goes back to the truck and drives home.

~

It does indeed rain on Sunday. There might be something about Sundays.

He doesn’t go out until later in the afternoon. When he does, he doesn’t go near the end of the street where the First Baptist Church is. She’s almost certainly long gone, but it still doesn’t seem like a good idea.

He goes to the coffee shop and sits for a while, coffee untouched in front of him, staring out the window. For a minute, standing at the counter, he almost ordered hot chocolate. Whipped cream. Little chocolate shavings on the cream.

Despite what Merle says, he isn’t having many good ideas these days.

Then again, he never really did.

~

Monday is normal. Beth is out with Jimmy and some friends. He doesn’t see her at all.

Tuesday is when things get out of hand again.

It’s back to being hot, bright, the air not yet heavy but clearly headed in that direction. They take it a little easier, stopping to rest more often, and Shawn talks to him a bit—something he hasn’t done much of before. Shawn seems to be warming to him. The conversation isn’t long and it isn’t deep, and Shawn does way more of the talking; like Beth is saying she might, he’s taking a break, and going into his second year of gap between high school and college. He’s not even sure he’ll do college. That was for Maggie—she’s been traveling but she’ll be coming home soon for a week or so before the semester starts up—and he assumes it’ll be for Beth, but he’s thinking about going into a trade. Maybe carpentry. Probably more solid money in it. And he likes that kind of work.

Daryl answers when it seems appropriate, makes noises to indicate that he’s listening and paying attention, otherwise keeps himself to himself and thinks all over again about how this is all completely alien. Planning like this. Thinking about the future. Recognizing any future at all beyond the next few days, the next week. How do you even fucking handle that? How do you deal with all that future coming at you? He has no idea. It frankly sounds scary.

Beth saying she wants to know why she’s doing something.

That actually makes more sense to him than anything else.

Later in the afternoon. Things beginning to cool off. Starting to wrap up, and that’s when it happens.
That’s when everything basically goes to hell.

Around noon Beth went out with Jimmy and a couple of girlfriends from another nearby farm, bearing a cooler and some towels. He heard something vague about a swimming hole, didn’t pay a whole lot of attention. Now Jimmy’s vintage Tahoe pulls back up the drive, the doors open, everyone piles out laughing at something someone’s just said—

And Beth slams her fist right into his stomach.

He’s not standing that close but he can see her with bizarre, dreamlike clarity. When she got in the car to head out, she was wearing a tight green tee and fairly short cutoffs, but to his credit he was distracted by something Hershel was saying to him and he barely noticed. Now, however.

She’s still wet—not dripping, but there’s a moisture-sheen on her shoulders and collarbones and upper arms, probably from her loose, damp hair. Flash of gold heart on her breastbone. He doesn’t think she was swimming in those shorts, but somehow now they look tighter. The tee is gone, and in its place is a bikini top, and he sees the blue and gold and green flower pattern and the slightly rough texture of the fabric and the way it’s ruched between her breasts, her bare arms, the slim line of her waist and the way her belly is flat and firm with muscle, the way she’s strong in a way he knew but never really saw until now.

The way there’s essentially nothing at all left to his imagination, and he has a decent imagination, and it’s perfectly happy to take care of the rest of the job for him.

He can’t exactly breathe.

And he’s staring. Someone is going to see him staring. Shit. Look at something else, anything. At the house, the ground. The barn. Look at a tree. A crow is flying across the field to his right; good, look at that. There’s always the old reliable standby for awkward people everywhere: pull out your phone and look at it like it’s doing something.

He thought he was fucked. He didn’t know what fucked was. He had no idea.

She sees him and waves. He waves back. He wonders how long one has to be deprived of oxygen to literally turn blue.

He says goodbye to Hershel and Shawn and drives home with the radio off. He feels mostly numb. He wasn’t ready for that. Probably he should have known it would happen eventually, probably that supposedly decent imagination of his should have tipped him off, but he wasn’t prepared at all, he wasn’t equipped, and in fact this is the first time he can ever remember feeling like that about anyone.

She’s nothing but a long, long beaded string of firsts.

And she’s half his age.

Merle isn’t there when he gets in. The place is dim and silent and stuffy. He opens all the windows and considers ordering a pizza and trying to get drunk; instead he heads to the bathroom and turns on the shower, strips and practically throws himself under the spray.

This is a Problem. This deserves to be a proper noun with a capital P and everything. Before it was a problem, but now it’s a Problem. He closes his eyes and leans his forehead against the tile and lets the warm water stream down his back, and despite that warmth he’s shivering slightly. Spent adrenaline. Maybe some other chemicals.

He already knows he still isn’t going to fucking leave. He’s going to leave even less now. There’s
every possibility that he’ll stay here until someone physically removes him.

So.

It gets worse.

He’s not even sure how or when it happens. He’s not entirely aware. He’s been drifting, trying to not think about anything. But that isn’t working, because he’s returning to the outline of her collarbones, her waist, the way her skin gleamed. He’s thinking about that flowered ruching. And then he’s thinking about what’s under it, about the smooth skin there and the way he’s positive without having to even see or touch that she’ll have soft, downy blond hair, and that’s when he realizes that his hand is between his legs, fingers wrapped around his cock, and he doesn’t know when he was last this hard.

Oh no. Oh fucking no.

Oh, yes.

Because it feels good. It feels so good. Just thinking about that, her skin, what it might be like to touch it. Run his fingers over her. Not even necessarily do more than touch her, but just... Do that. Graze his lips against the side of her neck. She might arch under his mouth, a little, and she might moan, and he remembers how she did moan when he was kissing her, when she was kissing him, when her mouth was working against his. Her tongue. Her body—there hadn’t been anything between them then. Just fabric. Just cloth.

Easy to take that stuff off.

His hand is moving faster, grip tightening, heat streaming through him like the water over his back. He should let go. He should really, really cut it out. This isn’t helping anything. But his mind is moving faster too and in his mind he’s slipping that bikini top off her shoulders, tugging it down, baring her. Seeing her. In his mind she wants it and she’s pressing into his hands—she’s tipping her head back, her hair falling all around, and she’s moaning again. Moaning, sliding her fingers into his hair like she did in the rain.

Mouth drifting over her chest, that soft downy hair. The gold heart cool against his lips.

Hand braced on the tile, his breath coming quick and tight, and as it turns out, this is actually the worst thing that’s ever happened to him. This, jerking off in the shower like this with every nerve in him a fluttering spark of pleasure and need, and gliding his tongue down the small curve of one of her breasts and closing his mouth over her nipple, sucking at it until it hardens, and then she—

He wrenches his head back and whines, jaw clenched until it hurts, shaking like someone’s fucking tasing him, and he doesn’t know if he’s ever come like this. Coming like a punch to the jaw.

And it feels so good.

So he stands there for a while—leaning one-handed against the wall, cock softening in his fist—as the water cools.

This is horrible. This is so, so, so horrible.

He knows he still isn’t going to leave.

When he first picked her up he was pretty sure he was being a creep, or at least kind of looking like one, but he figured that was better than being a jerk, and anyway she didn’t seem to think he was a
creep at all in the end. She seemed pretty sure he wasn’t.

Beth Greene might be smart. She might be observant. She might be perceptive to the point of discomfort. She might be thoughtful and even wise.

But Beth Greene is wrong.
But he can hold his shit together. Even now. And he does.

Somehow.

That night, after Merle comes home, they get in the truck with a couple of sixpacks and drive out of town, out near where Daryl went with the bow. Daryl pulls the truck off onto a bumpy dirt thing that can barely be called a road and they head up a small hill and stop, nothing but low grassy meadow all around. Probably the land belongs to someone. Probably they’re trespassing. But except for a couple of lights miles away—houses, he assumes—and the occasional light of a car gliding past on the road behind them, there’s no one he can see. Just night birds, night insects—a few bats flutter around, and in the moonlight he sees a black shape that has to be an owl fall out of a nearby tree. There’s a shriek that cuts off abruptly, and then the black shape swooping upward again.

Distant scream. Fox, sounds like.

They get out of the truck. Sit on the tailgate, legs swinging, drinking. Sort of talking but not about anything that matters. Daryl will never let Merle know how much he loves moments like this, how much he clings to them—rare as they are these days and getting rarer. Moments when he really does almost have what he thought he was going to have when his big brother got out of prison, where he supposedly got clean and got his head right. It’s not that he exactly thought they’d turn honest, solid citizens—Merle would never in a million years have stood for that—but maybe it would be all right. Maybe it could be something better.

Family.

He was actually fool enough to believe that.

But now, times like this, it almost happens. Merle talks shit and cracks stupid fucking jokes, and Daryl loves him so much it’s like a fist reaching into his chest and squeezing. And he realizes—and somehow it hurts even worse—that if he knew he could have this, have it all the time, get back the Merle before the crystal meth and the OxyContin he knows is starting to work its way in there too, and the truly destructive levels of drunk, the blackout levels of drunk, and the general out of control mess he knows his only family left in the entire goddamn world is becoming...

If he could have that, it would still be nearly impossible to leave this fucking town, but he could do it. He could do it.

He’s pretty sure.

The moon is incredibly bright. Waxing—a week or so out from full, low and yellow in the sky. Daryl slumps onto his back, metal ribs of the truck bed not entirely comfortable against his shoulders.
and spine but not uncomfortable enough to make him move. He’s not extremely drunk but he is *definitely* drunk—a loose, warm thing that sands down all his edges and makes the world at least sort of more bearable.

He feels like a slightly less terrible person for being so completely fixated on the sheen of Beth Greene’s wet skin. The fixation itself is even letting up a touch.

“Wassup, li’l brother?” Merle’s words are slurred even more than usual, but Daryl can tell that he’s also not nearly as drunk as he usually gets—not *mean* drunk, not *looking-for-a-fight* drunk. Not *looking-to-torment-his-baby-brother-because-he-fucking-can* drunk. “Somethin’ eatin’ atcha?”

Daryl mutters something ambiguous. He doesn’t want to talk about all the many, many things that are gnawing on him like tiny little rabid possums. Some of them—most of them—would just be handing Merle ammunition, and even if Merle isn’t *mean* drunk right now, that doesn’t mean that state of affairs won’t change.

And Merle tends to remember details. Like Daryl. Notice, note, file away. Use later, if it seems like a good time, or use when it’s not a good time at all, use when you want to hurt someone and you want to give them a sharp jab to the gut rather than a punch in the face.

“C’mon. You can tell me. Let it all out, you’ll feel better.” Merle kicks at Daryl’s still-dangling lower leg and glances back at him. “Never been good at hidin’ shit like that, man. Been atcha for days, don’t think I ain’t noticed.”

Of course he has. It was stupid to think he wouldn’t, but that’s exactly what—on some level—Daryl has been hoping. Supposing might be the case. Merle has seemed out of it a lot of the time, or he’s been gone, or he’s been unconscious. But no. Naturally, he noticed.

Because the universe refuses to cut Daryl Dixon a fucking break.

He can’t lie. He can’t lie to Beth, and he also can’t lie to his brother. Ever, at all. But he can do what he always does in these situations, what he’s been doing in one form or another since he was small, and dodge.

“Wasn’t sure about this fuckin’ job.”

“One at the farm?” Merle takes an enormous swallow of beer and lets out a commensurately large belch. “The fuck’s not to be sure about? You seemed pretty fuckin’ sure before.” The look he shoots Daryl is visible in the moonlight—narrow-eyed, suspicious. Great. “Kept us here for it and everythin’. Kept us in this shitty little burg ‘cause you was so fuckin’ sure.”

Daryl sighs. Sometimes dodging works. Sometimes it works but it doesn’t work completely. Sometimes it doesn’t work at *all*. Hopefully this is not one of those times.

*I can’t stop thinking about that specific farmer’s specific eighteen year old daughter and that’s the part I’m not sure about except for the part where I appear to want to do incredibly inappropriate things to her* is the kind of thing he would really rather not say right now. Or indeed at any time.

And in fact? He still has only a vague idea of what those specific things are. This afternoon he barely got as far as taking her top off. At this point he can’t get past imagining his hands and his mouth on her breasts. There’s a lot of territory left to cover. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?

His own goddamn sexual fantasies and apparently he can’t even get past second base.

He doesn’t even usually *have* sexual fantasies, so it’s entirely possible that he’s a little out of practice.
“Just wasn’t sure it was gonna work out. It is, though,” he adds, and blearily he hits on something else to which he can deflect this which isn’t actually a lie at all and which will—though it might not go well—take Merle’s attention for the rest of the evening. “In fact... They want me to stay on another few weeks.”

“They want you to stay on,” Merle repeats slowly. He’s turned completely around now, a dim, blurry shape looming in the corner of Daryl’s vision. “Stay on and... On what? Where?”

Daryl almost laughs. Doesn’t. It would be a bad move and he doesn’t have many moves at all. “Workin’ for ‘em. Guy says he could use a hand for the fall.”

Merle simply stares at him for a moment. Then Daryl can feel the realization sweeping gradually over him, and Merle groans hollowly.

“Tell me you didn’t fuckin’ say yes.”

Daryl pushes himself up on his elbows. He knew this was coming, he turned off onto this road, but that doesn’t mean he’s all that pleased about it, and it doesn’t mean he’s pleased about the shit he has to deal with now. And he’s getting angry again, because he didn’t even want to be in this position, ever, with any of it—he didn’t want Merle to break parole, he didn’t want Merle to get back into sucking horrible substances into his body, he didn’t want to go on the run with him, he didn’t want to come here, initially he didn’t want to stay here, and he sure as fuck didn’t want to end up in this pit he can’t even imagine wanting to climb out of, trying desperately to think of anything he can do to simultaneously be near Beth Greene every waking minute of the rest of his life and in fact all of the sleeping ones too, and never go near her again because he is the biggest fucking creep in the universe and he will ruin everything.

All he does is ruin things.

He’s angry and tired and he’s so confused, and all he wanted was a nice thing. One nice thing.

“Yeah, bro, actually I did.”

Merle snorts, scorn and contempt condensed into ugly laughter. “Well, tell ya whatcha gonna do, baby brother. You’re gonna go out there tomorrow and you’re gonna unsay it, and then we’re gettin’ our asses outta here as soon as you’re done doin’ whatever the fuck it is they gotcha doin’ over there.”

And here it is.

There are certain things he has never been able to say to Merle. At least, not in any way that sticks. Don’t is a big one. Various versions of do are pretty big too. Verbs in general. Imperatives. He’s not good at asking for things and he’s even worse at demanding them, especially when those things are anything whatsoever to do with himself, because it doesn’t matter, what he wants. He can whine and nag and make feeble attempts at pushing, and he can feel like a weak piece of shit for it, like he never got past being ten years old and scared in the dark and trying to convince someone, anyone, to let his life suck just a little bit less.

But the one thing he unquestionably cannot say to Merle is what he finally manages to say now.

“No.”

It does matter.

Merle’s eyes narrow even more. This time the laugh he huffs out is disbelieving. “Whatcha sayin’ to
“You heard me.” Daryl pushes himself up to sit. “No. I ain’t unsayin’ it. He’s payin’ good, I like the guy, and I’m gonna stay on if he wants me.”

“You fuckin’ kiddin’ me right now?” For the moment all the gathering anger seems to have been entirely drowned in that rising tide of disbelief. “You just... You just made that fuckin’ decision? After last time? After I told you not to fuckin’ do that again?”

“Oh, like that was really gonna be some kinda conversation?” Now he’s on a roll. No brakes. Someone cut the lines. Maybe it was the beer. Maybe it was Beth. Maybe it’s a healthy dose of both. She’s so powerful, she can fuck with his life from miles away. “You been makin’ the decisions for us since we started this fuckin’ road trip.”

“Cause you’d make shitty ones. Like keepin’ us in this shithole another... Weeks? Seriously, man?” Back to the disbelief. Daryl likes the disbelief. It’s potentially way less violent. And in fairness, weeks is sort of a long time. “You just... I can’t believe you. I honestly fuckin’ can’t.”

“Try.” The word is cold and flat and tired. “Make an effort. Look, bro.” Less cold. He has to ask, now. He has to make an appeal. He thought, when Shawn was talking about it, that thinking about the future in any serious way was a frightening thing, but suddenly he’s lunging in that direction. Thinking about something else. Something more. “Ain’t you even a little tired of runnin’? Would it be so fuckin’ bad to stop? Just a while?”

“Stop’n do what?”

_You could actually shock us both and get a fucking job._ Daryl shrugs. “Just... I dunno, just be here. Ain’t such a bad town. If I’m gettin’ paid more, maybe we... Maybe we look for a better place than that dump back there. Just... Somethin’. Like I said, just for a while.” He’s not going to beg. He is absolutely not going to beg. “Change of pace, bro. Whaddaya say?”

Merle doesn’t say anything. Daryl waits. He’s not sure what to expect. This is frankly uncharted territory and he’s deep in it with no map.

But he thinks he might feel something like Beth’s hand. Her hand in his. Holding.

Guiding.

“We ain’t stayin’,” Merle says—slowly, as if talking to an intensely stupid child. “We ain’t stayin’, so you do whatever you gotta do, baby brother, to get us the fuck outta here.”

Daryl looks at him for a long moment. Craggy face, older than his years account for. Worn. Tired as Daryl feels. All the life is getting sucked out of Merle, drained from him like he’s beset by an invisible vampire. A parasite nestled inside him, feeding on him. This man he loves, this man he’s always loved, loved this much and for this long because there wasn’t anyone else for him to love and he needed to love someone.

But now it’s all changing. And he looks at Merle and he sees what he’s only suspected might be the case, only sensed and hasn’t fully articulated: Merle has a vampire, Merle has a parasite, but while before he thought Merle might grab him and pull him down too, into that hell toward which he’s inexorably headed...

Merle is his vampire. Merle is his parasite. Draining everything strong and real and alive out of him. He can only see that now because just for a few days, Beth dragged Merle off him and showed him
an existence without that constant drain. He can see what this is because he’s been given a glimpse of a world where everything is different.

Suddenly he wants to cry.

*You can love him,* Beth murmurs in his head. In his ear. Capricious little life-fucking-with goddess, her mercy is boundless and unmatched. *It’s okay. You can love him. Lovin’ him doesn’t mean you have to let him do this to you.*

*Not anymore.*

Slowly, Daryl shakes his head. “You don’t wanna stay here,” he says, very soft, “you can go.”

Nothing at all. He can’t see Merle’s eyes now, but he can feel the pressure of that hard gaze. He bears up under it. There’s something solid at his back now, something for him to lean on.

“You can go,” he says again, louder. “I ain’t keepin’ you, bro. You don’t gotta wait for me. You wanna go, you go.”

“What the fuck happened to you, man?”

Merle honestly sounds scared. Just a bit, just for a second. It’s a strange sound, a *bizarre* sound; he doesn’t know if he’s ever seen or heard Merle scared. But it occurs to him now that maybe—just maybe—Merle is like him. Merle is scared all the time. Merle is scared and lost and has no idea what the fuck he’s doing.

He thinks he might cry again. He’s not drunk anymore, or if he is it’s no longer helping. This is horrible. Maybe it was better not to see this clearly at all.

“You can go,” he repeats, soft once more. Hardly a breath. He pushes himself off the tailgate and steps away, turns, stares at Merle in what light there is. He doesn’t want this. He never wanted this. But here it is, and what’s behind it...

He *does* want that. He wants it more than he’s ever wanted anything. Not the perfect little swells of Beth Greene’s breasts, not her smooth skin, not the slim line of her waist, her strong arms, her beautiful tangled gold waterfall of hair, her bright doe eyes. The fresh, clean way she smells. Her mouth and the way it tastes. All of that is amazing. It would be great to have it. But that’s not what he really wants.

What he wants, *all* he wants, is what’s been the best thing right from the start.

All he wants is to occupy roughly the same space.

*What happened to me?*

“So think about it,” he says, and he walks away into the moonlight.
He stays away about an hour. He thinks. He doesn’t look at his phone except once to confirm that it’s dead, and then he keeps half an eye on the moon as it rises and whitens and casts long shadows. His shadow, walking with him.

He moves in circles through the tall grass, sometimes head up and sometimes down. Not looking at anything specific, no more than anything else. The fox screams again, closer. Hoot of an owl further away. Rustle of movement all around him. Life. He’s definitely not drunk anymore, and he honestly doesn’t feel that bad now. The urge to cry has passed. He’s simply out in the night, breathing, untethered from Merle and the town and the truck and everything.

Except the farm and a certain girl, and he doesn’t mind being tethered to that and to her. Because what he now understands is that in spite of the pain of being near her, in spite of the way she’s tying his heart in knots and doesn’t seem to know that he needs her to untie them, in spite of how he’s starting to think about her in a way that isn’t right and that he knows he can’t have... He’s never happier, right now, than when he’s with her. When he lets go of all the knots and all the tugging at the most base levels of his body and his instincts, he just really loves being with her. No matter what they’re doing. He loves talking with her. She’s the easiest person to talk to he’s ever met, even if he still doesn’t say a whole lot. He loves listening to her sing. He loves being with her and doing nothing at all; just sitting next to each other in silence and existing, and taking pleasure in the simple fact of existence. Which is pleasurable in a way he had no idea about until he met her.

He loves being with her, and no matter how he’s beginning to think about her, want her... He can be happy with that. Just with her company. That’s not lying to himself. That’s not trying to convince himself of something he knows isn’t true. It’s true. He’s sure.

He wants to stay here, and he wants to be with her. Just to be with her.

Is that worth losing his brother over?

That, he remains unsure about. He thinks he should be. He’s close. But if he keeps on being honest, what happened back there was basically a game of chicken. Seeing who would blink. That game isn’t necessarily over. But he does think he’ll win.

Merle needs him. Merle knows that.

He never before regarded that as power.

He’s also never manipulated someone. Never in his life. He doesn’t want to. He’s horrified by the idea. And this isn’t exactly manipulation. But he’s not happy about it.

But maybe this could still be good. Maybe this could all work out.

He stands in the dark for a while and breathes. Thinks about the ruins, Beth’s ruins, all bathed in pale light. Dreamlike. He’d like to be there with her now. Just sit with her on that bench and listen to the night.

There’s a word for this. For this feeling. He almost has it.

He turns around and goes back to Merle.
Merle is sitting on the tailgate. Merle is extremely drunk, can barely walk straight. The ride home is silent. Daryl puts Merle to bed and sits up for a while, thinking. Something has happened to him and he’s thinking in some rather startling new directions. What happened in the shower, what he did, where his mind went, he’s no longer so positive that was such a bad thing. He didn’t hurt anyone. He didn’t actually touch her. He just thought about her. Just imagined her. Is he really an awful person for that? What if it was someone else? What if—somehow, letting go of the fact that if this was truly the case he would drive the truck up a hill and put it in neutral and get out and lie in front of it—it was someone else and she knew? Would she say he was an awful person for it?

He’s not so certain she would.

She hasn’t yet judged him for anything. Not even kissing her the way he did. She seemed nervous, even a little scared, but she hadn’t blamed him for it, not that he could tell. Hadn’t been angry. She said she wanted to be friends and he doesn’t think she was just trying to spare his feelings after all. He thinks she meant it. That he’s worth being friends with.

Maybe he’s not completely bad. Maybe he’s not as fucked up inside as he thought. Maybe he doesn’t really ruin everything. Maybe he really does deserve something nice.

These are remarkable thoughts he’s having. These are revelations. He’s kind of stunned by them, but he can’t find it in himself to question them.

He turns the TV on mute, lies down on the couch, and watches well-groomed people on PBS pleading for money until he falls asleep.

He dreams about touching her. Running his hands over her arms, framing her face and feeling how warm her cheeks are. When he wakes with the dawn he doesn’t feel guilty.

~

He goes back out to the farm and nothing has changed, but also everything is different.

Beth helps out this time—not for long, but he enjoys it, working beside her, rather than feeling like he’s about ten seconds from falling down and twitching weakly and whimpering to himself. Otis joins them and things proceed quickly. Beginning of next week, Hershel says, is when they’ll probably be done. But Daryl should keep coming back. There’s more to do. There’s stuff involved in getting ready for fall and his help would be appreciated, especially given that Beth is going back to school after next week and obviously won’t be around as much.

So he’ll see her less. But there might still be dinners. There are weekends. There’s Jimmy, and she has friends, but he’ll still see her sometimes. He doesn’t think she’s going to forget about him, anyway. If anything, maybe he’ll just become a feature of her landscape. Always there but no longer anything particularly special. That might be okay. That might actually be the best thing.

He stays for dinner, and after he doesn’t leave right away. He sits under a tree—the tree where she sang to him—and smokes and watches the fireflies rise out of the grass.

He remembers that song. He has a good memory for things like that. Lyrics. Things he reads. Words he hears. They stick around.

then I saw on a white space that was left
a blessing written older than the rest
it said leave me here, I care not for wealth or fame
I’ll remember your song, but I’ll forget your name
He doesn’t ever sing. But maybe he wants to. A little.

“Hey.”

He looks up and there she is, and it doesn’t hurt. Much. He gives her a nod and she sits down next to him without being asked. Not that she would need to. She leans back against the trunk of the tree and draws her knees up to her chest and sighs.

Her wrist is wrapped in a spiral of beaded wire. Glass beads again, gold and copper and brown. He thinks about autumn colors and wonders if she did too when she was picking it. He’d still like to ask her about it. Maybe sometime. He’s not sure how he would phrase the question. It’s more of a general kind of curiosity.

He still doesn’t know so many things about her and he still wants to.

“You dad says you’re goin’ back to school week after next.”

“Yeah.” She sighs again. “You know... Well. You know how I feel.”

He grunts and taps ash onto the grass. A breeze carries some of it away. “Don’t like it?”

“No. Not for the reasons people usually have, I guess. Classes are okay. I like some of ‘em, we got a good music one. I don’t hate homework. Don’t like it, but...” She gives him a faint smile. “It’s not that. I got friends. Everything’s okay. I just...”

Sudden understanding. He feels a connection with her, that tether becoming something more mutual. “You don’t like bein’ there,” he says softly.

She nods. “Yeah. That’s it. Just doesn’t... Somethin’ about it doesn’t feel right. Like I’m supposed to be doin’ somethin’ else.” She extends one leg into the grass. Her legs and feet are bare and she wiggles her toes, which are lacquered with light pink polish. It sparkles. “That probably sounds weird, huh? Goin’ to school is exactly what I’m supposed to be doin’.”

“You,” he says, glances over at her and smiles. Very small. But he smiles a lot more around her. “You don’t like bein’ there,” he says softly.

She nods. “Yeah. That’s it. Just doesn’t... Somethin’ about it doesn’t feel right. Like I’m supposed to be doin’ somethin’ else.” She extends one leg into the grass. Her legs and feet are bare and she wiggles her toes, which are lacquered with light pink polish. It sparkles. “That probably sounds weird, huh? Goin’ to school is exactly what I’m supposed to be doin’.”

“You,” he says, glances over at her and smiles. Very small. But he smiles a lot more around her. He’s noticed. “But you’re kinda fuckin’ weird, girl.”

She laughs and wiggles her toes again, lifts her knee enough to place her foot flat on the ground. He guesses she’s feeling the cool of the grass. He thinks about kissing her toes. Her knee. Almost innocent.

He used to be so uncomfortable with touching. Touching other people. Being touched. Now he thinks about touching her, everywhere, and it’s wonderful.

“You actually like movin’ around all the time?” She folds her arms around her bent leg and studies him. “You were talkin’ like you didn’t. But you never said.”

He shrugs and blows a stream of smoke up toward the branches. “’s alright.”

Is it? That might be the closest to a real lie he’s ever come with her.

“But you’re stickin’ around here for a few weeks.”

He nods.

She leans her head back. “Thought you didn’t like bein’ here.”
“Yeah, well.” There are things he can tell her. Things he couldn’t tell anyone else. Not complicated things, not really secret things, but just things he never says to people. He wonders how many of those things there are. He smiles at her again, the faintest curve of the corner of his mouth. “Maybe I like bein’ out here. I like this place, I guess.” He breathes a soft laugh. “I like your mom’s cookin’.”

She echoes his laugh and looks away, up at the sky, the deepening blue and the first few stars. A firefly drifts out of the grass when she shifts her foot and rises to her. She raises her hand and catches it on her knuckle, where it sits, flexing its wings and winking slowly on and off. He watches her, a low, sweet ache settling under his breastbone.

There’s a word for this.

“I like you.”

The firefly ascends from her hand and floats away. She turns her face back to him, frowning slightly, and he sees something flickering in her eyes, almost glowing. He wasn’t trying for anything. He wasn’t pushing. She’s easy to talk to is all, and he found something in himself, a thing he could tell her that he wouldn’t be able to tell anyone. A simple thing. A true thing.

He’s not good at saying when he likes something, because what he likes has never mattered.

But it does matter.

Her lips part, the barest hint of a smile playing around them though her brow is still furrowed, and in his mind he touches her chin, her jaw, leans in and finds her mouth with his, and he doesn’t worry about anything and he isn’t afraid. It’s perfect. Like her.

He merely looks at her. But here, outside his mind, he isn’t afraid either. It’s okay. It’s enough.

He’s not a bad person for wanting this. He really doesn’t think so. Not anymore.

He just can’t have it.

“I like you too,” she says softly. “Toldja.” Again that flicker, then something cuts it off and he sees a shade go down. Abruptly she clears her throat and sits upright, gets to her feet and pushes her ponytail back over her shoulder. “I should go help Mama clean up.”

He nods, watches her move, watches the last of the light catching her shoulders. Thinks about the deer, that grace, that promise of greater grace and speed and strength. She’s going to be so beautiful when she’s older.

She’s so beautiful now.

“See you tomorrow.” She flashes him one more smile and jogs toward the house, long legs carrying her. The first night with her, she dodged puddles in the moonlight. Quick and nimble and effortless. Like some kind of puddle-dodging expert.

He finds his own smile through that ache as he watches her climb the porch steps and disappear into that world of light and overall Niceness.

There’s a word for this. Fucked doesn’t fit anymore.

He almost sings on the way home. Almost.

* I am the only unquiet ghost that does not seek rest. 
This thing is *immense*. Immense enough that it might be the last one for a couple of days, so enjoy. I mean, yeah, yeah, I say that and then I write three chapters in a day, but I really mean it this time.

Maybe.

Merle doesn’t do a whole lot of talking to him for the rest of the week. Daryl is perfectly fine with that. At the moment—at this series of moments—Daryl is content to be mostly left alone. He’s thinking. Thinking more and more about that big scary future, though he’s not sure most normal people would consider a few weeks a big scary anything. But for him it’s novel. More than. It’s yet another first, and he knows precisely who’s to blame for it.

He continues doing odd jobs for Elmer. He pays the rent. He has a sock in which he’s hiding cash, shoving it under the couch with cigarette butts and Cheetos wrappers. He doesn’t trust Merle. He hasn’t in a long time, but now he’s *aware* that he doesn’t trust Merle. It doesn’t exactly bother him, at least not more than anything else—if it was going to, it would have stopped a while ago—but he’s conscious of so many more things in general. Shit he’s done without thinking for... Hell, since he picked Merle up outside that fucking prison, but honestly for even longer than that. Stuff he’s probably been doing for most of his life.

He’s not a piece of shit. He’s really not. He’s not exactly a *good person*, but Beth isn’t crazy and Beth isn’t stupid, and Beth is terrifyingly perceptive, and she *likes* him, so Beth must see something there worth liking. And he can go ahead and insist to himself that she’s crazy and/or stupid and/or oblivious, *or* he can trust her and operate under the assumption that, contrary to the belief system within which he was raised, he is not actually a piece of shit.

This is like a loss of faith. This is like discovering that all those stories you were told as a kid about God and Jesus and angels and the Devil and Heaven and Hell are probably only stories and nothing more.

Except the stories with which he was raised were not good stories. Not hopeful stories. Not even scary stories you tell people to make them behave. These stories were screamed into him, beaten into him. Scarred into him. He wasn’t good for anything. He wasn’t worth anything. He was useless.

He was nobody. Nothing.

In his mind, Beth Greene looks right at him, right in his eyes—this beautiful little goddess who won’t stop fucking with his life, and he doesn’t *want* her to—she looks at him and she says a single word.

*Lies.*

He almost can’t believe it. But he wants to. He wants to at least entertain the possibility. His belief system is threatening to crumble and fall. So he’s wondering what might rise in its place.
On Saturday morning—when he’s supposed to be at the farm but not until later—he goes back to the coffee shop and he does order hot chocolate because fuck it, he’s a goddamn adult and he can do what he wants, and he sits at that table by the window where he first sat with her and somehow without noticing he picked up the local paper, and he’s looking through the rooms and apartments to rent. Not genuinely focusing, but.

Looking.

He’s going somewhere. Feels like it. It’s frightening. But it’s not bad. He’s reminded of the first time he rode a motorcycle, that feeling of nothing at all between you and the sheer speed with which you were moving, this monster of metal and power roaring under you, all the stupid romantic shit people say about bikes actually sort of true, and he burned up a long empty stretch of road as the sun went down and it was insane but he wanted to lift up his hands, open his arms, like he could fly.

He didn’t. Obviously. But he never forgot how it felt, and now he feels like that again. His heart is pounding and his palms are sweaty, and he has to put the paper down and clench his fists until his hands stop shaking.

He’s going somewhere.

And though he wants so badly to believe otherwise, though he hopes so much that he can make it all work, part of him is sure that even if Merle stays here, Merle might not be able to go with him.

~

On Monday he shows up and Maggie is there, home for a week and a half. At first he’s not certain what to make of her; in a lot of ways she’s not much like Beth at all. There’s a slightly sharper edge about her, a directness—not that Beth isn’t direct, but Beth is direct in a way that’s a little less pointed. She has an attitude. Not overtly, but it’s there.

By Tuesday he’s pretty sure he likes her okay. He’s not certain what she makes of him, but he also doesn’t really care. She’s not sticking around. He’ll be as polite to her as he is to anyone, and he’ll proceed as usual. What is he to her, anyway? He’s merely the hand Hershel has taken on for the season. As far as she knows, he’s nothing more.

As far as anyone knows, he’s nothing more. Hershel might appear to like him, and so might Annette—he’s gotten as far as thinking about her on a first-name basis—and Shawn might think he’s all right, but he knows he’s basically nothing more to them, too. Maybe something vaguely like a friend, but they don’t know him, because he hasn’t allowed them to do so. He doesn’t want them to. Maybe he’s not a piece of shit, not exactly, but he’s not fool enough to think they’d be especially impressed with his biography.

He’s nothing more, as far as anyone knows.

Except Beth.

Nothing much changes. Work on the silo concludes. It’s good work; he’s pleased that he’s done something useful, something he can look at and see it used for something else. There are other things he can do, basic maintenance, and Hershel finds out that he’s not a bad mechanic and puts him to work on some equipment. He keeps busy and he doesn’t get bored.

And he thinks. About what comes next. About the big scary future.

He thinks a lot about Beth.
He thinks a lot about just being around her, about the parts of it he likes—which are almost all of them—the parts that are purely innocent and purely things friends do, about talking with her and her singing and about how smart and wonderfully strange she is, about how she doesn’t seem to see the world like anyone else he’s ever met. About how she makes him feel good just by being with him. Yeah, he thinks about those things.

But he also thinks about her legs when she runs, the length and the strength of them, about her bare arms in the loose, light sleeveless tops she likes to wear. He thinks about flashes of skin at her waist, about her waist itself. About the line of her throat all the way down to the dip of her collarbones. About her hips, her breasts. The shorts and jeans she wears are tight and it’s difficult—now, for him—to miss the full curve of her ass.

He thinks about these things in the shower, at night when he’s alone, in the truck driving out there or driving back, and he doesn’t try to push them away. Not anymore. He lets them happen, lets them come. He’s never felt like this about anyone. Never thought like this about anyone. Never took his cock in his hand and thought about being with someone like this. These half-formed fantasies, these disorganized flashes of images and sound and touch and taste and smell, almost adolescent in how heady they are while still not exactly going anywhere.

His experience of sex has nothing to do with what’s going on in his head right now. This is something completely new. Completely strange. He’s groping his way through it. He’s not sure where it’s going to end. Sometimes he’s amused and sometimes he’s freaked out by the fact that she’s helping him here too, helping him discover this part of himself, and she has no idea.

She doesn’t have to know. She never will know.

He’s very determined to make certain of that.

Then on Saturday everything falls apart.

He can tell something’s wrong as soon as he gets out of the truck. It’s not even that he sees anyone, at least not right away; it’s a hot, thick day, later in the afternoon than when he usually gets here, and there was already something sort of ominous about it—towering thunderheads gathering on the far western horizon—but he can feel it. Simply an overwhelming sense of Wrongness, impossible to tell exactly what or where it’s coming from but unmistakable.

He’s heading up toward the house, fighting back his unease, when Maggie pushes open the screen door and comes out onto the porch, pushing her thick brown hair back from her forehead.

“Daryl.” She starts down the steps toward him. She seems stressed in most of the visible ways it’s possible to be stressed. “You seen Beth?”


“Dammit.” She stops, hands on her hips, and glances around in a way he recognizes as stemming from a deep sense of helplessness. His stomach drops a little more. “Because no one has. Not since last night. And she’s not answerin’ her phone.”

“You ask her friends? That boyfriend?”

“Of course we did, those were like... the first people we checked with.” Maggie sighs, lowers her head a few seconds and appears to be trying to calm down. “‘Might be nothin’, I mean... But she just doesn’t do this. Ever. She goes anywhere, someone always knows where. And she always answers
He’s not panicking. He is not in any way panicking. He’s going to be useless if he panics, and he can’t be useless right now, because Maggie could be right, it might be nothing, but what if it’s not nothing? What if it’s everything?

He’s leaping right into the worst possible scenario and he knows it, but he can’t help it, because it never really occurred to him until this moment that he might actually lose her.

Thunder rolls in the distance.

If something’s happened to her he’s going to find whoever is responsible and he’s going to turn their head into pink paste, and that’s not hyperbole. He’ll do it. He hardly ever truly wants to hurt people, but he also knows perfectly well that he’s capable of hurting people in some utterly horrifying ways.

“Did somethin’ happen? You think of any reason, anythin’ might explain it?” Grasping at straws, but it’s something.

“There’s...” Maggie’s mouth tightens. “I don’t think it explains her bein’ gone this long, or no one havin’ any idea where she went, but her friend Chrissy said she and Jimmy had some kinda big fight yesterday, so...”

He was grasping; now he seizes. Because it’s even more of a something, and suddenly he has a feeling about it. Maybe Beth doesn’t know him all that well in terms of the details of his terribly interesting life story, and maybe there’s a lot about Beth he still doesn’t know and very much wants to, but he does know her. He knows how she is. Well enough to predict what she might do under certain circumstances.

“Any idea what about?”

Maggie shakes her head. “Just that she was mad. Seemed mad when she went to bed last night. She didn’t talk a whole lot. But if it was just about bein’ mad, you’d think she would’ve gone off with a friend or somethin’, not—”

“Where’s everyone else?”

“Shawn’s in the woods near the swimmin’ hole. Mama and Daddy went to town, checkin’ some places.”

He’s already headed back to the truck. “I’ll try the roads. Drive around. See if I see her.”

“Not sure what good that’s gonna do.” Maggie sounds skeptical and he doesn’t blame her. “But suit yourself.”

He will. Because as he pulls around and rolls back down the drive and turns left, away from the thunderheads and the sun dipping close to them and toward the lingering patch of clear sky, he thinks he’s pretty sure he knows exactly where she’s gone.

A place no one else knows about. She’s been careful to keep it that way. He’s kept her secret. And she might turn her anger on him for this, but he’s keeping it now.

Maybe she’ll understand.
It’s much cooler in the deep shade of the woods, though the air remains still and it’s even muggier. Mosquitoes and midges whine around his head when he gets out of the truck at the top of the steep slope, and he waves distractedly at them. The whole way out here he didn’t bother calling, didn’t bother texting; he doesn’t expect her to answer even him, and if she’s been out here as long as he suspects it’s entirely possible her phone is dead anyway.

He’s not worried anymore. But as he makes his way down the slope—boots sliding over mud gone dry and dusty and not totally holding together—concern is still tugging at him. Because if she’s been out here this long—or at least been out of the house and away from people—he thinks mad probably doesn’t totally cover what she’s feeling. There’s probably more to it than that.

Mad and hurt, maybe. Mad and upset. To the point where she doesn’t want to see anyone, not even him—and when did even get to be part of this?—and where she snuck away in a manner designed to keep anyone from following her.

God, he hopes she at least brought some snacks. Maybe he should have picked something up from the house. Except that would have been very, very weird. He almost certainly would have had to answer some questions. And Maggie, as he observed nearly as soon as he met her, is sharp.

And given that he’s almost certain she’s safe, keeping her secret feels, now, like the most important thing.

She trusted him. She trusted him with a deep part of herself. He can’t imagine betraying that.

The slope evens out onto the wide lawn, the stones, gnats hovering in the patches of sun that break through the low branches. The creek is lower and a little louder as the water spills over and dodges around rocks glittering with flecks of mica. He hesitates at the base of the hill and listens for her, hears nothing but the water, considers calling. Decides not to. It’s not that he wants to sneak up on her, but it is sort of that he doesn’t want to give her a head start if she decides to run or hide, and maybe that’s creepy and maybe it’s not, and he’s past caring. Because if she’s upset, he wants to talk to her. If she tells him to fuck off, he will. But while he’s almost certain she’s okay, he needs to be completely certain.

He needs to see her.

He walks over the stone path, through the arched doorway and into the ruins.

He expected to find her at the marble bench. Instead she’s right there in that large central room, sitting in a patch of sun, leaning against a wall with her knees drawn up against her chest—and he notes, with something like approval, that there’s a half full bottle of water and the remains of a sandwich in the grass beside her, the latter now serving as an early dinner for an army of black ants. Her hair is tied back, but strands of it have come loose—more than usual—and are hanging in her eyes. She raises her head as soon as he sees her and he can tell she’s been crying. Maybe not just now, but she was.

Jimmy might get the pink paste head treatment. A lot depends on what it turns out he’s done.

She looks at him a moment. He waits for her to say something. She doesn’t. She pushes her hair back from her face, tips her head back against the stones, and sighs.

“They send you out?”

“They don’t know I’m here.” He steps forward, hands in his pockets. He’s very glad she wasn’t crying when he found her. He’s not sure what he would have done.
She actually almost smiles. Not really, but it’s in the same county. Not quite the same town.
“Thanks.” She pauses. “But if I wanted you out here I would’ve called you.”

“I’m here now, so too fuckin’ bad.” He crouches, looks her over. Except for being tired and clearly upset, she seems okay. “What happened? Maggie said you’n Jimmy was mixin’ it up.”

“I would’ve called you,” she repeats, softer. But she’s not telling him to leave, so he doesn’t move. “I’m okay.”

“Yeah, you been out here how long? I dunno ‘bout that.”

“I’m not a kid, Daryl.” Not said with any annoyance. Any defensiveness. She’s simply informing him. In case he wasn’t clear on that point. “I’m okay, and I would’ve come home. I can be by myself if I wanna be by myself. I don’t have to explain that to anyone. Not even you.”

“Alright.” He supposes that’s fair enough. Nothing to argue with there. She doesn’t owe him a damn thing and she never has, and he’s not about to start thinking that way now. But she also still hasn’t explicitly told him to get out, so he sits down crosslegged on the grass across from her, arms resting on his knees.

“You wanna tell me what happened?” He pauses. He hasn’t wanted to entertain this as a real possibility—not after jumping to the absolutely terrible conclusions he initially leaped to—but now he has to. “He hurt you?”

She shakes her head, her mouth twisting. “No, he... Not like that. Wasn’t like that.” She hesitates and looks away, hugging herself. She sighs again, appears to come to some kind of decision, and closes her eyes. “He cheated on me. Okay? That’s all. That’s all it was.”

He blinks at her. Somehow he probably shouldn’t be surprised, because that’s sort of an expected asshole guy thing to do, but the idea of anyone being stupid enough to cheat on Beth fucking Greene is more than he can get his head around.

She looks back at him, brow arched. “What?”

He has no idea how to tell her what. That he can’t fathom what was going through Jimmy’s mind, because she’s perfect, she’s an absolute miracle, every part of her is remarkable and extraordinary and frankly unbelievable in every sense. That she’s the most amazing thing he’s ever seen. That she has quite literally changed his life. That he’s pretty sure at this point that turning Jimmy’s head into pink paste actually wouldn’t be too dramatic a change in terms of the overall functionality of Jimmy’s brain, if these are the kinds of life choices Jimmy makes.

He shrugs. Makes a little I’unno noise.

She huffs a laugh and looks away again. “Yeah, thanks. Thanks, that’s real helpful.”

“No, I mean...” Scrambling a bit. He can’t say all that shit, he can’t carve himself open and lay it all out there raw and gross like the slippery tangle of his guts, but he should say something. “He fuckin’ cheated on you?” He keeps coming back to that. Coming back to it and staring at it. Poking it. Walking around it in circles and trying to incorporate it into his understanding of reality. “With who?”

He tries to think of an answer to that question that seems at all plausible and comes up completely empty.

“Who?” Now she appears a bit incredulous, and he wonders if he’s made a serious misstep, but it’s
way too late to take it back. “The hell’s it matter who?”

He shrugs again. This is really not going very well.

She pushes her hair back once more and then lowers her head into her hand, forehead resting on the heel of her palm, and lets out a long breath. His gaze catches on her wrist. Leather cuff with the cross again today. “Just this girl. Girl across town. She goes to school with us, I don’t even know her.” She’s quiet for a moment, not moving, and he lets her be. “He said it’s been goin’ on all summer.”

“He told you?” This is getting weirder and weirder. “Just like... told you?”

She nods. Doesn’t look up.

“Why?” At some point this might all start making sense, but so far it’s not exactly headed in that direction. More questions keep popping up and demanding to be answered and looking smug about the impossibility of doing so.

She laughs softly, drops her hand away, drops her whole body back against the stones until she’s slumped. She’s wearing one of those loose tops—light sky blue—and her gold heart flashes in the sun. He notices these things not with any particular desire. Just notices them, the way he always notices her when she moves a certain way or when the light catches her just right.

“He’s gonna be goin’ out with her when school starts up again. Like... Out. Not sneakin’ around. So he was breakin’ up with me.”

And he’s right back to the staring and poking and being totally unable to comprehend any of it.

As far as the staring goes he stares at her, and he can feel that his eyes are a bit wider than usual and he knows he must look shocked—though there’s no possible way he can look even half as shocked as he feels—because she laughs again, clearly puzzled.

“Daryl... What? Don’t I’ unno me, what?”

He has to say something. He has to somehow compress the fullness of his disbelief and his incredulity and his scorn into something he can reasonably make into words. He has to, because he needs her to know that he feels these things. He needs her to understand. He needs that a lot.

Okay, he can try. He pulls in a breath and sits more upright.

“He’s a fuckin’ d*mbass.”

For a few seconds there’s nothing. And then this time when she laughs it’s softer and warmer and even the tiniest bit delighted. “Yeah. He is.”

And everything lightens a touch.

For a short while neither of them says anything. He can tell she’s working through something and he doesn’t want to push her, and as usual he’s perfectly content to simply sit with her. The sun moves and the shadows lengthen, and that patch of sun slips further up the wall. It still touches her, still lights up her hair, and he gazes at it and tries to be subtle about doing so. It’s nothing inappropriate, he doesn’t think. He’s simply focusing on it, because it shines. Focusing on it because he can’t come to grips with why Jimmy would want to put himself in a position where he can’t touch that hair. Run his hands through it. Tangle its strands around his fingers. Why he would ever want to stop doing that.
Why and how he is such an unbelievable dumbass.

“Thing is, I was kinda thinkin’ about maybe takin’ a break from him anyway.” she says finally. Her eyes are half closed, both legs now stretched out in the grass with her ankles crossed. Those beat-up cowboy boots. He wonders if there’s a story behind them, because she seems attached to them.

“He’s nice,” she wrinkles her nose, “or he was, but I just...” She rolls a shoulder. “I dunno. Somethin’ didn’t feel right.”

This is a new puzzling thing. He cocks his head slightly. “So how come you so upset?”

“I actually don’t even know.” He hears a faint tremble in her voice and realizes with a sudden pang that she’s crying again, or close to it, her face upturned and her eyes shining. “Isn’t that stupid? I came down here early this morning and I just... I just walked around. I dunno. I couldn’t stop thinkin’ about it, about how it was over, but now I’m thinkin’... Maybe it wasn’t even about that. Maybe it’s all about something else.”

“Got any idea what it’s about?”

There’s a long pause before she answers. She wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand and part of him is a little frantic. It’s deep, instinctual. Seeing her cry, even if it’s not a lot, he would suddenly do anything and everything to make it stop. To make whatever is hurting her go away. Even if it’s a small thing. It doesn’t matter. He never wants to see this girl cry.

But he has no idea what to do, and that’s awful. He just sits there across from her, feeling vaguely useless. Like how he was always told he was. Not quite, but it’s a reminder.

“I’m goin’ back to school on Monday. Summer’s over.” She digs her right heel into the grass and pushes, staring up at the trees. The jagged towers of broken stone. “Senior year, and after this everything’s over. And I don’t know what’s comin’ next. And I mean... I told you I wanted to think about it, I told you I wanted to figure it out on my own, but maybe it’s hittin’ me how I really don’t know, and everyone else knows, or they think they do, and I just... Everything’s changin’. Everything’s endin’. I’ve got no idea what comes after this. And I don’t know how to tell anyone about it. Not so they get it.”

She lowers her head and looks at him and rubs at her face with one hand, smiles weakly, and he almost can’t deal with it. No, there’s no almost; he can’t deal. Not even close. There is no part of this he can handle.

And he wants to touch her. Not because of some kind of physical want for her but because he wants to make her feel better. He wants her to know that he’s here.

So he doesn’t second-guess it, or at least not much, because he’s not a piece of shit and he’s not going to ruin everything, and this is okay. He reaches out and lays a hand on her knee, light, and she looks down at it and back up at him and her smile is a little less weak.

“See? I’m probably not makin’ any sense.”

He shakes his head. He gets it. He thinks so. He’s not sure how to tell her that, and maybe he actually doesn’t, because her world of light and love and Niceness is so far beyond anything he’s ever known. So maybe he doesn’t totally understand where she’s coming from. But he does know about being scared, and he knows about being scared of this huge roaring Unknown coming at you, and having no idea what to do about it. Having no idea how to prepare. The future is this ocean and it’s rearing up, all wave-crests, and it’s going to crush you.
He’s never seen the ocean. She probably has. If he could find a way to get all of this into words and describe it to her, she would probably get that image. Maybe better than he would.

“You’re makin’ sense.”

She nods slowly. Then she leans forward and covers his hand with hers, smooth and cool, and he manages to fight back a shiver. Manages to fight back a decidedly unwelcome urge to pull away. He thinks about touching her all the time, and he’s kissed her twice, and there have been little nudges and kicks—mostly on her part—and he’s been able to deal with all of that, but there hasn’t been anything like this. Not anything.

There’s what he thinks about, which is distant and unreal and safe. And then there’s this, and it’s almost too much.

“Thanks.”

He shrugs, feeling caught between awkward and genuinely pretty freaked out. He doesn’t want to be. He wants her to touch him and for it to not be a big deal.

“No, I mean it. Maybe I should’ve called you. I dunno. Anyway. Glad you came out here.” The corner of her mouth curves, wry. “It’s a long walk back.”

He shrugs again. He’s glad he did, too. She’s safe, she’s all right, and yeah, he can’t do anything about her being sad or scared—except maybe he did something just by being here, and that’s a good thing.

That’s an extremely good thing.

He gives her knee a quick squeeze, gets up and extends his hand down to her. She hesitates a second or two, then takes it, and he pulls her lightly to her feet.

Very lightly. Harder than he meant to, or she tugged harder than she had to and gave herself a little more bounce. Because she’s suddenly so close to him again, head tilted back to gaze up at him and her hands on his arms, and he can smell her. That clean soap smell. He can see the pale green flecks in her eyes and a nearly imperceptible dusting of freckles on her nose. The gold flash of her tiny flower earrings.

He should push her away. He takes a breath, opens his mouth to say something—an apology, maybe, or we should get goin’—and that’s when she curls a hand around the back of his neck and pulls him down.

It’s all her this time. Her mouth against his, her lips pushing his further apart—she’s not at all shy about this. She’s not at all hesitant, not now. There’s force in it, insistence, hunger; for a few seconds he’s too stunned to do anything at all except be there and feel what she’s doing to him.

Then he goes ahead and does what he’s been thinking about. Dreaming about. Right then he doesn’t pull away, doesn’t seize up, because this is so simple; he reaches up and lays his hands against the corners of her jaw, thumbs against her cheeks, angling her so he can kiss her deeper. Low heat pulses through him as he tastes her, that taste now familiar from two memories and hours of fantasies, and he sighs against her. He’s not going to feel guilty about this, and he’s not going to be afraid of it, and he should, God, he should, because she’s still half his age and he still shouldn’t cross this line, but she feels so good.

But then he does pull back for a second—enough to draw a breath and catch a glimpse of her wide, bright eyes. Some remaining part of him wants to keep up the resistance, or feels like it ought to.
Can’t let go.

“Beth, I—”

“Shut up, Daryl,” she whispers, and clenches a fist in the fold of his shirt and drags him down again.

He goes without any more of a fight. He was never going to put up much of one anyway. She presses closer to him and a quiet sound escapes her, and he realizes how they might fit together, how they do fit together right now, and she feels so fucking good.

She feels so fucking right.

~

He has no idea how much later it is when she finally lets him go.

He blinks, confused. The sun doesn’t appear to have moved, but he could have sworn it was a long time. Hours. With her, with her mouth, he experiences time dilation. Everything around them moves at a different pace, and she does that thing she did in the rain, where she created a bubble of space in which they could be alone and protected from everything else.

She’s a goddess. She has powers. She can manipulate the universe.

She smooths a hand over his shirt, looking up at him again, her eyes still big and bright. Her lips are wet, a little swollen now, and he realizes he made them that way and again has to fight back one of those shivers.

“We should go,” she murmurs, and—numbly—he nods. Drops his hands and shifts back from her. And neither of them seem to know what to do next.

The walk back to the truck is... He’s not positive awkward is exactly the right word. It’s weird. Speaking of lines, speaking of everything changing: The entire world appears different to him. The way the low light hits grass and trees and dirt, the tiny dancing specks of gnats, the speckled flash of mica. Water. The light itself. The way the air behaves. Colors. Birds calling into the oncoming evening. He thought that kiss in the rain was the dividing line; now he’s not sure there’s only one. He thinks he might have been really, really wrong about that. But he’s so far out of his element now, to the extent that he ever had one. He’s flailing around in the dark. He has no idea what the fuck he’s doing.

She walks up beside him, close enough to touch him but not doing so, not quite looking at him, and he’s pretty sure she’s not too much clearer on what the fuck she’s doing than he is.

It’s entirely possible that this is all a horrible idea.

It’s also entirely possible that this is a line he’s crossing alone. That whatever happened, she left it back down there. That now they’re back to being...

He doesn’t think they can go back to being friends. He just doesn’t think he can do that.

It’s terrifying.

She gets in the truck in silence. They pull onto the dirt track in silence. Pass through the woods and out onto the main road in silence. The radio is on, softly, but it doesn’t penetrate that fundamental quiet.
I feel like a newborn
kicking and screaming

could you take my picture
'cause I won't remember

“Stop.”

He jerks his head toward her, startled. They’re about a mile out from the farm, the thunderheads looming closer. Rumbles in the distance. The sun is now hard and red and strange.

“C’mon. Pull over.” She touches his arm—that insistence again, but softer. She’s going to have her way. There’s nothing he can do about it.

He pulls over and cuts off the engine and looks at her. Waits.

She looks back, and for a moment she does nothing. Says nothing. She’s managed to keep most of her hair back and out of her face, but there’s a strand, loose, and he remembers the first night in the rain and the moon, that first desire to touch her, giving in after she gave him permission to do so.

That could have been a rehearsal for this, because suddenly she’s leaning in again, cupping his face with her smooth, cool hand, and this time the kiss is more like that first night. Her lips part against his, nudge at him, but it’s gentle and he has no trouble giving in. His hand finds her bare arm, curves against her elbow, but that’s all.

He’s still not afraid. He just feels a need to be careful.

But apparently she didn’t leave anything back down in the ruins.

She pulls back, licking her lips, and gives him a smile—small and secret. He already understands—understood some time ago—that this is something no one else can know about. She doesn’t have to tell him. He can tell she knows that she doesn’t. For a whole host of excellent reasons, this is something just for them and them alone.

“That wasn’t ‘cause of Jimmy,” she murmurs. She’s still touching his face, her thumb moving. Almost stroking. “Alright? I just... I need you to know that. That had nothin’ to do with Jimmy at all.”

It’s not until she says it that he realizes: He had sort of been thinking it was. Partially, anyway. That maybe it meant something to him, maybe it did to her too, but at the heart of it was that she was mad at Jimmy and scared about things and he was there. No resentment in it, no hurt feelings. It merely seemed more reasonable to him than the idea that she might actually...

She might actually want to kiss him. Because she wants to kiss him. That simple.

He nods.

“Alright.” That smile again, and now a little bigger. Sweet.

Happy.

He has no idea how to even begin to tell her what she’s doing to him.

She leans in and kisses him one more time—hardly anything now. A quick brush of her lips and then gone. She sits back and lets out a slow breath, and he can see that she’s gathering herself. Getting
ready to emerge from whatever that was back there and reenter her bright Nice world, where he can be a visitor but never ever a resident.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Before he pulls back onto the road he reaches over, tucks that strand of hair behind her ear.

He figures she’s given him permission to do that much.

As soon as he pulls up the drive and Maggie sees them, she hollers and the whole family comes running. They’re all talking at once, gesticulating, clearly relieved and angry in equal measures. Beth gives him a rueful glance, and he hopes she’s used the ride back to come up with some plausible excuses. He’s sure she has. She’ll have a rough, irritating night ahead of her, but she’ll be all right.

She’s starting to open the door, but then she stops, leans back in, whispers something quick. Four words. They hit him in the chest, pound his sternum into broken shards and slam repeatedly into his heart and now he’s certain: Whatever that was in the ruins? They both carried it back. Now they have it between them, cupped in their hands, and they need to figure out what to do with it. They need to figure out what comes next.

She could have left it down there. He knows she knows. She knows he knows. She was under no obligation to make what happened any more than it was. To let it be any more than it was. She chose to bring it with her. She chose to let it be more.

He is not in any way whatsoever prepared to be the responsible party here.

He manages to come up with his own excuse for why he can’t stay and gets the hell out of there. It’s not hard; everyone is way too distracted with the business of yelling at and hugging Beth and demanding that she swear in every possible sense to not do that again. He looks in the mirror as he pulls down the drive, watches them gathered around her, and though there’s no way it should be possible, he swears he manages to meet the reflection of her eyes.

All the way home he’s playing those words over and over in his head. What they mean. That dividing line. That series of lines. Borders, and each space beyond it a new country, and what the hell is at the end of all of this? One of those old maps that goes as far as anyone knew when it was made and then ends in a blank space full of wind and water and the suggestion of monsters.

*Here there be dragons.*

He’s terrified and he absolutely fucking loves it. Those four words.

*Meet me after church.*

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Take a Picture" by Filter.
lay me on the ground, fly me in the sky

Chapter Notes

Today's chapter is brought to you by the letter E.

He’s a couple miles short of town when it hits him.

*Hits* isn’t an adequate word. It *slams* into him. He’s driving, watching the road, the sky, the last of the sun and the thunderheads ever nearer, thinking dimly about dinner and Merle and from what angle Merle might come at him and that sock full of cash and the apartment listings he wasn’t at all looking at and the future he isn’t at all thinking about, and always circling back around toward *Sunday* like one of those clichéd moths edging back toward one of those clichéd flames, and then the world cracks open, splits right the fuck down the middle, and his foot slams on the brake so hard that when the truck finally grinds to a halt he smells burning. Burning rubber. Possibly other burning things. Did lightning strike something? Something nearby? The field? Him? He leans over the wheel and tries to get his breath, fails. His chest feels like two immense hands are curled around it and are attempting to squeeze his lungs out through his nose. He practically kicks open the door and stumbles out onto the asphalt, and when the world rocks sideways he manages to brace himself up against the hood.

The metal is hot enough that it should be hurting him. If it is he doesn’t notice. He stands there, head hanging between his shoulders, and breathes. Or he makes a valiant attempt.

There are a number of things you can supposedly make if you fake them long enough; maybe respiration is one of them.

He finally looks up. No lightning. More distant thunder-muttering, but though the sunset is deep crimson and sullen, there’s no storm. Not yet. There should be, because he just got done *kissing Beth Greene* and it seems like there’s a thing with that and storms, but the sky right over him is clear. Darkening. Lovely in a deeply weird kind of way. In perfect accordance with the rest of the universe. In perfect fucking harmony.

He straightens up and stares at the truck like it can explain some of this.

It has a cursed radio, and Beth fucking Greene has kissed him in it three times now, so is the idea that it might start *talking* so unreasonable?

His grip on *reasonable* is the slightest bit shaky.

He turns and leans back against the truck and fumbles for his cigarettes. He’s parked in the middle of the damn road, but if anyone comes along and wants to get past him they can go the fuck around, and if they really want an explanation and they have an hour or so he might even try to give them one, just so—at the end—he can grab them by the front of the shirt and shake them and hiss *SO DID THAT HAPPEN OR WHAT*

He lights one up, leans his head back and gazes up at that weird, lovely sky.

It’s not even the kiss. The kiss was... Every kiss with her has been indescribable. Every kiss with her
has been like the first kiss ever in the history of the whole practice. A revelation. Small ones and big ones—the first soft one that night in her drive and the harder one in the rain and now, just now, both kinds in rapid succession—but each one world-altering.

His world. Different every time.

*Okay, just by the way, if that’s what kissing her is like, can you imagine—*

No. No, he can’t. Not right now. He has to drive home.

But it’s not even about the kiss. Not any of them, them and everything contained within them, everything sweet and hot in her compressed to a single primary point of contact. Stars are that dense, and they make wells in space into which you fall. But it isn’t those. It isn’t the ones he already orbits.

She said *meet me after church,* and he doesn’t think she would tell him to do that if she merely wanted to give him another fun iteration of the *Let’s Just Be Friends* talk. He’s very new at this, but somehow he doesn’t think telling the much older guy with whose mouth you keep colliding to *meet you after church* so you can inform him you only want to be friends again is a done thing.

He’s guessing, but as guesses go he feels pretty okay about it.

It’s not about those kisses. It’s about how she wants him to *meet her after church,* and he’s about as certain as he can be that she doesn’t just want to be friends, so what it’s about—what it’s *really about*—is the kisses he’s daring to suspect might be coming.

This isn’t over. It doesn’t feel over. He might be crazy, but he’s not kidding himself. Not about this. It doesn’t feel over because it’s not.

So what the fuck *is* it?

*You can’t do this,* some irritatingly rational part of him whispers. *You can’t. Whatever that was, you should have left it down there. Whatever you’ve got in your stupid fucking head now, let go of it,* because *that thing you’re thinking absolutely cannot happen.*

*You want to know what’s not a done thing?*

*Man, I don’t even know where to start with you.*

But it’s not one thing. Not just. He exhales smoke at the darkening sky and almost laughs. It’s not one thing at all. It’s so many things, a universe full of them. More than he ever thought might be possible. He saw a picture once when he was a lot younger—doesn’t remember how or where or even exactly what it was but he knows he saw it—which was supposedly a high magnification shot of space. He doesn’t know what part of space and it doesn’t matter; what matters is that—in that memory which is occasionally unreliable but which *never* lets go of the stuff it grabs onto—what he at first took for black space full of stars was, upon closer inspection, black space full of *galaxies.*

Hundreds of galaxies. Thousands of them. Millions.

It blew his fucking mind right out the back of his skull.

He has never told *anyone* about that picture, because he’s never had the chance to tell anyone who would even vaguely get it, but for years he’s carried it around with him, like he was saving it for something. For just the right thing. And now he thinks he might know what he was saving it for: To articulate to himself how it feels to know that Beth Greene might—of her own volition and free will and desire—kiss him again.
It feels like he understands how big the world truly is.

He stays there for the time it takes to smoke one cigarette and get another one about halfway down to the filter. During that time he doesn’t do much thinking. He lets himself process. By the time he gets back in the truck the last of the daylight is almost gone and he feels calmer. steadier. Like he can go back to the world and be in it, and at least maintain the appearance of nothing much having changed.

But God, the world is so fucking huge.

How do you come back from that? How do you come back down and walk around and be normal? How the fuck did those guys go to the moon and come back and even function?

He almost wants to pull over just to laugh for a few more minutes.

No, he’s not crazy. He’s fine.

He drives back into town. It’s a Saturday night and the storm—which now seems like it might actually miss them—has put a bit of a spark in the air. It’s warm and muggy but a wind is kicking up, and people are out on Main Street heading to one bar or the other, going to the restaurant, the cafe, and the coffee shop is—of course—doing its open mic night. He drives past crowds of kids seizing one last weekend of freedom before classes start up again, older couples walking hand in hand, small clots of what appear to be local farmworkers, and a few solitary people of all ages who don’t look like they’re going much of anywhere.


Beth was right. This is the cusp of something. At some point in the near future everything changes. Is already changing.

She was scared. So is he. And they’re completely different people from completely different worlds, so there’s no reason to assume any of this will touch them the same way or change them the same way or that any of this means any more than that she wants to kiss him some more and he’s going to be sticking around for another few weeks, and at the end of it he’ll say goodbye to her and leave and she’ll graduate and do whatever she wants and have a great life and he’ll never see her again.

Things are changing, yes, but nothing says her changes have much to do with his.

But he’s not sure they don’t. Because he looks back and he sees her fingerprints all over. Looks back and sees all the evidence she’s left to mark the exact places she fucked with his life. He looks back and sees all of it starting to come unmoored, to drift. He sees orbits decaying and bodies spinning off into the void.

He looks back and he’s not sure he sees much worth holding onto.

~

Merle is clearly already on his way out when Daryl walks in. Expected; not only has Merle been obviously avoiding conversation but he seems to be taking care to make certain their paths cross as little as possible. Daryl has been wondering what exactly is going on in Merle’s head right now. At least some of the time. Maybe not as much as he would once have done.

Frankly—also unsurprisingly—it’s starting to matter a bit less.
Merle is in the middle of pulling on a ratty t-shirt when Daryl comes into the bedroom and begins to strip off his. He keeps his back turned away from Merle as he does so. The scars there—the scars on both of them—are accepted between them as a given, recognized and understood and never spoken about. Daryl isn’t even sure what either of them would say. *You too, huh?* Do you high-five over something like that? Even very ironically?

Almost enough to get a smile out of him, the first time he thought about it. A grim one, but still.

But that also doesn’t feel like it matters as much. This is yet another thing which is now, in significant part, habit.

“You comin’ out, brother? Was gonna get in a game of cards or two, get some winnin’ on.” Merle sounds almost cordial. Daryl can’t tell if it’s because he’s nervous or genuinely in a good mood or what. But he’s not overly fond of the feeling that he’s the one being placated.

That doesn’t raise any good associations.

He isn’t. He tosses his shirt on the floor and shakes his head.

Merle turns and peers at him a bit. “Y’alright, man?”

So he must look like *something* happened to him. Can’t be helped. And he doesn’t think Merle is going to push him. Not right now.

“’m fine, bro.”

“Right, whatever. Look, I’ll bring you back a bottle of Jim Beam.” Merle hesitates. “Gonna need the truck, though.”

Daryl has no objection. He’s finding he’s distracted enough that it’s difficult to summon up any objection to anything much. Maybe Merle isn’t in a place to push him, but Daryl thinks he could actually be pushed to some effect. He supposes it’s good, then, that things have aligned the way they have.

He’s not a total fool, and he’s getting worse and worse at lying to himself—losing a skill he thought he would never let slip. It’s always been a survival skill and losing it might end up being a problem. At some point this is all going to come out and Merle is going to have himself a great big *reaction.*

Probably. Until then he can do some placating of his own. Distracting of his own. He’s still good at that, anyway.

He digs into the pocket of his jeans and tosses over the car keys. Merle catches them one-handed, gives him a nod.

Daryl pushes past him and goes for the bathroom. “Just try not to come home dead or arrested or nothin’.”

“Thanks, *Dad.*”

But even that doesn’t penetrate. Not really. It redirects around him like running water around a rock. A warm, soft cloud has gathered over him, the color of the night-glow outside, all that sound and life, and it smells like Beth’s hair.
He already knows he’s going to allow himself this. He’s going to let himself do some more discovering.

It’s remarkable, he thinks as he turns the shower on and finishes undressing, how when she kissed him he didn’t think of all the things he’s taken to spinning through his mind when he’s alone. He thought about touching her, yeah—but only her face. Her hair. Her neck and her shoulders. Her mouth, her lips and the slight roughness of her tongue—and there had been so much heat in that, huge pulses of it rolling up and down his spine—but his mind hadn’t wandered any further south. Her mouth had been the center. It had been everything he wanted in those moments. More than enough.

He’s kissed women before, of course he has, but those were hard things, clumsy in a way this wasn’t, completely unlike it. He had supposed they felt okay; now he’s questioning that. His perspective has been flipped over, opened up. He gets kissing in a way he didn’t. Or he’s beginning to.

So there had only been her mouth. With her pressed against him like that, bathed in sun, her strong hands on his arms and her cheeks warm against his palms, her tangled hair curling through his fingers, he thinks he might have fucking collapsed if his decent imagination had drifted anywhere else. But given some removal, a little distance between what happened then and what’s happening to him now...

Some things are different. Some things are more approachable, now that he feels like approaching them.

He steps under the spray and twists the tap from warm to hot, tips his head back and feels the water pound. Thinks of rain. How rain fits into his life now. Rain has a specific place and it is a place, and he feels like she might always be waiting for him there.

She kissed him.

That’s something. That’s something worth some attention. Because in his mind, in that place he’s carved out for the two of them—a poor echo of the way she manipulates time and space to make a place in which they can enclose themselves—she’s always the one who has things done to her. She’s not passive, and she certainly never resists—God, that would be absolutely horrifying—but she’s not the one determining the course of events, the order in which stuff happens. She’s not taking control. She’s under him, arching and sighing, moaning his name, but she doesn’t put her hands on him. She wants it, she whispers to him to keep going, don’t stop, God, but that’s all.

He pulls her against him and makes her feel him, how hard he is and what she’s done to him, and he drags his lips down her throat, licks at her collarbones and the depression between them, tastes the salt on her skin. He circles her nipples with his tongue. He’s gotten as far as completely stripping her and slipping a hand between her legs, grazing his fingers over her clit and making her jump and gasp, and that’s wonderful, so fucking great—but it’s all him.

And now he understands how wrong that is. Not wrong in the sense of bad or wrong in the sense of holy shit you are really fucked up you creep, because he stopped thinking along those poisonous lines a while ago, but simply wrong in the sense of incorrect.

If—somehow, and he can barely even consider that as a real possibility regardless of what happened or didn’t happen today—he ever got that far with her, he’s pretty goddamn sure she wouldn’t just have things done to her. Even eagerly. She wouldn’t just take it.

He has some revising to do.
So he’s going to get to work on that.

He leans back against the tile, hissing slightly at the cold, and slides his hand down his body. Of course he’s already hard; he’s been hard as fucking diamond since he got in here, and he curls his fingers around his cock and lets out a long, shuddering breath.

He’s going to have this. Maybe he’s not ready to introduce this to himself as more than a hypothetical situation outside this space he’s built for himself, but in here he’s going to entertain the idea all he wants. Play host. Fix it a drink. Make it comfortable, invite it to stick around for a while.

He usually does this quickly. He doesn’t think he’s going to do that this time. Because there are all those revisions to make, and he needs to make certain he gets it right.

So he stands there, feels the weight of his cock, the thickness and the heat and the softness of his own skin—notices himself in a way he hasn’t before. Forever, his body has merely been this thing. Meat. A conveyance. An object he rides around in and uses to do stuff. It had to be. It was dangerous to let it be anything more.

But if she touched him—if she touched him like this, and oh fucking God would she really—he’s not so sure she would think of him that way.

He holds himself. Strokes once, slowly, and shivers, and thinks about her hand. Standing there in front of him, smooth cool fingers, running them up and down his length. Exploring him. Looking up at him with those wide doe eyes. Maybe smiling. That sweet little smile.

Jesus, the curve of her mouth.

He breathes her name and he strokes himself again.

This is okay. This isn’t fucked up. Or if it is, he is so far past giving a shit.

In his mind she’s careful with him. In his mind there’s even a kind of innocence there, and that might be sort of fucked up, and also probably wrong because she’s eighteen and she has to have done some things, maybe all of them, but it’s there anyway and it’s his goddamn fantasy and he lets it be. She’s uncertain about how to touch him. Maybe he takes her hand, maybe he gives her some direction. Maybe he shows her what to do.

His hips are already rolling slowly, head back, eyes closed. He can have this. He can give this to himself.

He deserves something nice.

So she’s more confident. She’s pressing closer, handling him more roughly—maybe pushing him back, maybe almost pinning him. She’s smart, she’s sharp; if she didn’t go into it already knowing everything she needs to know, she’d learn fast. His breath comes a little more strained, a little shallower. Her lips against his jaw—he thinks she would probably slip her fingers into his hair and pull him down, kiss him again. That sweet gloss on her lips and the taste of her mouth. Maybe a hint of her teeth. Naked—yes, she can be like that. Breasts against his chest. He can cup them, pass his thumbs over her nipples, feel them harden.

He can have this. It’s all right. He can—

He stops, panting. The water isn’t cold yet but it’s headed there and he cuts it off, fumbling for a towel.
There could, if he wants, be more of this. Considerably more.

He dries himself. It’s a half-assed job. He drops the towel on the floor, moves in a bit of a daze into the living room and sinks down onto the couch, cock jutting up and head dark and glistening.

Okay, here’s an even better thing: he can place them back in the ruins. Return there. He can do that anytime he wants—how the fuck did he not realize that before? He can put them back there and melt their clothes away, and what the fuck are clothes, anyway? Who had that ridiculous idea? He drops into the grass and she goes with him, on top of him, straddling him with her beautifully strong thighs. They’re a fantastically bizarre Adam and Eve in the skeleton of an unidentified past, water and shifting light and the green swaying of trees. Taking hold of her hips, lifting her, but she’s already moving how she wants to. Gripping him.

Head dropping back between her shoulders and mouth dropping open and her hair in free golden waves as she guides him into her.

He’s aware that his hand is back on his cock, firm and fast, but it’s all her and her delightful weight and the sun flowing across her skin as she leans over him, braces her hands on his chest and rolls her hips against him. If she did this he could arch under her, meet what she’s doing to him, match it in rhythm and time. She’d ride him. She’d lean backward and prop herself up on his thighs and she’d throw her head back, her breasts standing out small and full and absolutely fucking perfect and begging for his palms.

If. If it happened like this. This is how it might happen.

He would ask her. She would want to be asked. He would ask her to go faster, harder, maybe even beg her; he could buck up against her, hissing impatience and need, and she could laugh and drop a hand between her legs and give herself what she wants, give it all to herself and bring him along because she feels like it. Go as fast as she wants and as hard as she wants, moaning his name—please let her do that, that would be so amazing—fucking herself to a crescendo and tearing open the world around her, squeezing him inside her and shaking, tensing and releasing and crying out and scaring birds out of the trees, exploding them into the sky in a torrent of wings, and he’s coming hot and slick all over his hand and belly, sobbing and snapping his head back so hard he’s distantly positive he’s pulled a muscle.

He sits there for a minute or two, half slumped, still gripping himself and staring at the ugly drop ceiling. Focusing on a waterstain that looks like a mutant South America. Trying to breathe.

She has a way of making extremely basic things extremely difficult for him. Especially oxygen. Oxygen appears to be antithetical to thinking about her in any direct way.

Well.

So if it happened—which it probably won’t because even if she likes kissing him, the rest of it seems like a bit of a stretch—it might happen like that. Sort of. Maybe. He doesn’t think it’s totally outside the realm of possibility.

Melting clothes into nothing would be a neat trick.

He sighs and closes his eyes. He’s not bad for wanting this. He’s not fucked up.

But he’s back to being pretty sure he’s fucked.

He gets up. Cleans himself off, pulls on a pair of pants and wanders over to the one window in the room. Drags up the blinds and looks down. The glass itself is filthy but not so filthy that he can’t see
that world outside—so much bigger than he ever believed. Maybe he can’t be in her specific corner of it—or he can’t stay there, not forever—but this world contains him and her, together. That tether isn’t his imagination. It exists. He thought it was only her; now he thinks maybe they wove it between them. She’s powerful but he has to take at least some responsibility here.

He might be powerful too. A little. That also is remotely possible.

People passing on the street below. It’s still not very late. He didn’t lose all that much time in his own head. He feels like a voyeur, looking down at them as they drift through the early night. Like he’s standing outside, like the glass is thicker than mere glass. A membrane he can’t penetrate.

But he could be closer than he was.

Everything is changing. He’s changing. He needs to accept the fact that he just spent what he’s reasonably certain was the better part of fifteen minutes doing something that usually takes him less than five—that’s part of those changes, because changes like this don’t leave anything untouched.

And that’s a rather appropriate turn of phrase.

He leans his head against the windowframe—pitted dark wood all blurry—and closes his eyes again.

He didn’t know. He didn’t go into this even slightly informed, or even vaguely equipped. If he could go back to the beginning and change it, he wouldn’t. If anything he would try to make it happen faster. Get there quicker. He would meet her at that goddamn party and save her a soaking, even if she was and is so beautiful when she’s wet. Crank up the heater and beg her to sing for him. Drive her through the night and, if she was amenable, carry her past the farm and to wherever she felt like going.

Do anything for her. Anything.

Oh, girl.

It’s not going to rain tomorrow. He’s positive.

That’s a change too.
then I open up and see the person falling here is me

Chapter Notes

ONCE AGAIN THANK YOU FOR THE COMMENTS I continue to be so damn bad at answering them but I love them and I love you and you are lovely and thank you so much. <3

It doesn’t rain. He’s not sure what he makes of being right.

She texts him—it’s early, and he gathers it’s before church. A word and a time, and after a few seconds of staring at it he realizes what she’s doing: keeping things as innocuous as possible, in case anyone checks her phone. Nothing obvious about who she’s meeting. What she’s doing.

Why she might be meeting him.

Two things.

It hits him very, very hard that the implication there is that she feels like she has something to hide. Which is suggestive in and of itself. Delightfully suggestive. Terrifyingly suggestive. Terrifying keeps coming up. He would have thought he would dislike being so constantly terrified but if anything it’s spice. It’s making everything sharper. More intense.

The second thing is he wonders what, if anything, she’s written about him in that journal of hers.

He wouldn’t peek even if he had the opportunity. As with the ruins, that would be a violation of her trust, and he absolutely cannot do that. But he wonders. He wonders a lot. It would be nice to know.

He can’t look. But maybe he can ask her.

Anyway.

park. 11:30

He knows which one she means. At the end of Main Street—the end he doesn’t head toward when he’s driving out of town—there’s a park which is a bit more significant in size than one might expect. It’s a World War II memorial thing, but it’s not like others he’s seen in so many similar towns. Not just a small green spot with flowerbeds and an obelisk or a statue or a plaque. It’s a larger space, green and flowerbeds and a statue of a soldier holding a flag, plaque with names of every one of the town’s native sons who served, but also a stream running through it and a path, and a fair number of trees. Almost a little wood. It extends past the commercial buildings and a few houses, perhaps a bit bigger than a football field. There’s a bridge over the stream. There are a few lampposts. It’s not as well maintained as it might be, but for a town somewhat lacking in any real charm, it’s honestly quite charming. If you go for that sort of thing.

He’s only been there once when he was doing some exploring on his own, but he kind of liked it. It was nice. He doesn’t like it the way he likes deep woods, true seclusion, the feeling of being far away from everyone and everything that pulls at him or drags at him or threatens to hurt him, but it was nice.
And there are secluded spots there, places into which they can duck and probably not be seen unless someone comes along close by. Which someone might, but.

It excites him. Maybe it shouldn’t, but it does. Something secret, more than it already was. Before it was his secret, something he kept from everyone, including her. God, especially her. She couldn’t know. She couldn’t ever know.

Now she knows and she seems to want to keep the secret with him, and that is so fucking exciting in so many different and badly tangled ways.

He flips his phone shut and sits there on the couch—Merle sawing some pretty considerable logs in the bedroom—and closes his eyes and lets it all sink in.

What if she kisses him again? He thinks it might actually be pretty likely. What if she touches him, what if she does that thing where she combs her fingers into his hair and uses it to tug him down and curves her mouth against his, pushes past his lips with her tongue? What if she...

He groans softly. Can’t think about that right now. Maybe later.

Apparently now that he’s decided he’s going to go ahead and consider her along these lines it’s difficult to make himself stop.

He wants her. She’s lovely and sweet and he loves simply being with her, listening to her, and he loves everything about her that has nothing to do with wanting her like this and he knows he could be satisfied with that, but fucking hell he wants her the way he’s never wanted anyone in his entire life. The way he was aware other people experienced desire, but vaguely assumed he would never have. Didn’t even really care. It didn’t strike him as a problem. He didn’t feel like his life was empty without it. He had a lot of other things on his plate. His first time—goaded into it by some poor excuses for friends and his own intensely resentful sense that this was expected of him and he would be even more of a fucking weirdo if he didn’t do it—was awkward and frankly humiliating and like something he had to get over with. Get hard, fuck the girl, come, be done with it. Because it was just another thing to do. Felt okay, once he got going and managed to focus on how it felt without the miserable fact of where he was and why he was there, but it didn’t matter.

It does matter.

If last night is any indication, what he wants to do with Beth is about a lot more than steps one through four.

Okay, well, he’s meeting her and he has no idea if she wants anything like what he wants, and even if she does it might never happen, so he needs to put it away and get his shit together and expect nothing.

He can do that.

He gets up and brushes his teeth and showers. Takes a little while with that. Because it’s like rain, and you know what rain’s all about. He dresses. All of this quiet as he can; he doesn’t want to wake Merle, doesn’t want to even risk questions. And before, he thought he wanted to keep this from Merle because he didn’t want Merle being an asshole about it and pissing him off with the kind of shit he would probably talk about doing with the farmer’s daughter, but now Daryl actually wants some of the shit Merle would probably talk about doing with the farmer’s daughter and that makes this whole deal about a hundred thousand times more of a potential problem.

Because if Merle finds out, Merle is almost certainly going to make some real trouble about it. Even
if Daryl’s not certain about what the nature of that trouble would be.


This Sunday is bucking the trend: it’s fucking gorgeous, like a high pressure front rolled through without a storm, and it’s bright and cloudless sky-blue and even a hint of crisp autumn without the chill. At the bottom of the stairs—even creakier than usual, and he’s wondering how concerned he should be getting about that, especially with how Merle tends to stomp up and down them—he lights up a smoke and shoves his hands into his pockets and walks. Sunday is bucking the trend in another way, maybe because it’s not raining: the sleepiness has been replaced by relaxed activity, and people are out—a lot of them dressed in neater church clothes, going into the cafe or going for coffee, or apparently strolling for the sheer pleasure of doing so. They’re in a good mood, most of them. He’s in a good mood. A few of them nod to him as he passes; people never do that, because he doesn’t exactly look reputable with his longish hair—which never appears all that clean even when he’s just washed it—and his worn clothes, always unkempt, never kempt, and he knows it.

He looks like redneck white trash, and he knows it. That’s what he is.

But Beth Greene likes him and that supersedes everything, so they nod and he sort of nods back, and he feels good.

He’s watching for her. Watching for her in that pretty white dress with the slightly flared skirt. Shining hair tied back, that single neat braid, the flash of her understated jewelry. Stuff that’s so essentially her.

He’s so fucked. He wants to be.

Basically forever.

He heads past the dying music store, past a place peddling secondhand clothing, past a shop with a window display full of old-looking brass and porcelain lamps that may or may not actually be old, and onto the path that leads into the park. She didn’t say where in the park, but he trusts fate—if there is such a thing, and regarding the two of them it does feel a bit like there’s an unseen hand lurking around behind the scenes—to hurl them together at some point. He checks his phone; eleven twenty-six. If he hovers around the path just inside that’ll probably be sufficient.

Try not to be creepy while doing it. Try not to look like a sex offender. If it was dusk it would be more of a problem. He’s out taking the air. Redneck white trash also enjoy air. Everyone knows that, or they should.


He exhales a stream of smoke through the corner of his mouth, and there she is. Coming toward him down the sidewalk, already smiling, and fucking Christ, she is so beautiful it’s agony.

She’s not wearing the white dress this time. She’s wearing a loose blue peasant top almost the exact shade of the sky, one shoulder bared, and an equally loose white skirt that stops short of her knees. When she gets close enough he sees it’s hemmed with pale purple-blue flowers. Forget-me-nots. Beaded leather thongs on her wrist, all yellow and green. Small brown handbag. And those cowboy boots.

He wonders if she even has any other shoes.

She’s smiling even wider when she gets to him and stops short, not too close, gazing up at him. Everything with her feels the same. And everything with her feels so different, they might have both
slipped into a parallel universe.

Hell, maybe they have.

“Hi.”

He taps ash. “Hey.” He can’t tell if he’s returning her smile or not. He can’t feel all of his face. Say he is. Just a bit. Not enough to make it weird.

“I told ‘em I was gonna do some shoppin’.” She laughs, light, carefree. Faint mischievousness working its way into the curve of her lips. Pink. A little extra color. It makes her glow. Not that she didn’t already. “Had to fight Maggie off. They don’t wanna let me outta their sight. Made me promise I’d be back by five or I’m grounded. You believe that? I’m eighteen.” She seems far more amused than upset. It’s adorable. “They haven’t tried to ground me in, like... a year.”

“Tried?”

“I was usually able to talk ‘em out of it. Don’t think I would this time. So,” she continues, “I’m meetin’ my friend Chrissy at four-thirty. Probably better if you don’t run me home.”

He nods. He doesn’t need her to explain why. Another rush of excitement; they’re dancing with the forbidden. He probably shouldn’t like that so much but oh well, he does.

She touches his hand, her face softening. “C’mon.”

He lets her lead him into the shade.

And once they’re deep enough, once they’re out of sight of the street, she pulls him off the path and behind a tree and she does it, what he wanted and what he told himself he shouldn’t expect: drops her bag and he drops the cigarette as she slides her hands into his hair and drags him down, meets him with her mouth.

And yes.

His hands find her waist like they were meant to be there and he fights back a shiver and fails, moans softly, and she does too, and her lips are so sweet. She’s so warm. He wants to tug that peasant top further off her shoulder. He wants to do a lot of things.

But this, her pressing closer and angling her head so he can have more of her... This last day of freedom, this last day before all that change she was scared about starts up in earnest, but they can hold each other here, just for a moment, and whatever else he wants, every time he has this it seems like it’s enough for him for the rest of his life. Hand in her hair and drifting down to cup her cheek as his teeth lightly catch her lower lip and draw another moan out of her, and holy God, this is just. It’s just.

He tries for the words and there aren’t any, except this one he keeps circling back to and has since that first Sunday in the rain.

“Girl,” he murmurs against her mouth, and she laughs and shuts him right the fuck up.
both our hearts have a secret only both of us know

After that they walk for a while.

Not anywhere in particular. They stay inside the bounds of the park. She doesn’t talk and he doesn’t make an attempt at talking—which he knows would probably go nowhere—and they don’t touch, though his hand is next to hers, very close, and after a few minutes of walking like that he’s filled with an overwhelming urge to take it in his, and it’s yet another urge he’s never had before and has no idea what to do with.

Not touching her is suddenly a miserable prospect. Which means he’s probably in for some misery.

Might be worth it.

He watches her out of the corner of his eye. Not looking at her is something else that’s apparently difficult—not that it wasn’t pretty difficult before but it’s worse now. Everything that was bad is worse now. He could be near her before and not want to grab her and drag her against him, and he wasn’t so goddamn scared by the idea. Wasn’t he supposed to be less afraid of this whole thing if he actually somehow started doing it? Wasn’t that how this was supposed to go?

Except he’s fucking kidding himself if he had any clear idea how it was supposed to go at all. Any expectations. He told himself not to have those.

He stares at her and he watches the sunlight play over her hair, every strand spun gold—like he can see every strand, so what the fuck is that about? He watches her braid bounce as she walks and he thinks about her making it, her fingers moving elegantly into an equally elegant pattern, a kind of care for her appearance that isn’t vain at all and which is completely alien to him. He thinks about running his own fingers over it and feeling every curve. He watches the subtle changes to the line of her neck as she moves. He could touch her there—he barely has. He hasn’t kissed her there. In his mind he has and in his mind she lets her head drop loosely back and she moans... and holy shit, maybe he can do that sometime—it’s no longer outside the realm of possibility—and see if it’s really like he imagined. Anything like it.

If it’s exactly like the way he’s imagined it he has no idea how he’ll continue with his life as a functional human being.

That’s overwrought and he knows it, but God, her neck. Her neck.

He hasn’t even gotten as far as looking at the rest of her. Below the delicate line of her collarbones is a blur of unapproachability. He can fantasize about her when he’s not with her, sure. This close to the real thing and his ability to handle it completely dries up and blows away. He’s all raw. There’s nothing between him and the sheer real potential of his hands on her.

He keeps telling himself to get it together and it keeps not happening.

Birds calling in the trees, occasionally strafing the path ahead of them. A kid laughing somewhere, another kid’s happy screams. Once they pass an elderly woman walking the species of fluffy little dog that Daryl always thinks about punting as far as he can even though he’s never played football in his life. He likes dogs, he wouldn’t actually do it, but they’re this totally puntable shape.

Anyway, she barely spares them a glance, likewise the dog, and Beth doesn’t seem to be bothered by it, so he decides to also not be.
He wants to ask her how secretive they have to be. Obviously her family can’t find out, but what about here? Who else should they be worried about? She dragged him behind a tree to kiss him. What does that mean?

He can’t ask her. He has no idea how to go about that.

*Hey, how potentially bad is this? Is this life-at-school-is-weird-for-a-week-or-so bad, or is this I-get-shot-and-you-get-forced-to-become-a-nun bad?*

Neither is great. It would be nice to avoid both.

Merle can’t know. Merle just absolutely cannot know.

The path winds through the trees, past a couple of little flowerbeds it appears no one has done anything with for a while. Bright red verbena, pink rose and purple aster. Yellow daisy-things. A little overgrown but the flowers don’t care who looks after them, and the brilliance of the colors in the sun snags his attention for a few seconds.

He might not have noticed those before. Yeah, maybe, but he sort of doubts it.

At last they come to a place where there’s a circle of side path off the main one heading into a stand of fragrant eucalyptus. She leads him down it, and only about twenty or so yards in, there’s a bench, which she sits down on. It’s not totally hidden from the path but he supposes it’s probably good enough. Good enough for her, anyway.

Good enough to hide from... something. Someone. Unclear.

He sits down next to her without being asked, and she looks up at the light in the slender leaves. He’s still trying to look at her unobtrusively and he feels like it’s not working very well.

But why shouldn’t she know he’s looking at her? What the fuck reason does he have now to try to play it cool? He is so painfully uncool. She’s known him for the better part of a month now; she must be aware of that.

So he does look. He looks at her hair, her neck, but he also dives in and looks at the rest of her, the lines of her body beneath her loose, comfortable clothes, her legs below her skirt and the slightly lanky grace of them, her boots. She swings one leg and the heel scuffs against the gravel with a pleasant crunching noise.

He touches her hand. Just with the back of his. It’s sort of accidental. Sort of.

Barely fifteen minutes ago his tongue was literally in her mouth, so why is it like he’s touching her for the first time?

He doesn’t hate it.

She looks at him so suddenly he almost jumps, and then she *leans*, pressing her bare arm against his, and he manages to not shiver. She’s so warm, God, she is always so warm, like she’s always in the sun. Always soaking it up and carrying it around inside her.

Those clear blue eyes grabbing his and holding on.

“*I feel like I should say somethin’,*” she murmurs, and laughs so softly it’s barely a breath. “*I just...*” Her gaze drops to the side, focusing on nothing in particular, and he can tell she’s thinking. Thinking hard. Maybe she was thinking this entire time. “*I know this is weird. Kinda weird, anyway.*”
She pauses again and he’s terribly sure he should say something too. Anything. Words. Christ, he is so fucking bad at words, how is this ever going to be anything but a disaster?

Nothing. He sits there and he stares at her. Then he looks down, because she’s too much.

“I meant it,” she continues. “It wasn’t about Jimmy. I wanted to do that for a while. I wanted to do it since that time in the rain. Maybe before. I dunno. I just... I like you. I really like you. And I know it’s weird, like I said, because you just got here and you’re older and I’m sorta new at this, ‘cause for a while it was just Jimmy, but I...” The rush halts and she’s gazing at him again, and he sees it when he hazards a glance up and catches a glimpse of her from under the fringe of his hair. She’s looking at him and she looks like she might be about to plead with him, and he realizes something startling, though he suspected it before.

She’s as nervous as he is. Or maybe not as, but she’s pretty nervous. She doesn’t want to fuck this up. She’s not confident of her ability to keep from doing just that.

She cares enough about whatever this is to care whether or not she fucks it up.

“I like you,” she says again, quietly. “I wanna keep... I wanna keep doin’ this. I wanna keep seein’ you.”

He realize does have to say something now. She’s been doing all the talking, and this is important, and she looks like that, like she needs something from him. Some reassurance. He can’t believe that, somehow. She’s always seemed like she had so much more of a handle on stuff than he ever has.

He wants to give her that. He wants to give her anything and everything she needs.

“Me too,” he whispers, and then he goes ahead and does it, because doing things has always been easier for him than saying them. Touching in general still freaks him out, the thought of it, but touching her...

He takes her hand in his, and if she’s warm her hand is nevertheless cool, and he holds it carefully. He doesn’t want to take more here than she wants to give him. Her fingers feel so delicate. Like her braid, so oddly elegant.

And she smiles then and threads her fingers through his, and something in his chest wrenches and melts and flows into his veins.

“It’s not just about kissin’ you,” she says, and he can look at her. He can. He does, and it gets easier, and she’s wearing that smile, and that’s when he knows he wants to make it his sole mission in life to make sure Beth Greene keeps smiling like that.

Or he wouldn’t mind. He probably can’t actually do that. Probably.

“I liked that. I like it a lot.” Another laugh, low and musical. “But it ain’t just that. You make me feel good. It’s easy to talk to you. You listen. People... Most of ‘em don’t. They might think they do, but.” She shrugs and squeezes his hand. “So I wanna keep seein’ you. I wanna... I said I wanted to be friends. I still want that. Just with the kissin’ part thrown in.” Her smile widens, almost into a playful little grin, and he just about leans in and kisses her again right then and there.

_Just do that, girl. Just do that forever._

“Me too,” he says again, still almost in a whisper, and he tries to put everything into those two words. Everything pulling and spinning and seething around in him. Everything he can’t seem to put a name to. If he could show her... Maybe he’ll figure something out.
Touching her doesn’t feel like it would quite get the job done.

But he does. He reaches up with his other hand, lays his fingertips against the edge of her jaw, and she presses into the touch and it’s perfect.

She likes it when he touches her.

That’s completely mindblowing.

This isn’t anything like his fantasies, because in those touching her is almost always easy. But he thinks he honestly likes this better, and not simply because it’s the real thing. It all means more.

There are things she should know. In about a month he might get to all of them. “I never...” he starts, and hesitates, waffling a bit. “I never had this. Like this.” He makes a waving gesture in the air between them and he’s sure it’s totally inadequate, but he can’t think of the proper name for it. A name that fits. “Like what you’re sayin’. Ever.”

She gives him a quizzical head-tilt. “You sayin’ you never had a girlfriend?”

That doesn’t feel right either, but he guesses it’s good enough. He shakes his head.

“You... Wow.” She laughs again. She sounds both surprised... and oddly pleased. It’s not what he would have expected. He’s well aware that it’s weird for a guy pushing forty to not have had a girlfriend, but if somehow she could get a look at his life up until now—which he would suffer almost any ordeal to prevent—he’s reasonably confident she would understand why he hasn’t.

Hasn’t been much of a way or a reason or an inclination. He wouldn’t have had anything to offer anyone anyway.

“How come?”

He shrugs.

She arches a brow. “Pretty sure you like girls.”

He lets out a laugh that’s really more of a grunt and looks away, doesn’t say anything for a few seconds—but he has nothing to defend. Or he doesn’t feel like he does. She doesn’t make him feel like he does. Even if it’s making him feel weirder about everything.

“I like you,” he says abruptly, because that’s a lot closer to the heart of it. Sure, girls, whatever. His feelings there have actually never been all that intense. He’s always been fairly certain that his preferences edge in that direction—thank Christ, because he would be in some serious fucking trouble if they didn’t—but they haven’t been especially strong ones. No one has stood out.

Not like her.

“Oh,” she murmurs, and she squeezes his hand again, and he ducks his head. All at once he feels naked, like she’s seeing more of him than he meant to show her.

“Not sayin’ that’s what I wanna be,” she says after a moment or two of nothing but the rustle of leaves and the nearby chatter of a couple of battling squirrels. “If you don’t want. We can just—”

“We gotta name it?”

It’s solid, how he says it. Direct. He isn’t even trying, but there’s no trepidation in the question, nothing hesitant. He’s asking, and the implication in that question is clear and meant: he would rather
not name it. And not for the reasons people often have for avoiding the naming of things. It’s not that he’s hiding from it. It’s not that he’s trying to keep it from being a real thing with all the weight of existence a name confers.

He doesn’t want to name it because right now it feels like it would defy any name either of them could give it.

*Girlfriend* sure as fuck doesn’t work. And he thinks about himself being her *boyfriend* and for some reason it basically gives him mental hives.

Somehow, bizarrely, *friend* still feels like the closest thing. Even if it’s not that close at all.

“I guess we don’t,” she says, voice and eyes soft. And she leans in and up and kisses him again, the slightest graze of her lips on his, and his eyes slip shut.

If somehow they ever get as far as doing what he imagined doing with her in the ruins, he’s probably just going to burst into flames. Actual honest-to-God spontaneous combustion. The kind they have pictures of, where it’s only a pile of ashes and a pair of shoes.

Except he wouldn’t be wearing shoes.

So.

They sit together for a while. She doesn’t let go of his hand. And toward the end of that while, she lays her head on his shoulder and he can smell her hair, the light floral scent of her shampoo, something he can’t quite identify but which is, like everything else she wears, totally and indefinably *her*. Then they walk a little more until she says she should get going, she does have some stuff to pick up before school tomorrow, and she implies but doesn’t say that she should do this on her own. So he nods, ready to let it go, but then he stops in the middle of the path and turns to her, and the question is out before he can stop it.

“How secret we gotta keep this?”

*This*. How fucking much is in that word?

She looks up at him for a few seconds, and her face is difficult to read. He’s suddenly worried he’s stepped across some other line he didn’t know was there. But she appears to decide something, because she nods—so small it might have been only for herself—and she answers him.

“Daddy can’t know. No one in my family can know. Probably better if my friends don’t know. Probably better if... if people don’t see us together too much. Might look weird. Might get ‘em talkin’.” Her expression turns serious. Nothing evasive there. Nothing ashamed. “You get why.”

He does. Of course she wouldn’t want people to know about this, because he’s so—

But she keeps going, and once again—and probably she’s going to keep on doing this—she startles him.

“It’s just that you’re older. That’s all. I mean... I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me. I mean it.” She takes his hand again and he stares down at it. “But they would worry. Daddy would worry. He likes you, he’d just... He wouldn’t understand. He’d think you were...” She shrugs, and an expression of distaste slips across her features. “He might think you’re *makin’* me do stuff, or you talked me into somethin’, and...” Her face does something complicated that hurts him. There isn’t any other way to put it. There’s complexity, and there’s pain, and he doesn’t entirely dislike either of those things.
It’s good to hurt the way she hurts him. He wants it to keep happening.

“I don’t want him gettin’ that idea,” she says quietly. “I don’t want him thinkin’ that about you. And I don’t want him chasin’ you off.” Flicker of a smile. Little flame. “I want you to stick around. At least a while.”

He swallows. Somehow he hadn’t fully articulated to himself that Hershel might think that. And yeah, it’s distasteful. And not just because he really would rather not get shot.

He doesn’t want Hershel to think that of him because he likes Hershel.

He likes that whole goddamn family.

He wants to keep getting invited to dinner.

Fuck.

“Alright,” he says, and they walk again.

They end up at the entrance to the park, and he’s about to say goodbye to her when she tugs him back to that same spot behind the tree, and it’s like everything he wasn’t sure about disintegrates under the gentle pressure of her mouth. He sighs against her, one hand finds her hip and the other slips around the nape of her neck, and then he does it because he can, because he’s confident she’ll let him: he ducks his head slightly and presses his lips to her throat, just beneath her jaw, and it’s soft and warm and thrumming with her pulse and Christ, she does moan.

Just a little. Hardly there. But she moans and he thinks again about bursting into flames.

He says goodbye to her and he watches her walk away, her hair bouncing, hips swaying, her skirt so light and drifting around her legs.

This defies naming because he doesn’t even know what it is yet.

Because he doesn’t know how far it’ll go.
I found a place where they could hear me when I sing

Chapter Notes

This one kinda gut-punched me.

Most of the chapters with Merle have given me cause to suspect that there’s a lot going on in this story, but this really brought it home.

“... up with you?”

Daryl spares Merle a glance. Not a lot more. Merle is yelling to be heard over music too distorted by a terrible jukebox speaker to be particularly recognizable; Daryl thinks maybe he’s heard it somewhere before but he’s not sure and he doesn’t care. This can barely even be called a bar in any proper sense of the word; it’s essentially a big shack about fifteen miles back the way from which they came when they first got into town, dim, loud even without the music, pool table that looks like it’s about ready to splinter into a pile of scrap wood if someone leans on it too heavily, floor gritty with dirt, all the liquor as terrible as the speakers, all the beer just as bad, and a bunch of bikers who don’t appear organized enough to be a gang so much as a bunch of very big unwashed guys who ride around in close proximity to each other.

It’s Merle’s kind of place. Daryl used to think it was his too, but now he wonders if it was maybe his by default because of Merle. He doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like the noise, the way it smells. It feels claustrophobic. He wants to be outside where it’s quiet. Quieter.

He wants to look at stars and think about some stuff. Some things.

Like how Beth is going back to school tomorrow and he’s not certain how that phrase makes him feel. She said she didn’t care about how much older he is, and that’s nice of her to say, but he’s not certain he feels the same way.

But Merle is poking at him, and he shouldn’t completely ignore it, because that would be even more suspicious. He shrugs. Has to yell, himself. Which he also doesn’t much care for.

“Nothin’. Tired.”

“You ain’t even worked today, man.”

“From day before.” He shrugs again. “Ain’t getting a lotta sleep, you fuckin’ snore too loud.”

Merle snorts a laugh, rolls his eyes. “You gone all fuckin’ prissy on me, Darylina. Anyway you’re lyin’, ain’t never been a problem for you before.”

Actually it has; Daryl just hasn’t bothered to say anything about it. He and Merle have slept in close quarters more than once, and there are a lot of ways in which that was less than pleasant. But yes, this time he’s lying, and the noise and Merle’s level of plastered—not considerable yet but getting there—are most of what’s making that at all possible.

Even if it’s not working.
“Whatever.” He knocks back the rest of his bourbon. “Ain’t your problem.”

“What, can’t look out for you? Can’t be concerned?” Almost a sneer; this is bullshit and they both know it. Merle is poking because Merle is feeling more himself now, and there are few things Merle likes less where Daryl is concerned than something he doesn’t know about, because something he doesn’t know is something beyond his control.

Something he can’t use to snap Daryl back into line.

That’s fucked up. Daryl knew that but now he knows it.

He shoots Merle another glare, wonders exactly how drunk he’s going to have to get Merle before Merle drops it and has forgotten it by the next morning. In the meantime Daryl is going to have to work on managing his feelings better.

That’s hilarious.

“Nothin’ to be concerned about.”

“Yeah, I dunno ‘bout that.”

Merle turns around and leans back against the bar, half full can of Camo Genuine dangling from his fingers. Daryl doesn’t have to see to know that he’s eying the woman across the room, with her deep brown skin even deeper brown in the low light, her enormous breasts straining at her pink tube top and her lime green skirt so short it’s practically an elastic band riding low on her hips. She’s wearing a ton of makeup and earlier she was cackling as she hung onto one of the bikers’ beefy arms. Daryl saw her give him an up-and-down as he walked past her and vaguely recognized that look, like she’d like him to toss her a fuck in a way she might not want a lot of the other men in here, but under that expression—slightly parted lips and coy smile—he saw desperation. Not directed at him. Directed at the universe in general.

God, get me out of here.

He feels for her. He’d even help her if he could.

Lady, I’m trying just like you are.

Except no. He’s not trying like her. She’s scrabbling at the air.

He might have actually grabbed something.

Merle likes this kind of woman. Daryl is mentally preparing himself for the apartment to be a little more crowded tonight.

“You wanna piece of that?”

Daryl starts. He hadn’t realized he was drifting, and it takes him a second to realize what Merle means, but then Merle jerks his head in the direction of the woman and Daryl’s stomach drops toward his boots. This has happened before. For the most part, this is how and why he’s fucked the few women he has. Merle gets it into his head that he should get his little brother laid, as some sort of favor, and Daryl takes the path of least resistance and does it even if he doesn’t want to. Which he basically never does.

Increasingly in part that’s because he’s not sure Merle is really doing this as a favor to him. Merle might think that’s why he’s doing it, but Daryl is beginning to wonder if it’s more about his baby
brother being kind of *weird* about this, about not wanting to do this, something Merle takes for
granted: you get drunk and you fight and you get high and you fuck, and of the last two things,
Daryl’s dislike for the former is something Merle will tolerate, but the latter...

Merle is uncomfortable with it and Merle is trying to *fix* it. And he refuses to give up.

Daryl looks at the woman. She’s noticed him looking and she’s got that coy mask on again,
something almost brutal in how she wears it, and though he still feels the most profound sympathy
for her—as one of the bikers paws at her and laughs in her ear—his skin is now trying to crawl off
his body to huddle whimpering in a corner.

He thinks about touching Beth—about *fucking* Beth—and it’s wonderful. It’s like diving naked into
a fathomless pool of sunshine. He thinks about touching this woman and he wants to run.

Christ, it isn’t her fault. That makes him feel worse.

No, he most definitely *doesn’t* want a piece of that, but telling Merle so is a huge squirming slimy
can of worms. So instead he shrugs. Neutral. Maybe that’ll be enough to shove Merle off his back.

while for you, go for it. You know she’d want it, fuckin’ look at her.”

He is. Not seeing the same thing as Merle is... Except he’s not so sure about that, because Merle is a
lot of things but *stupid* isn’t one of them, and neither is *oblivious*, at least not when he comes out
from under the drinking and the drugs.

And suddenly this is awful in about five or six fun new ways.

Merle isn’t going to let this go. He can already tell. If he pushes back, if he says no, that’s going to
make things hellish, and he’s getting better at pushing, getting better at saying no, but today was so
weird and he’s so weirdly tired, and this feels so dangerous, like there’s something—someone—he
has to protect and in order to do that he has to tread very carefully. At least when it comes to this.

He thinks about Beth knowing that he’s fucked this woman and he feels sick. Not because she
would be angry. He’s certain she wouldn’t be angry. Or at least not much.

Mostly, he thinks she would probably be sad. And not over some sense of betrayal.

She would probably be sad for the same reasons he is.

And that’s unbearable.

God, he just can’t. And he can’t not. He glances at Merle and tries to keep mere impatience in his
expression, irritation, *resignation*, but also trying to fake some interest, some *well actually I guess
now that you mention it*, and he digs deep into the core of himself and hauls up some cold steel and
walks across the room.

And as soon as she sees him she extracts herself, and she follows him out to the truck.

~

She sits next to him in the cab—passenger’s seat, *Beth’s seat*—and she stares at him with those
heavy black-lined, shimmery purple-shadowed eyes. Like she can’t believe what he’s just said.

“You wanna *talk*?”
He rolls an uncomfortable shoulder. This is going about as badly as he expected. “Or nothin’. Look, I—” He plunges on, because if he stops now it’s probably going to get even worse. “It ain’t you, okay, you’re fine, just... That guy I was with, that’s my brother, and he’s gonna be a bigger fuckin’ pain in the ass than you can imagine if he don’t think somethin’ happened, so when we go back in there, can you do me a huge goddamn favor and... make like somethin’ happened? Please?”

He is such a pathetic piece of shit. And the thing is, no matter what he does here he is still a pathetic piece of shit. There is no scenario in which he wins. There is no scenario in which he even goes as far as tying it up.

She blinks at him. Peers at him. She’s sort of angry now, but she’s also still bewildered more than anything, and he wonders if anyone has ever done this to her before.

“What are you, a faggot?”

He shakes his head. Not that I’ve ever been able to determine.

“So what the fuck’s your problem?”

My life is in ruins and I never want it to stop.

And then he realizes something that smacks him in the face, huge and startling and honestly kind of great if it’s accurate: he can tell the truth here. This woman has no reason—as of right now—to make a Thing out of it, and she might even understand. It’s not impossible. So he meets her gaze, dead-on, and says, “I got a girl.”

I got a girl. Jesus fucking Christ, he has a girl.

Does he? Is that what this is? Holy shit.

Just the faintest hint of dawning comprehension. “He don’t know?”

Daryl shakes his head again.

“How come?”

“What I said before, about him bein’ a total pain in the ass?”

She laughs softly. All the anger is gone, and so is the bewilderment. Now she simply seems curious, leaning forward a little and studying him. “But why would he be, about that?”

The truth. Here we go. And anyway, this is only an approximation of it; he’s still not even positive about what the truth is. “She’s a lot younger. She got a good family. She’s... She ain’t the kinda girl I’d normally... be seein’.”

As if there was any girl at all he would normally be seeing. There is literally no part of this that’s in any way, shape, or form normal.

But there’s more comprehension on her face, and that’s when he realizes what an old story this is. What a complete cliché, in every important sense. Nice farmer’s daughter gets a thing for the rough drifter farmhand. They sneak off together. It’s all a secret. No idea where it’s going, if anywhere. Lots of potential problems. It’s so done that it’s not even all that interesting.

He has to bite the insides of his cheeks to keep from erupting into peals of almost hysterical laughter.

She arches a brow. “What?”
“Nothin’. Just... So you get it, right? You can do that?”

She looks at him for a long, silent moment. Finally she nods, and he feels a rush of fierce gratitude. The corner of her painted mouth quirks up in a smile that’s actually pretty charming. Probably because it’s real. “But you owe me like ten fuckin’ drinks. Alright?”

He nods too. Very likely it’ll even solidify the impression that he fucked her. Imply there might be a second round. Very reassuring.

She leans back in the seat, her body angled toward him in a way that’s far more comfortable than flirtatious, and he’s suddenly sure she welcomes this break as much as he does. Which is nice. He likes her. More than he would have thought. More than mere sympathy allows. “So we got about ten minutes before we should head back in, I guess. Tell me about this girl.”

That’s unexpected. “Really?”

“Yeah. Tell me. Sounds like there’s a story there.”

An old, clichéd story, yes, but he finds himself telling it anyway, or at least an extremely abbreviated version. He starts talking, sort of haltingly, but as he gets going it comes easier and easier, the words not nearly as hard to find as they might have been. Maybe it’s because this is the first time he’s talked to anyone about this, and he thinks about Beth saying exactly that in the ruins, that he needed someone to talk to and it was easy to see, and he knows she was right.

He talks about the first time he saw her in the rain and he didn’t want to be a creep but he also didn’t want to just drive away and leave her there, and he saw her again coming out of church and she was so pretty, and he started driving her around, talking to her—she was sweet and she simply wanted to hang out with him, didn’t appear to want anything else and he didn’t want anything else, until he did, and seems like she does too, and the whole thing fell apart and it hasn’t stopped since then. And he’s stricken now by the feeling that it’s sliding out of control and it’s terrifying and so amazing, and he has no idea what to do.

And he stops and she’s smiling at him. She chuckles and shakes her head.

“Honey, you are so fucked.”

He sighs. A little mournful. He knows.

“I think you should stick with her. Sounds like she’s good for you.”

She is. He knew that too, knows it, but the woman says it and it strikes him all over again. Beth is good for him. Beth has made his life better. She’s fucked with it and she’s made some definite improvements in doing so.

And at this point that’s dangerous.

“Why’d you wanna know?”

She glances down at her nails—long delicate acrylic airbrushed soft pink and purple with tiny jewels. They’re pretty. “Ain’t a lotta good right now.” Turns her eyes back up to him. “Sounds like that’s you, too.”

“Ain’t a lotta good all over.”

“The world is kinda shit.” This time her smile is pained. “Me, I was tryin’ to get to Atlanta. My sister
had a nail salon, said she was gonna fix me up with a job.”

“What happened?” Except he thinks he already knows, at least the general shape of it. The outline. This is an old story too. They’re all old stories. There’s nothing new under this or any other sun.

“Closed up before I even got myself there. Sorta got sidetracked. Bad shit went down with a man.” She turns her face away. “Not worth talkin’ about.”

“You can.”

The look she flings at him is pointed, just the slightest bit suspicious, though he senses it’s instinctive suspicion rather than anything he’s said or done. The blur of light from the bar windows catches her eyes and he gets his first good view of them, and they’re a rich brown half a shade darker than her skin. There’s life behind them, clinging. She’s getting slowly ground down, but she’s not done fighting.

He sees that and he knows it so utterly and completely, and he thinks, *She deserves so much better than this.*

*Maybe we both do.*

“I shared. You share.” He gives her a faint smile that feels a little sad and which he supposes probably is. He *is* sad, but it’s a gentle kind of sad. “Show me yours.”

She’s quiet a moment. But she shows him.

It’s pretty much like he expected. An old story. Woman tries to make something of herself, of her life, everything falls apart, she searches for something else, is betrayed. Tries to get her own back, tries to make the guy pay for it—not in violence but in shame—but he doesn’t give a fuck, because men don’t. She’s alone. She’s lonely. She’s trying to fill her days. Trying to feel something. Erase that loneliness for a while. Trying not to think about what she almost had. Trying not to look back because that gets you nowhere, except there’s no *forward* either. There’s only a dismal variety of *now*.

He aches for her, and there’s nothing he can do to help her. Nothing at all.

She falls silent, staring at her hands again, and even with her face angled down he can see the tears she isn’t letting go of, and all his remaining fear evaporates in a need to reach out to someone in pain, *his* kind of pain, do it in a way he never would have been able to do before he offered a ride home to a girl walking soaked in rain, and he touches her chin and tilts her head up and kisses her.

It’s chaste, just his lips lightly on hers, but he feels her loosen, feels a sort of calm stealing over her. He has no idea if this is doing any good at all, but it’s something, and he thinks about if Beth knew he did this...

And he’s positive she would get it.

She might even smile. He’s pretty sure that if she could, she would make a world where everyone does things like this all the time.

After a moment he pulls back, and he can look at her. This isn’t so awkward that he can’t do that. It’s not really awkward at all. “We should go back inside,” he murmurs, and she nods, picks up her purse and opens the door and climbs out, tottering a little on her extremely high heels.

They go back inside, split up immediately, and when he rejoins Merle he’s met with a grin and lifted
eyebrows.

He orders another bourbon. “What?”

“Half a fuckin’ hour, little brother? How long it take you to nail that bitch?”

He doesn’t answer.

She doesn’t come over to get any drinks out of him. He doesn’t see her at all for the rest of the night. When Merle finally decides it’s time to stagger out of there, Daryl casts around for her, because it’s weird but he wants to say goodnight to her, but he can’t find her. Seems like she left.

He never asked for her name. That bothers him. It bothers him the whole way home.

She has a name. They all do. Every last goddamn one of them.

*It does matter.*
Monday rolls around and Beth goes back to school. By the time Daryl gets to the farm she’s already there, and he spends the day—during which he gets a tour of the machinery that needs some work over the next little while—trying to figure out how the fuck he actually feels about that, because he still doesn’t know.

Yes, he knew in a very abstract sense that he’s spending an increasing amount of time kissing a girl who’s technically—and also in every way that isn’t technical—in high school. Yes, he was well aware in the most intellectual way that he’s having increasingly vivid sexual fantasies about a literal teenager. He knows these are potential problems. He knows what a lot of other people would say if they knew. He knows they would say he’s a creep.

Which might well be the case.

But he didn’t mean for this to happen, his mind protests. He didn’t go looking for this. He just... He found someone who was nice to him. He found someone who genuinely seemed to like him, to want to spend time with him, and not out of pity or because she wanted anything more from him than to be in his company. He didn’t mean to see her that night in the coffee shop and feel what he felt. He didn’t mean...

Except for when he did. Except for when he kissed her. And when she kissed him and he didn’t push her away. And all the other times, everything else, all the stuff that he probably could have found a way to stop, every step at which the complications stacked up and stacked up, and now he’s having a slightly stilted conversation with her father about transmissions and what he really wants is to know is what she wore to school today.

What. She wore. To school.

All of this feels like a pile of extremely poor excuses.

But what the woman said in the truck, during that strange, sad, sweet half hour.

*I think you should stick with her. Sounds like she’s good for you.*

She is. He thinks there might be ways in which Beth is good for him that he doesn’t even know about yet.

It’s a clear day. Clouds roll in once late afternoon comes around, but there’s no sign of rain. He finishes going over stuff with Hershel, doing some basic chores here and there, and then Beth comes home. She’s wearing jeans. Loose green top, little lacy thing around the scoop neckline. Gold heart. Flower earrings. Bangles all green and yellow and beaded. That braid, those boots, and her sweet smile that widens—very briefly—into a grin when she sees him.

He stays for dinner. He doesn’t say more than a few words to her. He glances back when he’s leaving, when he’s starting up the truck, and she’s sitting on the porch and watching him. She doesn’t wave.

All evening he was itching to touch her. Literally itching. Not even in any particular way. His hand, her skin. Anything. With an edge of desperation.
This isn’t going anywhere. This isn’t going to get any better. And he isn’t going to come to his senses and try to call it off.

Radio on as he drives.

and while it’s on my mind there’s a girl that fits the crime
of a future lover’s dream that I’ve still to find

but in the meantime

The sun is setting, hot pink and streaks of purple and gold through the clouds—an aggressive sunset. A sunset yelling and striding around the stratosphere, looking to punch someone.

Daryl cranks up the music until the speakers buzz and stares the sky down.

~

Lying on the couch after midnight, Merle snoring incredibly loud in the bedroom, Daryl opens his phone and closes it and opens it and closes it and looks at the screen until there’s a brilliant green blotch floating in the center of his vision.

He could text her. He could. Text her what? What do you text someone in this kind of situation?

miss you. thinking about you. are you awake? what are you doing? what’s on your mind?
what are you wearing?

In the dark, TVless, lightless except for the phone and the floating blotch its screen makes, he smiles ruefully.

sweet dreams

He doesn’t text her at all.

~

Nothing much happens the next day. Business as usual. He isn’t at the farm the whole time but he’s there when Beth comes home, beaded wire spiral flashing on her wrist, smile flashing on all of her. She walks up the drive in the sun—she takes the bus, an actual fucking school bus, Jesus, exactly how much more uncomfortable can this get—hips doing that little sway that he can’t stop looking at, like one of those things you go forever without noticing, and then once you see them a certain way you can never go back to looking at them the way you did before.

All of her is like that.

She gives him a tiny smile and a nod and walks right by him.

He’s gotten nothing from her. If anything she’s considerably more distant than she was when they were still just friends. But that’s reasonable. This thing between them—now that it’s not just him who knows about it—is incendiary. It’s dangerous. Go too close to it and they’ll become reckless. Toss it around. Burn themselves. Burn someone else. He’s never done this before but he can sense it, how it might be a tremendous fire hazard.

So it’s better to be overcautious than stupid. So if he gets nothing from her—no texts, no touches, barely a word or a glance—he’s not upset. He’s not hurt. He’s not giving her anything either. They’re protecting each other.
He thinks he knows all the general stuff: her family enraged, possibly guns involved, her humiliated—which is way worse to him than being shot at—him being run out of town, Merle never letting him hear the end of it. Jail time isn’t a thing in play here—God, is he really thinking about that, would he do this anyway if it was?—but it would be unpleasant for all parties concerned.

But what would actually happen? If he went up to her in the kitchen when she’s slicing chicken breasts or mashing potatoes and curled an arm around her waist, tilted her head up and kissed her? What would actually happen?

What’s at stake here?

He mulls it all over through Wednesday, Thursday, watching her when she comes home, staring at his phone in the dark, doing nothing. He mulls it over and he gets to Friday and he still has no goddamn idea.

He doesn’t want to hurt her. He knows that. He absolutely cannot bear the thought of her getting hurt.

But he also doesn’t want to stop.

~

On Friday—a hot, muggy afternoon—she finds him at the far end of the yard out by the firewood racks splitting logs for stacking. He’s been doing it nonstop for over an hour and he’s sweating freely, straightening up with the splitter a pleasant swinging weight in his hand and wiping sweat away from his brow with the back of the other, and there she is, looking at him.

No, not looking. Staring.

He looks back at her, looks her up and down without meaning to—looks at her tight jeans and white sleeveless blouse that would be modest if it wasn’t damp with her own sweat to the point of being half translucent, so that her bra is clearly visible. He looks at it and sees that it’s a light powdery blue and he’d be willing to lay down money that it’s cotton, and soft to the touch. He looks at how the blouse as a whole is clinging to her, being persistent about it—being obnoxious.

Maybe tug it away, a treacherous part of himself whispers. Maybe take the whole damn thing off.

Strands of hair sticking to her neck, curling around her shoulders. Her lips slightly parted. Doe eyes wide.

Normally these things slip smoothly over him and they do it when he’s alone, when it’s convenient, when it won’t be difficult to manage. This is not convenient at all, and it’s not smooth; it slams down on him, almost making him gasp, and for a crazed literal five seconds he’s hauling her against him, ripping that blouse off her and dragging down those tight jeans, pinning her against the full rack and hitching her thighs high on his hips and tearing open his fly and driving himself into her.

Then he isn’t. He’s just staring at her.

Except then something extremely disturbing happens.

It takes him another couple of seconds to emerge from his own head—a beat or so of breath. Once he’s fully present and actually seeing her again, he processes how her gaze is moving over him, and for a moment of violent, almost nauseous vertigo, he sees himself from the outside—a blurry,
distorted picture, but he’s aware enough of himself to at least know what she’s seeing. He gets a flash of his own chest, arms, shoulders—gray tank which leaves a lot of that exposed. He knows he’s muscular, knows he’s strong, but that’s only ever mattered inasmuch as it was something he could use to do things.

His hair hanging around his face. He knows, in a dim sort of way, that his own bare skin has to be glistening in that abusive sun.

The woman in the bar... Other women have looked at him like that, and he knows what it means: that what they see is acceptable enough to them to make him fuckable. But that’s as far as his imagination of this—his comprehension of this—has ever gone. In those bars and dives and shitholes it’s a flat, bestial thing. Nothing in it except what happens when two bodies come together in a particular mechanical arrangement.

That isn’t how Beth is looking at him. And she hasn’t looked at him like this before. Not like this. Like she can’t look away from him.

Like she might be feeling some version of what he is.

That makes absolutely no sense. That’s impossible.

Here’s the thing about his fantasies, he realizes much later when he’s desperately trying to untangle the hopelessly stubborn knot that his life has become: they’ve evolved in complexity, and now she makes it clear that she wants what he does to her. She takes some initiative; she does things too. She clearly enjoys herself. She clearly enjoys herself a lot. Of course she does. He wants that, maybe above anything else. His fantasies are for himself, but in every single goddamn one she’s the center.

In his fantasies she tolerates his presence because of what he can do for her. But she doesn’t want him.

She doesn’t look at him like Beth is looking at him now.

“Hi,” she says, very softly. Her voice is wavering just a touch. Uncertain. Like she’s not completely sure what’s going on either, in this moment where the air between them seems perilously close to sparking into chain lightning.

He gives her a nod. And suddenly he’s just really uncomfortable. This isn’t by any means the first time she’s seen him dressed like this, but everything has snapped into a new kind of focus from a whole new perspective, and he feels like she’s seeing way too much. Way more than he wants her to. Because this isn’t anything like his fantasies. This is so much more complicated.

In his fantasies his skin is unmarked.

In fact, in his fantasies he might as well not have skin at all. In his fantasies, for all practical purposes, he’s merely a ball of nerve endings. Sensation. Pleasure.

Not something someone else would want to see.

“Mama’s makin’ a fresh batch of lemonade. Wanted to know if I should bring you some.” Her voice is still low, still very soft, and this time the vertigo is temporal in nature, as if he’s been flung back through time to before he kissed her at all. Maybe even before she kissed him that first time. All hesitation and awkwardness, as if last Sunday he didn’t basically push her up against a tree and tip her head back and press his lips to her throat until she moaned.

Everything here continues to make no sense, with a consistency that’s almost comforting.
She wants to know if he wants her to bring him... For a couple of additional seconds he has no idea what to say. The space between his collarbones and diaphragm feels like a seething barrel of aching need shot through with utter confusion. Because of how she was looking at him, and still is.

He glances up and past her. They’re within direct line of sight of the house, of the big dining room’s big windows. If he tugged her behind the firewood rack and did at least a little of what he wants to do, kissed her again, he doesn’t think anyone would see them, but.

They’re going to have to decide how many risks they want to take and how big they want those risks to be.

Slowly, he shakes his head. “I’m alright.” He’s not. He’s incredibly thirsty. But there’s a pump close by. There’s water.

And Beth isn’t leaving. She’s still staring at him Like That, and he pauses in the act of turning back to the log he was about to go to work on, and he goes ahead and just fucking asks her. Because the nice thing about being in this deep is the list of things you need to worry about is shrinking—as the few remaining things on the list you do need to worry about get bigger and bigger and bigger.

“What?”

She smiles, breathes a laugh, and drops her gaze down to her boots for a few seconds. He can see her cheeks and ears reddening—holy shit, she’s blushing—and when she lifts her head her eyes are shining in a way he knows pretty well by now. Excitement. Mischief. Teenage daring.

He’s not the only one who’s made a discovery here, he thinks.

“You look good,” she murmurs, and she doesn’t sound nervous now. At least not very. There’s an edge of something else in her voice, something that makes him want to shiver all over again without knowing exactly why.

He blinks at her, splitter dangling from one hand. When he moves it he feels the muscles in that arm shift and again he catches a foggy glimpse of what she might be seeing. “The fuck you talkin’ ‘bout? I’m a mess, girl.”

“Yeah.” Her smile widens. “But you also look really good.” She turns on her heel and starts back the way she came, tossing him the last remnants of that smile over her shoulder. “You change your mind, come on up to the house. It’s gonna be nice’n cold.”

He watches her go, still feeling face-smacked. Face-smacked in more than one way. And still aching, still burning, still wanting her with a kind of ferocity he wasn’t ready for and doesn’t think he ever will be.

He wanted to fuck her. He saw her like that and he wanted to fuck her, and the bluntness of that is still something he’s getting his head around, but by now he’s had a couple of weeks or so to at least make an attempt to get used to the idea.

What he has no idea how to handle at all is the idea that Beth Greene might see him like this and want to fuck him.

That they might both want the same thing at the same time.

Which is a real problem, because when two people want the exact same thing at the exact same time, and they want it badly enough, they usually find a way to make it happen.
And that’s... He doesn’t know what to do with that. It’s completely fucking ridiculous, but he doesn’t. He thinks about it—strips away all the vestiges of fantasy, where it’s all simple and easy and he can handwave away all complications and consequences—and he freezes up. He wants to. But it’s so scary. But he wants to. But he thinks it might kill him.

She might be a teenager, he might be almost two decades removed from that, but right now, about this, about everything...

He doesn’t feel a day older than she is.

Actually maybe like she has a few on him.

~

That night, wandering—alone—out of the slightly less terrible bar on Main Street, he gets a text.

11 tomorrow night, oak tree 1/2 mile past the farm
bring stuff to change into :)

He stands in the middle of the sidewalk for a moment, simply letting each word make its way into his eyes and wriggle down his optic nerves.

Really the only question is what stuff he’ll bring.

Chapter End Notes

Song is "In the Meantime" by Spacehog.
Actually, no: there are several questions and they’re all some species of big fucking hassle.

Merle. Merle is a pretty big question, and the question that is Merle brings a bunch of ill-tempered friends. Friends such as where the fuck is Daryl going and why does he need the fucking truck and what the fuck is so interesting at 10:30 on a Saturday night that he can’t tell his big brother.

And it’s not like Daryl has no excuse. He does. Some bullshit thing for Elmer in another county sent him out on the road on that fateful night when he first ran across the path of a certain capricious little goddess—the benefits of employing someone in an unofficial capacity being that you don’t have to keep them in regular business hours—and he muttered something about that being the case this time. But it’s not all that convincing for a whole lot of reasons, and he knows it, and maybe he’s getting better at saying no to his big brother, but he’s still shit at lying to him, and he knows that too.

They both do.

Merle knows something is up. Merle can smell it like a hunting dog, long time off the trail but senses not dulled by anything but time and distance.

So right up until Daryl walks out the door—change of clothes already in the truck, and he can think of a number of perfectly convincing excuses for that much at least—Merle is poking and prodding and being a characteristically outrageous pain in the ass.

Except he’s not. He’s making a show of it, but he’s honestly not. It’s a front, and behind it...

Behind it, Daryl feels two keen eyes watching him—watching him very, very closely—and he tries to convince himself he’s not scared by that.

And tonight is not his night for being convincing.

He is scared, is the thing. In the truck, rattling along under the wheeling constellations of early autumn, he feels it, curling a cold fist into his gut and twisting. He’s going where she told him to go, when she told him to go there, and of course there was never anything else he could do, because any thought he had earlier about being able to stop this was a cruel fucking joke, and not least because he lost sight of the difference between can’t and don’t want to about three hundred miles back.

He’s going but he’s scared. Because of what he felt. Because of how she was looking at him. Because of how much he wanted her, wanted it, wants it right now with Pisces and Andromeda and Pegasus spinning overhead as witnesses. Because of what she told him to bring, and how now—as never before—he’s aware of how possible, how likely it is that if this keeps going, she’ll see him. She’ll see all of him.

He doesn’t know if he can handle that.

No one has ever seen him. Not really.

The radio is blaring something loud and hard and weirdly dreamlike all at once as he sees the tree coming up on the left, a towering spreading thing that seems ageless in the starlight. Starlight spilling everywhere, all the clouds blown away, and her standing under the tree with her pale arm raised, her
hair loose around her shoulders.

meet me in outer space
we could spend the night, watch the earth come up

He’s so fucking scared. Of her. She’s terrifying. Little blond girl with those wide blue doe eyes and that smile like an inverted arch of sunshine, all her flower hues and her gold and silver, leather and beads, and that voice of hers sweet as warm honey right out of the hive, and she’s the most frightening thing he’s ever seen.

She’s going to fuck him up.

He pulls over and she comes trotting to him, pack on her back, and she’s already laughing when she hops into the cab and presses close, points into the dark ahead, tells him to drive.

~

“Where’re we goin’?”

She has the window pulled all the way down, her hand making dolphin-arcs through the wind, and when he asks she shoots him an absolutely radiant smile. It’s dark but he doesn’t need a lot of light to see it. That glow seems almost literal. Stars and the truck’s dash do just fine.

They’ve been driving for over five minutes and it took him that long to work up the courage to ask.

“It’s a surprise.”

Before they started driving again he lit a cigarette; now he blows smoke out into the breeze and under and over the fear he feels a thread of something a lot more like pure excitement. Which completely belies what he says next.

“Maybe I don’t like surprises.”

“You liked the last one.”

He tosses a sharp look at her and he’s met with that same smile, even broader. “The place by the creek,” she says. Except he doesn’t think that’s what she means, or not all she means, and he’s pretty sure she expects him to pick up on it.

He was raised on fists but also on mind games, on trying to guess what was the right thing to say or the wrong thing to say or how to get out of being hurt in a specific way if there was any way to do it at all. To this day few things set him off harder than feeling like his head is being fucked with, and this should be pushing all his buttons—but it’s not. He’s a little irritated, but more than anything he’s bemused by her, so fascinated in spite of and even maybe because of his fear, and it’s true that every surprise she’s given him so far—and there have been a number—has turned out to be a nice one.

Freaked him out a whole bunch, but other than that.

But it’s more. There’s something else going on.

He shrugs and takes a deep drag, tips her the smallest ghost of a smile. “Guess that was alright.”

“This ain’t the same. But I think it’s nice. Me’n my friends come here a lot but no one’s gonna be here now.”

“How d’you know?”
“They’re all at a party. One of the guys on the football team, it’s his birthday. Or it was on Thursday, party’s today.”

“You ain’t there?”

“No,” she says, as if this should be massively obvious and she can’t figure out why he would even feel the need to point that out—but there’s still a smile lurking under it, equal parts teasing and warm. “I’m here with you.” She reaches down and finds the volume dial, turns up the music. “I like this song.”

\[I\text{ }know\text{ }I’ve\text{ }felt\text{ }like\text{ }this\text{ }before\]
\[but\text{ }now\text{ }I’m\text{ }feeling\text{ }it\text{ }even\text{ }more\]
\[because\text{ }it\text{ }came\text{ }from\text{ }you\]

Daryl has mixed feelings about the vocalist—she’s just sort of strange—but he goes with it, because apparently Beth Greene gets what she wants.

And what he wants?

God, he just.

“Here. Down this way.” She lays a hand on his forearm and directs him to the left—another turnoff, but not the ruins. They went past the turnoff for the ruins a few minutes back, and though this is another road unpaved by anything but gravel, it’s wider and clearer, and obviously used a good bit more. Rather than running into the trees, it cuts straight through open, grassy land and over a small rise ahead until it dips out of sight. It appears almost silver in the starlight.

Okay.

He shoots her a quick glance. “You still ain’t gonna tell me.”

“Nope.” She sits back again, elbow out the window, her head tilted ever so slightly to the side and her eyes closed. Like this he can see the way the cords of her neck and shoulder stand out as she extends them, the way her collarbone and her jawline are thrown into sharper relief. The way the breeze picks up strands of her hair and toys with them.

God, he’s so scared, and God, he wants her so much, but he knows he could have simply this, look at this and nothing more, and that would be fine. He knows it. Has since this all started. Anything she wanted to give him would have always been fine.

Because she’s perfect, and even the smallest piece of perfection is more than enough.

“Seriously, why ain’t you there?”

“I told you.” She doesn’t open her eyes, doesn’t lift her head. The smile on her face is almost dreamy. “I’m here with you. What about that’s tough to get?”

He grunts at the night. Doesn’t respond otherwise. A lot of things about it are almost impossible to get, but at least none of them are new.

“Why ain’t you out drinkin’ with your brother?”

He starts, snaps his head around, and she’s gazing calmly at him as if she just asked the most innocuous question in the world.
“I mean, you could be. You haven’t told me anythin’ about him, but seems like that would make sense for a Saturday night in a town like this, huh?”

He blinks, rolls a shoulder, and swings his attention back to the road cascading out ahead of them in the headlights’ glow. Everything. She just said a huge fucking mouthful of everything, and she’s well aware of it, and it’s terrifying.

“Neither of us’s where we probably should be, Mr. Dixon,” she says softly, and before he can even begin to fumble for a response she points to the left bend in the fork they’ve come to.

The left bend falls down a short way toward a scatter of reflected starlight—water. The right bend continues on up a low ridge to a dim structure still pretty far distant, almost invisible except for its darker outline against a lighter sky and the couple of tiny lights in what he assumes are windows.

“He’s a rancher. Lets kids use this part of his land, if we don’t trash it up. Leave it like we found it. He’s a good guy.” She nods to the left again and bites at a knuckle. “Down there.”

He already knows where they’re going. Really he knew as soon as he read the text. It’s just too small to be properly called a lake and just too large to be properly called a pond, rimmed on one end by nodding cattails in which frogs sing, surrounded by trees—thick-trunked and old, a few gnarled. A couple sweep their boughs over the water and someone has tied a rope swing to one of these; even in the dimness, when they climb out of the truck, Daryl can see that it’s frayed, ancient. How many kids have spent how many summers here? How many childhoods went into this water and came out again, dripping and laughing and a little bit older and a little bit less pure, like baptism in reverse?

He stands there by the truck and looks at it, knows what it is and why she’s brought him here, and two strong hands grab him like a wet towel and twist him in the middle.

He can’t do this.

She moves past him, heading down to the water with her pack—full, he’s sure, of towels and a change of clothes. She glances back and flashes him a smile—

And stops, that smile freezing, because he has always been shit at hiding what he feels and even with only starlight to be seen by, it must be absolutely clear.

“What’s wrong?”

What’s wrong?

What’s wrong is that he knows that if he went along with this, bit down on every part of himself and gritted every single tooth, she would pull off her shirt and there would be that flowery ruched bikini top. That top he thought, that evening, about tugging off her shoulders, about slowly removing it and revealing the rest of her. The ruching between her breasts under which he wants to explore with his fingers, his mouth. She'll pull off her shirt and then everything else, and while he doesn’t for a minute imagine that she’s going to be naked or that she’ll even necessarily want to do anything—though fuck, who knows at this point—all that skin will be bare. Visible to him. She might let him touch her, put his hands on her. Feel how warm she is, how smooth. How soft. She might like him to do that.

He knows all that might happen.

And he also knows that she’s a fair-minded girl, tit for tat, and if she shows him hers...

She’s going to want to see something too.
And he can’t. He could maybe keep his shirt on, but... No, dead giveaway. Too weird. He can’t. She’ll see it, she’ll see them, and she’ll want to know about it because she’s curious and because she likes him, and it isn’t even that he thinks she wouldn’t leave him alone if he made it clear he doesn’t want to talk about it. That’s not it at all.

Just... Her seeing him. That first question.

*What happened to you?*

He can’t.

He backs up and shakes his head. He can’t see Beth’s face anymore, not well, but he can hear the questioning lilt in her voice when she speaks.

“Daryl? C’mon, you—” She jerks her head at the water. “I got you a towel, don’t worry.”

He almost cracks up. Oh, good. A towel. There’s that problem solved. He can force-feed it to himself as punishment for letting himself get pulled into this when he knew exactly what it was and where it was going.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“I told you, it’s fi—” She cuts herself off with a confused little laugh and he can feel the pressure of her gaze on him, bearing down on him, like the weight of the light of an oncoming train. A completely oblivious and also perfect and totally worth dying for train. “Daryl, what the hell?”

“Stop.” Trying to sound merely annoyed, sort of vaguely fed up, but *what the hell* is when she walks back to him, and *stop* is when the annoyance starts to slip and real anxiety takes its place. Tight and tense and unhappy. She has to be able to hear it, but she doesn’t seem to yet grasp its severity, because instead she just laughs again.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of swimmin’.”

She lays a hand on the hem of his shirt—no more intimate than any other way she’s touched him and in fact way less than most of those touches—and she’s barely even tugging, but it shatters something in him and he wrenches himself away from her. The movement wasn’t as intense as it felt, he’ll think later when he takes some stock of things, but still not good. Still *weird*.

“Jesus, will you lay the fuck off, girl.”

Somewhere in the trees an owl makes an announcement. Otherwise, except for the frogs, it’s silent. He stares at her and she stares back at him, and she looks about as smacked as he feels, and it’s awful. He feels *awful*.

Well.

“Daryl,” she murmurs, and her voice isn’t only confused now but hurt as well. He didn’t want to hurt her, he really didn’t, but he should have known he wasn’t going to be able to avoid it. Because could be he was right before and she was wrong, and he’s a piece of shit who ruins everything. Could very well be.

“Lay the fuck off,” he snaps again, and he thinks of an animal bristling and snarling because it’s too stupid to understand what someone is trying to do for it. “Shoulda asked me. Shoulda asked me if I wanted to do this, this is bullshit.”
Her face darkens, brows drawing together: hurt and confusion but a number of other things. Worry. A thin edge of her own anger.

“Don’t gotta say it like that,” she says. Her voice is quiet but there’s hardness in it. “You’re bein’ a jerk, all you had to do was say you didn’t wanna. What’s the problem?”

“Ain’t no problem.”

“Yeah, I totally believe that.”

“Know what, Greene? Ain’t none’a your business anyway. Been pokin’ at me from the beginnin’, how about you back off in general? Just ‘cause you kissed me a couple times, don’t make you some kinda fuckin’ therapist. That ain’t what this is.”

“So what is it?”

You said we didn’t have to name it. All his stupid anger dissolves for a few terrible seconds and he wants to release his own confusion, his own hurt—his fear. Wants to go to her, wants her to comfort him, because he’s pretty sure she would even if he’s been throwing verbal slaps at her for the last few minutes. If she saw that hurt she would reach out to it, even if she’s still mad at him.

He thinks she would.

And that makes it worse, and it makes him angrier at himself, so he’s angrier at her. Over such a small thing. He knows. Such a small thing, and it’s not truly small at all.

“Nothin’,” he growls, and instantly he knows it was the exact wrong thing to say. The thing the furthest end of the spectrum from right. He didn’t mean it the way it’s coming off—only meant it as a brush-off, a deflection, meaningless in itself, but he knows how it sounds. His brain and his throat lock up, panicked. He doesn’t know how to drag it back and explain.

“Nothin’,” she echoes, so soft it’s almost inaudible, and she turns on her heel and heads for the truck, not once glancing over her shoulder. “Take me home.”

He stares after her, the clenched fist in his throat too big and too tight for him to even swallow around it. Stares after her and his chest is that frayed rope swing, tangled into a tight mess and shoved into his ribcage, crowding out his organs.

I’m sorry.

In silence he drives her back to the tree, and in silence she climbs out of the cab, and she doesn’t slam the door behind her. The lack of slamming feels extremely pointed. She starts off down the road, walking toward the farm, and once more she doesn’t look back.

He could say it. She’s in earshot. She’s there with the starlight bathing her, moving through the dark, and she’s still beautiful—in her anger she’s so beautiful. He could say he’s sorry. Try to explain. Try to explain without explaining. It hurts so much.

He drives past her toward town.

Halfway there he stops and cuts the engine, slumps over the wheel. There’s no way to say for certain how bad this is, how badly he’s fucked up. It’s entirely possible that he’s fucked up beyond the point of recovery. That the next time he sees her he won’t get a smile, won’t get anything at all, that she won’t even look at him. That this was his one chance and he won’t get another one.
That he’s a piece of shit who ruins everything.

*I think you should stick with her. Sounds like she’s good for you.*

She is. Of course he couldn’t let her be that. Of course he wouldn’t try.

He goes back to town and goes drinking with Merle, which appears to make Merle feel better.

At least one of them does.

Chapter End Notes

Songs are "Stellar" by Incubus and "Dreams" by The Cranberries.
Yeah man I dunno, apparently I wasn't ready to stop after the last one.

There's a line in here which is drawn from this track by Explosions in the Sky, and it's also totally a soundtrack for this. It's perfect.

He has to do something.

He doesn’t see her Sunday, and he doesn’t hear from her. He goes back to the park. He wanders around, he walks the paths. He finds the bench again, though he doesn’t sit down on it. He listens to the kids playing, screaming; turns out the source is a small playground on the park’s edge. He lets his gaze drift, unfocused, over the flowerbeds and he thinks about the little flowers in Beth’s earlobes, winking when the light catches them, how he wanted—then and now—to touch a fingertip to them. Run that fingertip lightly up the cartilage of her ear. Kiss its edge.

He thinks about her hair and about how he hasn’t yet been able to properly comb his fingers through it, about how maybe he could have last night if he hadn’t been such a fucking asshole, if he hadn’t ruined it by being so afraid and so angry at his own fear. How she might have let him. Let him touch her. Kiss her. Tongue water off her skin, spread out their towels and lie with her under the stars and just exist.

Just occupy roughly the same space.

He could have done those things, he thinks she might have even wanted him to do them, invited him out there for that purpose, and he fucked it up.

He has to do something. He’s desperate. He was afraid last night but he’s more afraid now, of pouring himself into this place and what’s happening to him, in being close to her and in doing whatever it takes to stay that way, and losing her now.

Maybe melodramatic but he doesn’t care.

He drifts numbly through the motions on Monday and as he thought she barely looks at him, barely says a word. He’s studying her for any indication of what she’s feeling, of what he’s up against; he has no idea if he’s relieved or not when he gathers—from staying for dinner like usual and watching every facial expression and move she makes and minute element of body language—that she’s more sad and more disappointed than angry.

No, he’s not relieved. Angry would be easier. He would understand anger. He’s intimately familiar with anger. He has no idea how to handle making someone sad.

Fuck. He has to do something. And it’s going to have to be big. It’s going to have to hurt.

He has to do penance.
It takes him two more days to figure out what it has to be, and when the idea finally comes to him—fully formed and awful—it makes him stop in the middle of reaching for a socket wrench and curl in on himself a little and breathe until he calms down.

It couldn’t be anything else. It never could.

He thinks about waiting for the weekend. Then he decides he can’t. If he tells her and she says no, that’s that. Or she says maybe but also later that’s also that. But he can’t wait. He has to do this now. Now or he won’t be able to at all.

Before he leaves for the day he tugs her aside and murmurs, before she can protest, where he hopes she’ll be and when he hopes she’ll be there. Telling her that he’ll be there regardless and if she doesn’t come it’s fine, but he’ll be there and he’ll wait.

Staring into her eyes and feeling his own pleading, unable to tell how much of it she sees or what she thinks.

He leaves, turns and goes and doesn’t look back. Like before, he can feel the weight of her gaze on him.

He doesn’t go home. He calls Merle, says he’ll be late. He drives around as the last of the sun slips away and watches the color bleed out of the world and deepen into shadows and starlight. He thinks about the ruins—empty now, deserted—and he thinks about being there with her and about how if he never has that again he honestly doesn’t know what he’ll do.

Keep going. It’s all he’s ever done.

But he’ll have lost something and it won’t ever be the same.

~

She’s already there when he pulls up to the oak tree in the deep night, and this time she doesn’t wave. She doesn’t speak at all when she climbs into the cab. Once more she barely gives him a glance. She just sits and waits, and he doesn’t need her to direct him. Take him somewhere once and he’ll find his way back every time.

He can’t believe it. He can’t actually believe she came.

So he’s locked in now. He could try to go back, but that really would be the end of it. He’s absolutely sure.

He drives them down the road to the turnoff and rumbles and thumps over the gravel, over the little rise to the fork. Distant lights to the right, scatter of broken glass starlight to the left. He turns them and even though the thing is in drive it feels like they’re coasting. Under no power but gravity. He’s giving up, giving in.

He’s falling into her.

This is what has to happen.

He pulls to a stop, exactly where he stopped before. He’s reasonably confident that if he got out the flashlight he keeps stashed behind the seat and examined the ground, the tires would be set into their own tracks. Like all that intervening time never passed, and he’s gone back, and this is a chance to do it over.
Get it right.

He cuts the engine, opens the door, and climbs out. After a few seconds she follows, keeping her silence, and she trails him down toward the water.

He’s still on the grass when he turns to her and simply looks at her, her features soft shadows, her eyes quick glints that flick into and out of existence when she blinks. He looks at her and there are so many things he wants to say—I’m sorry, I fucked up, I always fuck up like this, I was just scared, you need to understand, it wasn’t you, it was never you, I need this, whatever it is, please don’t let me have ruined it, please let me try again.

But he’s always been better at doing things than saying them, so he swallows and pulls his shirt over his head and lets it fall.

And he stands there, the breeze cool on his bare skin, and he has to turn his face away from her. He just can’t. Can’t look at her, can’t see her face when she sees it, when he turns to the side so she can see—he’s certain she can see—the scars crisscrossing his back.

He has so many scars, and some of them are from the same place and the same person and some of them aren’t, but these are the worst.

He hears her draw in a soft breath, and then she doesn’t say anything at all. He stares at the water, the little rippled sparkles across its surface whenever the wind stirs it, and he waits.

It doesn’t hurt as much as he thought it would.

He’s expecting her to ask what happened. He’s expecting her to ask who did it to him. He’s expecting her to ask when and why. She asks none of these things. She has two questions and two only, and she asks them so quietly and so gently that he aches all over, and suddenly it hurts much worse than he thought it would.

And he doesn’t want it to stop. It’s like something twisted up inside him for years and years is finally uncoiling.

“Why didn’t you wanna show me?”

It’s not as bad as the other questions, but he has no idea how to answer it. He rolls a shoulder and makes an I’unno noise, flat but slightly wavering, and she lets it go. Sweet, kind girl, goddess of boundless mercy, she lets it go.

But then she asks the second question.

“Can I touch you?”

No. No, you can’t. No one ever has. He thinks about that and his knees tremble and threaten to give way. It occurs to him that he’s wanted to strip them both naked, wanted to explore her, wanted to see all of her and touch all of her and fuck her in so many ways, find so many ways to make her feel good, but somehow he never incorporated this into any part of that line of thinking. Like before, by the firewood racks. Her seeing him. Her wanting to see him. Explore him, the way he wants to do with her.

If he wants to have any of that, this is the price.

And maybe...
Maybe it’s not even about being a price.

His stomach in knots, still not looking at her, he nods.

The first touch is like she’s slapped him and he bites back a whimper, squeezing his eyes closed and clenching his fists until his nails dig painfully into his palms. Her fingertips, so light and cool and so careful, running from the outer edge of his shoulder down the side of his back. She’s so close to him; he can feel the heat coming off her in waves, the soft puff of her breath across his skin. He shudders, just a little, and she moves to another one and traces it the same way, and for a second he thinks he might be sick.

Because of what she’s touching. Putting herself into. Drawing connections between what she is, what she gives him, and what was done to him. And she’s not afraid at all, she seems fearless, and he wants so much to be like her. He wants her but he also wants what she is. This girl who knows her place in the world and claims it. Has expectations, but not spoiled ones. She expects things of herself and others.

She expects things of him.

“Daryl,” she whispers, “I’m sorry.” And he knows what she’s going to do a split second before she does it and he gasps, air hitting his lungs as her lips press against his shoulder.

He shudders again. Violently. It’s pain, and the fear putting in another appearance, and a weird, perverse species of shame—but it’s also relief. Real relief. And need.

And heat. Because no one else has ever touched him like this, in this place, and really anywhere. No one else has ever touched him like this, and he never wants her to stop.

He doesn’t pull away from her, and after a few seconds she leans her head against the space between his shoulderblades, and they simply stand there together. The owl again, quieter than the last time. More meditative. A little wondering.

She slides her arms around his waist, and before he knows it he’s covering her hands with his where they’re linked at his belly, pressing back against her, his breath coming rougher. Still trembling the smallest bit, like the breeze is stirring his surface. But she’s holding him. Holding him in place. She pulled him into herself and now she’s cradling him, and something has happened down here with her.

He’s not afraid anymore.

At last he feels her step back, and when she does he feels briefly bereft. Unmoored. He wants her back. He wants her holding him like that again. He draws in a breath, about to say her name, maybe say something else, but before he can she’s suddenly in front of him, facing him, and when she tips her head back the stars catch her eyes and bathe her face in light. What he sees there...

Her eyes are shining with tears.

“I need to show you somethin’.”

This is something else he already knows. The consistency of how she wears those bracelets, how she covers that wrist—it struck him early on, and he sensed that it meant something. He wants to ask her but he couldn’t figure out how. It seemed important, but he didn’t feel close enough. But now here she is, unsnapping the leather cuff she’s wearing, and he knows what he’ll see.

But she doesn’t turn the inside of her wrist to him. Instead she lays a hand at the center of his chest
and leans up and kisses him, light and soft, and moves away from him, heading back toward the truck.

“C’mon.”

He guesses why she’s there, but instead of turning on the truck’s shitty interior light—it flickers and the glow it throws is sallow and sickly—he fishes for the flashlight, turns back to her and flips it on, sitting down sideways on the seat with her standing between his knees. This has all taken on the quality of a dream, like he’s not here at all, like neither of them are. It’s very much like the night he went to the ruins in total desperation, grieving before he even lost anything, and he prayed to a winged wolf god and his prayer was answered in the affirmative, because he’s here now.

Because he is here. This is so vivid. He draws in a slow breath, and she holds out her hand and turns it. Palm up. Wrist up.

He studies the scar slashed across her wrist. He studies it for a long time. He’s not sure what he feels, except that he feels everything and he feels it with an intensity that completely immobilizes him. Like when she was touching him, sending his heart pressing raw and throbbing into his throat, but different. Like the woman from the bar. He aches for her. Aches for whatever happened to her, to do this. Aches for how she must have felt, because he might understand. It’s just possible that he does.

Pain. Loneliness. Being stuck, trapped, and no way out.

He thought she reached out for him because she was so full of light and sweetness and she wanted to give some of that to him. To share it. She wanted him to have a nice thing. He still believes that—still knows it’s true—but now he knows something else.

She saw something in him. She saw something she recognized. Something she knew.

Something she knew deep inside herself.

“I was sixteen,” she murmurs. “It was... Well, I mean, it was a bad year. But everyone has bad months, bad years. Lots of bad days. It’s bein’ a kid. That’s what happens. So that wasn’t it. It was somethin’ else.”

He wonders if she’ll let him. He thinks she will. He reaches out, trembling, and he lays his hand under her wrist, cradling it, his thumb stroking over the knob of bone there. Trying to be as careful with her as she was with him. This moment is so heavy and he wants to carry it. She carried his. He needs to do this. For her.

For him.

“What was it?”

She shrugs, gives him a small, pained smile. “It was like this... This darkness. Followin’ me around. It wasn’t like it hurt, not really. Wasn’t even like it made me sad. I mean, it did, but I mostly just...” She sighs and tilts her head, looking down at where he’s touching her. “Mostly it made me real tired. So finally I just... Nothin’ seemed like it was worth anythin’. There wasn’t anythin’ good tomorrow. Nothin’ good the day after that. Just more bein’ tired. More darkness. So I.”

She shrugs again.

“Just the one,” he whispers, because he knows. He’s observant. He notices, notes, files away, and she only covers one wrist.
She nods. “Got that far. And I... I dunno. I saw the blood and I didn’t wanna do it anymore. I changed my mind.” Another smile, but less pained. Merely sad. Maybe a tiny bit embarrassed.

“Went cryin’ to Maggie, they freaked out, took me to a hospital. I talked to a doctor. Started takin’ some medicine. Started talkin’ to someone. It got better. I got better.”

“It still happen?”

“Not like that. Sometimes... it’s hard. When it is, writin’ it down helps. I look back at the good days, and it’s like... They happened, y’know? They happened. They happened after the bad ones. So they’ll happen again. They have to.”

_The good days will happen again._

Things got better. She got better.

He closes his eyes against a sudden stinging blur.

For another moment or two there’s nothing. Then he lays down the flashlight and cuts it off, gazes down at her wrist again. He can’t see the scar anymore, but he knows it’s there, that delicate pale line, almost pretty. Almost beautiful. Like everything about her. He understands, without her needing to explain, why she hides it, and it’s not like why he does. It’s not shame. It’s not that she thinks it’s ugly.

It’s because after the bad days, the good days happen again.

“Can I—?”

She nods, and she slides a hand into his hair as he leans down and presses his lips against it.

Neither of them move. It stretches out. The autumn constellations turn slowly overhead.

“Daryl,” she whispers finally, and she tugs her wrist carefully free from his hand and his mouth, presses in close to him and combs through his hair with both hands. He curls his arms around her waist, absolutely no hesitation, and leans his head on her breast, her heart strong against his ear and cheek and jaw, and when he starts to shake he feels her do the same.

They kick away their shoes. He pulls off his jeans and she tugs off her own, her top off over her head, and there’s no color in the starlight but he knows without having to see it that she’s wearing that soft blue cotton bra.

He wants to touch it. Touch her. He wants to cup her breasts, feel how they fit into his hands. But it’s not time. Not yet. He can feel it. She can too; there’s a little distance. They’re still working their way gradually toward each other. If they rush things, it might not ruin them, but they won’t be as good. Not as good as they should be.

Later, he’ll think about how it felt to know all of this and it really _will_ be like a dream. Being so confident. Being so unafraid.

Almost naked, they walk into the water.

He moves in until he can’t touch the bottom anymore and dives, her beside him. Weightless, briefly suspended and completely submerged, he thinks again about baptism in reverse, about how neither of them are being cleansed because nothing can cleanse them. Nothing needs to cleanse them. He’s
seen some bad shit, done some bad shit, had plenty of bad shit done to him, and for a long time he was nobody and nothing, but he doesn’t ruin everything, or at least he might ruin some things but he can also fix them. He can do that. Maybe not everything, but he doesn’t need to fix everything.

His hand finds hers under the water, or maybe hers finds his, and when they break the surface together she drapes her arms over his shoulders and presses close to him, he settles his palms over her hips, and as she destroys the distance between them with her mouth, her fingertips graze one scarred line and he moans against her.

It doesn’t hurt, and he’s not afraid.

He kisses her for a long time, until they’re both breathing hard when she finally pulls back. He stares at her, blinks water out of his eyes, and realizes that something has changed. Everything has changed. He was naked in front of her and she was naked in front of him, and they went into the water together and came up again, and she’s so hot in his arms and he’s burning for her, but it’s not like before. Not like when he first saw her in her bikini top, not like by the firewood racks when he wanted to fuck her so fast and so hard. It’s a lower, hotter burn. Her lips are parted and wet and swollen, her eyes wide and glistening like pools of their own, and he leans in again and ghosts his lips down her jaw to her throat, flicking his tongue against her, biting gently at the soft skin over her collarbone, and she tips her head back and gasps his name.

This isn’t innocent. At all. But even so, she held his hand under the water before they surfaced. Down there where the changes happen. Where people go and come back out and grow up. *These are our last days as children*, he thinks, and he tugs her back to shore.

They don’t have towels, but they don’t need them. He’s perfectly fine to lie with her in the grass and dry in the breeze, look up at the stars. He could roll over on top of her and kiss her some more, find her breasts with his hands, settle into the cradle of her hips and rock against her and let her feel how hard she’s made him. But he doesn’t. He just lies on his back next to her, and she reaches down and threads her fingers with his.

“I’m gonna be fallin’ asleep in class tomorrow,” she breathes, and she laughs. She sounds happy. He thinks he might start crying again. It’s not a bad thing.

“Worth it?”

She squeezes his hand, gaze still fixed on the sky. “Definitely.”

They get dressed and climb back in the truck, and they rattle on out of there. Again there’s silence, but it’s a good silence. He’s content to be inside it with her. Already they’re coming out of it, whatever it was. Whatever they fell into, it’s fading. It was like a dream. He knows better than to try to hang onto it. He doesn’t think this is the last time they’ll go there.

Stopped at the oak tree they lean in at the same time, reaching in unison, and the kiss is hard, a hint of teeth when his tongue slides against hers, and he moans as she does. Everything this could turn into. Everything he thinks it probably will. And all that shit, everything that was freaking him out before... Yeah, it’s probably not done freaking him out. That shit is probably going to continue. And he still has no idea where this is ultimately going, this very old story.

He’ll worry about that tomorrow.

He drives off into the night, tasting her, windows down and the stars brilliant. These are good days.
He can’t lose sight of that. With her, they’re all good days.

Maybe they won’t always last.

But they’ll happen again.
now my work is done, I feel I'm owed some joy

Chapter Notes

Everyone being all like "this is ruining me": I know, man. I know. I. Know.

Me too.

<3

So once again: After that everything is exactly the same and everything is completely different.

He goes home and he sleeps well. Sleeps—doesn’t get drunk, doesn’t pass out, doesn’t toss and turn and writhe around and be generally uncomfortable. He falls asleep and he sleeps through the night, and to the extent that he remembers his dreams at all, they’re soft things. They wrap themselves around him like a blanket and he feels safe in them.

He can’t recall feeling that way before. But he’s no longer especially surprised by that. Everything now is new. Either he finds a way to get comfortable with that or he finds a way to get comfortable with constantly being smacked in the face by how constantly uncomfortable he is.

He wakes up, goes back to the farm. She’s at school. He does—he doesn’t question it, and yes, he does feel a tiny bit like a creep but he goes with it anyway—take a detour by the high school on the way out of town. Football practice is going on out on a field to the side. Of course he won’t see her—she’s inside, in class, and maybe falling asleep, and when he thinks about that he smiles. Small. It feels like the physical manifestation of everything they’re hiding, all that strangeness and sweetness and even the fear.

These secrets don’t feel so bad now. They don’t feel so wrong. They just feel sort of necessary. She’s good for him. He needs her. This is tricky. This is very problematic. But it’s also simply true, that she’s good for him and he needs her, and he should probably stick with her if he can.

And she wants him too. She does. He might not be a hundred percent on that, but he’s zoomed past fifty and it’s increasing all the time.

He’ll stick with her, and he’ll try so hard to not fuck this up. He really will try.

Overcast day, gray and dour in the sky and the colors it casts over the world, but he’s feeling good as he goes back to work on the harvester. He’s feeling light, like something heavy has been lifted off him. Something he’s been carrying around for years.

Maybe he’s just a redneck asshole and has been one forever, but he’s also strong, has had to become so. He’s strong and he can bear up under a lot. But right now he feels like he doesn’t have to. Not all the time. Because yeah, it’s like a dream now, doesn’t feel like it truly happened, and part of him is still afraid—still freaking the fuck out, basically—but he laid his head against her breast and she held him, wept with him, and he was weak in her arms and it was all right.

He feels light and he’s going to let himself float in it.

As the day wears on he finds himself thinking about places. Other places he can look at. Think about
getting. What he and Merle could do with. More space, more light. Maybe his own goddamn bedroom. Merle would bitch and moan but he might actually end up liking it. Might do him some good.

The sock full of cash under the couch is getting more and more full all the time. He’s saving whatever he can. He never saved anything before. Never had any reason to. He’s thinking about the big scary future and it’s not so scary anymore.

It’s not so scary, because when he thinks about it she’s in it. Right in the goddamn center.

~

She comes home and they all have dinner. Maybe it’s something in the air but everyone seems to be in a good mood. Everyone’s talking, laughing. He doesn’t talk much, because he still hardly ever does, but he sits there next to her and he listens and he feels that lightness, and he thinks about how he can be here with this family and it doesn’t feel so weird now. He doesn’t feel like he belongs, but it no longer makes him do quite as much internal squirming.

This isn’t his world—he’s only a tourist—but he’s getting to know it pretty well. He’s a frequent visitor. That’s nice. It’s a nice thing that she gave him. A door she opened and helped him walk through.

Her hand finds his under the table, threads their fingers together and squeezes. He hides a smile. He can tell she’s hiding one too.

A secret between them, in their clasped hands.

~

Before he leaves early that evening he finds her in the barn and he sort of loses his mind, but he doesn’t try to fight it. Twilight is coming on and the barn is full of deepening shadows—and that’s good, that’s perfect, because he pushes her into one of them and takes her hips in his hands like he did in the water, arches his mouth against hers, and she lets slip a groan. It’s deep, slow, and her hands comb into his hair—again like before—and she moves against him in a way that sends the coals smoldering in him into a brighter, hotter burn. She moves with a rhythm, pressing closer than she has. Rolling her hips in his hands. He runs the tip of his tongue over the points of her teeth and sighs.

He leaves her there, every nerve humming. Her teenage daring is contagious. He still feels like she has a couple of years on him.

They’re finding their way through this together. Neither of them has any fucking idea what they’re doing.

He’s pretty sure they’ll figure it out.

~

At home, much later and lying on his back in the dark, he does something he’s never done before. He strokes himself, slow, until he’s almost hurting with wanting to come, hot and throbbing in his hand—and he stops. Leaves himself there on the edge.

It does hurt. A little. It’s certainly not comfortable. But it also feels so damn good. And this time his dreams aren’t soft, warm things.
They burn.

~

Friday. Normal Friday, hot again. Rain on the way—not soon, but the weeks of the sharp autumn fronts have arrived, and it’ll come. Beth returns home and Daryl is on the way to the barn when she catches his eye and waves.

He gives her the smallest wave, the smallest smile, but he knows she sees it.

All day he’s been keeping that burn going. Not like the night before, not as intense—that would be a very bad idea for a number of reasons that should be obvious—but he thinks about her the whole time. Various ways, various contexts, and yes, he thinks about fucking her—of course he does—but he also thinks about not fucking her. Because the night by the swimming hole he lay side by side in the grass with her and held her hand and nothing more, and he honestly doesn’t know when he last felt...

He felt like he was exactly where he needed to be. With exactly the right person. Doing exactly the right thing.

Occupying roughly the same space.

He wants her. He literally can’t deal with how beautiful she is, with how she moves through the world like she rearranges it around her—gently—to fit herself. But he wants so much to simply be with her. Sitting next to her at dinner, holding her hand under the table. Feeling their secret and how they carry it between them.

He thinks about that. Lying with her in the grass in the sun, in the ruins, and feeling her against him. Running a hand through her hair, breathing her in.

For some reason he thinks about that more than anything else.

He’s fixing a loose board on a pen in the barn when she comes in and sits on a bale of hay, legs crossed, leaning back on her hands, her hair tied back and pulled over one shoulder—she’s wearing another peasant top, light purple, and her shoulders are bare—and smiling at him. He looks up at her and can’t breathe for a few seconds. It twists at him. Won’t let him go.

But it’s still not like before. It’s good.

The door is wide open. Shawn is in and out. But even if that wasn’t the case, something is making him want to hold off. Hold back. The same thing that kept his hands off her by the water, even though he wanted it. Wanted it so bad. Was reasonably certain she wanted it too. Even though it burned. It’s not time.

This deserves some care. It matters.

He gives her another small smile, all his own, and goes back to work.

They talk. Not about anything specific; he’s interested in everything she has to say, about how school is going, about stupid dramatic shit with friends—not that he thinks it’s stupid but that she clearly does, stuff she sort of feels like she’s moved past in some ways and no longer has time or patience for—and mostly he just listens, but that’s how it’s always been and he’s discovering that he’s very comfortable with it. It feels natural.

It all feels natural.
And it hits him: maybe he wants to fuck her, maybe he’s almost completely positive she wants to fuck him, maybe he watches her and his hands itch with how much they want to be on her, maybe he tastes her with all the intensity of the deepest sense memory...

But they’re friends. They still are.

Maybe that’s actually the foundation of the whole thing. They were friends to begin with. Of course that wouldn’t go away.

“Saw Jimmy with that girl in the hall,” she says after a moment of silence. She’s watching him nail the last board in place. Watching his hands. He likes that she’s watching. “Between English and Calculus. They were kissing.”

He looks up at her, studies her. She doesn’t sound upset, and she doesn’t seem upset. She seems generally okay. Maybe he detects a bit of residual discomfort, but he senses somehow that it’s not coming from a place of any real hurt. Not anymore.

She was telling the truth about that. It was never about being hurt, not at the core.

“Y’alright?”

She nods. “It was...” Quiet for another moment, then she shrugs, one hand drifting up to fiddle with the gold chain around her neck, rolling it between her forefinger and thumb. An idle little motion that distracts him, makes him stop hammering. “He looked happy. And it was like... That’s fine. He should do what he needs to do. It wasn’t gonna work anyway. He wouldn’t have been happy with me, just like I don’t think I would’ve been happy with him.”

She pauses again and tips her head to the side, her hair falling down over her shoulder, her upper arm. A shaft of sunlight breaks through above them and spills across her, and she’s all warm gold. He looks at her and she looks back at him, and everything in him seizes up into the sweetest pain he’s ever known.

“I’m happy now,” she murmurs, and he has no idea what to do or say.

But he also doesn’t feel like anything is required from him in either respect.

So—like before—he goes back to work.

~

She wants to go into town. She’s meeting some friends. He offers to take her; one of them can bring her back. Something low in his stomach is fluttering as she climbs into the cab with him and they drive, chasing the last of the sun, the radio cranked up and her doing the dolphin arc thing with her hand again—hypnotic. He can barely keep his eyes on the road.

Halfway there he pulls over and they practically launch themselves at each other, leaning in so fast and so hard their teeth knock together and she laughs. And her laugh twists into a moan and then a sigh as he kisses her and gets his fingers in her hair the way he wanted to all fucking day, and in fact he reaches back and tugs the band loose and lets it all spill free and wild over his hands, her bare shoulders.

She doesn’t wait for him to make the move. She lets her head fall back and tugs him in, inviting him, and he drags his mouth down the column of her neck and feels the rapid thrum of her pulse under his lips. His tongue. He has no idea where the impulse comes from but once again it’s there, and like he did in the water he closes his teeth—so carefully—on the skin at the base of her throat, and the sound
she makes is rough and strained.

He wants so many things. He wants to drag her into his lap, pin her between his body and the steering wheel. He wants to slide his hands up under her shirt, over all that hot skin—because like always she’s burning against him like a little coal. He wants to push one hand between her thighs and hold it there, press with his fingers, grind down with the heel of his palm.

He doesn’t. She doesn’t. It’s like the night under the stars; they kiss until they’re both gasping, breathing so hard, and he thinks they’re necking like two horny teenagers except then he realizes she literally is a horny teenager and it almost cracks him up.

And fuck, he feels like one. He’s twice her age but he never really got this when he was hers. He never got to be a teenager like this. This is his first time too.

If she touched him now, got a hand on his cock, he thinks he would probably come in about ten seconds flat. Again, horny teenager, and when she leans in again and grazes her lips just beneath his ear, her hot breath making him shudder all over, and asks him what’s so funny, he has no idea how to explain.

He drops her off outside the coffee shop. He can’t go inside with her and she doesn’t have to tell him so. It would be weird.

This is a secret. Delightful.

She touches his hand before she hops out and shoots him a grin over her shoulder. He stares at her until she disappears inside.

He’s very, very sure that he’s never been happy like this in his life.

He isn’t going to fuck this up. He is absolutely not going to fuck this up. Anything he has to do, to give, anything at all to keep from fucking this up, he will.

This is good for him.

He goes home. Merle wants to go out. Merle is suddenly flush with cash. Daryl doesn’t ask where Merle got it from. He doesn’t give a shit. Okay, fine, whatever; they can go out. He thinks he would probably be okay with just about anything. He’s still floating.

He’s also almost surprised he doesn’t still have an obviously raging hard-on, but when he jumps into the shower to rinse off the day—Merle calling him Darylina through the door and asking him if he also needs to fix his makeup—that abruptly changes and when he comes like the impact of something huge and solid he has to bite his lip to keep from making a sound he knows will be extremely audible.

Not like either of them jerking off is some big secret they hide from each other, fuck no. But this is a secret.

This is his secret. It’s just for him. Him and her. No part of it is for anyone else. When he thinks about her, when thinking about her does this to him, makes him feel so good, that’s his alone. Merle has no claim on it, and that includes knowing anything about it.

It’s not only that he deserves something nice.

He deserves something that’s his.
At four in the morning, dozing on the couch with the TV on, muted infomercial with black and white images of despairing people having their lives completely ruined by their inferior food storage solutions, he thinks about the ruins again. Lying in the sunny grass with her, legs tangled. On his side, looking at her, working his gaze over every curve and every angle of every feature. Learning her by heart. Combing his fingers through her hair, over and over and over.

They don’t have to be children anymore, when these last days are over. This is better.

His eyes closed, the flickering light from the screen becoming sunlight dappling through gently shifting leaves, he mouths her name. *Beth. Beth.*

*My girl.*
The next day is Saturday, and he gets a text in the afternoon telling him that she’ll be there in the evening. She’ll be doing the open mic night. He should come. It should be safe enough.

Since he was a jerk and left early last time.

And she adds something else. She’s being a little less careful with this now, but since Wednesday at the swimming hole he’s feeling more confident about the whole thing, and maybe she is too. Either way, she says he should take her home after.

There’s a lot unsaid there. A lot implied. A fuck of a lot.

So all right.

He’s expecting to have to fight Merle off about it, but Merle is actually fairly genial. Says he has his own thing. It’s fine, he ran into a few guys, they’re going to a honky-tonk they know about not too far out of town. Daryl wants to be a fuckin’ loser and not come? That’s his business. Merle’s not his babysitter anyway.

So yeah. Again. All right.

He fucks around until just before eight and then heads over—walks and takes his time. She said she would be going on at eight, but he figures it might look better if he merely wanders in, like he’s not expecting to see anyone in particular.

Though the barista he talked to that first Saturday night... He’s been in there a few times since, and he’s getting the distinct impression that she not only knows his face by this point but has picked up on a few other things.

He’s not going to be fazed by a goddamn barista. Not right now.

Anyway, she honestly seems nice. She’s always given him his coffee on just the right side of scalding, which is perfect. He likes her.

He steps inside and it’s like stepping back in time.

Those people, the light, the sound of the place, everyone around that little raised platform, people leaning close around tables, people toward the back of the room alternately sprawling and packed together on sofas, a few couples almost in each other’s laps. The smell of coffee beans and pastries and chocolate somehow intensified by the volume of people. And this many people, there should be a lot of noise, but there isn’t. They’re all quiet, except for a few kids whispering and giggling on the sofas, and as he stands there in the doorway and stares at the stage he hears someone shushing them irritably.

She’s up there. Not wearing the same dress, not with her hair the same way—this time she’s in jeans, a knit top all light blue, hair back and her wrist circled with beaded wire. And looking at it for a moment—it out of everything else—he feels like he and she are sharing secrets of more than one kind.
This girl has seen him, yeah. Sure. But she’s also let him see her.

Maybe no one else has seen her the way she’s let him see her.

He moves more toward the back and tries to install himself somewhere out of the way, finding any patch of lower light he can melt into. He’s only sparing the minimum amount of attention necessary for it. All that remains is on her, her gently strumming fingers, her eyes closed and her head tilted the slightest bit upward as she sings. It’s soft, a little melancholy. Sweet to match her voice.

now my apartment lies awake at night
it tosses every time she sighs
tries to take it easy on her eyes
but I can feel it giving up the fight
my whole building’s on its last floors
her heart’s not in it anymore

When she’s done with that one he goes ahead and orders coffee. He supposes he should. Of course it’s his barista, and the look she gives him when she hands over the cup with his change feels Significant. And then she flicks her eyes toward Beth, and he’s reasonably certain. Maybe she doesn’t know any particulars. Probably not. And well, whatever. What the hell is she going to do? He already decided against worrying too much about this.

He doesn’t have the attention to spare. Beth is singing again.

She does four songs. He thinks. They bleed into each other, and it’s not that he’s not paying attention but rather that he’s paying so much attention that all the bigger stuff blurs into a background mass while all the fine details blow up into razor sharpness. The light off the pale pink polish on her fingernails. The beads at her wrist. The muscles and tendons working at her throat. That gentle sway of her hips as she keeps the rhythm. The way she seems to find notes effortlessly, her voice never strained or uncertain, always so pure. So clear. The way the corners of her mouth curl when she sings, like she’s always smiling. Like she’s so happy to be doing it at all.

Which of course she is.

It’s not like before. It’s not agony. It’s not destroying him inside. That job was already well done before he even walked in here.

No sign of Shawn or Shawn’s friend with the bobbed hair. No sign, actually, of anyone else he remembers ever seeing with her. She leaves the stage as people applaud—again, that solid applause that first made him sure she wasn’t simply a regular attraction but a popular one—and she catches his eye, nods toward the door, and he gets it.

With a warm little shiver, he gets it.

He leaves and heads across the street and down toward the store and the parking lot and the truck.

He doesn’t have to wait more than ten minutes. He’s leaning against the driver’s side door, smoking, when she walks up to him with her guitar case. He watches her move, watches how she carries the case with total ease, no indication that it’s too heavy for her—because it’s not. There’s real power in those arms, and he knows it so well by now, but he admires it anyway.

He can’t imagine not admiring everything about her.

She looks up at him, and even in the dingy glow of the streetlights he can see that she’s flushed and happy, her eyes shining.
“Wanna go?”

She simply nods and moves past him and around to the passenger’s side, pulling open the door and pushing the case in, following it. He turns and watches her, bemused, as she shoves it out of the way as best she can, for the briefest of moments forgetting that she’s being watched. Pushing a few strands of hair out of her face. The fragment of a smile flickering across her mouth—a little smile, just for herself.

He lingers, feeling himself clench and release and clench again, tight and warm. Muscles he didn’t know he had.

He’s strengthening them. Working them out.

He drops the butt of the cigarette onto the pavement and grinds it out with his heel, climbs into the cab, coughs and shudders the engine to life, and rolls out into the night.

~

Of course he doesn’t take her home.

They don’t come to any spoken agreement. They head out of town and take the road that leads to the farm, but they pass it without slowing, lights flying past in the dark. She leans back in the seat and pulls off her boots and her socks on what appears to be a whim, puts her bare feet up on the dash and sings softly along to the radio.

show me where to look
tell me what will I find
oh, heaven let your light shine down

Not to the ruins. Not to the swimming hole. He’s not totally sure where he’s going. He’s following both an impulse and an instinct, something coming to him wild and hot and more than a little reckless on the wind that ripples over them both. This girl next to him, all open and burning, and all this darkness all around them, and above them all those stars.

When he was small, nights like this would make him want to run and run and run.

He drives until they’re in deep dark, the lights of the town faded into nothing behind them and the skyglow of anywhere else not yet intense enough to block any significant number of stars. They come to a huge field, open grass bordered by lines of trees, and he pulls over and she tugs her boots back on and hops out, taking the guitar with her. There’s a blanket in the cab and he briefly considers it, but it smells musty and too much like old cheeseburgers and he elects to leave it behind.

There’s a two-thirds empty jar of moonshine. He does bring that. Special occasion and all.

Even though he might be drinking it alone.

They hop the ancient wood beam fence—him first and she hands the guitar to him, then vaults lightly over. They walk softly over the grass, and when the breeze stirs the tips of the blades they look like tiny silver waves in the starlight.

He’s excited, that same flutter in his middle—he never knew before how literally butterflies in the stomach can apply. It’s the same low-burning desire for her, but it’s also simply being with her in the night, the cool air, all secret. No one else knows they’re out here. There’s a kind of power in that, like what he imagines literally being invisible might feel like.
They walk until the road disappears and stop on a flat stretch of ground. She bends and sets down the case, then straightens up, curls a hand around his nape, pushes up on her toes and kisses him, quick and light. He can feel her smile, her mouth so warm, and it shivers into him.

She sits down in the grass, crosslegged, and starts to unsnap the clasps that hold the case closed. He watches her for a few seconds, bemused, then sits down opposite her. She lifts out the guitar and it bumps against the side of the case as she does, and a low, tuneful hum drifts out of its sound hole and into the dark.

She eyes the jar as she settles it on her lap. “That’s moonshine, right?”

His eyebrows lift. This is a touch surprising. “How you know that?”

“I’m not a total kid, Daryl.” She pauses, seems to consider something. “If I come home smellin’ like that, you’re not gonna see me again until I graduate.”

He shrugs. He’s not going to push. But it feels appropriate. “Suit yourself, girl. More for me.”

“Uh huh.” She gazes at him a moment longer, her face all unreadable shadows, then reaches out a hand. “Gimme.”

“Seriously?” But somehow he’s not surprised about that much. He hasn’t thought of himself as a bad influence, but it makes sense that he might be. Guy twice her age, drifter, shitty background, generally disreputable—it’s part of that old goddamn story. But he no longer feels like he’s ruining anything. It feels like how he came out of the water with her. Less pure. But not any less good. This feels like what should happen.

“Yeah.”

So he hands her the jar.

He watches her closely as she unscrews the lid, looks at it a bit dubiously, then tips it back. At first nothing, but then she makes a little choking noise and splutters a bit, her face all screwed up.

“That’s the most disgusting thing I ever tasted.”

He shrugs and holds out his hand for it. But she shakes her head and tips it back again, takes a second swallow, and this time there’s a grunt as she feels the burn but she smiles at him.

“Second round’s better.”

“Yeah, take it easy. You ain’t got no tolerance.” He leans in and tugs it out of her hand. “And I’d kinda like to go on seein’ you.”

For a few seconds she just keeps studying him, that smile playing around her mouth, then gives the guitar a gentle strum. They’re in the wide open, nothing but night all around them, but somehow it echoes anyway, like they’re in a big but enclosed space. Good acoustics.

Like a church, maybe.

He sits back, leans on his hands and looks up. She looks up with him, still strumming—no song in particular. A low series of chords, almost cohesive without ever really becoming so. They’re pretty and he likes how he can’t pin them down.

So many fucking stars. He’s no stranger to this view, but like everything else it’s hitting him in a way
it didn’t before.

“You know about stars?”

He glances at her. Her attention is still focused upward, and her throat is exposed. He thinks about leaning in and touching her, trailing his fingers down to her collarbone. Feeling the rise and fall of her muscles as she swallows. Kissing her there again, feeling how she arches into it. Listening to her sigh.

Heat rolls through him, low and pleasant, by now entirely familiar.

“What about ‘em?”

She doesn’t answer at first, her fingers working music out of the strings. Then: “Like how old they are. When someone first explained it, how it takes thousands and thousands of years for their light to get to us, I thought they were pullin’ my leg. Then I found out it was true.” She jerks her chin upward. “Some of them aren’t even there anymore. Gone. But we see ‘em anyway.”

“Yeah,” he says softly. God, he wants to touch her even more. Everything she’s saying is stoking the coals, drawing that need higher. “I know about that.”

“Time ain’t always the same everywhere,” she whispers. “Ain’t always the same shape.” She glances down at him. “First time I was in Atlanta at night... I was real little but I remember. Lookin’ up. The stars were gone. It was like someone turned off the sky.”

“Never had that problem growin’ up.”

“Yeah?”

He nods. And as he does he realizes he’s not afraid to talk about this. Not prickling, not feeling himself backing off and reinforcing all his walls. He doesn’t need to. When they were helping with dinner in the kitchen that first time and she said she never judged him, she was absolutely right.

He’s safe with her.

That completely blows his mind.

“Wasn’t nothin’ out there. I mean... People was livin’ there, but no cities. No big towns. Not around where I grew up. Fuck all, pretty much.”

“You like that or not?”

He shrugs. “It was just how it was like.”

She looks at him for a long, long moment, all silent. With her head angled how it is, he can’t tell if she’s smiling. Once he would have felt some anxiety about that. But it’s gone. It’s not like that anymore. He senses thoughtfulness from her. Meditation. He’s perfectly content to sit and let that ancient starlight flow all over him and let her meditate.

“I still hardly know anythin’ about you, Daryl Dixon.”

Now the thinnest thread of fear. Barely there but he feels it, and it’s unwelcome. “Ain’t much to know.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”
“Whaddaya want me to tell you?”

She shakes her head slowly. “I dunno. Just... You can talk to me. You don’t have to be afraid or anythin’.”

He gives her a faint, teasing smile. It feels good, so good, to smile like that. “I ain’t afraid’a nothin’.”

“I don’t think that’s true either.” Another moment of silence, of her looking at him and him letting her look, almost shivering under the pressure of that gaze, and then she lays the guitar aside and reaches for him.

He goes to her.

He pushes her down with his hands on her shoulders, with his body, and she goes without the slightest hint of resistance, and when he kisses her it’s the easiest thing in the world. She opens up under him; he feels it happen and knows it’s not only her lips parting, and that’s so easy too—because she’s already so open. She always is. Never closed off the way he’s been. And she helped him do the same, flooded into him and expanded all his cracks.

She slides her hands into his hair and tugs, pulls until tiny little stings spark through his scalp, and he shudders. Moans softly. Closes his teeth on her lower lip and bites down and again he’s so careful with her, but he can feel how he might be rougher. How he wants her that bad. And without meaning to, without even noticing at first, he gets a knee between her legs and he’s pressing against her hip, and he’s so hard she has to feel it.

She does. He knows because she pulls back, panting and staring up at him with her doe eyes wide. “Daryl.”

“What?” That thread of fear again. Like he’s done something wrong—wouldn’t she tell him? He wants to believe she would, needs to believe it, because the alternative is too awful to contemplate.

She shakes her head again. “Nothin’.” And she tugs him back down, tongue slipping into his mouth, and it’s like she’s trying to tangle it with his. He groans and the fear is gone, and he runs his hands down her sides and frames her hips, pushing her down harder, almost pinning her.

If he actually drank this in, everything it is and everything it means, he might stop functioning. Might just not be able to do anything. His brain, his entire body short-circuited. As it is he’s so hot, something on fire between them and spreading, his cock and his gut and all the way up to his chest, tightening his throat. Never before, never like this, and he rocks against her as he drags his lips down her jaw, looking for friction, pressing his knee in harder, and when she rolls her hips up to meet that pressure he gasps and breathes her name.

Simply knowing he can make her body do that. Make her feel good. God, it’s all the power he could ever want.

“Daryl, I—” He scrapes his teeth against her collarbone and this time the noise that escapes her is almost a little frantic, rough, close to a whine. “Oh God, Daryl...” And then it occurs to him that he might fuck her right here, here in this field under the stars, strip with her and lay himself between her legs, spread and lift her thighs, thrust hard into her, and that might be good. That might be very good. Because she’s rocking against him in a steady rhythm, meeting his own, wriggling against his knee, and every breath out of her is shaky and shallow and there’s so much fucking need in every single one.

But then her fingers tug in his hair, more sharply than before, and he senses something wrong when
she stiffens. Jerks himself up and back with the contents of his chest trying to crowd into his throat.

“Beth?”

She bites her lip. The starlight is touching her face, making it all so clear, and there’s need but there’s also anxiety. A lot of it.

And he can’t. He can’t be a jerk and he can’t be a creep. He stops moving, shifts himself away without completely letting go of her.

“I just... I’ve never done this. Ever.”

He stares at her, briefly uncomprehending. But she’s. Regardless of how some of his fantasies have gone, she’s eighteen. She had a boyfriend. It sounded like she had one for a while, the same one. But she never. She never.

She has no reason to lie to him about this, and a dim instinct tells him that she in fact has a great many reasons to not do so.

“You’re sayin’...” He pushes himself up, braces himself there, though he’s not totally rolling off her. “Sex. You never.”

She shakes her head. “Not... Well.” No color in this light, simply shadows and silver, but he can tell that she’s blushing furiously. “Not really anythin’.”

Another brief period of staring. A deeper part of him knows that he shouldn’t actually be so astonished by this, that it’s probably not all that uncommon, but he’s still having trouble. And he’s probably making her feel even weirder, and he feels bad about that, but he also can’t help it.

“Why not?”

“I wanted to wait,” she says simply—a slight quaver in her voice. Sounding a little helpless.

“Till you got married or somethin’?” Because he genuinely does want to understand. Understanding feels important.

She rolls her shoulder with a mild amount of difficulty, and he thinks he really should get off her, so he finally does—he rolls to the side and raises himself up on one elbow, still staring at her. She also turns on her side, facing him, and if he’s still staring she still looks pretty helpless. Still blushing.

“Maybe. I dunno. I just wanted to wait. Till it felt... good. Till it felt right.”

Everything in him sinks. So maybe he has fucked up. Maybe he went ahead and did it again, because he wanted something too much and he went too fast, pushed too hard, possibly misread some signals. He thinks there’s also a good chance he didn’t, but the idea that he did...

“It don’t feel right, now?”

“It’s not you. Daryl... Daryl, it’s not.” She hesitates, then lifts a hand and touches his face, runs a fingertip down his cheekbone, and he could pull away but instead he leans into the touch.

He’s helpless too.

“So what is it?” he murmurs, and the words feel gentle in his mouth, tone soft in his ears. He hopes it does sound like that. Not fucking things up. Not hurting her, not causing any upset. Merely trying to process.
“I’m just not ready.”

So soft. Soft as him. He hears it and he can’t imagine not obeying that, though it’s not phrased as a command. It still is. A gentle one but a command all the same. \textit{Back off.}

\textit{For now.}

He closes his hand over hers, curls his fingers around it, nods.

But he needs her to understand too. He does.

“I want you.”

She smiles then, smiles and leans close and tips her forehead against his, and he knows it’s okay and he settles again. This isn’t bad. He isn’t bad.

“I want you too.”

Jesus \textit{God.}

And all at once he gets what that means. What that means they could do. What he could do with her. What he could \textit{be} with her.

It nearly makes him tremble. Shake. That’s... Maybe it shouldn’t, but it feels like a lot of responsibility. If he does. If she wants that. If she truly does—and once more, could be he should feel like such a creep for this, but he does anyway and can’t even begin to help it—the idea of being her \textit{first}, of being inside her like that... It sends a pulse of heat straight into his cock so hard and so hot that he has to fight back a moan.

“All right.” He smiles, slightest curve of his mouth, and it feels good again. Like everything else, it feels right. It feels like what should happen. She’s so beautiful like this, flushed and wide-eyed and panting, warmth flowing off her like water. He lays a hand on her hip and her eyes flutter half closed.

Just a hand, and it does this to her.

“I want you,” she whispers again, and she combs her fingers through his hair. He makes a quiet sound, low and rough, and closes his eyes.

He has no idea how to show her how much he needs her. Not only wants; \textit{needs}. To be with her like this. Be with her at all. No fucking idea how he could do that.

Except maybe.

He dozes. When he opens his eyes again he’s on his back and she’s curled up against his side, head pillowed on his shoulder and her hand resting on the center of his chest, rising and falling as he breathes. He looks at it, watches, and feels her. Feels how she fits with him. His arm is pinned under her and it’s completely asleep, but he couldn’t care less.

But the moon is rising. It’s late. Extremely late. He has to get her home. She stirs and he stirs her more, and eventually she sits up, rubbing at her eyes and yawning, and it’s absolutely the most adorable thing he thinks he’s ever seen.

He takes her face in his hands and kisses her, slow.
She kisses him again when he lets her off a little way up the road from the farm. It’s between hard and soft and it’s very deep, and he sinks into it and pulls her down with him, hand tangled in her hair, snarling it up even worse than it already is. She’s going to have a hell of a time brushing it out. He wonders if, when she does, she’ll think about him.

About this.

“G’night,” she whispers, smiling against his mouth. She doesn’t smell like moonshine. At least hardly at all.

But she tastes like it.

She climbs out and starts walking. He watches her for a moment or two and then drives into the dark, thinking about old stars, old stories, about how this has a quality of inevitability that should scare him, or at least he imagines it should, but it doesn’t. She said she didn’t think it was true that he isn’t afraid of anything, and it’s not...

Except right now it sort of is. Almost.

Later, on the edge of falling asleep, the slow aftershocks of his orgasm rolling gently through him, he thinks that it might be dangerous, that lack of fear. But for now he drives along with the windows down and the taste of moonshine still on his lips, literal moonshine falling on him, and the radio is off but he gives in to that impulse—old now—and under his breath he sings a little of one of the songs she sang at the coffee shop.

He never thought he could sing, not really, but he also never exactly tried, and it doesn’t sound all that bad to him.

And it feels right. Feels like what should happen.

ring the bells that still can ring
forget your perfect offering
there is a crack in everything
that’s how the light gets in

Chapter End Notes

Songs are "The Bad Actress" by Josh Ritter and "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen.
As it turns out, they both like teasing. They both like being teased.

Daryl knows what Merle would say—shit about blue balls, shit about Beth being a little cocktease, about that being pretty shameful behavior in fact, about Daryl getting himself a woman who’s actually willing to put out and Christ, there are a considerable number of establishments in a thirty mile radius containing women who would be willing to do that for him, for free for fuck’s sake. And this is all if Merle wouldn’t give him endless amounts of shit for wanting to fuck a high school senior.

More than that. He still hasn’t fully articulated it to himself, but he feels—very instinctively and very strongly—that there would be bigger problems. That something else might happen. That he’s already in a somewhat dangerous position, and it isn’t even himself he has to worry about.

If anything happens to her. If anything happens to her because of him.

But the week after the night in the field is delirious. That’s really the only way to describe it. She said she wasn’t ready and what he realized later is that he’s simply happy that she said something, happy that she told him—because he can trust her now, in a way he didn’t expect. He can trust her to say no.

Because if anything happens to her because of him he honestly doesn’t know what he’ll do.

But this is amazing. He can’t deal. He isn’t trying to deal. Tuesday night she climbs down her trellis and meets him by the oak tree, rides with him, parks on a service road ten miles away and gets in the truck bed with him. He has blankets, and they don’t smell like old cheeseburgers. They wrap themselves up in each other, and it’s a muggy night and they’re burning against each other, slick with sweat ten minutes in.

Ten minutes of kissing her. Almost all kissing. Kissing until her lips feel swollen against his, until his definitely do, sucking kisses at the juncture of her throat and shoulder and she laughs and asks him if he’s crazy, because people could see in school tomorrow, see the marks he’s leaving on her, and wonder how she got them.

But sure as hell she doesn’t want him to stop.

He licks the sweat off her jaw, laps at the hollow between her collarbones, and she leans up and grazes her teeth over his adam’s apple and he shivers and breathes fuck, Beth.

She might be a virgin, but she doesn’t feel all that virginal. He grinds against her hip and she slides fingers into his beltloops and tugs him harder against her.

He wants her so bad, and the wanting actually feels like the best part. For now.

And when they wind down, slow and easy, and pull apart a little, she curls against him again and he wraps his arms around her and the breeze cools their skin, even though he’s still aching for her, the blood roaring through his veins.

I want you.

“I never had this,” she says softly, staring up at the sky. “Never...”

“Never thought I would,” he finishes. Even softer than her. He doesn’t want to speak louder than
this, even though there’s no one around to hear them, like this moment is delicate and if he’s not careful he might break something. He turns his head and presses his lips to her temple. It’s not just that he has this at all. It’s not just that it came out of nowhere and he feels like he’s being continually smacked in the face by the sheer reality of it, and he never wants that to end.

It’s that it feels so easy, since the night of what he’s come—somewhat whimsically—to think of as their baptism. It feels like it’s something he’s always had, this thing he never even imagined he would. Holding her. The simple reality of his hands on her skin, tangled in her hair.

She turns, lifts her head and gives him a half smile. “Never?”

He looks up at her and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. He can’t tell if she’s teasing or not but he thinks it’s entirely possible that she isn’t. That she might find it strange that it wouldn’t have been on his radar at all. “You think this is honestly somethin’ guys like me... that we ever get? C’mon.”

She leans her chin on his chest and studies him. “Guys like you?”

Suddenly it’s awkward. He shrugs, best he can with her lying half on top of him. I’unno.

“You’re a good man, Daryl Dixon,” she murmurs, and before he can say anything she lifts her head and kisses him.

Kisses him for a while.

He’s breathing a little fast and a little shallow when she lays her head down on his chest again, and it’s not just that she’s built that burn back up and it’s a low throb between his legs. It’s the words. Those fucking words. What is he supposed to do with those? No one has ever said that to him. No one has ever said anything vaguely like that. He’s been called all kinds of things, told that any number of colorful descriptions apply to him, that he falls into any number of interesting categories, but no one has ever called him good.

“Thought you knew nothin’ ‘bout me,” he whispers.

He feels her smile against his neck, her breath warm on his skin. “I know what I need to know.”

He has to close his eyes against the sting.

Wednesday after dinner he corners her in the barn again but this time she’s the one who backs him into the wall. He knows what a risk this is, how stupid this is, but he feels stupid. He’s into being stupid. He tastes like Annette’s buttery biscuits and absolutely incredible fried chicken. He can smell it in her hair. He grins—grins, Jesus Christ—and catches her earlobe between his teeth, breathes that he wants to eat her up. She shakes laughter against him, his arms curled around her.

He drives home with that low throb again, practically making him squirm in the seat. He never would have ever believed that it could feel so good to not fuck someone. Even if it’s driving him crazy.

He likes this kind of crazy.

Merle is high when he gets home, high and flying, his pupils eating up his eyes. He looks jerkily up when Daryl comes in, asks him what the fuck he’s smiling about. Sounds irritated about it, like Daryl has some sort of audacity in feeling that good. Daryl ignores him and gets in the shower.
In his mind, wrapping her legs around his waist and fucking her up against that wall. Fucking her and kissing her at the same time, making it so good for her that she can’t stop gasping his name, shuddering against him. God, that’s all he wants. He doesn’t even care how it happens in the end.

By Thursday he’s positive: it’s not even about fucking her. That would be great, but it’s not even about that. He is completely obsessed with the idea of making Beth Greene come.

He wonders if anyone else has ever done that to her. For her. Given what she said... Yeah, probably not.

And he believes she’ll let him. Sooner or later.

~

Friday night they meet in the park, in the shadows—she’s hooking up with some friends later and they’re all going back out to the swimming hole, taking advantage of the last truly warm nights of the year, but he figures he can get her nice and wet beforehand, and he smiles at the thought of it before she even gets there. He pushes her against a tree, clumsy with how hungry he is, and she fumbles at him, at the waistband of his jeans, pushing her hands a little way up his shirt, fingers cool as they drift over his lower back.

He uses his knee again and barely manages to keep from using his hand, and she wriggles, squirms, clamps her thighs around him and lets out breathy little moans. For a few seconds he thinks he might actually satisfy that particular new obsession.

But in the end she backs off. Leans against him and trembles, panting, coming back down from what was perhaps indeed the edge. He strokes her hair, running his fingertips over the curves of her braid.

“You’re so good,” she whispers, her voice rough. Shaking at the edges, almost imperceptible but he does miss it. “You’re so good, Daryl.”

He almost wishes she wouldn’t say things like that. It all gets more difficult to deal with when she does. And he wants to say something like that to her except good won’t even begin to get the job done; he wants to tell her that she’s the most amazing thing he’s ever seen, better than he ever believed anything could be, that he can’t believe she even exists, that she blows his mind apart in the best way every second he’s with her—and she’s not a goddess. She’s not a goddess at all. She’s a girl. She’s a brilliant, strong, beautiful girl, and he’s starting to understand that she’s brave, too. So brave.

She’s not merely everything he wants. He looks at her and he sees something he wishes he could be.

He still thinks it might be too late. He can bask in this, soak in its warmth and its light, but in the end...

What’s going to happen?

Where do these stories go?

Later, he takes the money Hershel gave him and, when Merle is in the bathroom and he knows for a fact—given Merle’s announcement that he has to drop one mother of a deuce—that he’ll have at least a few uninterrupted minutes, he pulls the sock out from under the couch and does what he does every time he’s paid now and adds up the total.

With this week, he has over a thousand dollars saved. He should just shove it all back in and get it out of sight again as quick as he can, but for a moment he stays where he is, on his knees on the dirty
It’s not like they haven’t been flush before, but it always goes fast, gone like it was never there and leaving only hangovers and—in Merle’s case—numerous instances where he’s needed full courses of antibiotics. This isn’t like that. This is *his* money. He earned it. He’s not going to piss it away.

It’s time to start thinking very seriously about what he *would* like to do with it.

Later after that, watching Merle working up to cheating at pool, he decides to float the question. Casual like. To the extent that he can be casual about something like this.

“Been thinkin’.”

Merle knocks back his shot of rye and calls for another one, shoots Daryl a look. “Yeah? After all these years, baby brother, I’m so proud I think I might fall the fuck over.”

Daryl ignores him. He’s gotten pretty good at that. He’s nursing a beer and he intends to stay on his feet and in his head. “Was thinkin’, if we’re gonna be here a while longer... Might look at gettin’ somethin’ better’n we got now.”

Another look, a little more incredulous, Merle’s glass halfway to his mouth. “Better’n what? The fuck’s wrong with that place?”

“Bro, it’s a shithole, said it yourself like a hundred fuckin’ times.”

“Yeah, well. ‘s good enough. We had way worse. I don’t see why we gotta go makin’ shit complicated.”

“Nothin’ complicated about it,” Daryl says with carefully modulated patience; Merle is skilled at picking up on when he’s being patronized and that would be an excellent way to shut the conversation down hard and fast with possible consequences later on when Merle figures out exactly what manner of sadism he wants to employ. “Just get somethin’ a little bigger. There’s places. I could do with a bed, man, that couch is fuckin’ up my back.”

Not entirely a lie.

Merle slams down the shot glass and turns, eyes narrowed. “Sounds like you really *have* been givin’ this some thought, huh.”

Daryl shrugs.

Merle is quiet for a moment. Over by the pool tables someone has been caught hustling and his nose is in the process of being broken by an eight ball. A small circle of onlookers cheer. Daryl thinks about the woman in the bar, her desperate eyes. *God, get me out of here.*

He’s so done with this.

If only he believed there was actually a way he could be.

“Alright,” Merle says slowly. “You find somewhere rent’s that low?”

“I’m gettin’ paid more, you know that.”

“Yeah, and I ain’t seen a whole lotta evidence of that, brother.”

Daryl’s jaw tightens. He didn’t expect this to go particularly well, but even so. But he’s also sick to
death of dancing around this. “Know what? You’re right. I been givin’ this some thought. We got the money. Let’s do it, let’s just...” He breaks off, screams of exasperation seething around the bottom of his lungs. “Don’t you want somethin’ better? If you could have it?”

“Seems like you do.”

“Yeah.” Daryl grits his teeth. He was ready to walk away, that night. He wasn’t, but... He was. “I do.”

Merle leans in. He smells overpoweringly of terrible liquor but his eyes are sharp, keen, focused. “We’re just leavin’ anyway. Sooner’r later.” He tilts his head. “Or is there somethin’ I don’t know?”

Daryl simply looks at him. Looks at him for what feels like a long time. Before, this might have scared him. Before, a lot of things about Merle would have scared him. He’s been scared of Merle and for Merle for years, scared so long it’s become that same kind of bullshit background radiation, something else he hardly notices. Hardly did notice. But if he can’t see Beth without thinking about how it feels to run his hands over her skin, he can’t look at Merle without thinking about how it feels to let someone weigh you down until you forget how to stand up straight.

“I’m gonna look,” he says slowly. Firmly. He holds Merle’s narrow-eyed gaze and doesn’t waver. “I’m gonna look, and if I find somethin’ good I’ll let you know. And you can look too.”

“Yeah,” Merle says after another moment or two. Thing is, he doesn’t look mean now. He doesn’t look suspicious. He doesn’t look angry. Daryl can’t figure out what’s going on with his expression. This—flat, almost mask-like—is something he’s never seen before.

And yeah. That’s scary.

“Yeah, alright.” Merle turns away again, orders yet another shot. “You do that, little brother. You do that.”

~

Saturday he doesn’t see her. Sunday morning he walks by her church—he knows when to do that now—and there she is. He’s walking—not standing—and trying to appear as if he’s merely on his way somewhere, and it’s a good thing, too, because this time they all see him, and Annette waves and gives him a wide smile.

Annette seems to have taken a shine to him, which weirds him out a little but which he also kind of likes. Sort of. Even if it’s gotten a lot weirder on his end since he started to badly want to fuck her daughter.

Beth waves too, smaller, and gives him her own distant little smile. No white dress this time, and no peasant top. Yellow sundress, bright, and like the white one it stops just above her knee. The neckline is deeply scooped, and he thinks about running his fingers along its edge. Over and over and over until she’s breathing hard, until he can tell she wants him to take it off her. Even if she doesn’t say so.

He keeps walking. He doesn’t actually have anywhere to go but he’ll figure something out.

Later that afternoon his phone buzzes.

*tonight, 12 come over*
There’s not a lot of detail in that.

But he can infer enough.
'cause I don't shine if you don't shine

Chapter Notes

The poem in here is by Mary Oliver.

Mary Oliver is fucking amazing.

There’s a storm.

There’s something about Sundays. There really is. An electric quality to the air; not only the lightning itself but a kind of potential for more. He obviously can’t drive up to the house; he parks by the side of the road a quarter mile away and walks. It’s not raining yet but it will be, and it’ll be bad: lightning is nearly constant on the horizon, jagged veins of it spidering down toward the ground, thunder cracking minutes after. It might come in the next few hours, if it’s rolling fast enough. Probably is.

He watches it as he walks through the dark, half hypnotized. Something about Sundays. Rain. Something about rain and her. Water. There’s a theme going on that he can’t quite pinpoint the sense of.

He wants to dive into her.

The house is dark when he walks up the drive, boots crunching softly over the gravel. She didn’t need to tell him where to go, and she didn’t need to explain; he heads around the side of the house to where he knows her bedroom window is and surveys the trellis, or what he can see of it in the dark.

It clearly supports her weight, but she’s small. Light. He imagines all of this coming out when he’s discovered with a head injury and part of the Greene’s house fallen on him, and he indulges in some silent laughter.

That unsteady feeling that he’s been dipping into and out of has returned to him. The feeling that he’d like to do something very stupid.

He already is.

He takes hold of the trellis and begins to climb.

It creaks, protests, but it must be of extremely superior construction, because it holds his weight. Moving deliberately, he makes his way up, and it hits him all over again, what an incredible cliché this all is. Creeping up to her bedroom window in the dead of night for...

You know, he’s not sure. Anyone else would assume—and he would assume, with just about anyone else—that she’s called him here because she’s ready. But this is Beth Greene. Assumptions aren’t such a wise thing when it comes to her. And if it’s about being ready, he thinks the truck bed or the field or the swimming hole would do just fine. Yeah, she wanted to wait, but she doesn’t strike him as the kind of girl to have these romantic fairytale ideas of how her First Time might be. Rose petals and a big frilly fucking bed or whatever. She seems entirely too pragmatic. Too realistic regarding the universe in general.
And in fact, he thinks under the stars is more her style.

So this is probably more complicated than it appears.

Well, okay. Sure. By this point he’s almost used to complicated.

There’s no light through her curtains but he raps softly on the glass and waits. And a few seconds of irrational panic where he’s positive he’s wrong about which window is hers are thankfully relieved when the curtains are drawn aside and the window opens, and she pokes her head out and smiles at him.

“Get in here. I don’t gotta tell you to be quiet.”

He climbs in. It’s not that hard and he does manage to be pretty quiet, but all at once he feels very big and very clumsy, and very likely to do something to blow this whole thing wide open. It comes home fully, as he finds his feet and simply stands there for a few seconds, how fucking dangerous this is. The barn is one thing, but if he’s discovered here there’s no way he’ll be able to explain it as anything other than exactly what it is.

And while he’s mulling this over and wondering how freaked out he should be, she turns her bedside lamp on and he sees her room. Scans it, and for the moment forgets everything else.

He’s not certain what he expected. He supposes he didn’t really expect anything. Definitely not a stereotypical teenage girl’s room with lots of posters of pouty guys everywhere. Definitely nothing like those vaguely creepy overly juvenile versions of the same that he’s seen once or twice in movies from that barely legal genre of porn Merle has gotten his hands on. No: this room is, like her, practical. Pretty. There are actually two large windows, and he can tell that when the daylight comes in it must be bright and airy. She has a sizable bookshelf piled with stuff; he scans the titles and sees novels, some books on music—a lot of books on music—a couple of other books on their sides which he can identify as poetry. Knickknacks on it and on the dresser opposite—little crystal items, a couple of snow globes, the kind of useless souvenir statuettes that he’s aware people pick up on vacations.

Horses—a fair number of the things are horse-related. A couple of the pictures on the walls—in addition to family photos—are paintings of horses. In this respect she does seem to fit at least one stereotype. A gentle stereotype. She’s a farm girl. Of course she would.

A wooden tree on her dresser, branches hung with bracelets, bangles, wrist cuffs. A bewildering number and variety.

Her bed.

He saves this for last and he stares at it for what might be approaching a creepy length of time, but he’s simply trying to process it. That he’s here. That she sleeps in it—it’s not even about sex, he realizes. He looks at it and he feels no particular heat, at least not right now. It’s simple, bedspread covered with a complex geometrical pattern of blue and green and white that has the appearance of being either knitted as a gift or some sort of passed-through-the-family thing.

This is a place that’s fully hers, only hers, and the bed is the center of that. Since he met her what now feels like years ago, he’s gotten close to her in more ways than he knew was possible, but he feels like this is the closest he’s ever gotten.

Except for that night. The night when they went into the water, when he kissed the scar on her wrist and she held him.
“Daryl?”

He almost jumps. He had nearly forgotten she was there at all. She’s standing beside and behind him in an oversized and worn pink Disney World t-shirt and pajama pants made of something fuzzy, and she’s smiling this odd little smile—and after a second or two he figures out what’s up with it.

She’s nervous. She’s nervous for the same reason he stared for so long at her bed. This is her place. She’s let him in. Different from the ruins and the swimming hole; she was sure he would like those, absolutely confident. But this... This is just different. He doesn’t know how to fully explain it even to himself.

“Hey.”

“I just wanted to see you,” she says softly. “And you’ve never been here. So.”

He nods. Both true things. The latter he can speak to directly; the former he trusts.

“It’s.” He clears his throat. “’s nice.”

“Nice,” she echoes, still soft, and now the smile pulling at her lips is less nervous and more amused. “Alright.”

Somehow the ease with her he had almost begun to take for granted has half lifted, and he feels awkward again. Devoid of any guidance regarding what he should do, he turns to the bookshelf and moves over to it, examines its contents more closely. A lot of the stuff there frankly looks cheap, doesn’t even look like she cares all that much about it, the way it’s scattered around, but there’s a carved wooden bear that catches his eye. It’s on all fours and its head is turned as if it heard something, as if it’s about to rear—not so much a vicious or a dangerous or even an alarmed stance so much as a merely curious one.

The wood is dark and glossy, and on impulse he picks it up.

“Got that at Yellowstone,” she says at his elbow. He isn’t startled, though he hadn’t realized she had closed in on him again. “Last year, actually.”

He glances at her. “You been to Yellowstone?”

“Ain’t that what I said?” Her tone is gently teasing. “Yeah, just for a week. You ever been there?”

He shakes his head, gazing down at the bear again. It feels good in his hand. Real, somehow. “I never been outta Georgia.”

“Oh,” she says quietly.

He’s suddenly worried that he’s made this even weirder than it was, and he’s going to put the bear back in its place when his hand unbalances one of the snowglobes. It doesn’t fall—thank Christ—but it dislodges one of the more precariously placed books, which does. But reflex takes over and he ducks, catches it in one hand. When he straightens up her smile is wide and pleased.

“Nice.”

He rolls a shoulder, gives her a tiny half smile, looks down at the book.

*House of Light.*

“That’s one of my favorites,” she says, and takes it from him. “You like poetry?”
He shrugs again. He’s not sure where this conversation is going. Then again, he’s not sure where it came from. It’s just sort of there. “Don’t really know any.”

“There’s this one in here.” She has the book open, thumbing through the pages. “It’s... Here.”

Her voice drops even further as she starts to read, and it hits him out of nowhere how it’s almost like hearing her sing—smooth and clear and musical. It grabs him the same way, holds him in place. He’s not clear on what’s happening, but he can’t not listen.

So he listens.

I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Her voice lets the last word go and then except for the thunder rolling outside it’s quiet, hanging in the air, and he has no idea what to do with it. He has no idea what it’s made him feel.

Only that it’s like her singing.

“I read it after...” She glances down at her wrist, and he realizes suddenly that she’s not wearing anything there. It’s bare. Naked. “After. That last part. It was like.” She closes the book and lets out a breath, looks up at him. “It meant a lot. It means a lot.”

He nods slowly. He can see it. It’s very, very clear.

“Anyway.” She reaches past him and quickly slides the book onto what seems like a random shelf, and a bit of a flush has come into her face. Her eyes aren’t quite meeting his. She’s embarrassed, at least a little, and he doesn’t understand why, until abruptly he does.

Another piece of herself. This one maybe harder to share, because it’s here. It’s not out there. It’s not growing wild.

Even if the words are.

He catches her wrist—her bare wrist—and holds it gently, his thumb against its inside. He can feel the flutter of her pulse. “I like it.”

It’s almost a whisper, and he means it.

She looks down at her wrist and his hand and his fingers for a bit. She doesn’t try to pull away. She looks like she’s thinking, thinking hard.

Finally she gives him another smile—not so much with her mouth as with her eyes. Her expression is saying something very much like thank you.

And she gives him a tug with that grip, leads him toward her bed.

She moves backward until the backs of her knees hit its edge and she sits, almost falls, staring up at
him with that wide-eyed gaze. As has been the case since he got in here, he’s not positive about what
exactly is going on here, what exactly she wants, but she clearly wants something, and he slides a
hand into her hair, both hands, and she tips her head back, her eyes closing and her lips parted.

They stay like that for a moment. Desire is coiling low in his belly, smoldering dark red. Glowing,
but it’s with her light. Whatever she wants. Anything she wants.

“I don’t wanna do this here,” she whispers, and he’s not in the least surprised. Already sensed this
wasn’t quite right. She leans in, her forehead almost against him. “Just... Just come kiss me.”

Everything in him flexes. Jumps. How she says that, it’s like she’s saying I need you, I need you so
bad.

Fingers still in her hair, he pushes her back and down, knee on the bed and lifting himself over her,
angling his head down to catch her mouth with his. This is so fucking dangerous.

And he loves it.

Her bed is big enough for the two of them and he crawls fully on top of her, kissing her slow and
deep and hard, and her hands slide up his back as a soft little moan shivers out of her—makes him
shiver too, and he’s sure she can feel that, his shaky breath at the corner of her mouth, her cheek as
he drags a kiss across her face. Her gorgeous face, God—no, she’s not a goddess, but he thinks
about worshipping her, hands on her waist, as he moves her how he wants her. Finding her hips and
turning her, straightening them both and laying her against the pillows.

Like that for a while. Drawing those amazing sounds out of her, those moans, needy sighs, groans
she’s desperately trying to suppress but which he can tell might turn into low cries given the right
context and the right things being done to her. Someday, he thinks a little hectically. Sometime, fuck,
he’s going to make her cry out that way. He’s going to give her that. Here in her bed, in this new
kind of secret, he wants to, wants to so much.

And he’s so hard. Like always, making her feel it. Rocking against her, biting back his own moans.
Wanting her to know it, what she’s done to him. What she does. How hot she makes him. How he
burns.

“Daryl,” she breathes against his mouth. He echoes something that might be her name. Always her
name. Always comes back to that. And her bed, fuck, doing this in her bed. Soft, giving under their
weight. The quietest squeak of springs. He couldn’t fuck her here anyway. No way they could be
quiet enough. Someone would hear.

Doesn’t matter. As usual this is totally melting his brain. Her hands pushing up under his shirt,
fingertips trailing against his sides, sending jumping little shivers into his muscles.

“Fuck, Beth.” Trying so hard to be quiet. So hard.

And she takes his hand before he realizes what she’s doing, lays it over her breast. Cupping herself
with his palm.

He freezes, pulls back, stares down at her. Wondering if it was an accident, if she didn’t mean to.
She’s ground herself against him until she’s almost come, until he almost has, but this is something
they haven’t yet done, and all at once it feels like so much. That first fantasy, stroking her nipples
with his thumbs. Getting them hard. Trailing his mouth down, closing his lips over one, sucking
gently.

She’s gazing up at him with a mischievous smile pulling at her mouth.
She’s not wearing a bra.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, leaning up and kissing his throat. Up to the skin beneath his ear. “You can. I want you to.”

He’s still staring at her, still having trouble processing, when he presses his hand harder against her. Squeezes.

She’s small. Something else he’s certain Merle would scoff at. He knew that, could see it: Her breasts little swells, and some people—some *assholes*—might call her flat-chested and find her wanting for it. But she’s so good under his hand, *so fucking* good, and he inhales sharply as he feels it, how she fits so perfectly into his palm.

He squeezes again, careful, and when he shifts his fingers there’s her nipple, already hard, a little nub under that soft fabric.

And he has to. He just does.

He moves his hand down to her waist, to the hem of her shirt, trying to ask a question without explicitly asking as he slips his hand under it, fingertips against her skin—so hot, hot like a goddamn fever, and she draws in a shallow breath and nods.

She feels even better like this.

It’s not like his fantasies. But it is. He outlines her with his hand, his fingers, gentle and slow, making circles, and she arches under him, her head back, gasping. Again. He makes his way to her nipple and strokes his thumb across it, exactly like he wanted, and her gasps twist into his name as she shivers, almost violent—he shivers with her, rocking his hips down again. Undulating, rolling. He feels her nipple hardening even more under his touch. *Feels* it as it happens.

“Daryl. Oh—*God*.”

She rocks her hips up to meet his rhythm and it’s nearly unbearable.

“Christ, you’re so fuckin’...” In her ear, lips brushing its edge as he circles her, circles her. He wonders if she can come from this alone, if that’s even possible. The words are falling out of him, no thought behind them. “You’re so hot, Beth. You’re burnin’ up, God, just *feel* you. Feel that.” The movement of his hips twists into more of a thrust, and fuck, he really might come. Might, and there’s a stab of anxiety in the back of his mind, because how the hell would she feel about that? She grabs him when he’s grinding against her, encourages him—but this would be different. She might—

But then she pushes a hand between them and closes it over him, tracing his length—or what she can feel through his jeans—and as his breath and body stutter, she shoves her face into the crook of his neck and her moan is louder than it has been. Louder than maybe it’s ever been.

Her lips move. He can’t hear her. But somehow he can feel the shape of the words.

*You feel so good. Oh my God, you feel so good, so good.*

This really isn’t *just kissing.*

He presses his mouth against her jaw, smiling. He feels completely, delightfully insane, jittery all over. More energy than his body can contain and aching for any kind of release. Any fucking thing.

*You too.*
When he’s finally inside her it might kill him. Literally fucking kill him.

That would be okay.

Then something almost does.

She shifts her hand away from his cock, withdraws a little; then he feels her pressing in again—clumsy, the angle not quite working for her, him pinning her a bit too much. But eager. Needy. Moving.

And he figures it out. His hand freezes on her breast.

He pulls back sharply, enough to look down; her hand is deep beneath the waistband of her pajama pants, and he doesn’t have to actually see it to know where her fingers are, what they’re doing.

His eyes flick back up to her face. He’s aware that he’s gaping at her. Her smile is lazy. Teasing. Completely unafraid.

“Beth,” he whispers, and she rolls her hips up, making a quiet noise lost somewhere between a sigh and a moan.

“I need—” A whisper even lower than his, tight. Caught in the top of her throat. “Daryl...”

He doesn’t think. He practically falls toward her, fumbles at her, grabs her hips and rolls her roughly onto her side, lining himself up behind her, chest to back, arm curled around her with every muscle tense. Gripping her. He plunges his hand back under her shirt and she whimpers, tensing into a whine when he pinches her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Keep goin’,” he breathes, then: “Fuck, Beth, don’t you dare fuckin’ stop.”

He’s not the one giving this to her.

Then again, he sort of is.

She keeps going. He feels her moving, her hand falling into a rhythm, her hips rolling and her neck arched so the back of her head is pushing against his shoulder. And without meaning to, his fingers still working her nipple—both of them, slipping back and forth from one to the other—he’s meeting that rhythm, cock thick and throbbing against the curve of her ass, panting against her cheek. Words raining from his lips.

Beth, Beth, ah, Beth.

He’s not thinking. Can’t. He’s all impulse, some kind of completely unbound imagination. He leaves her breast and flies downward, shoves under her waistband, covers her hand, and he clenches his teeth, bites down on his lip to keep back the noise.

How she’s moving. Circling her clit. So fast now.

He bites his lip again, hears a harsh little sound locked in her throat, knows she’s doing the same. Blast of heat through his head, almost too much; he can’t, he just can’t, thrusting against her and making the bed springs squeak anyway, and oh my God, please let everyone be sound sleepers.

Please, because she’s twisting her hand from under his, gripping it, drawing it in, and there’s so much wet. So fucking much. So much.
He’s never made a sound like this before in his fucking life.

“Daryl.” Strained whisper; he can hardly hear her. “Please, I want you to—” It bleeds off into a moan. He wants to. He’s stunned. He moves his fingers, feels the swollen nub of her clit, and she shivers so hard.

He’s never done this. Not this. Not with anyone.

He doesn’t think it’s probably that complicated.

She had a rhythm, fast and tightly focused; he can find it. He does. Uses her own wet to slick her, circles and presses, slips into the folds low on either side, slides over her lips, and for the moment he forgets what his own body is doing, awkwardly matching this rhythm. Fast as he’s going with her. A little desperate.

He’s not even fucking her and he’s never felt anything like this.

“Oh, please, Daryl.” She’s trying to whisper. She’s clearly almost failing. He sees a flash of her teeth, sees her biting down so hard, and her lip popping free. “Please, oh my God, please, please don’t stop, please—”

He doesn’t stop. He shoves his other hand under her side and back under her shirt, finds her nipple and twists, and as he does she goes rigid, forces out a sound that’s almost a strangled squeak, reaches back and clutches at his hip as she starts to shudder.

He holds on. Feels like he’s riding her. Every fragment of conscious thought is gone and there’s simply this, how she’s shaking, gasping raggedly, gasping his name.

Nothing like his fantasies.

This is better.

Her shudders finally fade into trembling, into shaky breaths, and he’s still so focused on her that it sneaks up on him and grabs him, cracks his hips and his spine, and he thrusts against her one more time and frantically muffles a dangerously loud groan against her shoulder. Coming in his pants, coming like a fucking teenager, totally out of control, oh my God.

“She sounds almost panicked, gripping his hip even tighter. Digging her fingers in. But she’s pushing her hips back, rolling her ass, and he can’t find it in him to be worried.

It’s so good. It’s so fucking good.

He comes down gradually, panting like he’s been running. Out of the haze that’s fallen over him he realizes she is too.

“Oh my God.” Woven in with her gasps, and she sounds every bit as stunned as he is. Trying, with whatever is left of her mind, to process. “Oh my God, my God. Oh, Daryl.”

Her hair is a golden blur before his eyes, all lit warm by her lamp. His fingers are still circling her nipple, slow. Mindless.

She loosens against him. Goes limp.

After a while she turns in his arms, and he withdraws his hand. It’s slick from her, sticky, and he stares at it, wondering. His focus is pretty narrow, but beyond it, still blurry, he sees her eyes eating
up her face.

Never done this. Never.

He brings his fingers to his mouth and without a second’s hesitation he takes them in and sucks at them, and he has no idea how to describe the way it tastes.

Well, he doesn’t need to.

He cleans them with his lips, his tongue. She watches him, silent, and when he’s done, when he’s licking the last of it away—eyes closed, he wants to give this his full attention—he feels her mouth on his. Soft. Barely even there.

“That was...” And she doesn’t finish that sentence.

He curls his arms around her and tugs her in against his chest and holds her for a long time, and she lies there, boneless, her breath growing deep and slow.

Until it’s over. Too soon.

“You should go.” She whispers it against his neck, her lips tickling, burning. “It’s—”

“Yeah.”

But it’s so hard to pull away, so hard to disentangle himself. His mouth drifts over hers, her cheeks; he kisses her brow and everything in his chest clenches and releases, like an aftershock. A warm ripple, washing over and through him.

“You’re so fuckin’ amazing,” he breathes, and finally gets loose from her.

But it hurts.

It hurts even more to leave her. Once he gets to his feet, going to her window, looking at the night outside—the thunder is more distant but he doesn’t trust it as any kind of ending. The wind is picking up. The lightning keeps coming. They’re going to get hit. It’s only a question of when.

She comes up behind him and wraps her arms around his waist. “You’re gonna get rained on.”

“Maybe.” He turns and combs his hands into her hair and tilts her head to meet him, speaks against her mouth. He can’t stop kissing her. This might be a problem. “Worth it.”

She smiles. “Definitely.”

He climbs down. He’s not looking up but he can feel her watching him, knows the wind is grabbing her loose hair and making it dance. He feels her eyes on him as he walks into the dark, feels them all the way down the drive. The lightning is moving in. He knows, to anyone’s sight, it must appear as if it’s flickering him in and out of existence.

He’s almost to the truck when the first fat drops fall.

He drives back, still in that haze. There’s a storm and it has a rhythm, shaking through him. Rattling his core, meeting the other tremble lingering there. He got it, the satisfaction of that obsession, except it’s not satisfied. He’s not sure it ever will be.

All he wants is to give her that. More and more of it.
Except no. What he really wants is so much simpler.

Briefly, he pulls over and gets out and stands in the rain and lets it soak him and thinks about her wet skin that Sunday morning. How terrible, how absolutely fucking right. He was completely lost then. There was never anything else he could have done. He leans his head back and opens his mouth, and even the fucking rain tastes like her.

What should he have done? What else?

All the way back, the only music is the thunder, and in his head her voice—speaking, but it’s like her song. It’s all like her song. It’s so deep in her, he can’t imagine it ever leaving her.

She brought him into it. For a time. So she’ll bring him back. All these secret places of hers, revealed to him bit by bit. Around her. Inside her.

These are good days.

Back in the rain he made a decision. It wasn’t even about making it; he realized he already had. Hadn’t been a complicated one. He’s been making it over and over since she kissed him in the ruins and this all started seeming possible.

He’s going to fight for this. That big scary future, he’s going to run at it and wrestle it into submission, or he’s going to let it devour him, and either way. Either way he’s not letting go.

Either way it’s fine, if she’s waiting at the center.

_Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?_
It rains all day Monday, heavily. So there isn’t a whole lot for him to do. Not at the farm, anyway, though there could be shit he could do there that doesn’t involve getting soaked. Regardless, Hershel calls and tells him to stay home.

Given what happened the night before in Hershel’s youngest daughter’s bedroom, Daryl actually isn’t all that upset about doing so. It would be weird. A buffer day is indicated.

Elmer—who is growing colder and colder with each passing week—has nothing for him either, and is starting to make extremely passive aggressive comments about getting the truck back. Which in truth he never used anyway; it sat out back rusting until he slung it at Daryl, and Daryl has gotten more use out of it in the last few weeks than Elmer probably has in about ten years. But Daryl has a moment of intense disquiet before he realizes:

He can probably just buy the fucking truck.

So he does.

Elmer grudgingly refrains from trying to screw him over. Daryl is good at knowing when someone is trying to screw him over. And Elmer knows Daryl owns a crossbow and a fairly sizable knife.

Things happen sort of quickly after that.

Same day, later in the morning, he leaves a dozing Merle and drives his truck—his, what the fuck—to a tiny apartment building at the less well-to-do end of Main Street, toward where it stops being Main anything. It’s pretty crappy—all chipped paint and faded brick and concrete walk with little weeds poking their way through the cracks—but it’s better than where they are. He gets the sour-faced woman working in the leasing office to show him a two bedroom place on the top floor—cramped, the walls a dingy white that looks like it hasn’t been repainted in at least a decade, but it’s reasonably clean. Utilities included, but no furniture, and he’s not sure about the rent. Might be a bit high. There are complications.

Can he do month to month? The woman’s face gets even more sour, but she doesn’t say no.

Anyway, it’s a possibility. Maybe.

He doesn’t look at anywhere else. It’s not a big town. There aren’t a huge number of options. But he goes to the coffee shop, gives his Perceptive Barista a tiny smile, and checks out the listings again over a cup of perfectly almost-scalding coffee.

Checks them out and turns his face to the window—rain hammering on it, swept under the awning by gusts of wind—and thinks, eyes closed, about his own bed. His own fucking bed.

Beth Greene in it.

He shakes his head. That... No. Merle. So probably never that.
But maybe.

There’s a secondhand furniture store in town. It’s tiny and it doesn’t have a huge amount of stuff in stock, but it has some things. He stares at them, at the prices, does some mental calculations. Thinks about the barest essentials of what someone might need to make a place functional.

You don’t actually need that much to make a place *functional*, at least not in the most fundamental sense of the word. You need four walls and a roof, and electricity and indoor plumbing are a nice bonus. He’s spent extended periods of time living out of sleeping bags.

This isn’t about making a place functional. It’s not about that. He wants more than functional.

That’s the point.

~

Later that afternoon he considers driving by the high school again. Just parking on the edge of the lot and sitting there for a while. And he doesn’t exactly feel like it’s creepy, but he thinks about trying to explain it to anyone else, what happened and what’s going on, and the whole thing falls apart. To literally anyone else he can imagine having this conversation with, he’s utterly certain he would come off as a tremendous creep.

Not to her. That’s all that should matter to him.

But he doesn’t do it.

~

“Looked at this place today.”

That night, pizza, shitty beer—the usual, but somehow it tastes better than normal, and Daryl ordered green peppers on his, which he never has before. Last Thursday Annette made this stir fry thing with green peppers—her first attempt at the recipe, and everyone was very congratulatory—and it really had been good. First time Daryl paid attention to something small like that. Something that used to not matter.

He’s been eating better the last few weeks. A lot better. He feels stronger. He feels *healthy*.

He didn’t know what that felt like. Had no reference for it. It took him a long time to figure out what was going on.

Merle made a face about the peppers, called him a *fuckin’ weirdo*. Daryl couldn’t care less.

So pizza, shitty beer. Lots of thinking. Daryl is still working on being committed to not dancing around this. He’s going to be straight with his brother. He’s going to do it and see what happens.

He says it, sitting on the floor with his back against the couch, *Swamp People* on the TV, and behind him he’s pretty sure he feels the temperature of Merle’s mood slide down a few notches.

“Yeah?” Neutral. Neutral isn’t necessarily good, but it’s not necessarily bad, either. It’s middle ground. “Where?”

“This place other side’a town.” Daryl pauses. Swallow of beer to fill the pause. “Two bedrooms, ain’t too bad.”

Merle grunts, and again it sounds and feels neutral. Daryl tries to keep hope from sneaking in at his
“Think we might be able to do it. I gotta see.”

“You makin’ your mind up after one place?”

Daryl swings his head sharply around before he can stop himself. There’s no playing this cool; Merle’s tone is still neutral, even placid, and there’s also something placid in his enormous, messy bite of pizza, sauce all over his fingers and chin, but the question is anything but neutral.

If Merle truly didn’t care, if Merle didn’t even think this was something worth spending a single serious thought on...

What the fuck.

“Ain’t a lotta options,” he says carefully. “I mean... I could, yeah.”

Grunt. Nothing else. Daryl leans back, gaze locked on the TV again, people gleefully wrestling alligators, but he doesn’t see it. He’s not focusing. A puzzle has been dropped in front of him and he can’t stop staring at it, circling it. Studying it from various angles.

He didn’t expect it to fall out of the sky at all.

All right. So he’ll look. He was going to anyway, but... Yeah. He’ll look.

~

Tuesday the rain continues, and if anything it’s heavier than ever. Daryl leans against the windowsill, window half open, smoking and feeling the impacts of drops misting water onto his forearms, watching it run in rivers down the sides of the street and waterfall into the storm drains. Watching people run with umbrellas, newspapers over their heads, none of it doing much good. It’s warm rain, still the kind of storm late summer brings. Late summer, hanging on. Refusing to let go.

He thinks about the catalogue of words he assembled for what rain does. Pounding. Soaking. Hammering. Sheeting when the wind grabs it and flings it sideways.

What was it doing when he picked her up by the side of the road? What was it doing when he saw her coming out of church? What about when he kissed her? What were the words for those times?

He should know. Maybe he should have been paying more attention.

~

Text late that night. He’s almost falling asleep. It’s a single line but it says it all.

thinking about you

That could mean any number of things. But he’s pretty sure it means one specific thing. One specific thing going on at exactly this moment. Or about to happen.

Thunder roars outside, lightning lances through the sky, and the whole world snaps into hard illumination. All the shadows on the walls make everything look huge. In the next room, Merle thumps over into another position—Merle never just stirs—and growls something in his sleep.

Daryl texts back.
And he reaches into his shorts and curls a hand around his cock, already hard, and thinks about her.

~

Wednesday the rain lets up, though the sky still looks extremely threatening. It’s a reprieve, but it’s not over. The farm is all mud, all puddles. There are actually a few things in the house he can do—there are hinges on the cellar door that need replacing, there’s some stuff down there that needs moving around. Small things that anyone could do, but he’s here, so that means no one else has to do them, and he’s content enough to take that work. It means he gets to be in the house, and he likes the house—bright even with the overcast sky, clean, all its decorations and furnishings clearly fine and worth a fair bit but somehow not in a way that makes him feel resentful.

He used to feel so out of place here. That feeling remains as he moves through these rooms—nothing about him in good repair, his hair hanging long around his face, and he hasn’t done any form of shaving in a day or so. He doesn’t belong. But no one particularly wants him to leave.

On the way out to the shed to get some tools he takes a detour through the living room because he can, because he hasn’t really been in there much and he doesn’t think anyone will chase him out by now, and he’s curious. There’s a cabinet in one corner, all glass and dark wood. The cabinet itself appears very old, and so does the crystal inside—ornate wine glasses, a decanter. Some of the glasses are colored, stemmed with what looks like silver. There’s a statuette of a dolphin rising out of a sweeping frosted glass wave, caught in an exaltation of motion.

Merle would look at this and think seriously about ways in which he could bust in here in the dead of night, or when people aren’t home, and lift the whole collection. It all looks expensive. Extremely. If he could find a fence, which wouldn’t be easy around here, but probably doable. Merle has an instinct for that kind of thing.

Daryl looks at it for a while. How the light through the windows catches all of it, bounces around.

Then he goes out to the shed, comes back, fixes the hinges.

He’s finishing up when Beth comes home. It’s started raining again, and Annette is refusing to send him back out there without a hot meal—they aren’t having anything fancy, just some beef stew she made the other day, bread she baked fresh. Daryl’s positive there must be something about Annette that isn’t perfect in a low-key way, but he hasn’t yet identified anything. He hangs out in the kitchen with her, mostly because he’s not sure where else to go, and she talks to him, mostly about winter, how it was especially bad last year, how this one is projected to be a lot better but who knows. About how Hershel works himself too hard this time of year, and it’s tougher since Maggie went off to college, how now she’s living on her own and talking now and then about coming to stay for a while, but if she does, it probably it won’t be for long.

About how it’s nice to have Daryl around. How he helps.

The emotions that throw themselves briefly against the walls of Daryl’s stomach are numerous and complicated.

Eventually he wanders out again and stands in front of the screen door for a moment—outer door open—listening to the rain drumming on the roof of the wraparound porch and watching it puddle on the boards. Listening to that until he hears the sound of a piano coming from the living room, soft, just under the steady rhythm.
He’s heard it before, knows Beth plays—Annette plays too and quite well, at least to his untrained ear—and it draws him in. Hershel and Shawn have gone into town on an errand. It’s her in the living room sitting at the old upright piano, her back to him, alone.

He leans in the doorway, feeling himself loosen and open up and tighten all at the same time. Her voice, low and soft and agile, singing something he doesn’t recognize.

you’re so red in the eyes
either too low or too high
when I met you, you were sick
but you did not know why
I was a pretty poor cure
but my love for you was always sure
the bucket was broken
but the water was pure
tell me I got here at the right time
if I did it’s probably the first time
no second guesses or secret signs
tell me I got here at the right time

She doesn’t know he’s there. He can tell. He doesn’t want her to know; yet another thing that might seem creepy to someone else, but there’s something so effortlessly lovely about her when she isn’t aware of him. It’s happened more than once. She never tries to be the way she is, even when he is looking. He remembers the first time he thought about it, when she bought him coffee and they sat in the shop together. He realized there was nothing artificial about her. Nothing fake or pretentious. There might be things she doesn’t show, plenty of stuff she keeps to herself; she has her share of secrets, including from him. But she doesn’t cover them up with lies.

Maybe she doesn’t know what she plans to do with her life, doesn’t yet have a plan at all, but she knows herself. Perhaps because she knows how she is, how she can be, when she’s pushed to the brink of something overwhelmingly horrible.

He thinks about a world without her and everything in him shuts down.

After another little while he leaves her, silent.

~

Friday night.

want to see you. oak tree

He goes.

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Here At The Right Time" by Josh Ritter.
coming down, the world turned over

Chapter Notes

So. Uh. This is long. And. Well, yeah.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Before, she wouldn’t tell him where they were going, and even when he had been mostly fine with it there had always been this low undercurrent of impatience with her. Because Beth Greene doesn’t play games, except she does, her own games—sweet ones, never mean ones, but still games.

She plays with him.

So yeah, that used to be how it was. But not so much now. When she wants him to go somewhere, when she wants it to be a surprise, whatever’s on the other end is probably worth it. That’s his operating hypothesis, anyway. All the evidence indicates that it’s a safe one.

There are a lot of ways in which he trusts her. More all the time.

The rain has let up again, at least for the time being, but the air is saturated, and she’s damp when she hops into the truck and kisses him. It’s fast and hard and the slightest bit surprising, and when she pulls back he can make out an excited flush in her cheeks and neck and—because she’s wearing a low-cut tank top—all the way down to her chest.

He wants to get a hand on her there. Fit her into his palm the way she did, so fucking perfect. Work her nipple with his fingertips until she’s whimpering—and hey, here’s a thing: she wouldn’t have to make herself be quiet. Here, she could be as loud as she wants. Those cries he believed he could get out of her—she could let those go if it pleased her to do so. And he suspects she would. He suspects she might like that a lot.

But he doesn’t. And it’s not exactly a lack of confidence; it’s more that Sunday night feels like it might possibly have been an exception to an existing rule, at least maybe, and he’s not sure it’s a good idea to go assuming things just yet. Not sure it’s a good idea to assume it’s open season on certain parts of her that have been previously off-limits.

She leans back in the seat and grins at him, and that’s when he notices she has a couple of towels in her hand.

Okay.

He’s pulling back into the road, turning in the direction of the swimming hole, but she shakes her head. “Nope.”

He shoots her a questioning glance. “Nope?”

“Mm-m.” She jerks a thumb behind them, her grin a little smaller but something even more deeply gleeful about the curve of her mouth. Girl is Up To Something. Then again, it seems like she usually is. “Somethin’ else.”

He shrugs and swings them around, heads off into the dark.
It’s not a quiet night. It’s a loud one. Thunder is still rolling gently in the distance, but the frogs and crickets are going insane, as are the crickets, excited and maybe slightly freaked out by so much wetness. They respectively bellow and scream, and it’s deafening even over the sound of the wind rushing through the rolled-down windows. There’s something about it—the way the water hangs in the air, like something you could almost swim through—that fills him with bright anticipation rather than makes him feel weighed down. Might be that electricity again. That sense of something potential, something waiting to snap into light, break the world open.

He lights up a cigarette and feels her looking at him.

“What?”

“Those things.” Her arm is half slung out the window, everything in her loose despite her obvious excitement, and out of the corner of his vision he can see her features are smoothed by lazy amusement more than any kind of irritation. “They’re gonna kill you.”

He grunts. “Somethin’ else’s probably gonna get me first.”

“Nice to see you’re feelin’ optimistic.”

He is, is the thing. “’s plenty optimistic. Means I can go ahead’n not worry about it.”

She laughs. “You live like that, somethin’ really will get you.”

“How else should I be livin’?”

She pulls off her boots and props her feet on the dash again. Her toenails are glittery, but this time blue—that same cornflower blue she seems to favor when it comes to her clothes. That same blue that sets off her hair, makes it look even brighter, richer—not that it needs a whole lot of help in that regard.

She almost always wears those boots. Probably hardly anyone sees her toes. So why does she paint her nails?

He’s more and more certain that these pretty things she does and has—all these pretty little things—are far more for her than for anyone else. She’s not interested in anyone else’s opinion when it comes to this. Or if she is, ultimately it’s not the deciding factor.

She leans down and picks at a loose bit of polish, flakes it away. “That’s up to you, Mr. Dixon.”

He has nothing to say to that. But he watches her, as much as he can without sending them into a ditch, and he fights back a smile. Even though he doesn’t need to.

They head toward town about five miles, then she has him take a right onto a smaller road, just as straight, cutting through the same generally flat land with fields on either side, little copses of trees here and there. A few more farmhouses, distant dim hulks against a softly and weirdly glowing sky. This place is far enough from anything majorly important to have avoided any big housing developments, any McMansions, and he’s glad of that, and it’s not only because those places have always made him feel a deep and almost violent resentment of all the spoiled, prissy assholes who tend to live in those kinds of things. Names like Hunter’s Run and Pinewoods Glen. The kinds of places Merle would case, once upon a time, and Daryl would offer no significant objection to hitting.

It’s not only about that. It’s not only about a general low-level seething hatred. It’s about how somehow, when he wasn’t looking, he started thinking this place was actually pretty beautiful. With its wide fields and meadows, green pastures, open skies, cool shadowy woods. Old trees.
Secrets.

I don’t like bein’ here.

Huh.

They don’t speak. As usual with her, he doesn’t feel like either of them needs to; there’s nothing awkward about the silence. It’s not even silence. Night sounds surrounding them, wrapping them up. It’s just after midnight and no one knows they’re here. No other cars on the road. They might be the last people on Earth. The last man and woman standing.

That idea isn’t as upsetting as maybe it should be.

After another fifteen minutes or so she points to the left, to a drive coming up. Another long one like hers, another farmhouse, but even at a distance Daryl can see it’s not as large as the Greenes’, nor quite as stately. No lights on, no indications of presence, and he gives her another look as he turns in, brow slightly arched.

She smiles, not quite at him. “Jimmy’s place.”

He slams his foot down on the brake, jerking them both forward, and turns on her. Not upset—surprisingly, not at all. But he’s going to know what the hell this is about, and he’s going to know it now.

“*The fuck, Greene?*”

She’s still smiling, idly toying with a few strands of her hair. “Dontcha trust me?”

“Ain’t about trust. It’s about you tellin’ me what the fuck we’re *doin’.*” He nods at the bundle in her lap. “With *towels.*”

One corner of her mouth inches even higher and it takes every shred of strength at his disposal to keep from tackling her and pinning her to the seat and doing absolutely unspeakable things to her. “You ain’t gonna let me surprise you?”

“Girl, what’d I tell you ‘bout surprises?”

“*Daryl, what’d I tell you about you likin’ ‘em most of the time?*”

God, it’s so fucking hard to keep from smiling, because she’s so fucking cute, and it wrecks him inside. Just totally ties him in knots. Maybe he’s not all that frightened by her anymore, but apparently the part with the knots isn’t going anywhere.

He leans in. Gets right in her face. She shifts back, but her smile doesn’t budge; it’s clearly not out of fear. She’s not recoiling. It’s all in her body language. *Chase me, then.* “You tell me what we’re doin’ or I swear to God, I’ll turn this thing around right now.”

She hesitates for a moment—very purposeful, leaving him hanging—then rolls her eyes and touches the tip of her forefinger to the end of his nose and pushes in a little poke that leaves him completely speechless.

No one has ever done that to him before.

And she abruptly presses close, hand firm against his chest and smile light against his mouth.

“Jimmy’s family has a hot tub. And Jimmy’s family is outta town for the weekend.”
Jimmy’s family does indeed have a hot tub.

Daryl stands there for a minute or two and looks at it. It’s not large, all wood paneled and surrounded by half a privacy fence, but that doesn’t lend it a tremendous amount of privacy—not that it needs it, given that there’s no other house from which anyone could see anything much unless someone wanted to make use of a powerful pair of binoculars.

And it’s dark, so.

The house—which is, as he thought, a good bit smaller than the Greenes’ but also looks newer and with its brick facade and high arched front windows has the vague sense of belonging to a wealthier family—is completely dark and completely silent, but every house they passed appeared dark and seemed silent and he doesn’t imagine all those people were out of town. So he stands there and regards the hot tub, and he does this a bit skeptically.

In the past, Merle has been able to talk him into shit orders of magnitude crazier than this. But Merle isn’t here. Beth is.

Then again, she’s been introducing him to a whole new kind of crazy.

“Toldja.” She bumps his shoulder with hers and shoves the towels into his hands, moves past him to the side of the thing and crouches to open a panel. She reaches in; it looks like she’s feeling around, searching for something by touch.

“You need a light or somethin’?”

“Nah, I got it.” He hears a soft click and the tub hums to life. Beth lets out a pleased little sound and straightens up again, grasping the handles of the tub’s cover and pulling it back and away. Steam billows out. It can’t have been off for long. “See?”

“Use this thing a lot?”

“Yeah, actually. He liked havin’ parties out here, gettin’ everyone to use it. He’s not some show-off, I don’t want you thinkin’ that... But I think he did like showin’ this thing off. Does.”

He moves closer to her. Something started humming in him the second she told him what this was about, and now it’s humming louder with each passing second, like whatever switch she flipped wasn’t only for the tub. They might be out here just to relax, sure.

But he doesn’t think so.

“You use it alone?” His voice drops. “You use it with just him?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, cocks her head, and again he feels that powerful urge to tackle her. “You jealous, Daryl Dixon?”

He shakes his head. He’s genuinely not. He doesn’t think he’s ever really been jealous of Jimmy. There was that time in the coffee shop the first night he saw her sing there, but while he and jealousy aren’t exactly on intimate terms, it doesn’t feel like quite the right one for what he felt in that moment. You’re jealous when you feel like something belongs to you. That wasn’t it. It might be hair-splitting, but it seems important. He’s never owned Beth. Never had a claim on her, at least not the way most people think of it. He doesn’t think he ever will. She doesn’t seem like the type of girl who tolerates claiming.
No: he was envious. He wanted something he didn’t have. Wanted it and never believed he would ever even get near it. And he was wrong.

He has nothing to be jealous about.

She gazes up at him in silence. Then she says, softly, “No. I never did.”

That’s sort of surprising.

Then she surprises him again.

Maybe it shouldn’t. Maybe it shouldn’t surprise him at all. Last weekend she put his hand on her breast, arched up under him, got her own hand on him, used that hand on herself. Got his fingers on her cunt, got him to make her come. Begged him to make her come. She was hungry for it. She never had a drink before his moonshine, but she was drunk on his hand. He felt how wet she was. People say virgin, and he doesn’t think what they have in mind is what Beth Greene appears to be. She’s a little hesitant, a little cautious about some things, but she’s not some delicate shrinking violet. He would be happy to literally worship the ground she walks on if she told him to, but a significant part of him now thinks of her in terms that don’t even approach softly romantic. She wants to fuck. She’s just not ready.

Except now this is happening, and maybe he shouldn’t be surprised, but when she reaches down and grips her top by the hem and tugs it over her head, he still is. He’s staring, his mouth slightly open, as all that skin comes into view. Dim view, but view. Not more than he’s seen, because she took off everything but her panties and bra that night at the swimming hole, but that...

That didn’t feel like this. That was different.

His gaze flicks up to her face. She’s staring back at him, eyes wide, lips the slightest bit parted, and she looks... Not scared. Scared is the wrong word. Not even nervous. But something like those things. Something like she’s about to take another step and she knows it, and she knows that once she does there isn’t any going back.

And there isn’t. Because she catches her bottom lip between her teeth, reaches behind her and unhooks the clasp of her bra and shrugs it off, lets it fall into the grass.

“Beth,” he whispers, and she stands, clearly uncertain, meeting his eyes and then shifting her own away. And he can’t figure out why. Why wouldn’t he want to see this—her breasts small and firm, how he already knows how they feel under his hands, how her nipples respond under his fingers, all that smooth skin radiating heat like she’s on fire beneath it. Her flat belly, her slim waist, the farm girl muscle there, how her size and her slenderness are in significant part a lie in the weakness they might suggest.

She’s so beautiful. His blood is roaring and he’s already hard enough to scratch glass, but he’s also pained. Those knots she ties him in have risen into his chest. She’s so fucking beautiful and he doesn’t think she has any idea at all.

Something seems to gather in her and she looks directly at him again, steadies her gaze, resolute. And she toes off her boots, unbuttons her jeans, and starts to slide them and her panties down her thighs.

Beth.

All the feeling disappears from his legs. It’s just gone. He might as well not exist from the knees
down. Everything upward, everything in his chest and his gut and between his legs, it’s all a ball of lightning, crackling, cascades of sparks. He has a sudden crazed image of his own nerves lit up like neon spiderwebs, flickering at the ends, and he’s simply looking at her. The ends of her ponytail fall across one shoulder as she bends, pushes her jeans the rest of the way down, steps out of them.

Straightens up.

Dry doesn’t describe his mouth, his throat. It’s not nearly enough. There isn’t a word in the English language to describe this total lack of moisture. He tries to swallow and nothing happens but a dull ache.

It’s ridiculous. He’s seen naked women before. Many times, in person and otherwise. But this is. It’s.

There aren’t many real curves in her upper body, but here her hips swell gently outward and flow down to her thighs—which are slim and strong as the rest of her. Graceful, powerful, and still awkward. She’s awkward. She’s standing there, naked and pale, and he doesn’t have a clue where to look.

He touched her. He had his hand between her legs, he stroked his fingers over that little patch of tight curls, he felt the slick, soft, hot wetness just below. But he looks at it and his cock hurts, it’s so hard, and that total lack of existence creeps up past his knees and he thinks it’s entirely possible that if she pokes his nose again he’ll just fall the fuck over.

“Daryl,” she murmurs.

He lurches his gaze back up to her face, her eyes. He’s seen them wide before, but he doesn’t think he’s seen them like this. Wide and shining and, under the sky’s weird, almost apocalyptic glow, seeming to glow with a light of their own.

He wants her to know. He wants her to know how beautiful she is, he wants to find some way to tell her. He’s frantic with it. His heart would match the thunder on the horizon if it was currently beating at all. His jaw works a bit and he’s sure he must be freaking her out; he doesn’t have a huge amount of experience in this area but he’d be willing to bet actual money that it’s not good to be silent this long when the girl you’d happily die for has just taken her clothes off in front of you.

Say something. God, just fucking say something. Anything.

There’s one thing he can go to. Always has. It’s always been her for him, as much her as her name.

He shakes his head, breathes a single awed word.

“Girl.”

She breaks into a smile—not wide, but small and pleased and deep. “Alright,” she says softly, and turns and walks toward the tub’s low wooden steps, shooting a glance over her shoulder and the quirked edge of that smile as she swings a leg over the edge and starts to lower herself into the water. Everything is in that smile. She can do that. It’s a talent. She can communicate with the slightest movement of her lips.

C’mon.

Fair-minded girl. Tit for tat. A couple of weeks ago he would have turned tail and run, and he might have done it literally. Simply sprinted off into the dark and been very, very careful to never see her again and suffer the fallout of it, because his own imaginings of the alternative would have been so much worse.
This isn’t a couple of weeks ago. This is now.

He pulls his shirt off over his head and drops it beside hers.

The rest of his clothes come off in a haze. This isn’t like the night at the swimming hole, but on the other hand it is, because it’s taking on all the logic and sense of a dream. He can see her there, shoulders above the water, and she’s watching him. She’s not making any pretense of not doing so. This is also the same. She’s going to look at him and she’s not going to spare his feelings. She’s going to let him deal with it.

She has boundless mercy, but sometimes it’s not so merciful.

But she showed him something that night, and it wasn’t just her wrist. It wasn’t just herself.

He leaves it all behind and walks toward the tub, towels in his hands, and he sets them down on the edge and stands there naked as her, and he meets her eyes and doesn’t look away. She didn’t fix him, didn’t make him better, and he feels scraped raw, and it’s almost too much. But he lets her look at him, and he knows what she’ll see, and she’s already seen a lot of it: how he’s strong, not the carefully sculpted muscle of someone who spends hours in a gym but instead works for what they have, and the new things, his tattoos and his scars, and his cock jutting up so hard, ready for her if she wants to have it.

He’s waiting. He’s waiting for her to tell him.

She draws in a breath, and it’s quiet but it comes to him clearly over the tub’s hum, and then she slaps him in the face.

“You’re beautiful.”

He has to look away from her then, suddenly almost shivering. No. That really is too much. She could have warned him that was coming. Should have. “Stop.”

“You are.”

Fuck that shit about mercy. She has none at all. And he’s ripped in half between wanting so bad to look at her and being completely unable to, but between the two he sees her raise a hand to beckon him, smile again, and she looks so light and happy and like she doesn’t care about anything. Like there’s nothing to worry about. “C’mon.”

Just don’t say that again.

But he manages to move his numb legs, climbs the steps, swings those slabs of meat and bone into the water and follows them in as she shifts herself backward, facing him.

It’s already hot enough to make him hiss and close his eyes, half in pleasure and half in shock at the temperature change. When he opens them again she’s there right in front of him, so close but not touching him, her eyes dancing.

She doesn’t merely wrongfoot him. She hacks his fucking feet off and asks him to juggle them for her.

She lays a hand on his chest, right over his heart, and grazes her lips against his. “It’s good, right?”

He makes a low, slightly confused noise and he feels her smile as she pushes him backward. His ass hits a curved ledge under the water and slides onto it, a jet near his lower back, and when she presses
herself in closer, lays her hands against the sides of his face...

*Jesus*. His own hands find her, her hips, her waist, tugging at her, and when he spreads his legs and she drifts between them and his cock nudges her belly—

“*You ever done this?*” she whispers. She drapes her arms over his shoulders, fingers toying with his damp hair. He wants to keep his eyes open but suddenly it’s almost impossible. They’re heavy. A buzz is working its way into his head.

“*Done what?*”

“*Just... been like this. With a woman. In a hot tub.*” There’s an odd lilt to her voice, and when he manages to focus on her face her smile has gone crooked, and she’s... Shy. She’s shy. She’s not sure how to talk about this. She’s fumbling a little. That shouldn’t surprise him either, and if anything it should surprise him less than how goddamn *bold* she is, but it does. Every time she seems less than confident in herself, it’s a bit astonishing. Even if, when he thinks back, it’s not even all that rare.

He shakes his head and takes a breath. This is hard to say, and he’s not even sure why. “*Never actually been in one.*”

She blinks. “*Never... A hot tub?*”

He shakes his head again. It’s simply never come up. He’s done a lot of other things. That was just never really on the list.

“*Wow. Okay.*” She laughs, soft and once again with that essential lightness, and before he can do anything else she turns in his arms and settles back against him, back into his lap, her ass firm against his cock and her head tipped back on his shoulder. Instinctively he curls his arms around her, and then doesn’t do much else with them. Not for the moment. He’s trying to get a grip on what he’s doing *now*.

“Tell me somethin’.”

She wriggles, and she might only be looking for a more comfortable position, but as his breath catches and he presses involuntarily up to meet her, he doesn’t think so. He thinks she knows exactly what she’s doing.

“What?”

“How many things... How many things with me are the first time you’ve done ‘em?”

The question is oddly phrased and he doesn’t get it immediately, and with the movement of the water and the uneven pressure of her ass against his cock it’s difficult to think at all. “*Why... Why you care?*”

“*Why you care if I care?*” She wriggles again and he can hear her smile. “*Just tell me. I wanna know.*” She turns her head and her wet lips find his jaw, cool in the rest of the heat. “*I wanna know how special I am.*”

He manages to twist his groan into more of a laugh. “*You so sure you’re special?*”

“I know I am. I just wanna know how much.”

“*Girl, you got one hell of an ego on you.*”
It’s coming to him, slowly through whatever blood is left in his brain, that he can retaliate, and he unwinds his arms from around her, laying his hands against the sides of her waist and trailing them upward across her ribs. Now that he’s here, now that she’s here, now that he’s under the water and she’s grinding herself slowly against his cock and her whole body feels like it’s his to play with, all the hesitation is gone. She wants to tease him? Fine. He’s pretty sure he knows enough now to tease her right back, and do it effectively.

Then a breathless moan slips out of her and he’s very sure.

“I never had anyone sing for me before.”

“Like... Only for you?”

“Mmmh.” Up all the way to the sides of her breasts, barely touching her at all, and her moan is a little sharper—and her squirming increases accordingly. His eyes force themselves closed again and he feels them roll. “I never... had no one sneak out to see me.”

Never been worth the sneaking.

“What else?” Her whisper is shaky and he smiles against the edge of her ear, takes a sliver of pity on her and ghosts his fingertips across her nipples—hints of a touch rather than any real touch at all.

“Never kissed no one in the rain before.”

“I never did either.”

“Seriously?” He cranes his head, trying to get a better look at her face, but the angle is wrong and she’s lost in shadow. “You were with that kid how fuckin’ long?”

“Too long. Daryl...” Not quite asking him, but he thinks she might be getting there, and she’s still moving against him, rolling her hips back, her ass a smooth, maddening weight right on him, but she’s having trouble finding a rhythm. It comes to him with a hot little shiver of triumph: he’s got her. Got her right where he wants her.

Probably right where she wants to be.

“What?”

“Keep doin’ that. More. Like you—” She breaks off into a gasp, her hands braced on his thighs and her back briefly arching like she’s chasing his teasing fingers. “Like before, please...”

There we go. He grins for a second or two—and it doesn’t feel so alien—and then he finds her nipples with his thumbs and strokes across them, and it’s like being right at home.

“What about you?”

“I told you.” Breathless. She’s not panting yet but he thinks he could get her there. Thinks it wouldn’t be anything approaching a challenge. Maybe he should have fumbled more with her, had more trouble, but so far, when it comes right down to this, to the most basic mechanics of it, she makes everything so easy. “I never—I never really did anythin’.”

“Never touched yourself with anyone?”

“No.” She drags in a hard breath and briefly finds herself, rocks back harder against him and rotates her hips, and for a few seconds she has him totally pinned, his hands closing over her breasts as his
dexterity vanishes into the steam. “You ever been with anyone when they were touchin’ themselves?”

“Not...” He moans; can’t help it, doesn’t want to. “Not like that. Fuck, Beth...”

“Touch me.”

It comes out in a rough, needy whimper, weak, but the words smack him again and then she’s lifting his right hand away from her breast and pulling it down between her thighs, over those tight curls and lower, and even in the water he feels how wet she is, thick slickness totally different from the rest of what’s around them.

For a few second he doesn’t budge. He’s motionless, listening to her ragged breathing, feeling her hand tightening on his as she tugs at him with a bit more urgency.

“God, Daryl, please.”

He feels her. Soft, smooth, her outer lips and where they draw together, that little nub between them—and sure, he felt it before, but that might as well have been another universe for all its similarity to this. It’s right there, and she spreads her legs, pressing his fingers against her, moving them. Moving them how she wants them, using him on herself like a toy.

But she doesn’t want a toy.

He remembers what he did. He remembers what worked. It’s like groping through a curtain now, but the memory is there, and her hand falls away from his as he starts to work her on his own, making tight circles with his fingertips, stroking her, and he has to be going slower than she wants, because she’s spreading her legs wider and her moans sound almost frustrated, twisted at the end.

“Daryl—”

“That feel good?”

He has no idea where this is coming from. He’s not asking her because he wants to know. He already knows. He’s not an idiot. He can pick up on these things. He’s asking for a different reason, because once again—with her—he’s finding something in himself he didn’t know about. Something new—or maybe not new, but something so deeply buried for so long that it might as well be. And it’s bizarre, it’s fucking scary—but he barely feels that. Simply her body and her skin burning under his hands, and the power thrumming under that question.

He’s asking her because he wants to make her tell him.

“Yeah.” More of a groan than a word, and he tries not to laugh.

“Say it. Tell me it feels good.”

“It... feels good. Oh God, Daryl...”

“You want more?” And it’s not just her. Maybe she let that rhythm slip, the way she was rocking her hips, but he’s working her back into it on a level that takes no conscious attention, and his cock is pinned and throbbing between her ass and his belly.

“I want more.” Anticipating him. That’s nice. “Please, I want more, I want—”

“Christ, girl, you sure you’re a virgin?”
“Don’t be a jerk.” His other hand is still on her breast, kneading gently, and her hand suddenly flies up to cover it, like she has to hold onto something besides his thigh or she’ll drift off into the water and out to sea. “Daryl.”

She’s not merciful. But he can be. He falls into something faster, a little rougher, and her head drops loosely against his shoulder, her breath coming in steady, heavy moans—loud, loud as he wanted her to be, and he doesn’t try to keep back his laughter.

Laughing like this. Something else he never did before her.

“What about your tits? He ever get his hands on ‘em?” More of that, more roughness, coming from somewhere even deeper inside him—someplace that, again, maybe should scare him, except for how natural it feels, his utter lack of fear, and how she’s moving against him, her whole body rolling in shallow sine waves. His fingers settle on her nipple again, close over it and pinch, and she yelps.

“He—just. Just over my—my bra. Oh my God.” She’s not even talking anymore. She’s giving him grating noises into which words are slipping, uneven and oddly shaped and not fitting very well.

“He—just. Just over my—my bra. Oh my God.” She’s not even talking anymore. She’s giving him grating noises into which words are slipping, uneven and oddly shaped and not fitting very well. “Not like that. Not like this. God, Daryl, I—” And she drops her hand again and clutches at his fingers on her clit, and he’s about to yank them free and ask her what the fuck she thinks she’s doing —

But she drags them lower, using them to nudge her lips apart, and he groans a heavy *Oh fucking Christ* as she pushes his middle finger into her cunt.

He thought he froze before.

It’s not even about freezing. He forgets how to move, every memory of ever having done so instantly scrubbed from his brain, and it’s simply because the rest of the world is gone and it’s just his finger, her slickness and her muscles tightening around him, how maybe it’s only his imagination but he would swear he can feel her juices coating his hand even in the water.

“Never,” she whispers, and breaks off into a laugh. “Never had anyone put their fingers in me. Well.” Another laugh, louder. “Never anyone but me.”

Never anyone but her. For some reason his mind has never really delivered this image with any real clarity, even after what they did in her bed, but it comes to him now: Beth Greene splayed on the bed, legs wide apart and knees lifted, her head thrown back and her breasts standing out full and sweet and meant for his palms, fingering her cunt with one hand while she works her nipple with the other, hips rising and falling to meet herself as loose moans bleed out of her.

*Oh, fuck.* He doesn’t want to come yet. Not nearly yet.

“You like doin’ that?”

“I love it.” No thought, no pause to screw up her courage or figure out any words; no sign that she has to do any of these things. She’s shoving herself upward, pushing him deeper, that impatience returning. “Daryl... I said it, I love it, do it, please—”

He smiles so wide—probably not especially wide by anyone else’s standards but massive by his—and flicks his tongue against her earlobe. “You wanna come in your ex-boyfriend’s hot tub?”

For an instant—and then another one—she doesn’t speak and though she’s still gasping and still moving he’s sure he’s overstepped somehow, said something fucked up and knocked her out of whatever this is. Sure he’s found a way to ruin it yet again, just when it was really starting to get good—like *good* can even come close to describing what this is, like there’s a word for it at all—and
wouldn’t that be so typical, wouldn’t that be so him.

But instead she jerks her hips against his hand and her voice has a pleased, wicked little edge.

“Yeah. Serves him right for cheatin’ on me.”

The rest of it is so easy.

More laughter rolling through him, through both of them, as he seals his hand over her and shifts into a rapid back-and-forth beckoning rhythm with his finger—despite his imagination he can tell there’s not enough of her own juices to make fucking her comfortable, probably, but he can do this and it seems okay—nudging her clit with his thumb and feeling the clench of her muscles as her body tries to grab him and hold on, and he moves with her, cock nestled into the crack of her ass, aware of himself only enough to know how fucking *good* this feels.

“Oh, *Daryl.*” Her moans are so loud, so continuous—so close to those cries. If he pushes her harder, finds another level to go to—“Oh, oh, Daryl—do that, yeah, like *that,* I’m—I’m gonna—”

Her whole body snaps, whips backward with the muscles around his finger *squeezing* him, and he catches a glimpse of her face, screwed up like she’s in pain. And her mouth wide, heaving frantic breaths, and finally, *finally* there are those cries, those wonderful cries, pulsing out into the dark and the sky’s glow, just shy of screams and completely released.

And a significant percentage of them is his name.

He gets lost in it. Maybe even as lost as she does. She’s *never really done anything,* but he hasn’t done his fair share of things, and he’s *never done that,* and it’s not that he hasn’t fingered someone to orgasm in a goddamn hot tub.

He’s never made anyone come like that in his *life.*

So she shakes against him, hips twitching now and then as she comes back down, and he basks in it, his head back and his gaze locked on the glowing clouds above them. He’s still pushing his cock against her ass, looking for friction, but it’s mindless and slow and for the moment...

For the moment he has everything he can imagine ever wanting.

“*Daryl.*” Hardly a breath, hardly there, but he shifts his finger inside her, curls it slightly, and she sucks in air and whimpers—laughs again. It seems like she fumbles at his name when there isn’t anything else to hand, and he’s glad, that’s so good, because he *loves* how she says his name. How it sounds like that. Like it’s not even about him, about who he is, but instead every indescribable thing she’s feeling packed into two syllables. Like she made him into something else.

Made him *mean* something else.

Redefined.

“Yeah?”

“That was—” She lolls her head back and laughs harder, not loud or deep but instead shuddery little giggles. “Oh, God.”

He turns his head and smiles against her neck, strokes the tip of his tongue against her shining skin.

For a while there’s nothing else. Just the hum beneath them and the thunder—even more distant now
—and it occurs to him that it might have been a bit of a risk getting into water like this, even with the
storms apparently far away, but he can’t bring himself to care. Might even risk death for this, if it was
only his he was risking. His finger slipped out of her at some point but his hand is there between her
legs, cupping her, almost strangely possessive, and his other hand is still kneading her breast, more
idle and relaxed than trying to get her anywhere.

She shouldn’t be anywhere other than where she is.

It’s right, he thinks with a soft wave of surprise. It’s right that she’s here with him. It’s not merely all
right, it’s right.

At last she shifts, wriggling but this time seemingly trying to center herself, and she tenses up when
she feels him still hard against her.

“Daryl, you—”

“‘m fine.” And he is. She hasn’t said she’s ready, hasn’t invited him inside her that way, and when
she is, when she does, he knows somehow it’ll be her. She’ll say it. Make it clear. It won’t be
assumed, can’t be. And fuck knows that in the course of this insanity he’s been left hanging plenty of
times. Has wanted to be, intended it. But he feels her shake her head and then move again, this time
obviously with more purpose. An experimental circle of her hips.

“No.” Another quiet giggle. “That ain’t fair.”

But he doesn’t want her to move. Fitting like this, her back to his front, her ass in the cradle of his lap
—that sweet, full curve, he needs to really get his hands properly on it soon if she’ll let him—he
honestly can’t imagine anything better. Even if he wants more, this is so good, more than good
enough, and he’ll keep her here if he can.

He thinks for a few seconds, then slides his hand down to her hip and his other away from her cunt,
nudging her.

“Lift up.”

He can feel her confusion even if he can’t see her face, but she does, and he reaches between them
and takes hold of his cock, angling it forward and down a little and just right, and as he spreads his
legs wider and pulls her gently back down against him and between them, it presses into the tight
space between her thighs.

She stiffens when she feels it, gasps softly, clutches at his hand. “Daryl, I’m not—”

“I know. ‘m not doin’ that.” He tugs her closer, trying to get her to lean back as he curls an arm
around her and smiles against the ridge of her shoulder. “Don’t got a rubber anyway. C’mere.”

He feels her relax again, loosen back into that soft boneless thing he made—he made—and he holds
her by the hips and starts to move.

Something else he’s never done, and it’s all instinct, the idea itself and what he’s doing with it. He
suspected it would work, that it would be good, and it is; not her cunt and not even—probably—her
hand, and yes, he was thinking about that, but somehow this feels like it might be better. This warm
pressure, just enough friction, but more than that, her reclining against him and breathing slow and
deep, lifting a hand to trail her fingers along the top of his thigh. Almost experimental.

“Never had anyone do this to me.”
“Never did this to anyone.” He rolls up harder and just then she finds some muscle and presses down against him, and he muffs a groan against her shoulder as thick pleasure pulses through him—then remembers he doesn’t have to. He can make all the noise he wants. “Beth...”

The sound she makes is happy, musical. “That feels good?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me.”

He laughs against her nape, shivering and near panting. He’s been on the edge for what feels like hours now. He simply forgot for a while. “You feel so fuckin’ good, Beth.”

“I think this is the most I ever heard you talk, Mr. Dixon.” She presses down to meet him again and he can tell, with a harder shiver, that she’s trying to find his rhythm. Trying to fuck him right back. Least virginal virgin he ever thought possible, if he thought about it at all. “Guess I am special.”

“Got a—shit—got a mouth to match that ego, girl.”

“Think it’s gonna feel even better when you fuck me?”

She asks it almost casually, all her breathlessness and those outlines of moans disappearing back into her for the moment, and for that moment he can’t move. She’s never said the word, not that he can remember, and it’s a word he’s heard thousands upon thousands of times, a word he uses probably something like thirty or forty times a day, and it should mean nothing, but coming out of her mouth like that, easy as you please, it’s the most sweetly filthy thing he’s ever heard.

When. He knew she wanted it. She said. But when. When he does.

Just a matter of time.

“Oh,” he whispers, and stutters his hips to life again. “Fuckin’ hell, Beth.”

“Yeah.” Her voice is dense with laughter, head thrown back, and suddenly she’s basically riding him, lifting herself up and forward and dropping down and back, rolling herself in slow circles, thighs so tight around him, better than he can cope with. Shoving him toward the edge, hauling him by his cock. “You wanna come in my ex-boyfriend’s hot tub?”

It takes him a second to gather himself enough to talk. Then he laughs again, drops his head back and laughs low in his chest, closer to a groan. That alone feels so good. Everything feels so good. Every fucking hectic fragment of sensory input, pounding into his skin and head, his ears, her gasps and the sloshing of the water as she moves, the sounds forcing their way up through his throat, twisting from groans into needy, helpless whines.

“Yeah... Yeah, serves him right for cheatin’ on you.”

“Damn straight,” she hisses, and there’s not really any malice in it—she said she wasn’t all that angry and he could tell she meant it—but there’s a kind of sharp glee that sends those sparks at the tips of his nerves stabbing into his cock, and he clutches at her hips, bucking against her, wild.

“C’mon,” she breathes, head hanging between her shoulders, spine arched back like a bow’s limb. “Lemme make you come, Daryl, Lemme—”

She cried out when she came, a long, strained series of cries, and there was surprise in them, like there was something she couldn’t quite believe. When Daryl comes he snarls, bares his teeth against
her shoulder and is aware enough that he wants to bite down on her to fight the impulse. He can’t feel it, and most of his higher brain function is completely gone, yet another thing dissolving into the steam, but the image does slide into him: his come hot and slick on her skin, running down between her legs, coating her and mingling with her own juices.

And that grabs him, stretches him out over the waves of pleasure crashing into him, and the snarl is a cry, half wordless and ragged and beneath it her name and a string of obscenities that don’t feel obscene at all.

She’s not a goddess. But he wants to worship her anyway.

More of that haze. Steam in his brain. Then she’s there, stroking his hands, his legs, so slow. So gentle. He sorts through the wreckage of his head, finds a couple shards of usable words. Not especially new or creative, but they’re there.

“Oh my God, girl.”

Soft giggle. His eyes are half closed, unfocused, and he can’t see anything much at all, but she turns in his arms and faces him again, slides forward to straddle his lap and rests her hands on his shoulders. “So that was good?”

He huffs a laugh. He’s trembling. “That’s a stupid fuckin’ question.”

She ducks her head and nuzzles at his jaw. “Tell me anyway.”

“Yeah.” Okay, sure; he’ll tell her. He can do that. He’s starting to scrape together more words, and she wants him to, and what, at this moment, wouldn’t he do to make her happy?

If she told him to go kill a man, he would probably ask her if she had any specific target in mind.

He lifts his head and leans forward, his brow against hers and one hand catching hold of her ponytail—wet now and extremely tangled. “Beth. That was so fuckin’ good.”

Her whole face lights up and that light seems and feels literal, and she presses in even closer and nods their mouths together and kisses him for a while.

At some point she loosens again, settles—still straddling him—and she rests her head on his shoulder and he wraps his arms around her, the water swirling and the breeze collecting the higher wisps of steam and carrying them away. Unreal. It all feels so goddamn unreal. He shouldn’t be able to feel this good. Never has. His hand and whatever he can weave out of the material his brain has stored away; even with how positive he was that she would give him more, those things were all that seemed real. All that seemed possible, seemed solid enough to grasp. Now she comes along and she does it, actually does it, delivers everything he found the courage to hope for and then some.

He said it felt good. No, it didn’t. How it felt is something he can’t quite believe.

After another while: “Daryl?”

“Mm?” Words are difficult again. But there’s something about the quality of that, the upward inflection, that catches his attention. She’s nervous about this, about whatever’s behind his name, and while it’s sort of beyond him to be nervous at the moment, he doesn’t miss it. Wonders at it.

“Can I ask you somethin’?”

He’s always found that one of the most useless fucking questions, because how the hell is he
supposed to answer it without knowing the nature of the question to follow? But irritation with her is something else he can’t find. It’s lost beneath the wreckage.

“I guess.”

“I mean... You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, you don’t have to answer it, I’m... I don’t wanna...” She trails off, the slightest bit tense now, though her head is still against his shoulder and her breath is still coming deep and slow.

“Spit it out, girl.”

“How did you get your scars? On your back?”

His turn to tense up, though not more than her. He knew this question was coming—pretty certain, anyway—but not here, and for a few seconds he feels, a little angrily, like he’s been ambushed. Like she got him loose and acquiescent and she sprung it on him because she knew he would be too weak to push back.

But of course that’s not what she did. She’s open to him right now. She wants him to be open too.

She wants to know him.

He squeezes his eyes shut. He can try. She’s made him feel safer than he’s ever felt with anyone. She won’t judge him, not for this. She never has.

And he really doesn’t believe she’ll give him any insulting kind of pity.

“My dad.”


She’s quiet for a moment, but though she isn’t speaking she’s moving, almost burrowing into him, and she would feel like a child seeking comfort, except he can’t escape the overpowering sense that she’s trying to comfort him.

Except no. Comfort is the wrong word. That’s too close to pity.

She simply wants him to know that she’s there.

“I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head and he holds her tighter. He’s not going to let this ruin anything. Not tonight. He’s damned if he’s going to do that. “Don’t matter.”

It does matter.

More quiet. He breathes it in and it’s gentle in his lungs, just heavy enough to be comfortable—like her, like her body, weighing him down in a way that isn’t in the least confining. Safe, he thinks again. He didn’t want to answer that, didn’t like that she asked it, but he did, he did answer, and it was okay.

Not all of this is going to be easy. He already knew that.

Worth it?

Definitely.
“Should go,” he murmurs finally, and she nods.

So they do.

In the truck, hot tub covered and turned off, pulling back down the drive, she leans forward and flicks on the radio, then settles back with a sigh. She sounds tired. Worn out, nothing left—like he feels, so tired he wants to pull over and curl up with her in the truck bed and sleep. But it’s not bad. It’s not bad at all. They got to this end through the best means.

All fucked out and they haven’t even fucked yet.

When.

But back at the oak tree they sit for a moment, that silence remaining between them, and she looks at him, her face unreadable. Something has happened between the water and now. A little stab of disquiet finds the soft gap beneath his ribcage, though he’s not sure where it comes from.

“I don’t know what this is,” she says at last, and her hand finds his in his lap. “But Daryl...” She takes a breath and all at once he can read her face again, and her expression is serious. Almost solemn. “I wanna keep goin’. I do.”

This isn’t a promise. It’s not a vow. Or it doesn’t feel like that. But it feels like something. Something else that should frighten him, something fundamentally temporal—it touches everything behind it and coils around the present and reaches forward to shape the future.

Something he shouldn’t be sure he wants to get into.

But lately he’s been doing all kinds of things he probably shouldn’t do.

He gazes at her all lit up in that strange storm-light—because that’s what it is. There will be more storms. The growls and mutters of the thunder are closer, closing in, and all those words for rain that he found and filed... He suddenly knows he’s going to need them again.

He already knows he needs her.

“Me too,” he whispers, and turns his hand under hers, threads their fingers. Weaves them together.

Wind sweeps over them and buffets the truck, grips the branches of the oak tree and shakes them like it’s trying to convince of them of something. There’s a shower of wet leaves, smacking flatly against the roof and the windshield and the windows.

Summer might be trying to hold on, but gradually it’s being torn away.

She’s gone into the night, a small pale shape moving along the edge of the dark ribbon of road. He sighs, full up with things he can’t define, swirling like those clouds and arguing fiercely with each other about which one matters the most.

And that fucking radio.

a thousand other boys could never reach you
how could I have been the one

It occurs to him, heading back with that wind raking through the grassy fields like a rough hand, shoving itself against him, that the thing about good days is that you can’t trust them to last.
Song is "Black Balloon" by the Goo Goo Dolls.
Daryl is beginning to measure his life in weeks.

He knows that’s not so strange. Lots of people do that. People with regular jobs do that, and he supposes he’s actually sort of one of those people at this point, which he’s still dealing with in increments rather than all at once—because not everything is easy, even now. But he’s pretty sure all those people aren’t employing this form of measurement for the reasons he is. By this point he and Beth have established that there can be stolen little moments, there can be late nights wrapped up in each other with the dark swirling all around them, but the weekends appear to be when they can really spread themselves out.

Saturday he comes to see her sing, but nothing else happens. An unspoken agreement passes between them when she meets his eyes at the beginning of her second song and he gives her a slight nod, and when she’s done he leaves without speaking to her. Sunday he doesn’t see her at all. Starting Monday he’s thinking about Friday, and it continues like that for the entire week.

So does the rain. Monday morning it’s back and harder than ever. People are starting to talk about it in musing tones; he hears them that afternoon when he passes them on the street, ducking from awning to awning and depending on the meager shelter of a newspaper, heading for the liquor store on a beer run—too close to justify the truck, and anyway he wants to be outside, honestly kind of likes the smell of all that wet. They’re making low noise about flooding basements, drainage in other respects. The waterfalls into the storm drain gratings are constant.

It’s a lot of rain. It’s just... a lot.

Monday is another day off from the farm. That’s good, even if it means he has no ready excuse to see Beth; Elmer is one of those people making grumbly noise about the rain but he’s also making noise about wanting that space back because he has some stuff he can store up there, and Daryl figures it’s a good day to look at some more housing possibilities. He hits another building on the opposite side of town, not much better but slightly cheaper, and in the truck he does some more math. With the purchase of the truck he’s down a couple hundred dollars—no fucking way was Elmer going to get much more than that for it with the condition it’s in—but this is genuinely beginning to seem doable, and Merle has put up no more resistance, though he still appears to think the idea is stupid and unworthy of Daryl’s time.

Daryl sits in the truck, listening to the rain pound on the windows and the roof and the radio’s low music hum—Semisonic again, nobody knows it but you’ve got a secret smile and you use it only for me—and he thinks simultaneously of Beth Greene’s sweet, clear voice and the sweet, hot slickness of her cunt, and there’s no conflict between these two things. He wants her. He wants all of her.

He meant it: he still has no idea where this is going.

But it as well is beginning to seem like a possibility. Even if he’s not sure exactly what it is that’s possible.

*I wanna keep goin’.*

*Me too.*
whatever they do when they work together: talk a little here and there, about nothing in particular. Hershel does some outlining of the history of the farm and his family—goes back four generations including Hershel, though the house is relatively new. Off in the northwest corner of the cow pasture there’s the foundation of the first house, though nothing else remains. A fire in 1895 took the rest, along with the lives of his grandfather’s wife and youngest son. Three years old.

Suddenly the talk isn’t so idle. Hershel seems to notice that Daryl is no longer making eye contact and gently changes the subject without asking why.

Beth comes home. She runs up the drive in the pouring rain, boots splashing through the puddles, calves and shins muddy, no umbrella, clothes clinging to her body and hair clinging in loose coils to her face and neck. She’s grinning; she appears to be enjoying herself. Everything in him leaps into his throat and settles there, making breathing difficult; she still does this, she still fucking 

does this to him, and maybe he should get used to the possibility that it’s never going to stop.

He’s sitting on a bench under the shelter of the porch, smoking—she sees him and gives him the tiniest smile, only in passing, but he doesn’t miss the flush that blooms in her cheeks and flows all the way to her ears and down her neck to her chest. It’s wet and September is drawing to a close, but it’s warm enough that she can wear those loose, sleeveless tops she seems to like so much.

She sneaks her hand into his at dinner. Daryl doesn’t blush, not as a rule, but he feels warmth doing that same blooming thing deep inside him.

Later he’s on the porch again, and Annette comes out, sits in a rocker, watches the rain.

“You have a girlfriend, Daryl?”

He whips his head around to stare at her, the cigarette almost tumbling from between his fingers. She doesn’t seem to mind his smoking in the mild way Hershel does, and she’s simply regarding him with placid interest, her hands resting loosely on the arms of the chair as she pushes herself with the tip of one foot.

He’s not being cool. Not at all. She’s not oblivious.

“Uh.” He rolls a shoulder. She’s merely curious, she’s not suspicious. Regardless, now he has to lie, and he’s so bad at that. Especially when he’s trying to lie to people he likes. “Nah. Not really.”

That’s technically not so much a lie. Beth isn’t his girlfriend. That isn’t at all the right word for what she is.

Annette smiles at him. “Maggie’s coming home for Thanksgiving. We should try to set you up with her. We’re starting to be concerned about that, be honest with you.”

He blinks, cigarette burning down in his grip—because it is suddenly a grip. He’s squeezing it with his knuckles, making a dent in the filter. He has no idea whether or not she’s kidding.

Then she laughs. “Oh, relax. I’m teasing. We’re not worried. When she called last weekend she said she met a boy, actually. Someone she really likes. He’s coming home with her. Y’know, it’s something,” she adds after a pause, quieter, “when your children start meeting people. Getting serious. When you start thinking about these things. You still don’t see them that way. Beth had Jimmy, Maggie’s had boyfriends, Shawn’s had girls, but it’s...”

Daryl says nothing at all, and Annette shakes her head, her gaze distant. “Sorry. That was kind of a weird thing to bring up out of nowhere. I was just thinking about it.” She abruptly refocuses on him, arches a brow, and he can tell she’s kidding again, but. “Anyway, you’re a little old for Maggie,
aren’t you?”

He shrugs again. He doesn’t smile. He doesn’t think it would go very well if he tried.

~

More rain on Wednesday, but lighter. Softer. Beth comes home soaked again, and no one is around; Annette is napping and Hershel and Shawn have gone into town. Daryl is out in the shed where they keep some of the smaller equipment and the tools to work on them, and she corners him, gets his back up against the wall, narrowly missing a shelf full of spare engine parts, and before he can deal with what she’s doing she has a hand between his legs, cupping him, kneading slowly.

“I was thinkin’ about this all day,” she breathes against his neck—practically purrs—and he tangles a hand in her hair and rolls himself against her palm and her name slips out in a rough, hard breath.

Not the only thing that’s hard.

“I wanna touch you.” She’s already fumbling with his belt. He bites back a whimper and tugs at her hair, pulls her head back and stares down at her, manages to focus on her face. That flush is back, the same dancing in her eyes he saw from Friday night, and he knows he’s fucked. “Can I? I haven’t yet, not really, can I?”

He thought about her, that first time he thought about fucking her at all. Thought about her being new at it, being unsure but eager, and then he decided that wasn’t realistic and she would already know what she was doing, she was eighteen and she had to already be experienced in at least some areas. But he was wrong about that, and also creepy, maybe, but when the reality of it comes home to him he can’t keep the whimper back anymore and he nods.

“Beth... Fuck, yeah. You can.”

Not that she needs his permission. She’s tugging his zipper down, slipping in, and then, fuck, the world narrows to the sensation of her hot little hand on him, fingers tracing down his shaft to the base, grazing over his balls, back up again. The whole time she’s looking up at him, and when she reaches his foreskin and pushes at it her eyes widen.

“It’s so smooth,” she whispers, sliding it over the head and tugging him free, getting a firmer grip, and his eyes roll up and his head drops back and hits the wall with a dull thunk. It doesn’t hurt at all. She giggles, sounding delighted, and strokes him again.

She’s clumsy, clearly unpracticed, clearly experimenting with what will make him moan louder, pant rougher and more shallowly, and he doesn’t give a fuck. Let her experiment. Let her explore. She squeezes him, rotates her wrist a little, runs a thumb up the side and the underside, and she draws in a breath when she strokes him just right and he thrusts into her fist. She reaches in again and wriggles her fingers deeper, cups his balls and weighs them in her hand, and he thinks his knees might fucking give out completely.

His hand slips loose from her hair. He can’t. He can’t do anything with his hands anymore. Except brace himself against the wall, fumble at the shelf as heavy groans push themselves out of his chest, and then he can, and he gropes for her hand, guides her, moves her faster as he thrusts again and whines through his clenched teeth, tries to warn her and wonders if he should pull away and then he can’t, he’s spilling all over her fingers and down her hand, her wrist, shuddering and clutching at her and frantically biting the insides of his cheeks to make himself be quiet, because fuck, fuck, is that a car?
Oh my God. Oh my God, Beth. Girl, Jesus fuckin’ Christ.

He stares down at her, gasping. She’s released him and she’s gazing at her hand, at his come coating it, sticky lines of it stretched between her fingers when she parts them.

And then she lifts her hand to her mouth and her pink tongue slips out between her lips, curiosity in her wide blue doe eyes, and she licks at one glistening fingertip.

He dies.

Or he should. He should just die. It makes absolutely no sense for him to continue living after this. His heart should just stop and he should tumble to the floor, and he would be happy when he did it.

“I dunno,” she says, looking speculatively at him. He stares back at her, breath harsh and jagged in his chest, utterly incoherent. “I dunno if I like it.” She tilts her head and a faint smile curls her lips. “Gonna have to try it again, I guess.”

He’s still gaping at her, his cock hanging out of his pants, when she turns on her heel and walks out of the shed, snatching up a loose rag on her way past a pile of them and wiping off her hand.

He has no idea how long he stays there. He can’t make his eyes focus. He switches from the assorted shapes of a hanging rack of tools on one wall, the faint sheen of a rusty toolbox on a dusty clamp table. Fishing rods leaning in a corner. A shop vac, bulbous with a tangle of hose like some kind of long-snouted alien. Great; now he feels like it’s staring at him. It’s judgmental.

Okay, that’s a car. Those are car doors. Those are voices. Hershel’s, and Beth—very cheerful.

Girl.

He heaves in a deep breath and shoves his cock back into his pants, zips up, squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his fists and yes, he’s going to be normal about this. As far as right now is concerned, what just happened did not happen. He didn’t just serve as the subject for Beth Greene’s first fucking handjob.

Yes, he did, and it was amazing. Later he can bask in that fact. Now he needs to go talk to her goddamn father.

She holds his hand under the table at dinner, that hot little hand in his, and it takes everything he has to not bust out laughing, and he can tell she’s going through the same exact thing.

This is not only the most wonderful thing that ever happened to him. He’s as certain as certain can be that it’s the most wonderful thing that ever will.

~

Thursday evening he wants to run down to the Kroger for some chips, hot dogs, more beer, and also some actual fruit, because ever since he started eating regular suppers at the farm he’s been increasingly lusting after fresher things. But he’s short of spare cash and he gives in, waits until Merle is sprawled out on the bed with a skin mag, kneels down and pulls the sock out and fishes out a twenty.

Then he pauses, and—simply because he has it out—he thumbs through the bills, totals it all up.

And kneels there and stares at it for a moment.
He counts it again. He counts it a third time. Stares at it some more.

He’s extremely careful with his mental financial records. He has to be. He’s hiding this thing as well as he can, but he’s smart enough and realistic enough to admit to himself the very real possibility that Merle will find it and either take the entire thing or start using it as his own personal bank account, like Daryl wouldn’t notice. Because he won’t care. What’s Daryl’s is his. That’s just how it works, since they were kids, until Merle took himself away and left everything terrible behind to be Daryl’s completely.

That’s how it works, and they both know it.

So he keeps extremely careful mental financial records. Every dollar in that sock is accounted for. Every fucking one. He knows where every single one went, and he knows where every single one came from.

Just to be sure—just to make absolutely fucking certain—he counts it all one more time, and he runs through his withdrawals and deposits. There aren’t that many. It’s not complicated. He knows he hasn’t made any mistakes. He’s sure.

There’s a bookkeeping discrepancy of a hundred and fifty dollars.

There are a hundred and fifty dollars more than there should be.

~

Then the rain on Friday, harder than it’s ever been. Torrential. Biblical. Fucking alarming.

As it turns out, there’s a lot to be alarmed about.
He decides he’s going to give it twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours—not sure how he arrives at that number, but it seems like it makes sense, or as much sense as anything else. Twenty-four hours—if nothing happens in that time he’ll give it another twenty-four, and another twenty-four after that. He’s not going to ask anything directly. He knows that wouldn’t get him anywhere.

He’s going to give it time, and he’s going to watch.

And he has no idea what he’s going to do about whatever he might see.

~

He wakes up Friday morning to a voicemail and the sound of someone hurling gravel at the windowpane.

He thinks it’s gravel. It’s not. He stumbles half naked to the window and the world outside is a single solid sheet of gray water. He stares at it, phone forgotten in his hand, the calm robot lady on the other end telling him that he has one new message and no saved messages, and wonders if somehow in the night something picked up the building and carried it out to sea.

But no. Of course it’s the rain. It’s the rain, or he thinks it is, it has to be—but he’s never seen rain like this in his life.

Vaguely he wonders if there’s some way in which he can make the truck’s cab watertight.

Merle makes his yawning way up behind him as Daryl is listening to the message—basically telling him to take another day, everything indicates it’ll let up over the weekend—and lets out a low whistle.

“Jesus, looks like we might wanna see about scrapin’ an ark together or somethin’.”

Daryl snaps the phone shut. “Comin’ down this heavy, can’t last that long.” But though he’s pretty sure that’s true and he’s trying to *sound* like he’s sure, he’s really not. Something about this whole thing—the way, especially with Beth, it’s felt as though he’s slipping into and out of a dream—is suggestive of a suspension of the rules.

He’s not sure what he can count on anymore. Nothing he thought about the world is quite bearing itself out these days.

In any case, he’s glad he made a food and beer run the day before, because there’s not much else
worth going outside in that weather for, and not a whole lot to do. Merle wanders off into the kitchen for a bag of breakfast Cheetos and Daryl wonders if it might in fact be worth braving the elements for some decent coffee.

In the end he decides against it. And he has other reasons besides the rain. Surveillance obviously isn’t something he can manage every day, and there’s no reason to assume Friday is special for any reason, that anything else is going to happen—and anyway his presence might well nix any move anyone might be inclined to make—but he’s here, so he might as well keep an eye on things.

As unobtrusively as he can manage.

And maybe this particular Friday actually isn’t so mundane. Because as the day wears on—TV, beer before noon and Merle getting high and Daryl trying not to chain-smoke because it doesn’t make him feel good, and in fact he’s been making a real effort to cut back lately—it becomes very, very clear that Something is Up with Merle.

Daryl is shit at lying to people in general. Merle is a lot better at lying to people in general, but when it comes to Daryl specifically, not so much. Even when he can pull off lying, it’s a different matter when he’s trying to pull off hiding something.

Merle is fidgety. Twitchy. Moving around just a little too much. Doing a lot of glancing at the window—outside of which the rain is continuing as heavily as before. He’s high, maybe even higher than usual, but this doesn’t feel like his usual meth twitchiness. Daryl sits slumped in the threadbare recliner, trying to appear drunker than he is—which is not much at all—and watches him with narrowed eyes.

It’s not like there’s money missing. So really he shouldn’t be angry about this. And in truth he’s not, and he’s not sure anger would have been exactly what he would have felt if money had been missing. He thinks he would probably have mostly felt deeply, bone-achingly weary.

But now he’s not certain what he’s feeling. No: he has no idea what he’s feeling. He has no idea what to do, besides watch. Because this makes no sense. He knows Merle, knows Merle maybe better than he knows anyone, and this makes no sense. This isn’t Merle. This isn’t what Merle does. Not ever.

Has Merle finally lost it? Has Merle found Jesus?

Is Merle possessed?

Merle is wearing only his boxers and is tapping his fingers on his bare thigh. Over and over, taptaptap. Daryl wants to lunge at him and seize his hand and scream would you fucking stop it, and also would you tell me what the fuck is going on with you.

And at some point in the early afternoon, just as it seems like the rain is slowly beginning to taper off, it comes to him: This might be what Merle has been feeling about him.

This might be what Merle has been feeling for weeks.

His little brother, his brother who was never so happy when they hooked up again, free from their ravaging sadist demon of a father, his little brother who looked up to him because maybe Merle was a loser like he was, called stupid and worthless all his life and never finished high school, never even made it halfway into his sophomore year, but Merle made it, Merle got out, Merle had the strength to leave and therefore became something almost mythical, the living embodiment of some kind of fucked up promised land. His little brother who just about worshiped him, at least at first—looked at
him like some kind of hero who knew how to survive anything, clearly loved him so desperately, followed him around like a puppy. His little brother who fought for him, defended him, went through the most stupid, idiotic shit for him, suffered for him. His little brother who made Merle his entire world, and when Merle got put away and then got out again he dropped everything else he had going on—not that there was a whole lot, working part time for minimum wage in a garage in what amounted to a shitty, dirt-poor extension of Atlanta—dropped it all to come pick his brother up and skip parole and wander the great state of Georgia in that slow, slow downward spiral. His little brother who was—increasingly tired, increasingly sad, increasingly scared, but loyal to the end—following him into a gray and hopeless Hell.

His little brother now talking about jobs and sticking around for a while, and not drinking as much, not going out as much, spending way less time with Merle in general, looking for apartments, and, when he gets pushed, pushing the fuck back.

How the fuck is Merle supposed to feel about that? Just how the fuck should he feel?

And all that shit Merle doesn’t know about. Not the outside, but the inside, and everything associated with it. Beth’s voice, the way her hair shines in the sun, the heart around her neck, the delicate scar on her wrist and the pretty things she covers it with. Her smile and how it makes his every cell burst open like a seed. How good it feels just to be around her, how it feels when she holds his hand, how well it fits, how well they fit, how she tastes and how his veins run liquid sunshine when she’s in his arms, the sounds she makes and the way she shudders when she comes, the way she says his name.

How they went into the water together and came out and were changed. Her hand in his and the secret held between their palms.

Daryl doesn’t know if Merle can know all of that. Not even that he shouldn’t know, not even that Daryl needs to hide it; he watches Merle twitch on the sofa, black blown-pupil eyes darting everywhere, and he thinks about everything they had together and everything he has now, is trying to have, wants, and he feels a chasm opening up between them and he knows that even if he laid it all out, told Merle about it, tried to explain...

It wouldn’t happen. It wouldn’t work. There would be no meaningful exchange of information. Merle wouldn’t get it. At least Daryl really, really doesn’t think so.

He loves his brother. He loves his brother more than he can stand.

But they aren’t together anymore.

~

Finally around three the deluge slows to a shower, which then slows to a trickle. For the moment it appears to be over. Merle is still fidgeting, still twitching, but less so. He seems more focused. He goes to the kitchen and comes back with a jar of peanut butter and a knife, starts eating right out of the jar—it would frankly be weird if he didn’t—and rambling about nothing, about the fucking rain, about how he hasn’t been laid in like a week, about how here Daryl has this day off and all they’ve done is sit around like Merle had some big plans to be somewhere, and Daryl keeps noticing how Merle’s gaze keeps returning again and again...

To the recliner Daryl is sitting on.

Huh.

So Merle flops back down on the couch, getting peanut butter on his fingers and continuing to
ramble, and after another ten minutes Daryl gets up and announces that he’s getting a shower.

And Merle’s eyes widen a touch, and it’s not surprise. It’s also not exactly nervousness. Daryl stands there and looks at Merle in the dirty brown-gray light, and what he sees... This word isn’t right either, but the only one coming to him is anticipation.

Merle raises the peanut butter knife in a salute. *You do that, man.* Daryl heads into the bathroom, closes the door all but a crack, turns on the water, and waits.

After about half a minute he hears the creak of dying springs as Merle lurches to his feet. The unmistakable shuffle of a not-quite-sober man trying to walk quietly. And the squeaking of the chair’s own springs, the sound of something like a cushion hitting the floor, and Daryl shoves the door open and is in the living room in two long strides, and there’s Merle, crouched in front of the recliner, whipping his head around with eyes even wider, and in his hand is a thin plastic freezer bag two thirds full of cloudy grayish shards of something that looks like broken safety glass.

Daryl stares at it. At Merle. Because naturally it’s crystal meth, but it’s more than Merle could reasonably hope to smoke unless he intended to kill himself, and it’s more than Merle would ever carry around for personal use.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” Daryl breathes, and Merle actually cringes, looks like he’s expecting a kick, and somehow that’s the worst part of any of it.

Because Daryl knows that look, and that affect. He knows it very, very well.

“Look, brother,” Merle says, still crouching and still clutching the bag—drawing it closer to his chest like Daryl is going to snatch it away. “You ain’t—”

Daryl doesn’t give him a chance. It boils up in him all at once, everything, bubbling poison, because he thinks he gets it now, or he sort of does, he’s beginning to, and it’s horrible, it’s making him feel literally ill. It would be so much better if Merle had merely been *taking the fucking money,* converting it into that shit, sucking it down like he always does. It would have been simpler. Daryl would know how to feel.

He thought he would just be tired if it was something bad in the normal sense of *bad.* He was wrong.

He takes a slow step forward, fists clenched, feeling his face screwing up into something like a grimace. “The fuck’re you doin’?”

“Man, you gotta—”

“The fuck’re you doin’?”

He’s never heard himself sound that way before. It’s not exactly a roar, but it’s closer to that than not. He’s complained to Merle, he’s nagged, he’s been irritated, and yes, he’s been angry, but he’s never been like *this.* He’s never been *enraged.* And he is: it’s tearing into him and wrenching at his intestines, hammering at his stomach, cracking open his chest and squeezing his heart. It isn’t even just rage. He gazes at that bag, at an amount of crystal that can only be there for the purpose of sale—selling a *lot,* selling in volume Merle never has before—and he thinks he might double over and vomit all over the shitty fucking rug.

“He’s never heard himself sound that way before. It’s not exactly a roar, but it’s closer to that than not. He’s complained to Merle, he’s nagged, he’s been irritated, and yes, he’s been angry, but he’s never been like *this.* He’s never been *enraged.* And he is: it’s tearing into him and wrenching at his intestines, hammering at his stomach, cracking open his chest and squeezing his heart. It isn’t even just rage. He gazes at that bag, at an amount of crystal that can only be there for the purpose of sale—selling a *lot,* selling in volume Merle never has before—and he thinks he might double over and vomit all over the shitty fucking rug.

“*The fuck you think I’m doin’?*” Merle is clearly trying to regain control of the situation, trying to summon up his own anger—because Daryl has so often given way under that anger—but it’s not working very well. That shocked, cringing look is still twisting his features. “You ain’t seen this before? Don’t act stupid, man, you ain’t—”
“You’re sayin’ I’m bein’ stupid?” This is not Merle’s day for getting to finish sentences. Daryl is standing there, rigid, almost shaking, and he doesn’t even think it’s about the meth. It feels immense. It feels like his skull is blowing open.

This is about everything.

“You really sayin’ that? You really sayin’ I’m the one bein’ fuckin’ stupid? You simple-minded piece of shit, fuckin’ look at that thing!” Merle does. Daryl doesn’t give a fuck. “How the fuck did you get that much? You owe anyone? You get yourself into that?”

Merle swings his gaze back up. “I ain’t owe no one nothin’,” he says quietly. And Daryl doesn’t give a fuck.

“You... How the fuck you gonna sell that much? Huh? You got some kinda big plan for that?”

“Maybe I do. The fuck you know ‘bout it?” Merle is definitely recovering, and his eyes are narrowing into sharp slits, mouth thinned into an equally sharp line. Daryl knows this look. Once he would have done a lot to avoid it. Now he’s doing that thing where he doesn’t give a fuck. “The fuck business is it of yours?”

“Business of mine...” Daryl gapes at him, and just for a second he’s utterly speechless. “How the hell do you...”

Merle shoves himself to his feet, still holding the bag. “Yeah. Ain’t your fuckin’ business. Tryin’ to do all that flyin’ straight, thinkin’ you’re better, it never was. Not this shit. Ain’t your business.”

“It’s all my fuckin’ business!”

It’s not almost a roar. It is a roar, loud enough and hard enough that Merle reels backward, nearly stumbling, finally dropping the bag. Daryl lurches a step forward, another, and he doesn’t even feel like himself anymore. He feels like some stranger, or like he’s watching some stranger wearing his face explode in slow motion. It’s dizzying. Again, he thinks he might be sick.

Can’t get out of it. There was no going back with Beth, and there’s no going back now.

“It’s all my fuckin business, you useless fuckin’ idiot. It’s all my business. Who was there when you got out? Who let you drag his ass all over this fuckin’ state for two fuckin’ years? Who got the cops off you like fifty fuckin’ times? Who got the cops off you like fifty fuckin’ times? Who put up with your shit, over’n over’n fuckin’ over? Who’s been your punchin’ bag ever since I found your sorry ass? Who fuckin’ left me? Who left me? I’m SICK OF THIS SHIT.”

He’s thunder. The remains of the rain outside is dripping off the building’s eaves, and down in the street he hears the rumble of traffic, but in here it’s all storm, and he’s crashing through the air, pounding it all open, and for this moment—this horrible, monstrous moment—he feels his own power and he revels in it, like he’s been aching to do this for years. Decades.

Because he has.

“What the fuck you think happens if you get picked up with that shit on you? That’n they find out you broke parole? The fuck you think they’re gonna do to you? Hell, the fuck you think they’re gonna do to me? I been with you this whole time! How many fuckin’ accessories you think I’m gonna be? You been fuckin’ yourself, now you’re fuckin’ me, and I am so. Fucking. SICK.”

Merle is cowering. Actually cowering. Without realizing it Daryl has started advancing on him, stalking forward and taking on every indication that he’s about to do damage, and it all comes
surging back like bile—doing his own cowering, trying to cover his head and belly from what he
knows is coming, wrenched to his feet and hurled against a wall. A broken dish and fumbling and
his hands sliced open, blood all over the floor, dripping off his fingertips like rain. Now Merle’s eyes
eating up his face and his lips trembling, and the man who did it to them felt this same power. Daryl
knows it now, knows it like he never did.

And everything in him collapses. He almost collapses, his knees buckling like they’re full of ragged
tinfoil, compressing with his own heaviness. With the weight of this horror. Merle backed against the
wall, small, trying to cover his head, trying to cover his brother’s head, putting himself in the way of
the oncoming blows, whimpering Stop, stop, he didn’t do nothin’, stop it.

Daryl could reach for him. Pull him in, pull him close. It’s all right, it didn’t kill them. They’re alive
and they have each other, and it’s all right.

But Merle knows him. Merle knows him so well. Merle has always seen his weaknesses, always
knows how to hit him where it hurts most, where his cracks will widen and the darkness will seep
out. Merle sees it now; Daryl can tell because a sneer—so familiar—twists his mouth into something
ugly, and he pushes forward into Daryl’s face, teeth bared.

“Yeah, and who fuckin’ took care of you? When no one else did? When you had nothin’, who the
fuck had you? When it was just Dad and no one else, who was there for you, you little shit? Who
was always there? Who else coulda helped you, when he was there?”

Daryl’s turn to reel back. These are words as kicks and punches. Lightning cracks through him and
rain pours in, washes out his blood. Everything he can’t say, every last thing caught in his throat. Not
rage now but all his scars and everywhere they came from.

You left me. You cut out and you left me, and then it was just me and him and he made me pay
double. He made me pay your share. I took the hurt for both of us. Me.

Me alone.

He shakes his head, slow, and the words cascade out of his flooded mouth and he can’t stop them.

“Wish he was here now. You fuckin’ deserve each other.”

Merle lunges at him and when the fist connects with his jaw the world blows itself into a thousand
electric spikes.

He swings back without thinking about it, snarling, clumsy and unbalanced. He’s never been a
graceful fighter, never been skilled in any sense of the word, but he can get the job done. He can aim
and throw a punch and put someone on their ass. He’s hurling punches now but he’s not aiming at
all, and neither is Merle, half the blows spinning wide—raining down on his shoulders, his upper
arm, glancing off his cheekbone. One solid one connects with his mouth and he grunts pain as he
feels his lip split open, blood waterfalling into his throat like a storm drain. It’s not even punching
then, merely grappling, a perverse, wretched parody of a hug, and Merle kicks his legs out from
under him and they go down together, rolling, throwing fists and knees and anything they can. And
the whole time it’s possible that he’s hissing things, spitting them bloody through his torn lips. Fuck
you. Fuck you. Fuck you.

I hate you.

Everything hurts and Daryl doesn’t give a fuck. He doesn’t think either of them do.

He tumbles away, gets free, groping for any possible weapon, and as his fingers close around plastic
he sees—in a single burst of clarity—Merle’s face, blood pouring from his nose, sudden fear, mouthing something like don’t—

This time his aim is true and the bag hits Merle’s face with a crack that slices through the air and shatters, and dully glittering shards fly like hail.

And everything stops.

“Daryl?”


He jerks his gaze toward the door. Merle does the same. It’s open, open wide, and a girl is standing there, blond hair darkened by wet, her sky-gray t-shirt hugging her body, hands loose at her sides and her blue doe eyes huge, her pretty lips parted. She’s shock embodied. She’s been struck by lightning.

He thinks she might fall and he wonders if he can get to her in time.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, but she still doesn’t move.

He can’t look away. But he can get to his feet. Somehow. Beside him Merle is as motionless as she is, and in the periphery of his vision he sees utter disbelief on his brother’s wrecked, bloody face.

Stop, he whispers to himself, but it’s too late and he’s heading for the door, that same awful stalking he did with Merle, because the rage couldn’t be beaten out of him and all he tastes is blood, and she shouldn’t be here, he didn’t tell her she could be here, how fucking dare she see him like this.

She’s backing away from the door. He moves through it, staring down at her, huge to her smallness, and she keeps backing down the stairs, fumbling for the railing.

Don’t hurt her. For the love of God, love of everything, love of her, don’t fucking hurt her, you piece of shit.

That baptism didn’t heal him. He didn’t get changed. God, he’s so full of poison. He’s so ruined. He had no idea. Because she might actually be scared of him.

Except he looks into her eyes and some remaining sane part of him thinks no, no, she’s not. She’s backing away, but she’s not scared.

“The fuck you doin’ here?”

“Daryl, I—”

At some point they left the stairs and now there’s blacktop under their feet. The side parking lot. After-storm sunlight in his eyes, harsh and white. She’s so bright and she’s all he can see, and he thinks she could burn him if he got too close.

“The fuck you doin’ here?” Because she hasn’t come here before. She’s never asked him if she could, never tried. Why hasn’t she tried? Does it matter? She’s here now. She saw what she saw. She’s not stupid. She’ll understand what it was. She’ll understand enough.

She’s not backing away anymore. He’s looming over her, but she’s not budging, and she reaches into her pocket, her jaw set, and pulls out a neat roll of bills and holds it out.

“Daddy wanted you to get paid for the week. Even if you didn’t come by. I was comin’ outta school.
Seemed convenient. Then I heard you, I thought maybe you were in trouble.”

Her voice is cirrus cloud, wispy and light but full of high cold. He stares at the bills, at her, at her eyes—no longer doe eyes but chips of blue ice—and all at once he feels small. Small and stupid and pointless. She’s not a goddess, she’s a girl, but she had mercy and he thinks there’s a better than average chance that he just exhausted the last of it.

She gives the bills a jerk with her hand, indicating that he should take them from her. He doesn’t move. He can’t.

So she drops them onto the wet blacktop at his feet, and she doesn’t break her hold on his gaze for one fucking second.

Somehow he finds his voice. A voice. He’s not sure it’s his. It’s nothing more than a hoarse whisper, and he doesn’t recognize it, and when he speaks it sounds far less like a command than a plea.

“Get out. Don’t come back here again.”

She spins away from him and starts to walk, and she tosses the words over her shoulder without looking back.

“Don’t worry. I won’t.”

He watches her until she rounds the corner back onto the sidewalk and he can’t see her anymore.

Even walking away she’s so fucking beautiful.

After what feels like half a day he bends and picks up the damp roll of bills with numb fingers, curls it into his equally numb palm, turns and makes his slow way back to the creaking stairs and up them, and into the room where the storm has died. Merle is sitting in the wreckage, meth scattered all around him, leaning against the couch with his head tipped back and a dirty shirt pressed to his nose. He glances over when Daryl comes in, and though Daryl can’t see a good portion of his face, he can read Merle’s expression perfectly well in his eyes. It’s also in the slump of his shoulders, the way his legs are sprawled on the rug in front of him.

Like Daryl thought he would feel before the sky broke open. Not angry. Not anymore. Just very tired.

Maybe a little sad.

Daryl is freshly aware of his split lip, which is still bleeding freely, and he heads to the kitchen and gets a wad of paper towels, comes back out and sinks down beside Merle. He wonders vaguely how long it’ll take the bleeding to stop.

The room gets dimmer. The door is swung wide, and outside the rain is starting back up, steady drumming. There’s none of that good rain scent he likes. The air smells like wet garbage. And when Merle finally speaks his voice is muffled, nasal, but Daryl understands him.

“Who the fuck was that?”

Daryl lifts the paper towels away from his face and stares down at them, at all that blood. He’s not full of poison. He’s full of water, and he’s going to wash away and be gone, and none of this will matter anymore.

“That was Beth.”
That was Beth.

Was.
“And who the fuck is Beth?”

Daryl wants to laugh. Laugh through his split lip—the blood is clotting but the laughter would probably rip it open again, and that seems entirely appropriate.

He wants to laugh, but he can’t. So he doesn’t.

That question. Who is Beth?

Who indeed.

Daryl returns the paper towels to his mouth, speaks as clearly as he can. “Girl.”

“No fuckin’ kiddin’.” Merle is now leaning his head back as far as it’ll go, shirt still against his nose, and he actually sounds kind of amused, and for a few blessed seconds everything else—the shitty apartment, the crystal meth all over the floor, the girl who just walked away and the cold, hollow void-thing in the pit of his stomach—it’s all gone, and this was only a stupid brawl, and they’re sitting together in the equally stupid aftermath and all the tension will dissipate, and they’ll laugh about it like they have a thousand times before. And everything will be all right.

Fantasy. But Daryl Dixon has learned all about the power of fantasies.

He closes his eyes and says nothing else. If no one speaks, he can hold onto that fantasy a little longer.

“Think you broke my fuckin’ nose, man.”

“You had it comin’.”

Once more, that sense of nostalgia. He’s so far away from real anger that he can’t even remember what it felt like. This is his brother. He’s a redneck asshole, a loser, not good for very much—perfect match for Daryl himself, if it comes to that—but he’s Daryl’s brother, and if that doesn’t count for anything, what the hell does? “Was already crooked, just straightened it out for you.”

“Fuck you.”

Daryl lifts the paper towels again, checks to see how much more blood there is, probes with his tongue. Tough to know how bad with no mirror, but he doesn’t think it’s horrific. He doesn’t feel any loose teeth. “Fuck you too, bro.”

Silence for a while. It’s really starting to get dark, and it’s raining in through the door, but there’s no wind now and nothing to see and anyway Daryl feels too exhausted to get up. Too exhausted to do
much of anything.

He closes his eyes and he sees Beth’s receding back. Her hair falling over one shoulder, shining in that glaring white light. Hard to look at. She was so hard to look at for so many reasons. She stared him down—this tiny blond girl, she is absolutely terrifying, and he has no idea what’s going to happen now, because maybe he hurled words at her at the swimming hole, but he didn’t back her up like that. He didn’t loom. He didn’t use his size and his strength as a weapon—even if it completely failed here. Both times.

*Who is Beth?*

Beth Greene is indescribable.

“No, I mean it.” Merle still sounds very nasal, difficult now and then to understand him—a trip to the hospital might be a good idea, though it’s not going to happen. “The fuck is she?”

This moment was coming. It was always coming, all of it; Daryl has fallen back into the sense of overwhelming inevitability that’s marked this old story from beginning to now—a sense of falling in and of itself, dropping with ever-increasing speed and no handholds, and in fact he’s going so fast now that if he tried to grab hold of anything it would yank his arm right out of its socket.

He could refuse to answer, but he’s so tired and he hurts so much, and he just got done spewing bloody, toxic honesty everyfuckingwhere, so more of it doesn’t seem like it would make the situation a whole lot worse.

Maybe he was always afraid of all the wrong things.

“Y’know that farmer I’m workin’ for?”

“Yeah?”

“Daughter.”

Merle laughs, muffled and pained, and what he says next is dripping with sardonic humor and obviously not truly meant, but it’s once it’s out there it’s out there, and it has to be dealt with.

“Why the hell was she here?” Another rough laugh into the balled-up shirt. “You fuckin’ her or somethin’?”

He doesn’t even have to lie at this point. He could address the first question and leave the second one alone, leave it for the jab it is; he could just talk about the money and it would be true and convincing and it wouldn’t actually make this so much worse, regardless of whether or not that’s even worth caring about now.

He could do that. It would be the smart move. But he’s been inhumanly stupid this whole time, so why break a streak when he has one going?

“Not exactly.”

He glances over at Merle, already knowing what he’s going to see. It’s getting on to evening and the room is crowded with shadows and lines of streaked rain on the window opposite the door, but he can see Merle’s face well enough to know what’s going on there, and it’s all vague shock and slowly dawning realization.

“You’re *not.*”
Daryl says nothing.

“Holy shit, tell me you’re not.”

He almost laughs again. Almost. Closer than before. Because how much bad shit has Merle done? What the fuck is scattered all over the damn floor, crunching uncomfortably under his ass when he shifts his position? But he appears to be at least mildly horrified by this, and whatever his reasons, Daryl doesn’t feel like arguing. Merle’s reaction might even be appropriate. Fair, under the circumstances. He’s dimly aware of the fact that this is an old, nasty internal voice talking to him and he probably shouldn’t listen, but there’s still the thing about him doing everything stupid he possibly can.

So he simply nods and pulls the paper towel away, checking it again; he’s re-torn the lip and the darker, older blood is spotted with brighter red.

“The fuck old is she, man? Twelve?”

“She’s eighteen.”

“You sure? She don’t look eighteen. Don’t even look sixteen.” Merle lets out a harsh, ugly guffaw. “And you’re yellin’ at me ‘bout gettin’ locked up.”

“Told you, bro.” No force at all behind the words. They’re flat, lifeless. God, he’s so tired. “She’s eighteen.”

“And you’re fuckin’ her.”

He shakes his head. Third time he’s wanted to laugh, and it’s the worst by far, because what he’s been doing with Beth... He hasn’t had his cock inside her, no. And yet somehow that doesn’t even seem to matter at this point. Maybe someone else might not consider it sex, maybe Merle might not consider it sex, but everything they’ve done together—from the first time she felt him pressing hard against her hip, to when she put his fingers on her clit, to when he pulled her into his lap and rutted between her thighs—has been more like fucking than any actual fucking he’s ever done in his life.

This, too, is indescribable.

“She wants to wait.”

“She wants to wait.” Merle repeats the words slowly, as if he’s trying very carefully to grasp the full sense in each one. Through all of this he hasn’t stopped staring at Daryl, though Daryl can’t bring himself to look directly at Merle. Periphery of his vision will do just fine for this. He’s gazing at the TV—it’s been knocked dangerously close to the edge of the crooked table they originally tossed it onto, and one more good knock and it probably would have toppled onto the floor and added real glass to the littered crystal—at its blank face, which is so much like an enormous staring eye. Him and Merle mirrored in it, sitting side by side, and except for the wreckage around them and the injuries they’re sporting, the fight might as well not even have happened.

They’ve sat together like this so many times before.

“Yeah.”

“She wants to wait.”

“Yeah.”

For a long moment Daryl is silent. He doesn’t move. He barely even thinks. The entirety of his consciousness is locked on those five words, spinning around the inside of his head and throwing themselves against the walls of his skull. They won’t sit down and be quiet. They’re yelling at him, screaming—her voice and her eyes and her hair, sitting in the grass with her and listening to her talk, sing, her hand in his under the fucking table as he eats dinner with her family, weeping against her as she holds him under the stars, and how, since this all started, since he saw her on the side of the road and asked her to let him give her that fucking ride home, all he ever really wanted from her was to occupy roughly the same goddamn space.

All he wanted. Everything else, he could live without. But he doesn’t know what he’s going to do if he can’t just be with her again.

You’re in love with her.

He smiles and blood rushes into his mouth.

I get it now.

~

At some point he gets up, reaches down a hand, and after a moment of a little more staring at him Merle takes it and allows himself to be hauled groaningly to his feet. He pulls the shirt away from his face, and it’s very dark outside now, but Daryl can see him through the last of the colorless daylight through the open door. He peers at Merle’s nose, and the damage doesn’t look catastrophic.

Anyway, it wouldn’t exactly be the first time Merle’s had his nose broken.

“You’re a fuckin’ asshole,” Merle mutters, and Daryl doesn’t see any reason to argue with that.

He crosses the room and turns on their one trash-fished-out-of lamp. Merle staggers to the door and closes it.

And they gaze at each other.

Daryl glances toward the kitchen. There’s a mostly full bottle of Jack Daniels in there, of which they’re both aware.

“Wanna get wasted?”

Merle grunts an affirmative. Daryl goes to get the bottle.

~

It doesn’t take that long. It’s also not intense, not sudden, and though they’re slumped on the floor with an unbelievable amount of crystal meth all around them, Merle isn’t high. They’re passing the bottle back and forth, and Merle’s nose is about twice the size it should be and Daryl’s lip feels like it’s in pretty much the same condition. The whiskey stung it pretty bad at first, but Daryl’s slipped back into that thing from earlier where he mostly doesn’t give a fuck, and it’s soothing in the hollowest possible way.

At some point Merle takes a huge swallow and then stares down at the bottle for a moment or two, picking at the edge of the label with his thumb.
The rain throws itself obsessively against the window.

“You’re outta your fuckin’ mind. You know that.”

Daryl ducks his head. That, yes, he knows. He’s been perfectly cognizant of that from the beginning. Completely out of his mind and never finding his way back, and regardless of how much it hurts now and how much he’d give to be able to get a do-over with today, he still doesn’t want to find his way back. He doesn’t want to stop feeling this way.

He has to be in love, because he has no idea what else would make him sink into this level of determined masochism. He’s never been in love, not that he’s ever noticed, but he has at least a vague sense of what it does to people.

Among other things, it kicks them out of their minds. It evicts them from their sanity. In a sane world he wouldn’t love this girl. But he’s never lived in a sane world.

That possibility was taken from him at birth.

“Guessin’ her dad don’t know.”

Daryl shakes his head.

“Jesus, little brother. Fuckin’ hell.” Another one of those thin blocked-nose laughs, and Merle hands over the bottle. It’s at very low tide. “Fuckin’ the farmer’s daughter.”

“Told you. I ain’t.” God, he needs to cut that out, because that’s a level of hair-splitting he should know better than to engage in. It’s ridiculous. It’s *comical*. He knows what her cunt tastes like, she knows what his come tastes like, he’s made her cry his name, she’s made him shout hers, they’re fucking even if they’re not.

Getting drunk isn’t helping all that much. Not where that’s concerned. He can taste her. Even now, he can taste her. Sense memory strong enough to kick him in the face, split his lip all over again.

“Right, ’cause she wants to *wait*.” Said with a healthy degree of mocking, which means Merle really must be feeling better, but there’s not as much as there might be. “This why you’ve been findin’ excuses for us to stick around? It is, ain’t it?”

Daryl stares into the depths of the bottle and pushes at the inside of his lip with his tongue. The dull flare of pain is perversely comforting. He nods.

Merle takes the bottle. Tips it up, swallows, grunts and tilts his head back and gazes up at the ceiling. That mutant South America water stain. More of them now, probably. It’s a wonder that water isn’t running down the walls, soaking the rug. It’s a wonder they aren’t sitting in a puddle, in addition to a hailstorm of drugs.

“Man, I gotta ask.” Merle rolls his head to the side so he can look at Daryl, and when Daryl looks back, this time he can see no real scorn in his brother’s eyes. Only that constant weariness, and a faint outside edge of confusion. “Where the fuck you think this is even *goin’*?”

Daryl’s eyes narrow. “Whaddaya mean?”

“I mean, okay, we *stick around*, you get that fuckin’ apartment, you keep workin’ for her *daddy*... What then? She’s gotta be in *high school*. If she even *is* eighteen. What’re you gonna do? You gonna *marry* this girl or somethin’?”
Daryl looks sharply away. This question... He had avoided it. Or at least he had avoided it directly, buried it under *I don’t know*. Put it away, blocked it off, successfully ignored it in favor of how simply happy he had been. What was he going to do? Worry about that later. Thinking about the *big scary future*, sure, but he wasn’t going to think about *that*.

About what he could have with her. About *anything* he could have with her.

He thought about her graduating, going off to college—okay, maybe not right after, but eventually—meeting a nice guy, getting married, getting a house, maybe having a kid or two. A dog; somehow he sees her with a dog. A normal life. A *Nice* life.

He doesn’t fit into that, and he never will, and that’s simply the truth. He’s...

He met her in the summer.

And this is a very old story.

It’s like Merle can read his mind. “Maybe you got this thing for her, baby brother, but are you fool enough to think she got it for you? Man, you just this *summer fling* for her. Girl like that, *good girl*, for sure she’s gonna be into *bad boys*, saw you and saw somethin’ she could dip into and get out of when she’s ready to start gettin’ serious.” Daryl opens his eyes in time to see Merle shaking his head, and there’s still no scorn there. With the words, there should be, but there isn’t.

It’s like when Daryl first came back in. Merle looks tired. A little sad.

“You gotta get outta this, brother. She’s gonna hurt you. When all’s said and done you got nothin’ to give her, and she knows it. Sooner you figure it out, better off you gonna be.”

Every word is a slow, gentle punch to the gut. Every word. A blow relentless with truth. Because this is...

Because he has about a thousand dollars to his name. He has a truck which is, any minute, going to fall apart in the middle of the road like a goddamn cartoon. He never made it through as much as one full year of high school and he has no real marketable skills aside from fixing broken machines. He’s sitting in the middle of a floor covered with crystal fucking meth, in probably the worst living space Beth has ever personally seen, and she walked in on him beating the shit out of his drunk addict parole-violating brother, and then he pretty much as good as threatened to hurt her.

No. He has nothing to give her. He loves her so much he can’t even remotely handle it, but he has nothing whatsoever to give her.

“Say she did run off with you,” Merle says softly. He almost sounds back to his uninjured self now, except he doesn’t. He never sounds like this. Never so sober, so old. “Say she married your redneck ass. Got a tumble-down shack in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere. Pumped out a couple kids.” He pauses, and it’s horrible. “Say she did that.”

*You know what that looks like.*

Daryl’s throat locks up, his organs curl in on themselves, and he has to close his eyes, *has to*, because some things don’t change, some things are reliable and consistent and solid as foundations, in some ways we never grow up and we never stop being children, and he is not going to cry in front of his big brother.

“You gotta let this go.” Something smooth and cool nudging his hand; he thinks about Beth reaching for him under the table and it’s the bottle. He takes it. “You gotta let this go, baby brother. You listen
to me. I’m tryin’ to help you. Let her go.”

Daryl pulls in a long, shaking breath. It feels like claws raked down his throat, sandpaper, gravel spilling into his lungs. But he makes himself take another one, and another. Another. Beth is antithetical to oxygen. But he’s going to make himself breathe.

She was so beautiful walking away.

“Think maybe that already happened.”

“Yeah, well.” Merle swings his unsteady gaze back to the ceiling. Daryl glances up and sure enough, wet patches are forming. One of them is beginning to look vaguely like Australia. “I said my piece. You just think about it, now.”

The silence stretches out. Daryl holds the bottle loosely in his lap, doesn’t raise it again. The rain continues—not heavy now but constant. Drumming fingers on the glass. As if the world itself is trying to get him to come outside.

“About before,” he murmurs, and at first he’s certain Merle has passed out, but he gets a very slight shake of the head.

“Don’t.”

So he doesn’t.

After another little bit, Merle starts to snore.

Daryl listens to that, to the rain, to the thrum of his blood in his swollen lip—which does indeed seem strong enough to be literally audible. He thinks about passing out too, thinks it might be a good idea, might be the smart thing to do... So of course he doesn’t. He swings to his feet and picks up the bottle and staggers to the door, jerks it open, and glances back a single time.

Like this, in the light and in the laxness of unconsciousness, Merle’s features have smoothed out. The wrinkles don’t look quite as deep—the damage time and alcohol and other substances have done to him. He almost looks young again.

The way he looked when he walked away.

Daryl slams the door behind him and carries himself and the whiskey out into the night.

~

It’s not far to the short dead-end road where he kissed Beth Greene in the rain. Took her and kissed her, and it was such a stupid fucking idea, and she kissed him and then tried to take it back later. Said they should be friends. But those few perfect seconds with her pressed against him, with her mouth...

It’s not far and he reaches it in what seems like no time at all, the universe folding to erase the line between those two points. He’s still lurching, but he’s way more sober than he should be, and it might be the rain but he doesn’t think so. He’s drenched, wet beyond wet, his sodden clothes dragging at him—or he’s dragging them—and he scrapes his boots over broken, weedy pavement toward the even weedier wasteland at the end.

It was right here, where it happened. This spot. Or was it? Maybe it was there—is that pothole familiar? That place where it almost appears to have buckled? Like something thrust itself up from underneath. Something trying to escape. Mutilating cracks patched with tar, melting them. Once he
heard about a fire in a coal town up north, a fire burning underground for decades. Eating away at the anthracite. Bubbling up under the roads. Chasing everyone away. Devouring everything. Burning and burning and burning.

Changing it. So you can’t go back.

It wasn’t there, where he kissed her. Or there. He doesn’t know where it was, that point of no return.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

He wanders into the weeds and there he stands for a few minutes, face lifted to the wet night, letting the rain wash into his nose and into the corners of his eyes, into his damaged mouth, streaming down his cheeks and combing through his hair. Cool. Cold. This is the last of the summer, washing away.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do?

This is wasteland now, but once it was something else, and even under the weeds and the carpet of dirt there’s pavement, hard surface, and when Daryl hurls the bottle at the ground the glass shatters and shards fly glittering into the dark like stars falling upward, and all that hardness echoes the sound back to him when he doubles over and screams his voice away.

With your one wild and precious life?
what makes the water holy she says is that that it's the closest thing to rain

Chapter Notes

No, you may not be happy. Sit down and be quiet and be sad.

*I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.*

Daryl has no fucking *idea* what a prayer is.

He thinks he’s prayed. He knows he’s prayed for deliverance: from pain, from terror, from his own childish understanding of evil—and don’t children understand evil with a kind of purity that adults forget?—from loss and grief, from loneliness. He hasn’t ever meant to pray those prayers, but he looks back and he can see that he did. Not to any specific God—he lost his faith in that a long time ago if he ever had it at all—but to anyone or anything who might be listening and might be in an answering mood.

There’s one specific, intentional prayer he knows he made. One prayer for one half-formed thing, and the lack of articulation didn’t matter, because he felt it to his marrow and he meant every word. The spoken ones and the ones he left unspoken.

He said a prayer and the answer was yes. It just hasn’t worked out like he expected. Not that he ever expected anything.

This... He probably should have.

He told himself, after the last time, that he shouldn’t come down here without her company, without her permission, because this is her place. When she brought him here that first time she was giving him a gift. Not *carte blanche*. He was probably overstepping in coming here that night when he prayed.

So now he’s overstepping again.

The period of time between the flat wet of the wasteland and the road spinning out under him is a blur. This whole night is a series of clearer, sharper moments spaced out between the blurs through which he travels. He doesn’t remember walking back to the parking lot, he doesn’t remember getting into the truck. He doesn’t remember driving out of town. He doesn’t remember making this decision. He only knows, when the world snaps into focus, that these things have happened.

It’s not the whiskey. He was sober hours ago.

He parks at the edge of where the slope becomes treacherous, climbs out and starts to stumble downward. It’s still raining, hitting the leaves over his head so hard they rattle, sullen thunder muttering constantly miles away. Lightning is nothing more than flickers on the horizon, barely any illumination at all—though with each flicker he can see the broken stone towers, the jagged walls, the exposed brick, nearer and nearer as he descends. This is her place but she’s in bed, in that bed he shared with her for barely an hour, the bed in which he finally made her come, and she was kind enough to let him follow her. She’s in bed, and he wonders how she’s sleeping.

He could have checked. He could have climbed her trellis and tapped on the window, and she could
have opened it and sent him crashing onto her lawn with a kick in the face, because who the fuck needs a bottom lip anyway?

He doesn’t. He thinks he would be okay without one. It’s amazing, the things you can learn to live without.

God, he’s so fucking fucked up.

Creeping down this slope with her the first time had been like climbing down into a kind of fairyland—nothing facile and fluttery and stupid but something like what he once imagined real magic to be. Rules rewritten and suspended. A space closed off from the rest of the world. A place that protects itself without any outside assistance—and isn’t there no trash here? Isn’t there no graffiti? Something is guarding these ruins. Sure, he felt that before, coming here that night he was certain he was going to have to leave town; he felt some species of power flitting through the shadows and he thought about how maybe it wasn’t only a kid reading ghosts into hanging sheets. He thought those things and maybe in the moment he even felt them, even believed them a little. But not like now. It’s dark and the storm is still immense even if a lot of its power has bled away, and maybe he’s not nearly as sober as he thought, but he feels it, and it grips his spine with icy fingers. It’s not vague. It’s not dreamlike, even if everything else is. It’s sharp and hard and real. Something is here, watching him.

He might not be welcome.

“Fuck you,” he mutters as his boots slide on mud and loose rock. He fumbles for saplings, hanging shrubs, anything he can get his fingers around for purchase. “Fuck you, just—”

He’s not even sure who the you is or what the fuck really refers to, but that Something might indeed be listening, because all at once the ground vanishes from under his feet—not slides but actually fucking vanishes, he’d swear to God or whatever—and he goes down on his ass, kicking and grabbing to try to stop his fall, mud working its way up the legs of his jeans and the small of his back, shards of wet rock scraping his palms open. He’s yelling something—he has no idea what—rolling over once and then again, and he hits the grass on his side, except it’s not grass anymore: It’s a fucking waterfall of muddy runoff pouring into a creek swollen into a surging river. Lightning flicker: crumpled, bruised and bleeding and coughing dirty water, he sees brown foam swirling, bubbling into poor excuses for whitecaps and cascading away again.

He lies there, wondering vaguely if anything is broken. When he’s confident nothing is, he rolls onto his back and stares up, mud soaking into his hair, his clothes, swirling around his boots. He closes his eyes and lets the rain bathe his face.

After a while he starts to shiver.

~

At some unknown point later he turns over and shoves himself to his knees and then to his feet, and that clinches it: nothing is broken. He’s going to be in thirty-two flavors of pain later, and his entire body is probably going to look like he got naked and rolled in purple and blue and green paint, but bones aren’t sticking out of anywhere and he can move everything.

So this is all going really well.

He simply stands there for a moment, palming water out of his eyes, and staring across the swamp the grass has become toward the arch she led him through.

He fell into this. Literally. Okay, he was headed down the slope anyway, but the last fifteen or
twenty feet had been this place’s doing, not him. This isn’t his fault. He stares up at the stone and he might be saying as much. Waving his arms a bit. Belligerent. He’s having a miserable enough night; what, does he have to pay an entrance fee here? Is he just being fucked with?

Yeah, maybe not so sober at all.

Whatever.

This didn’t even have to be complicated. It could have just been her. That was all I asked for. Why did any of that other shit have to happen? Just her, just being with her... The rest of it could have been left out. Didn’t need it. Not really.

If he hadn’t gotten all those bonuses, would that mean he wouldn’t have to pay as hard now? Would that mean he would get let off lighter?

He was ready to kick Merle’s ass over owing people. Here he is, standing in front of a broken stone arch in the pouring rain in the small hours, and he’s apparently become very sure that he owes a malevolent winged wolf god a favor. Or three hundred.

Except no, that’s all beyond stupid. What happened is he got himself into a thing and it was good for a while but he can’t help being what he is, so then what happened happened like it always happens and he ruined everything because that’s what he does. There’s no wolf god. There’s no magic. Just some broken walls, no roof, and a redneck asshole soaked to the skin.

Soaked like she was. That first night.

He lets out a hollow groan and wanders through the doorway.

In the semi-enclosed space beyond, the rain is at once quieter and louder; there’s some small amount of shelter, but the sound of the drops echoes off stone after stone, amplifying itself, compounded by the roaring of the river. It’s disorienting, difficult to sort any of it out, impossible to tell exactly where he is in relation to anything, and he stumbles and turns in place and blinks. He can orient himself by memory, and it seems like he can do it here in a way he couldn’t out on that dead-end road. That wall right there, the one facing the river, higher than the rest—that’s the one he found her leaning against the afternoon he came searching for her. So here, right here where he’s standing—that’s where he tugged her to her feet and she kissed him. Over there to the left, where the stones have chipped away around a single big, smooth one—that’s where he laid his hand when she first brought him here, and touching it made it real in a way nothing else had.

That’s what touching things does.

So when she touched him, what did that do?

He turns until he finds another doorway that he’s ninety percent sure isn’t the one he came through and staggers back into the open.

This is a grotesque parody, he’s realizing. Slogging along like this, in pain and feeling very sorry for himself and getting angrier all the time because of it—except for being wet, this is simply a worse version of exactly what he did before. This is a broken mirror. He can turn here, look back, and see that all he’s done is come full circle yet again. Like how he did with her in that first week, six days to fall in love with her like making the whole fucking universe and on the seventh day he kissed her and there was no longer any such thing as rest. This is just a bigger circle. Merle is the biggest—Merle, and then maybe even bigger is that girl and that shack and those two fucking kids. It’s all circles. His entire life is circles.
Except circles go around and around. This is heading downward.

You have nothing to give her.

And you honestly think Merle is the only one who could drag someone down with him?

Honestly?

As he sloshes across the grass he glances at the river again, at how it’s sweeping up high over stones and leaning trees, and as he watches—stopping with his mouth slightly open—one of the smaller trees leans, shudders, and tears free from the ground, tumbling into the water with a crash and trailing roots like clutching fingers desperately trying to save itself.

He spends a few seconds staring at the hole in the world where it was.

Then he moves on.

~

Once, years ago and lost in bottles and bottles of bottom shelf whiskey, he and Merle got into a protracted discussion—and before long a debate—about the nature of the end of the world.

For starters, what did the world mean? What qualified as the world? What were the exact terms under which they were operating? What about end? How do you know something is over? What are the criteria by which you judge worlds and their endings?

Merle had been impatient with the semantics; he thought they were pointless and wanted to move on to the parts where everyone shot each other and hacked off each other’s limbs and stole military-grade weaponry and blew everything up and burned everything down and descended into cannibalism. But Daryl was stuck on the conceptual side of things, and after Merle passed out snoring in the wide back seat of the old Impala they’d stolen, Daryl lay awake in the front seat and nursed the last of the whiskey and thought about worlds and their endings.

And what came to him, there in the dark, was the fact that when people talked about the end of the world, for the most part they weren’t talking about an ending, and they certainly weren’t talking about a world. In all of their bloody scenarios, things just...

Changed.

Changed a lot, sure, but everything was recognizable in those end-of-the-world nightmares. People were people. They fought and hated and killed and died and destroyed like always; they only did it with fewer constraints. They were just as ugly as they always had been. The ugliness was merely a lot more visible.

At the time, Daryl thought that might actually be preferable. At least at the so-called end of the so-called world people might be honest with you.

So, he mused—tasting whiskey and hearing Merle’s thunderous snores and drifting into his own internal darkness—if really all they were talking about was change...

Maybe that was what endings were. Just more changes.

Maybe nothing ever really ends at all.

~
The rain peaks again before he reaches the bench.

He can see it ahead of him, pale in that lightning flicker like a spirit flitting through the trees. If he’s still going with the half-crazed idea of this place possessing some kind of real supernatural power, he can feel it thrumming through him—rainfall against the outer walls of his veins, his cell membranes. Every step he takes the rain comes down heavier and heavier, and to his right the river seems like it’s rising higher every second, becoming truly dangerous. Rain like this, people die in it all the time. All kinds of ways, all sort of stupid reasons. Like lurching around half drunk in the woods way too close to a river running far too high.

No: If this place has power, he doesn’t think that’s going to happen to him. He doesn’t think the place will let it. Though Christ, the entire sky is emptying itself onto him, and he grabs onto the slender trunk of a birch tree and feels it bend, and he splits his lip open all over again when he yells Jesus, could you give me some kinda fuckin’ BREAK.

But it only rains harder, and it keeps going like that until he stumbles into the clearing where the bench sits, almost slips in the mud again and has to catch himself on yet another birch, and just when light cuts jagged across the sky and throws that snarling winged wolf’s head into shadows as big as hallucinations, shadows that he would swear make those wings spread and spread—

It stops.

It doesn’t lighten. It doesn’t taper off. It just stops.

And it shouldn’t be quiet, because there’s the river behind him and rain dripping everywhere and running down to the roiling water, and the thunder can’t just have completely died like that—but the silence is deafening.

So he stands in it and he listens.

What happens next shouldn’t happen either. It probably doesn’t. It’s probably not real. No way is it real. He’s definitely drunk, he’s had a bad day like he hasn’t had in maybe years, maybe since he was a kid, and everything he sees and hears and feels is generally not all that reliable right now, so it’s probably some fun little temporal trick his brain has cooked up to amuse itself.

Nevertheless: There’s no moonlight. Then he blinks water out of his eyes and the sky is clear and the moon is pouring itself down on him, turning all the wet to silver and the marble of the bench to bone.

He stares at it, shakes his head, squeezes his eyes shut. Rubs at them. Opens them and gapes up at the sky and the moon is still there. Heavy, high, nearly full.

He did not sign on for this level of weird. Then again, he doesn’t remember signing on for any of this.

But you did. Right here. You did.

“Fuck you, asshole,” he growls, each aching muscle coiled up tight and vibrating with potential violence, and he stalks toward the bench. For a moment he thrusts every poisonous, agonized element of himself into that snarling maw, imbues it with himself, and he considers finding a rock and turning it into a pile of marble rubble.

But no. He cringes away from the very image, pushes it back. He couldn’t even drop a cigarette butt here. He took it away with him, and he did it without even thinking.

This is her place. Hers. He can’t do that. He just can’t.
So instead he sinks down and leans his elbows on his knees, lets his head droop forward and his dripping hair fall into his eyes, and he wishes so much for a smoke.

And for a while there isn’t much of anything else.

The inside of his head feels like all that loose meth, all rattling around—alternately dusky and glittering. Fragments that don’t fit together. Bits of him are sitting there in a cloud of merciful numbness, other bits are just in a significant amount of pain, but then there are the bits still capable of making sense, and they’re calm and they seem profoundly rational, and those bits are telling him things.

Like how, okay, Merle’s an asshole, everyone knows that, but there’s a lot of merit in what Merle says. About how really, stepping back and studying this objectively, it was probably all a huge mistake. About how he was happy and he had a nice thing, and he’s always been good at lying to himself, allowing himself to ignore certain ugly truths. About how he’s been led around these last few weeks by his cock and his heart in equal measure, and he already knows he can’t trust either of those things, so when they get together on something that’s extremely bad news.

About how he doesn’t have anything to give her... And actually, what does she have to give him, if it comes to that? Yes, she’s sweet and beautiful and smart and fun, and her family is nice and he likes them a lot—but like he’s been thinking this whole time, where does he have there? What good is any of that, to a redneck asshole with an even bigger asshole for a brother?

For the moment it’s pleasant, sure. But what about a month from now? Two months? Three? What if he’s still hanging around here in the spring, in the summer? When she graduates? Hanging around like a hopeful dog, eyes sad and tongue lolling, while she dances off to the rest of her Nice life?

Where did he think this was going?

So after he drags himself back up that hill and crawls home, it might be time to start thinking exit strategies. Get out before he gets in any deeper. Get out while he can. While they both can.

Even if it’s entirely possible that after the way he treated her she’s made the choice for him.

Those bits of himself are very reasonable. They’re very persuasive. They’re very good at gently pushing everything else aside in favor of their eminently reasonable persuasiveness, and after a while they’re all he can hear. All he wants to hear. Because yeah, it’s shitty and it hurts, but it’s all familiar. It’s all material he knows. He’s an expert on it.

He’s been studying it his entire life.

Sitting on this bench—on her bench, in her place—he looks at things in this new, detached way, with the aching eyes of someone emerging sober and hungover from a night of the most amazing drunken debauchery imaginable, and that all feels like the dream. This is real. He’s wet and cold, and he hurts, and this is just an old bench in the ruins of an old mill no one remembers, and he doesn’t even know what any of it was for. He has no idea what the point was. He doesn’t know what any of it meant.

She’s not a goddess.

She’s just a girl.

The moon is setting and the sky is beginning to lighten at the edges when he finally shoves himself to his feet and makes his painful way back through the trees and across the sloshy grass toward the
arch. The sky is still clear—incredibly clear, each star the head of a silver pin and not a cloud in evidence. And chilly. Almost cold. Tuesday is the first day of October. Summer officially took its leave almost a week ago.

Well.

He climbs back up the slope without falling again. Things are looking up.

At the truck he has to fumble in his pocket for his keys—has a bad moment where he can’t find them and is positive he dropped them in the ruins and will have to go back down to look for them—but then he hears a cheerful jingle and his fingers close on cold metal and it’s okay.

And there’s something else. He pulls it out and holds it up, squinting, letting a shaft of low moonlight catch it.

It’s the cigarette butt. The one he carried out with him.

Except no. He threw that one out the truck’s window, halfway back to town. This has to be another one. They’re all the fucking same, how could he be able to tell the difference between one and another in the cold moon-splashed dark after the day and the night he’s had?

But tonight has been a night of old stories and gods and unexpected light. It’s been a night of rule-suspension. And he’s sure—he’s sure—it’s the same damn cigarette butt. It’s the same goddamn one.

He signed on for this, yeah. He did.

Time to sign off.

His mouth twists and he flicks it back down the slope, gets into the truck, and drives until dawn.

~

He doesn’t hurry going back—takes a detour or two to give himself time to dry off with the ancient heater, and then drives around some more simply because he can—and when he finally pulls back onto Main Street it’s getting on to eight in the morning. And... Yeah, okay, it’s Saturday and days and days of rain just blew clear, and the air is fresh and crisp and the sun is already warm and staggeringly bright, and it makes sense for the locals to be feeling lively, but as he rolls down the street and watches people rushing past him, notes the unusual amount of traffic, and everyone seems very intent on something, and all going in generally the same direction...

Something’s happening. Or has already happened.

He drives—drives past the feed-&-seed, Merle momentarily forgotten—and the street becomes increasingly more congested with cars. Daryl drives until he can’t anymore, until the traffic is bumper to bumper and motionless, and by now he can hear the noise—though he has no idea what it is.

Except it’s familiar.

The world is taking on a whole new dreamlike quality. In a daze, he leaves the truck where it is and gets out and walks.

People keep running past him—a lot of kids, their faces lit up with a weird kind of excitement. An unsettling kind of excitement. Also familiar, in a way he can’t place. He watches them, considers asking one of them what’s up, and then he sees where the crowd is going and he doesn’t have to ask at all.
A little stream ran through the park at the other end of town. It was pretty. He and Beth walked next to it, walked the footbridge that arched over it. That was pretty too.

Not anymore, because the stream is gone.

So is half of the park.

He stands on the sidewalk and stares at the raging torrent barely yards away. For a moment—one of the most dreamlike yet—he’s half certain that the rules have been suspended to the point where the river by the mill has been picked up and slammed down in the middle of town, left to scour itself a new bed. The same brownish foaming water, scatters of debris, twigs, leaves—and here, fragments of paper, plastic wrappers, garbage. It’s carved a swath through the park and sliced away concrete, and half the road appears to have collapsed, the pavement and blacktop jagged and crumbling.

A Durango is sitting in the middle of the flood, submerged almost up to the windows. It’s moving. Only ponderous little inches forward, water swirling around it, but definitely moving.

All up and down next to him on this new riverbank, a crowd. Staring, pointing, laughing. A lot of kids, but a fair number of adults as well, all excited. A carnival atmosphere. And all at once he knows where he’s seen this before. It slams into his gut like a fist and he knows, and he smells smoke and hears sirens.

He squeezes his eyes shut and jams the point of his tongue against his lip. The smoke disappears into the dull stab of pain. The sirens don’t. He glances back and sees, down the street beyond the clog of cars, the steady flash of police lights.

Well, that’s probably good, because the adults here don’t seem particularly invested in adulting and kids are fucking idiots, and someone is going to—

Scream.

He whips his head around. To his left—sharp, high-pitched, terrified. A kid—of course. He sees the kid topple, screaming, flailing behind for anything to stop the fall. Little boy, can’t be more than nine, tangle of black hair and his eyes huge and dark, older girl who might be his sister trying to catch him as he tumbles off the pavement and into the foam. Daryl sees all of this in slow motion as he lunges forward, as he knows he’s not going to get there in time. He’s moving anyway, barreling through the few people between him and where he can still see the kid’s head bobbing just above the water as he’s swept down—

Someone else running toward the same place from the opposite angle—not barreling but sliding effortlessly through the crowd with a slightly gawky, awkward grace he knows as well by now as the movements of his own body. Knows because he’s watched it, devoured it with his eyes, wanted to devour every inch with his hands. Taken those movements into himself, collected them and kept them like another in a long, terrible series of treasures.

The way she moves, impossibly lovely, like every step is dancing, and the morning sunlight turning her hair to streaks of gold fire as she hurls herself into the water and drags his heart with her, even if all he can do is stand there and watch her go.

Girl.

“Beth!”
What’s been happening here since the very beginning is that she’s been fucking with time.

She made him start marking it in the first place, separating out minutes and hours and days from the streaky blur his life had been before. She made him start counting the whole thing in weeks. Last night the rain slammed itself down and the moon slammed itself up with no interval between, and he’s pretty sure that was her fault too. Now he watches her go into the water, watches her bobbing feet away from the kid and soaked and already muddy and reaching for him, and Daryl feels the seconds stretch out into hours as he claws his way to the edge of the young river.

She’s already too far away for him to grab her.

“Beth!”

But she doesn’t turn; how could she? The current is spinning her, dragging her further from the lip of the broken concrete, and anyway she’s intent on the reason she’s there in the first place, her fingertips grazing the kid’s shirt before he tumbles away again, letting out a single choked scream before the water muffles him.

Daryl tenses. Coils. Strong arms seize his shoulders from behind, yank him back.

“Man, don’t, it’s fuckin’ suicide!”

Daryl wrenches at the man’s grip—or is it two men?—and snarls, every muscle protesting loudly.

“The fuck you call that, then?”

“Don’t.” But the repetition clangs off his eardrums. It’s inconsequential. All that matters is Beth, her blond head darkening with muddy water, her arms flailing as she tries to keep herself upright and floating. People are crying out, rushing the jagged edge, reaching groping hands, useless.

He thinks numbly about how he never got to talk to her. About how he never got to say he was sorry.

And she has the kid.

More cries running through the crowd, chaos of disconnected words. Grab—hurry—God—don’t—help—die. He finally gets himself free and hurles down toward her, stumbling over a thick chunk of pavement, almost falling, feeling it slamming into his shin, ignoring the pain. She’s actually almost succeeding, the kid clinging to her neck as she forces her way sideways through the current, stretching her hand toward the hands stretching for her, angling herself so the kid is closer.

Daryl has no idea how he got there but he’s there, his body thrusting through the space between the people on either side as he leans forward, someone else taking fierce hold of him from behind. His hands clamp onto the kid’s arm and jerk, and then he’s hauling, his muscles screaming pain as he yanks the kid in and onto the bank. Someone is there, takes the writhing boy from him, and he barely notices as he surges forward again, and his fingertips brush hers as she plunges her whole body toward him, and she locks her wide blue eyes onto his.

She’s not afraid. She’s all fire.

“Beth, c’mon!”
He has her hand. He has it. His fingers slip, slip, and then she threads her fingers through his and clutches him and he has her, dragging her to him, *he has her*.

And a thick branch crashes into her, thuds against her cheek and her fingers jerk loose from his and the flood carries her away.

He stares at her, at it, at the whole thing, frozen. Watching as she’s sucked down and is gone.

Somewhere someone is shouting. Maybe a lot of someones. Sirens, flashing lights throwing sharp shadows onto the concrete. He stares at the place where she was, his hand hanging useless above the water, dripping like fresh rain. Searching. No, that can’t happen. It can’t. It doesn’t make any sense.

He had her.

Someone pulls him backward and he goes, not fighting anymore. He might be yelling her name. His throat hurts, raw. He might not be doing anything.

No, see, he *had* her. That’s the thing. He had her, that’s what happened. She can’t be gone, because he had her.

“Jesus Chr—Look!”

Everyone swings their focus away, further down the bank. For a moment he doesn’t follow with his own, because what the fuck could they be looking at that matters at all? What *does* matter at this point?

But he looks, and there it is: Blond head gone dark with muddy water.

Gone dark with blood.

She’s not being carried any further. It’s the Durango, she’s clinging to the Durango, her fingers curled around the door handle, the rest of her body trailing out in front of her and her arms straining. He catches a glimpse of her face, bloody as well, and then he’s tearing open the world, ripping a hole in it and leaping through, no air in his burning lungs. He doesn’t need any, not for this. If he had any left, she could have it all.

*Beth. Girl, no. Beth.*

The SUV had been inching forward and it must have inched faster in the last few minutes, because it’s much closer to the broken pavement than it was. Everyone seems to be reaching for her but he throws them all bodily aside, not caring, not even genuinely aware of them except on the most basic level. He drops, grabs hold of the edge, teeters, and for a split second he’s certain he’s going to fall in too, and really? That would be fine at this point. That would be just fine.

Reaches out and it’s not enough and it’s not going to be enough, he’s going to lose her again.

He has her. He has her by the wrist, her bracelets catching on the side of his palm, and once again he tears the air apart to bring her in.

And she’s against him. Cold. Boneless. He tumbles backward, holding her tight, holding her so tight that he feels those nonexistent bones grind.

More shouting. Sirens. Someone hollering for an ambulance. He doesn’t give a fuck. He’s shoving himself up as she falls from his arms and he’s bending over her, trying to straighten her out, hand on her chest, desperately feeling for a heartbeat. He can’t tell. He can’t feel anything. She doesn’t appear
to be breathing. He can’t tell that either. He knows how to do this, or he did, but it’s all gone and all
he has is the most basic, fractured memory to go on, fumbling for it, sure he’s getting it wrong and
doing things in the incorrect order, sure she’s going to die right here if she isn’t already dead and
there’s nothing he can fucking do because he’s a useless fucking asshole and he ruins everything.

He pinches her nostrils shut, seals his mouth over hers and exhales hard. Again. Makes a weird,
stupid, nonsensical connection with something mostly unrelated. Doesn’t give a fuck who sees this.
It doesn’t matter now. She can have all his air. Every last breath, she can have.

With more strength than he thought he had he pushes up, stares down at her, at her chest.

Nothing.

Then she spasms, coughs, rolls to the side and vomits dark water. Again everything freezes, locks
into place, and it’s like when she kissed him, like so many times when she’s spun a space around
them apart from the rest of the world. Something for them alone.

A place where he can curl an arm under her and lift her, gather her into him, press his cheek to the
top of her head and rock her back and forth and shake with all the terror as it bleeds out of him.

Oh my girl.

Tension is creeping back into her limbs, and she shifts in his arms, shivering, dragging in huge,
rasping breaths. He pulls back enough to see her face—the ugly gash slicing across her cheek, the
blood streaking down it and her jaw and neck, more all the time, and he can taste it on his lips. He
slides a hand into the wet tangle of her hair, cups the back of her head, and when he withdraws it, it
comes away bloody too.

And she’s gazing up at him, blinking, her eyes unfocused. She doesn’t look like she’s entirely there.
Her shivering is increasing in intensity, almost shuddering now, and her lips move. No sound. He
leans in, feels them moving against his ear.

Was coming... coming to see you.

He’s such an idiot. He’s such a fucking idiot.

Her eyes flutter and roll up and fall closed again, and her head lolls back. More cries for an
ambulance, more sirens. Something about it not being able to get through, and he remembers the
solid wall of cars, and he’s scooping her up, stumbling to his feet, turning and trying to run. He can’t
and he staggers forward because she’s heavier than she looks; her arms and legs are dangling limp
like a stringless marionette, she’s dead weight, and he thinks this isn’t a dream, this is a nightmare,
and please God, whatever god there is, please let him wake up in the ruins and the mud and the rain
and please let this not have happened. He’ll give anything. He’ll pay anything that fucking god
wants.

He sees stunned faces, wide eyes. None of them are real. Just her and all that blood.

Flashing lights. People in blue and bright yellow rushing toward him, pushing something on wheels.
They’re reaching out, trying to take her from him, but he holds on, struggles, and they push at him
and pry at his arms and they’re saying Sir, sir—you have to let go, all right? You have to let us take
her. And somehow he gets that and he loosens, releases her, but it’s like his breastbone is cracking
and he almost doubles over as they put her on the stretcher and strap her down, turn and start rolling
her away.

He’s still trying to break through them. So ready to tear open that space like he did before. One of
them is bracing their hands on his shoulders and he’s saying *I have to go with her, let me go with her* and they tell him he can’t, can’t ride along, but they’re taking her—where? They’re taking her to the name of a hospital he doesn’t quite get, doesn’t quite process, and he tries to see where she is and the lights and suddenly the sun blinds him.

And then he’s just standing there and watching those lights recede, and once again she’s being carried away.

But he had her. He did. He just had her, just now.

It’s very confusing. He’s very confused.

People behind him, saying things. Someone touches his arm and he jerks away, already walking and then running toward the truck. They told him. They told him where they were taking her. If he can only remember.

He *had* her.

He’ll find her. He’ll find her or nothing will matter anymore.
At some point on the edge of town he forces himself to pull over, get out of the truck, crouch and drop his head over his knees until he can breathe again.

It takes everything in him. Every cell is screaming for him to drive, *drive* for fuck’s sake, push that fucking chunk of scrap metal on wheels as hard as he can. But part of him is awake and aware enough to know that he *has to be able to get to her in the first place*, and if he can’t think, he can’t follow the directions he pried out of the bewildered elderly man on the sidewalk about five blocks away from where he managed to turn the truck around.

Got the name on his own, excavated it from the mound of panicky debris that was his higher brain function. But that was only half the equation. In isolation the name meant nothing, and his phone is not smart and *GPS* in that fucking truck is a hilariously bad joke.

He has a name *and* directions, both pieces he needs, but it won’t mean anything if he can’t think straight.

*How the fuck is he supposed to think straight.*

How is he supposed to think straight with her blood on his hands.

And no, that’s not even a question. It isn’t worthy of the punctuation.

He breathes. The sun is warm on his back and head, perversely cheerful; it’s a gorgeous early fall day. The kind of day, before yesterday, that he would have been looking for a way to spend with her. Well, he supposes he *did and might still*, and that’s horrifying and he has to squeeze his eyes shut and make himself breathe all over again.

She was breathing when they took her away from him. He remembers. It’s all a broken series of smeared fragments, but he does remember that. She was breathing. She was alive and she was breathing.

So he’ll do like her.

He opens his eyes and stares down at his hands. They’re streaked with mud, with blood—his and hers, because he forgot about his scraped-open palms but there they are. More dirt and blood packed under his fingernails. His hands are an indicator of the state of the rest of him. He probably looks terrible.

That couldn’t possibly matter any less.

She was breathing when they took her, and he has a name and directions. Those three things. He clutches them like handholds, like *hands*, threads his fingers through them. They’re enough.

*Focus.*

He lurches to his feet, shoves himself back into the truck and kicks it into drive, stomps on the gas.

He turns onto a bigger road, passing cars at unsafe speeds. The sun hits his eyes to the right, makes
him blink hard, makes his eyes sting, and at some point he realizes it’s not just the sun, and the wet
on his face isn’t just sweat or water dripping out of his hair. He scrubs at his cheeks, suddenly angry.
At the tears, at himself, at the fucking road, at the truck which refuses to go as fast as he deems
appropriate to the situation, at the gorgeous fucking day, and most of all at the little reasonable
persuasive bits of himself that made all those very rational arguments, told him all those twisted
comforting lies, and angry at how much he wanted to hear them then. At what a coward he was. Is.
Telling himself that she wasn’t all that important in the long run. That she had nothing to give him.
That he didn’t need her.

He’s sure as fuck been set straight as far as that goes. Ph-fucking-D in lying to himself. He could
teach college courses on it. He could write books.

Used to think it would be enough merely to be with her. Around her. Having her not allow him
that... He would have hung his head, gone away, never dreamed of resisting her, but except for a few
broken and half-imagined seconds when Maggie told him she was missing, her telling him to go was
the worst thing he could think of.

Such an idiot, and he’s so fucked.

He’s on autopilot but he gets there, and by the time he does he’s forgotten the name again, but of
course now it doesn’t matter. He parks, erases the distance between the truck and the ER entrance,
and the possibility that he’s going about this all wrong doesn’t occur to him, and if it did it wouldn’t
matter. The double doors hiss open—too slow, everything today is too fucking slow—and someone
in scrubs is coming toward him, a woman with her hair pulled tightly back and deep frown lines on
her brown face, looking tired and harried though as far as his dim awareness goes the smallish room
isn’t all that full.

The sharp white light hurts his eyes, his head.

“Sir, you’re—” The woman looks him over and her frown deepens even as her eyes widen a touch.
His lip, he thinks vaguely, except the blood there dried up hours ago, and it can’t possibly matter, or
maybe it’s just that he probably looks like he’s been rolling around in a mud puddle, which he
basically has.

The nurse touches his arm. “You need to come over to the desk, we can take care—”

Impatience mixed with desperation mixed with residual terror: under his skin is a thunderstorm,
inside of his skull churning dark. He grips the woman’s upper arm. “A blond girl come in here? You
see a blond girl?”

“Sir, you need to calm down.” To her credit, she’s extremely calm; also becoming slightly annoyed,
and that’s contagious and adds annoyance to his own cocktail of already furious emotion. “You’re
lookin’ for someone—do you have a name? Do you know how long ago she would’ve come in?”

“Beth.” He’s trying to focus on the nurse and scan the room at the same time—the few people
waiting in seats, a couple of them nursing relatively minor cuts on hands, legs, and no sign of her, not
anywhere. Like she’s just gone. “Beth, she’s Beth Gree—”

“Daryl?”

Familiar voice. Quiet, also level, calm, and not a trace of annoyance. He feels a hand on his shoulder
and whirls, and it’s Annette, her face pale and a little drawn but not stricken.

She doesn’t look like something absolutely terrible has happened.
That’s weird, very, because it has.

“It’s all right.” She’s saying it to the nurse. He thinks. He simply stares at her, everything clenched.
“T know him, he’s looking for my daughter."

Her hand hasn’t left his shoulder. Normally he might be stiffening, uncertain, but now he doesn’t care, and in fact he feels grounded, feet solidifying against the floor. It’s easier to breathe.

She’s here. So they know. The rest of the family knows. Good, because he probably would have forgotten to call them. At least for a while.

The nurse appears a bit doubtful, but she turns away and heads over to the woman with the cut hand, bending over to peer at it. It doesn’t matter. The rest of the room is of no consequence at all. All he can see is Annette.

“She’s,” he murmurs—can’t get find any more volume than that, and the back of his throat feels like it’s been raked with a goddamn rake, but Annette gives him a small nod and tugs gently at him.

“She’s going to be alright. Why don’t you come sit down with me?”

For what seems like a long, long moment all he can do is stare at her some more. Because she’s going to be all right.

She’s all right.

Okay. He’ll sit down. That seems reasonable.

He does—sits beside Annette in a chair at the far end of the room facing the doors—and he leans his elbows on his knees and gazes down at the ugly, sickly-pale tile floor and goes back to trying to breathe. Because he thought Beth Greene and oxygen didn’t mix but that wasn’t right. There was nothing right about that. She’s air. She actually is the air. And she would want him to hold it the fuck together right now. Keep breathing.

Especially if she’s all right.

Annette doesn’t try to get him to talk. Doesn’t say anything to him. Just sits with him. He’s ridiculously grateful to her.

After a short while he leans back and blinks in all that hard light, finally beginning to be aware of what’s around him—not only the light and the plain hard chairs with inadequate padding but also the sterility, the low hum of activity that manages to be unsettling rather than soothing. Not that he’s ever heard anyone say they like them, but he hates emergency rooms. He hasn’t spent a lot of time in them but there were a few times when he was a kid. A few.

Once he recalls better than the others, because it was worse, and because there was something he had to remember so he could say it and get it right and not mix things up.

He was climbing a tree and he fell and he broke his arm and that was also where the bruises came from. He broke his arm because he fell. That was why. That was how it happened.

He lowers his head again and doesn’t raise it. He’s back to hurting all over. He’s also so thirsty. But he can talk.

“She’s going to be alright. Why don’t you come sit down with me?”
“Yeah.” Hint of a smile in her voice, though he doesn’t look up to see. “They’re parking. Longer term. We might be here awhile.”

“Thought you said she was alright.”

“She is. Or that’s what the doctor told us. She said they’re running some tests, getting her a room.”

He does look up then, stabbed by fresh alarm. Very little of this is making any sense. Then again, none of it has been for over a month. “They’re keepin’ her?”

“For now. They said they’ll have more to tell us soon. When Hershel and Shawn get here we’ll move into the actual waiting room.” She pauses, her eyes searching his face, and there’s something in her expression he doesn’t quite know what to make of. Not sharp, but keen. Probing. She’s thinking something and she’s searching for confirmation.

Finally she appears to make a decision. “They said someone pulled her out of the water. Carried her to the paramedics when they couldn’t get through the traffic.” Another pause, a few beats, and he feels like cracking under that gaze. He’s too exhausted to do much more in the way of concealment. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

Whatever she asks him, he’s not sure he’ll be able to deny any of it. Not to her. Maybe not to anyone. I’m in love with your daughter. I know it’s fucked up and I’m sorry but I love her and it’s torture and I don’t know how to make it stop and I don’t even want to. I was wrong. I was so fucking wrong.

“That was you,” she says again. “Or at least you were there. Otherwise I have no idea how you’d have found out. Far as I know no one called you.”

He ducks his head. Nods. Slight, hardly at all, but he can’t keep from doing it and anyway he’s not certain there’s any good reason to resist the urge. Why would he even want to lie about something like this? Even make the attempt? It was him.

He had her.

Annette lays her hand over his and it’s warm and soft, and he tenses, twists up inside, but he doesn’t pull away. He can’t pull away. It wouldn’t be one of the worst things he could do right now, but God, it wouldn’t be good.

“Thank you,” she says softly. “You saved her.”

Everything in him rears up in protest and he shakes his head, emphatic, though he keeps his gaze locked down on his hands, his boots, the ugly floor. “She did. Grabbed a car door. Held on. Kept her head up.” He swallows and his throat burns. “She saved herself.”

Annette says nothing else. She does squeeze his hand, once, and he can sort of deal with it. He thinks about this woman, this woman who was kind to him from the beginning, even when she had no reason to be, even when she wasn’t sure about him, this woman who has always been kind to him since, has invited him into her home and fed him and let him—for a while—share in what it is to be with her family, how she’s with him now, and he thinks about lifting his head and meeting her eyes and just saying it. Just saying it. Just telling her the fucking truth and letting her do what she wants with it. Taking the consequences. He’s so tired.

Part of him—a tiny part, like a seed settling into soft earth—doesn’t want to lie anymore.

I love your daughter so much. I do. I don’t expect anything from her and I don’t have anything to
give her, but I would give her everything. There’s nothing in the entire fucking world I wouldn’t give her if I could.

And I just wanted you to know.

He doesn’t say anything.

At some point she brings him some water.

~

He didn’t know how exhausted he was. Didn’t have any idea. But now, having received those six talismanic words—she’s going to be all right—he’s collapsed and is still collapsing. Lead fishing line sinkers are dangling from his eyelids, the same lead that made them flowing into his marrow—his bones are dense, too dense for his muscles. He feels ragged at all his edges. All the pain in him has subsided into a mercifully dull ache. Annette has been good enough to refrain from commenting on the essential walking natural disaster he is at the moment, and when Hershel and Shawn show up no one says much of anything to him. Annette talks to them in low tones. He suspects she might be telling them what happened, with him. Why he’s here.

He doesn’t have the energy to care. He just wants to sit. Or no: What he really wants to do is curl up on a couple of these extravagantly uncomfortable chairs and go to sleep for a few days.

After a while—or maybe it’s only a few minutes—he becomes aware that they’re all moving and he shuffles after them.

The waiting room proper is marginally more comfortable, to the extent that he’s even paying attention. He merely has to do so long enough to perceive that it’s standard in every possible way. More uncomfortable chairs. Magazines years old. TV on one wall, droning. Plant that may or may not be real. He closes his eyes again and drifts.

And somewhere in that semi-darkness it occurs to him that he might actually get to see her again.

He can’t start crying in here. He’ll have to explain why.

Later, someone comes in. He glances up; petite woman with dark skin sharp contrast against her white coat, looks like the doctor. Saying something—Annette mentioned tests and here they get mentioned again. Something about a concussion. Something about it not being all that bad, considering. General exclamations of relief. Something else about stitches. Yet something else about keeping her overnight, maybe a night after.

Something about how they can see her now.

Something about how he can come with them.

~

He doesn’t go in. At least not at first. He stands there just inside the doorway and he watches the rest of them, watches Annette take a seat on the side of her bed, watches Hershel lean down and kiss her forehead, Shawn kiss her cheek, saying something about the stitches, about how she looks pretty gross, and that’s funny, because he’s about to just tumble to the floor looking at her like this. Just about to give up and let all his lead-filled bones take him down.

She’s clean, her hair’s washed, her head’s bandaged and the gash over her cheek, and she’s pale and she looks almost as tired as he feels, but she’s smiling. She’s smiling.
And she sees him and her smile changes.

He doesn’t know how to describe how it changes. He doesn’t know how to understand it. It simply
does. The sun pours in through the half-drawn blinds and catches her hair, her skin, and she smiles,
and she’s so bright he has to look away. She’s on fire. She’s a flame. No amount of flood could put
her out.

Before anyone has time to invite him in he’s turning away, heading for the doors back to the waiting
room with his head down and his hands thrust into his pockets.

When he looks up he’s outside the main entrance, bathed in sun.

There are a series of concrete planters in rows on either side, full of juniper and slowly dying
annuals, and he half falls onto the edge of one of these, breathing—which is difficult again, so he’s
doing it a little hard. The air is so fresh it’s like new pain in his lungs, and he’s fumbling for his
cigarettes when he remembers that he spent most of the previous night absolutely soaked so it’s
extraordinarily unlikely that they or his lighter will be in any condition to be used.

He checks anyway. Nope.

Sigh. Okay.

He tilts his head back and faces the light and the warmth and just... just soaks in it for a while. Lets it
be that for a change. He’s tired of water. Wishes he didn’t even need to drink it. Wishes he didn’t
need to go home and use it to rinse off all this mud and this blood and whatever else he’s gotten
himself covered with.

Go home and face Merle. Which honestly feels like the least unpleasant of the tasks before him.
Merle will probably take one look at him and leave him alone. At least for a few hours.

He can go home and he can do these things and he can sleep, because she’s going to be all right.
And whatever her smile was doing, she gave him one.

Her mercy is boundless.

He jumps when he hears his name, feels the touch on his shoulder; he must have been at least
halfway into a doze. Feels like it, anyway; he feels disoriented. Though he wouldn’t need to doze to
get to that place.

A shape is blocking the sun. He blinks. It’s Shawn.

“Not gonna come back in?”

Daryl shakes his head. No. He’s not. He can’t. It’s just not on the table. His bones are already full of
lead but the rest of him is brittle and run through with cracks, and if he stays in that room with her, if
he goes nearer to her right now, she’s going to shatter him, and everyone in there is going to see.
And he can’t exactly ask for some time alone with her.

He doesn’t need to go back in. She’s going to be all right.

Shawn shrugs. “Suit yourself. You should go home, then. You look really bad.”

Daryl gives him a very small, very thin smile. He knows.

“She wanted me to give you this.” Shawn is holding something out. Daryl stares at it, struggles to
focus. It looks like a folded piece of paper. It is a folded piece of paper. He takes it with a slightly shaking hand and stares at it some more.

“Thank-you note,” Shawn says, by way of explanation. “Kinda weird, you’re gonna see her next week anyway. Whatever, she got knocked on the head. She might be kinda weird for a while.” He glances back at the doors. “I’m gonna head back in.” But then he takes a second and looks back at Daryl, seems to study him. “Hey, listen... You okay?”

Not ever. “Yeah.”

“You don’t need a ride home or anythin’?”

Probably. “No.”

Alright.” Shawn turns, heads back toward the entrance, tosses a final glance over his shoulder. “See you.”

Somehow Daryl makes it back to the truck.

But he just sits there for a minute or two, staring into space, wondering if he actually for a fact is capable of driving home without hitting someone or something or rolling into a ditch. Passing out right here doesn’t seem advisable. Going ahead and driving seems questionable. A decision in the next little bit is probably necessary.

He realizes he’s still holding the folded piece of paper. He unfolds it.

The handwriting is shaky. It wobbles. He wonders how she even got someone to give her paper and pen, why she wasn’t told to cut it out and concentrate on being concussed. But she has a way of convincing people, of gently and kindly and persistently getting what she wants, and she got this.

She wrote him a note.

He’s not sure it qualifies as a thank-you note, but it’s a note.

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

He doesn’t completely understand. He doesn’t need to. It’s the last thing, the last weight and stab and flood that washes over him and fills him and empties him out. She’s going to be all right and she smiled at him and she was coming to see him and she wrote him this.

This.

He leans over the steering wheel and cries until he can’t breathe at all.

Chapter End Notes

Poem is "The Uses of Sorrow" by - who else - Mary Oliver.
and reruns all become our history

Chapter Notes

So much of this goddamn this is becoming the Goo Goo Dolls, I'm just sayin.

Also, not gonna repost here, but I wrote a quick note on my blog this morning about some stuff it’s important to bear in mind when interpreting this thing, especially chapters to come.

Merle is there when he comes in. Merle simply looks at him in silence and Daryl looks back—able, with the last of every kind of his strength, to focus on the room and its one other occupant—and gives him a single nod.

There is no crystal meth in evidence.

He might ask about it tomorrow. He might. It’s not clear to him what tomorrow even is. Sunday? How long has he been awake? What does awake even mean anymore? He’s not certain how one judges consciousness when one has been through what he’s been through in the last however many hours.

What time is it? Maybe afternoon. Numbers are problematic. He stumbles into the bathroom and at some point he fumbles off his boots and strips off his clothes, and after he makes some abortive attempts to make use of soap he sits on the floor of the tub under the warm spray and draws his knees up to his chest, wraps his arms around them, lowers his head and dozes.

Water isn’t so bad. Though it snaps him awake when it starts to get cold.

He climbs out. His legs aren’t lead anymore; they’re noodles. He gets himself mostly dry, and when he stumbles back out of the bathroom Merle is there. Merle gestures at the bedroom, still without comment.

Daryl doesn’t ask for clarification, and he sure as fuck doesn’t want to converse on the subject. He stumbles into the bedroom and drops the towel and collapses naked onto the bed, feels and sees nothing except for the thin light and the thinner mattress under him, stays awake long enough to drag the rumpled sheet over himself as he does, and about five seconds later he’s tumbling down into the deepest, darkest sleep he’s had in years.

Down there in the dark, he thinks he can feel fingers threaded with his.

He’s almost sure.

~

When he wakes up it’s dark through the broken blinds in the bedroom’s single tiny window. He’s curled up, curled tight as a ball, like he’s actively trying to make himself smaller. He uncurls and immediately it seems like a questionable decision; all his muscles yell at once and he bites his lip to keep from yelling along with them. Once the pain subsides he manages to stretch everything out, roll onto his back and stare up at the shadowy ceiling, the grid of dark framing and white squares barely visible.
From the next room he can hear the faint mutter of the TV, see a little light down the stub of a hallway.

So now he has to figure out what the rest of his life is going to consist of. Or at least the next few hours of it. Would help if he had any fucking idea at all what time it is. Or it might. Maybe not. He’s not certain he’s in a good position to make those kinds of evaluations.

Getting up isn’t as awful as he thought it might be. His mouth is awful, desert-dry and tasting like it’s been used as a burial ground for small animals. He sits on the edge of the bed for a moment or two, blinking at nothing, then levers himself up and gropes around in the dimness for some pants to wear.

In the bathroom he brushes his teeth. It almost helps.

Merle is on the couch in his underwear, which is so fucking predictable it just makes Daryl tired all over again. But when Merle looks up he appears reasonably alert, though his nose is still a thing to behold. He doesn’t look high. He doesn’t even look all that drunk, though he does have a fresh bottle of Jack Daniels beside him, which he raises and offers without a word. Daryl shakes his head and makes his way to the tiny kitchen for a huge plastic cup of water.

Merle waits until he’s seated on the couch and half the water is gone before he says anything. That might amount to kindness.

“Fuck happened to you?”

Daryl grunts. Talking now seems possible. “Fuck didn’t?”

“You gone all that time?”

Another grunt. He doesn’t think that’s actually a question. Definitely not one Merle doesn’t know the answer to.

“Coulda left the bottle.”

Daryl shrugs. He supposes he could have. He could have done a lot of things. There are a lot of other things he has done which maybe he should have left alone.

Merle focuses his attention back on both the current bottle and the TV. On the latter, Kim Kardashian is being extremely angsty about the renovations on her new house. “Was this flood down here. You see that?”

A couple of enormous swallows of water give him some time to mull the question over. “Yeah. I saw.”

“Sounds like it was really somethin’. Fuckin’ kid fell in. Almost drowned.”

“Girl, too,” Daryl murmurs, and it’s only after it’s out there that he realizes a: how he said it, and b: that Merle isn’t a complete idiot. And sure enough, Merle is giving him a Look, all sharpness and keen study, and Daryl squeezes his eyes shut and wonders in exactly what way he wronged the universe that it refuses to cut him a break.

Except it did. A few hours ago. Sort of a huge one.

For a long moment Merle says nothing. Then, very quietly and in a tone Daryl can’t at all read, “She alright?”
Oh.

Daryl nods. He doesn’t know what the fuck else to do.

Merle looks at him a moment longer, then looks away, back at the TV. He might nod too. Daryl isn’t positive. He desperately wants to just not care.

So he stares down at the water for a short while. A little of the TV’s light reflects on its surface. He thinks about moonlight, moonlight that shouldn’t even be there. That wasn’t there, maybe. He has no idea how much of what he saw last night was real. He has no idea if it matters. It felt real. It all felt real. The ruins. The rain. The moon. Real as the flood, real as her hand slipping out of his. Real as the weight of her in his arms. Aren’t his palms scraped open? Isn’t he a giant walking bruise?

For a couple of weeks there he actually thought he might have been getting a better grip on things. Isn’t that funny?

There’s only one thing he’s sure of anymore. And he doesn’t think it helps all that much.

“You get rid of the crystal?”

It takes him a few seconds to realize that the question came from him. Merle shoots him a glance—unreadable again, Merle is playing his cards even closer to the chest than usual right now—and his already twisted mouth twists a bit more.

“Yeah. ’s gone.”

Daryl thinks about asking exactly how it’s gone, which specific method of disposal Merle made use of, then decides that’s the beginning of a much longer conversation that he’s not remotely prepared for. And which Merle would probably refuse to get into anyway. Merle is acting stupid a lot lately, but Merle isn’t stupid, and while he hasn’t felt like he could fully trust his big brother in a long, long, long time...

At some point he has to. At some point he’s too tired to keep an eye on everything.

He could also ask about the money. He really should ask about the money. He’s certain the money and the drugs are directly related, certain they are, but he doesn’t totally understand why or how and he thinks he should. Out of all of this, this whole fucking fiasco, that feels like it might lie at the core. Like if he understands that, a lot of other things might become clearer.

But he can’t. Not now. He doesn’t feel like he’s genuinely through what’s happened, doesn’t feel like he’s come out on the other side of it yet. Could be because he’s only slept a few hours and he needs a lot more before he’ll be a functional human being capable of talking coherently and walking around without falling over, but regardless...

He needs to treat himself gently right now. Which he hardly ever does. Which he didn’t even completely recognize as a real possibility until a few weeks ago. That he might deserve to be treated gently. That he might deserve to be something other than generally miserable.

He coughs, drinks more water. “What the hell time is it?”

“I dunno, man. After midnight.” Merle tips back the bottle and keeps it there for half a minute, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand when he lowers it again. “Should go back to bed. You still look like shit.”

“Dunno if bed’s gonna fix that.”
“Yeah, you’re a lost fuckin’ cause.” Merle nudges Daryl’s thigh with the bottle. “Go on. Ain’t got no reason to be up. Get your ass back in there.”

Something deep in Daryl’s chest shifts, tightens, aches. Suddenly he can’t look at Merle at all, can’t look at anything. He has no idea when this last happened. When any of this last happened. When he didn’t feel like his big brother was finding a hundred tiny ways to make him feel small, make it clear what his place was, keep him in line. Keep him where he was meant to be. All of that is gone now, and it’s just Merle again, and it wasn’t ever supposed to be like this.

Day before yesterday he broke his brother’s nose. Broke a bag of drugs open against his face. Screamed that he hated him—he knows he said that. He knows he did. Knows he meant it.

Looked him right in the eyes and cursed him. Cursed him with their own father. Wished that on him. The worst thing he could say.

In another world, one where everything is different and so many terrible things never happened, and children weren’t simultaneously made old decades too early and kept children forever, he turns to his brother and says I’m sorry. That was wrong. What you did was wrong, but so was I. I was wrong. Forgive me, please, and let’s start over.

That world is not this one.

Daryl goes back to bed.

He sleeps through into early Sunday afternoon and wakes up hurting and thirsty again and the light coming in through the window is so horrifically bright that he wonders if maybe he’s been hit by an extremely delayed hangover. But he staggers to the bathroom and showers, drinks another gallon of water, and he feels mostly sentient. It’s a start. Whatever he was in before, he has indeed come through it. He’s on the other side.

Now he needs to decide what’s next.

What’s next is Merle comes home with coffee and donuts, and Daryl consumes both while sneaking surreptitious glances at him and trying to figure out what’s wrong with him. He seems okay, but...

It’s weird is all.

Anyway, the rest of the day is quiet and nondescript, and that’s fine. Late in the evening Daryl wanders outside and down the street toward where the flood was. That end of the street is cordoned off and there’s a police car. There’s not much to see. The water is lower. Debris is everywhere, snagged on things, mud and sediment caking every surface it could cling to. The SUV is gone. It’s inconclusive whether it was removed or simply carried away.

Doesn’t matter, except to the degree that Daryl feels some odd, vague gratitude toward it.

He goes back to the apartment. Nothing much else happens.

Except that he gets a call from Annette.

Beth is coming home tomorrow.
No work on Monday, but Daryl goes to the farm. Not going is not an option.

He goes in the late afternoon, not too early; Beth was supposedly discharged around noon but he doesn’t want to be there right as she arrives. Doesn’t want to appear too eager. Back to thinking he should tread very, very carefully here, not only with Beth—until he knows the details of what’s up—but also with the entire family. Because he doesn’t know how much he let slip at the hospital, how much anyone might have seen or what might have been said, or how they might have interpreted any of it, but...

There are still a lot of reasons to keep this under wraps. A lot. He’s going to assume nothing there has changed.

He’s so painfully uncool about this entire thing, but he has to appear to be.

He comes by. They let him go up to her room—not unchaperoned. Annette is with him. Maybe that’s not what it is, but he kind of thinks that might be what it is. Not that they suspect anything, but that...

Well.

Really, he has no idea. Probably bad to overthink it.

He has to behave as if he’s never been in her room before—and in fact, here in the daylight, it is different. Beth is in bed, propped up on some pillows, a mug of what looks like tea on the nightstand, and she’s a bit pale and clearly tired, and her cheek is still bandaged, but otherwise she looks all right.

There’s this distance they have to maintain. Pretend. It was almost easy before. Now he looks at her across it and he doesn’t know what to do.

He pulls up a chair. Sits next to her bed, makes a few minutes of awkward, stilted conversation—how she feels, and yes, it was so lucky he happened to be there, honestly he was terrified, glad it wasn’t so much worse. He wants to touch her hand. He has no idea what to do with his own. They feel—as they have before with her—big and clumsy. He looks at the afternoon light hitting her hair, looks at the subtle curve of her mouth when she smiles at him, and he would spend hours upon hours trying to explain how much he loves her even if he knows he would suck at it.

But he’s just here with her, and she’s all right.

So that’s enough.

He drives back into town and goes to the coffee shop. His Perceptive Barista isn’t there. The reedy kid who was singing that first open mic night is working the register. Daryl gets coffee and sits and stares into space, trying to sort through the internal wreckage the storm left behind and failing to make any sense of anything at all.

~

Around seven his phone buzzes. Not a text.

She’s calling.

He’s outside, wandering in the general direction of home, and he stops and stares at it, briefly uncomprehending. She doesn’t call him. For whatever reason, that isn’t a thing they’ve done. Which is fine; he doesn’t care for phones, doesn’t like having a voice with no face. But with her it wouldn’t
Regardless, it’s yet another odd thing. He answers.

“Yeah?”

“Hi.”

He stops, leans back against the brick of the wall behind him and watches cars roll by. “Hi.”

“I’m glad you came out today.” Pause. She sounds like she’s working through something. Not sure how he gets that; it might be something in the quality of her silence. “I know it was weird, but it was... It was good to see you.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs. He doesn’t have a lot to say. He agrees. It was weird, and it was good to see her. All the other things he’s thinking... There aren’t words for them. At least not any words he knows.

Another pause. He closes his eyes and lets it sit there. Even simply knowing she’s on the other end of this, breathing, it’s something he wants to hold onto.

“Listen... We should talk.”

Great. “Uh huh.”

“I mean... About a lot. A lot happened. I just... Daryl, I really need to. There’s some stuff I wanna say.”

His eyes are already shut; he squeezes them. Tight. This doesn’t sound like a fun conversation. But fun got pulled off the menu a while ago. And if she wants to talk to him, he’ll listen.

Hell, he might even come up with some stuff of his own to say. Wouldn’t that be something.

“Alright. So let’s talk.”

“Not on the phone. I don’t think that’s a good idea. Can you... Can you come over?” Voice pitched low. Clearly trying to not be heard. She could have avoided that by not calling at all, he thinks, except maybe...

She has her reasons.

“When?”

“Tonight? Maybe around one?”

“Kinda late for a Monday, ain’t it?”

He’s teasing, or he’s trying, trying pretty hard, and he hears a faint smile in her voice when she speaks again and it’s like every part of him simultaneously coils up and loosens completely. “Yeah, school got canceled on account’a head injuries. You comin’ over or not?”

“Yeah. I’ll be there.” God, he’ll be so there. He’ll be there more than he’s ever been anywhere and he’ll take whatever she feels like dishing out. Take it and then some.

“Okay. Good. I’ll see you.” Yet another pause, and he thinks of her curled up under the blankets, pink t-shirt and pajama pants—which she hadn’t been wearing before but it’s so hard to think of her
wearing anything else to bed now—and he has no idea how to name all the ways in which he wants her, few of which actually have anything to do with fucking her.

“I’ll see you,” she says again, and then, very soft: “G’bye.”

Silence, and on the screen her number blinks red. He stays where he is, phone loose in his hand, and stares up at the evening. It’s clear, and the days haven’t shortened all that much yet, but there’s a softer, pastel-ish quality to the sky that indicates the last of the fiery sunsets of summer.

Tuesday, he thinks again. Tomorrow. October.

Might not feel like it, not yet, but one way or the other, they’re spinning on toward the dark.
I want to wake up where you are

It’s one in the morning when he gets to her, so it’s October anyway. Has been for an hour.

He mulls on that as he walks down the road from where he parked the truck, finally wearing long sleeves in the cool night. He mulls on it as he makes his quiet way up her drive in the moonlight. It’s only a day. It shouldn’t mean anything. But it does. He was with her through August, through September—summer fling, maybe, and now he’s sliding deeper into fall.

Summer flings don’t survive the fall. He knows this old story well enough to know that. Summer flings aren’t evergreens. They don’t come out the other side of winter. The term for this, he supposes—he’s heard it before—is May-December, and he’s the December. He’s the edge of the turn of the year. He won’t make it to the new one.

He’s aware that this is a pretty goddamn pessimistic line of thought. Maybe more pessimistic than is appropriate given what he knows, and even more, what he doesn’t know. But Merle wasn’t all wrong. He knows that too. Merle was wrong about a lot, but he thinks Merle was probably still batting over .500 there. He doesn’t think Beth is using him, even benignly. She’s not like that. No artifice. No pretense. She’s true and she’s honest, and most of all he suspects she’s honest with herself. She wouldn’t lie. She wouldn’t do that to him.

That doesn’t mean this isn’t an old story, and it doesn’t mean it doesn’t have a clear and well-established end. Wouldn’t be her fault. It would just be.

He’ll love her no matter what. Love her and never blame her.

The house is dark and silent, its eaves cast in silver. The trellis is pale bone patchwork. He takes hold of it, feeling like he’s slipped back into a dream, and makes his slow, careful way up, distributing his weight as evenly as he can, listening for creaks or any other indications of strain. There aren’t any. He reaches the top—dark window, blinds half closed—and taps.

A second or two and the window opens, and she leans out, her hair silver too, face marble, and he thinks yet again about that night by the swimming hole, and the night in the field under the stars, listening to her play her guitar, wanting her so bad it burned in his veins.

It burns again now.

“C’mon,” she whispers, and steps back, and he reaches up and grips the sill, lifts himself through and inside.

He’s seen her room in the day. He’s seen it at night, in the soft light of her lamp. Now it’s all moonlight and she’s standing in front of him wearing a thin camisole that looks like it might be powder blue if there was any color to speak of, and long pajama pants—soft but not fuzzy. She seems very small. Her cheek is unbandaged and the stitched line across it stands out sharp.

He wants to stroke a thumb over it, so carefully. He wants to gather her into his arms and hold onto her, feel how alive she is. That’s all he wants.

Except not. This is all he wants. Just existing in close proximity to her. In roughly the same space.

“Hi,” she murmurs, and he nods. And she reaches out to him, touches his hand. “C’mere.”

He goes with her to her bed. She lowers herself to its edge, swings her legs up—a little gingerly, he
thinks, like she’s still sore—and brings her knees to her chest and hugs them, her uninjured cheek leaning on one and her loose hair falling across her neck, looking at him sideways. She doesn’t turn on the light, and her face is half shadow.

“Sit down?”

He does, turned, looking back at her.

God, this hurts. It’s always going to hurt.

“Your lip,” she breathes, and he ducks his head. He forgot. It doesn’t particularly ache anymore and he hasn’t looked in a mirror in a while.

“Yeah.”

“Are you alright?”

He shrugs. I’unno.

The correct answer is not really.

“Like I said. I wanna talk.” She pulls in a slow breath. “Look, about... what happened. What I saw.”

Here it comes. He ducks his head lower, shuts his eyes against it.

“That was your brother?”

He nods.

“On the floor... That was drugs. Wasn’t it.”

He nods again. His hands are boneless in his lap. He doesn’t know what else to do with them.

“I don’t understand it,” she says, very quiet. “Not all of it. Daryl... I want to. I don’t wanna just... assume somethin’ if I don’t know. I wanna understand. Can you help me? Can you help me do that?”

It’s not what he expected.

What did he expect? Maybe some version of the Friend Talk. That she can’t deal with it—that when he was just a drifter that was one thing, when he was only a drifter exactly twice her age it was something else but still okay, but him and his brother beating the shit out of each other with drugs all over the floor of their unbelievably shitty apartment, well, that’s a little more than she can handle.

Sorry, it was fun, it really meant a lot at the time, but she’s... She’s eighteen, and she has her whole life ahead of her, and this isn’t how she wants to spend the next few months of it.

All right. That’s fair. He was ready to nod and be understanding—because he does understand it, he understands it perfectly—and he was ready to agree and then slowly, like he was thinking before, consider some gentle exit strategies for the sake of them both.

But she says that instead. And there was the note.

This, too, was a gift.

That hadn’t felt like rejection. Not at the time. He had been so tired, out of his mind with tired, and later he hadn’t been sure, but at the time?
At the time it felt like anything but rejection.

A box full of darkness. And a gift.

He has to say something. He takes a huge breath, lets it out slowly. Another one. She waits in silence: boundless mercy, boundless patience.

He can’t hope to ever deserve her.

“He’s my brother,” he says, so quiet he can barely hear himself. “Two years ago he... he got outta prison and I picked him up, he skipped parole, we went runnin’...”

And then he finds himself telling her everything, everythi,

ing, starting very slow and very halting but gradually picking up speed as he goes, like he’s rolling downhill, or it’s water behind a dam and the dam is cracking and cracking, more and more water spouting free, until finally the whole thing bursts and floods. Halfway through, one year in, he couldn’t stop even if he wanted to, and he thinks about the woman in the truck and how he felt like he needed to tell someone about Beth, needed to because he didn’t have anyone else, and not even that was as easy as this is becoming.

She’s listening, he can tell she’s just listening there behind and beside him, and he’s not afraid because she’s not judging him, because she’s never judged him. Even if she wants to end it after this she still won’t be judging him, and he loves her so much he wants to bury his face in her neck and sob.

He tells her right up until they came to town, this town that dragged him in and trapped him, and then he starts working backward again, swinging back around to the beginning. And this is where he folds in on himself and he doesn’t look at her, can’t look at her; he looks out the window—blinds left open after he came in—and he watches the moon, and he thinks he can see it moving across the sky, rising. Not quite full, but on the way. Another few days. Months and weeks and years—and he slips back to the bad days, the worst days, though there’s a lot there he doesn’t tell her, a lot he leaves incomplete, and a lot he says only in the spaces between the words, leaving the holes there for her to dig through if she wants, because he can’t.

There are some things he doesn’t have words for.

This is an old story, but it doesn’t begin with her. It doesn’t even have a beginning. Stories like this never do. Nor do they have an end. They circle around and around forever, and he goes back as far as he can, as far as his memory extends, and he tries to tell her about learning fear before he learned anything else, about love as thin as watery blood, and about needing the latter and having too much of the former, and not knowing how to say what he wants, and then learning that he shouldn’t want it at all. That what he has is all he deserves.

He tries to tell her about loneliness and terror and pain, about how there was so much of the last that what he eventually learned was to take himself away from his body when it got bad, look at this thing made of meat and blood and bone from the outside, detached, even hating it a little because look at what’s being done to it. Hating it because it’s weak and broken and not good for very much. Hating it because he’s being taught that he should.

Returning to it but never really feeling like it’s his. It’s not for anything but work and transportation. He feeds it, he washes it, he makes sure it functions. It’s meat. That’s all it is. Even tattooed, even trying to find a way back into it with an image and a needle, it’s still only meat.

Losing that and then losing everything. His mother. His brother. Abandoned to this monstrous man, watching every idea he ever had about a future for himself torn apart and thrown into the trash. Too
stupid for school. Too much of a loser for a real job. No point in learning how to do much of anything except what his father cared to teach him. The tiny little pleasures he kept close, kept secret, eventually discovered and destroyed, or twisted into something he didn’t want. He liked animals; it was never safe to have a pet. He liked reading; books were for fags and pussies. He liked being out in the woods with the trees and the quiet and everything growing and alive; good, he could learn to kill things, because what the fuck else were the woods for?

He’s just some redneck asshole. He’s nobody. He’s nothing.

Beaten down to a shred of that nothing, and then his brother, getting his brother back, everything supposed to be good again, then two years of the same shit except now he’s the one holding it together, holding everything together, he’s taking care of his big brother who he loved —worshiped—for so long, and he’s so tired and so sad and so scared, and he just wants to be done.

He just wants to be done with all of it.

So that’s what she saw that day. That’s what she saw.

In terms of literal words, he tells her almost none of that. But it’s there. It’s there, and he thinks she’s perceptive enough and wise enough to get at least some of it. Even if most of it lodges itself in his throat and won’t come any further.

And there’s one more thing he doesn’t say.

He wants to. For a few seconds he tries. But though Merle said the words aloud and though he knows them—has been thinking them over and over for four days now and in truth he’s been thinking them over and over for a lot longer than that—he can’t. He doesn’t know how.

No one ever taught him how.

At last he’s silent. The moon is high. She’s still there; she hasn’t moved, beside and behind him, and he can practically feel her thinking, and she doesn’t judge him and she never will, but he feels like he’s waiting for her to pass some manner of sentence on him.

And she wraps her arms around his waist and leans her head against his back, right between his shoulderblades, right where she did the night he showed her what his shirt conceals.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “Daryl... I’m so sorry.”

No. No, he was supposed to say that. It was supposed to be him.

Nothing is going the way he thought it would.

That keeps happening, with her.

He doesn’t cry. Not this time. But he lowers his head and breathes, his core going loose and heavy, and lets it all flow out and away from him, passing through the dark and then through rivers of moonlight to a great and unseen ocean.

~

“Stay,” she says, and it startles him. When he was talking he lost track of the time; with her holding him like this he lost track of it again. He looks up and the moon doesn’t seem to have moved, at least not much. It takes him another few seconds to process what she’s said, the word, and then he’s not sure. Not sure about that.
Isn’t that dangerous?

He gently pulls free from her, turns to look at her. He can see enough of her face to make out her expression, and it’s...

He never has words for her. He simply never does. She defies them. She won’t be contained by them.

She pushes up onto her knees and lays her cool, smooth little hands against the sides of his face, frames him, and tips her forehead against his. “Just till I fall asleep. Alright? Will you?”

Anything she wants. Anything. He nods. She holds onto him, leans in and kisses him, and when he moans against her mouth he sounds pained, because he is.

But it’s a good kind of pain.

She lies down, tugs the sheet up over her, and he lines himself up along her back like he did that first night he came to her like this, but this time it’s different. He feels hollowed out, but not like something’s been taken away from him. He feels scrubbed and scraped clean, ready to be filled up with something new.

She settles back against his chest and he curls an arm around her, and then—because he senses it’s okay—he slips his hand under her camisole and up to cup her breast, and she sighs and presses into his palm.

For now he doesn’t feel a surge of heat for her, though it’s there, burning low. She’s warm and he’s warm with her, and as he feels her body relaxing and her breathing going slower and deeper, he thinks about how it might be if he could stay like this, if he could stay all night with her, fall asleep with her and wake up and not have to leave her.

That would be a good thing. That might be the best thing. The best thing he can imagine.

But he does have to leave her.

So he does.
Next day is normal. Fairly. At any rate things have changed less than he expected them to in the sense of anything obvious.

The night before, he got home after Merle was asleep, and he left before Merle woke up. If he was in a mood to be honest with himself—which he sort of is—he would privately admit that there are things there that he’s still avoiding. There’s a conversation they probably should have, and he doesn’t want to have it. It occurs to him, driving out to the farm in the brilliant morning sun with a cool breeze dancing its way into the truck’s cab from all angles and combing through his hair, that for a long damn time his and Merle’s relationship has been defined by what they don’t say just as much as what they do. What he wanted to say before in the storm’s aftermath and couldn’t. Didn’t have the words, but also sensed what Merle’s reaction might be. Pulling back. Giving him a look like a slap in the face.

Get outta here, man.

He doesn’t need that. He’ll take a strange and unsteady peace. A ceasefire. At least for the time being.

And it’s a beautiful morning, trees green and fields gold, and something is lingering in him from the night before, small and warm and bright like a stone left in the sun, and it’s a peace just as strange but far less unsteady. It’s there, where she touched him. Like it came from her head resting between his shoulderblades, sank through his ribcage and settled into his chest.

It’s a weird image, but it feels true.

Radio on, moderate volume, but instead of pushing back the sound the wind seems to be catching, lifting it up, amplifying it because it can. Carrying it through the air and out and behind him like slipstream.

I want to be where I’ve never been before
I want to be there and then I’d understand

He’s all right.

~

The farm is something else that hasn’t changed, or how people treat him there. He doesn’t know what Annette told Hershel and Shawn at the hospital, about what he did and the state he was in, but they left him alone then and he suspects it was because she told them to. No heartfelt expressions of gratitude. They didn’t really say anything to him about it at all. They still didn’t when he came to visit Beth; they mostly treated him as if it didn’t happen. He supposed someone else might take offense at that, but it’s exactly what he prefers, and he doesn’t know how Annette knew that but he resolves that if he ever figures out an adequate way to thank her he won’t hesitate.

In truth he really just doesn’t want to go there. It was a nightmare. The whole thing was a fucking nightmare. There wasn’t any heroism. He’s not proud of anything. He was just terrified and confused and exhausted far beyond his ability to describe. And she was only there in the first place because she had been coming to see him, which he hasn’t thought about any more than he can help. He’d
rather forget about it.

He knows they’re happy to have their daughter back. That’s all he cares about.

He works. The odd jobs are getting less odd and more consistent; the real job, the harvesting and getting things set for the winter, is pretty much here. It’s good to have the consistency and he finds himself looking forward to more of it, even if it won’t last. Even if he still has no idea how long any of this will last.

Maybe she’s not turning him away, maybe she still wants this, but he’s still December.

He eats dinner with them—round roast and baked potatoes and he’s content to sink into that small tasty heaven and not say very much—but after he leaves he doesn’t go right home. He drives around a little in the setting sun, watching the side of the road for errant deer, and also watching for other things. When he finds them he gathers them up in a bunch, digs a length of twine out from under a seat, cuts off a section of it and binds them together.

In the last of the dusk he goes back to the ruins. Not into them, but he parks in the woods at the top of the slope and edges gingerly down over ground still slippery with mud that probably won’t fully dry for another few rainless days, looking for the cigarette butt. He has to pick it up, take it out. He spoiled her place in a fit of bitterness and he can’t let that bitterness remain.

But he doesn’t find it.

He stands at the bottom of the slope and breathes deep: the smells of damp earth, wet, and growing things sent by rain into what might be one of their final spurts of life before winter shoves them down. The creek is high but it’s no longer a river. The stone towers stand quiet among the trees.

It doesn’t matter that he was here and it doesn’t matter what he did. This place is so much bigger and so much older than he’ll ever be.

~

He waits until late, until after midnight. Then he parks and heads up her drive in the moonlight and climbs her trellis, silent as he can, the twine wrapped around the bundle held in his teeth. There are small rusted hooks just under the bottom of the windowframe—maybe once for a flowerbox or something similar—and he slips one of these under the twine, makes sure it’s both secure and visible from inside the window, and climbs down again.

She’ll see it in the morning: goldenrod and cardinal flower. He trusts she’ll see it before anyone else does, and no one will ask her where it came from.

~

Wednesday turns out to be the last day she’s staying home. Daryl comes earlier than usual—has been told he should, at least for a while—and she’s in her pajamas on the porch steps in the post-dawn light with her knees drawn up and a mug full of what turns out to be tea resting on them. She’s looking mostly okay except for the stitches across her cheek, and when Hershel offers him coffee Daryl figures there’s no harm in sitting alone with her for a few minutes, not too close, and keeping the conversation minimal.

“They’d keep me home another day if I let ‘em,” she says quietly. She sips tea and tilts her face up to the bright soft-blue sky and smiles, faint and sweet. Her hair is loose again and a little tangled, clearly not yet brushed and spilling over her shoulders, and something about the way the light touches her smooths out her skin and features and makes her look both so young and completely ageless. Not
entirely human. Even though she might be the most fully human person he’s ever met.

“You wanna go back?”

She rolls a shoulder, glances at him. “Figure it’s better if I get back to normal soon as possible. I feel pretty much fine. If I turn out to not be, ‘s not like I can’t just come home again for a while.”

He’s on her left and his view of her stitches is clear, close—seeming nearer than he’s actually sitting. He’s got a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, but he wants nothing more than to set both down and touch that dark line like he didn’t the night he came to her. Trace it with his fingertips. Maybe his lips.

He doesn’t know why he should love that stitched line the way he does, and it’s not just because he loves everything about her. It’s more than that. It might be what it means—he saw her bloody and limp, was half sure she was dead, more than half, but she wasn’t and she’s not. She’s alive and she’s going to heal. The gash is going to heal.

But it’s not going to leave her unmarked.

“’s gonna scar,” he whispers, not meaning to say it aloud and slightly mortified when he realizes he has, but the look she gives him is merely amused.

“Thanks for pointin’ that out, Mr. Dixon.” She pushes stray strands of hair away from her face and takes another sip of tea. The fragrance of it drifts over to him: lemon and ginger. With honey, maybe. He can’t tell for sure. “I know. I don’t mind. Shawn says it’s gonna make me look badass. You think I need to look badass?”

He grunts and taps ash carefully off the side of the steps. “Probably can’t hurt.”

“Can’t hurt what?”

“Just good to not have people messin’ with you.”

“Yeah, I’ll scare everyone away ‘cause I got hit with a tree.” She laughs softly, and he wishes so much she was closer—that it was safe to be closer—that it’s like a knot in his chest. Close enough to put an arm around her, just sit with her in the morning, listen to the distant lowing of the cows in the barn and the cries of starlings as they rise out of the grass, turn and wheel and circle in dark shifting clouds, settle again. He already knows how well she fits against him, strength hidden in a deceptively small frame. One thing he can say is that he’s never underestimated her. Not even at the beginning.

“You’re already pretty scary, girl.”

“Good. I try to be.” She looks down into her mug, still smiling—to herself, looks like—and her teeth briefly catch her bottom lip. “When I was in ninth grade I was in this play—A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Shakespeare, y’know?”

He doesn’t know, but he nods.

“I didn’t have this big part—I was just this fairy, didn’t even really get to say anythin’—but there was this one line in it I always liked. Though she be but little, she is fierce.” She lifts her head and looks at him, her eyes direct and cool and clear blue as the sky overhead, and she’s got him locked there. He can’t look away even though he almost wants to. Almost. In the meantime his coffee is getting cold and his cigarette is burning down to the filter. “I think I wanna be fierce, Daryl. When I grow up. That’s what I wanna be.”
Christ, you don’t think you are now? But really, he thinks she does. Or some part of her does. In time, more of her will.

She’s tough. She knows it. She is.

Finally he dislodges his eyes from her gaze, swings them down. Drops the cigarette into the coffee and listens to it fizzle. He didn’t lose her—he didn’t lose her in any of the ways he was afraid of. But that doesn’t mean everything is easy now, and when she looks at him like this, he’s pretty certain he’ll always feel just a bit like he’s being pulled apart.

Wind sweeps up the drive, raising small puffs of dust and pushing gently at both of them like the ghost of a hand. It smells like dry grass. Crackling leaves. The day is going to be warm, but the air that wind carries is cool. The edge of a chill. The starlings cry and wheel. He knows a lot about animals and not just how to track and kill them, but he never understood how birds can move like that—like they all know at all times where each one of the others is and can alter their flight paths accordingly. Like schools of fish, and he doesn’t get those either.

That song she sang. Hello blackbird, hello starling. Winter’s over, be my darling.

“I should get goin’,” he murmurs, sets down the mug and stands. He stretches and his spine pops in several places, and for the first time in a while he feels old. Maybe it should be more of a common thing, given his actual age, but when he’s conscious of his age at all he usually feels too young. Young and awkward and like he doesn’t understand very much. Doesn’t understand near enough. Wandering through life with nary a clue.

She told him in the kitchen that he didn’t act like he was thirty-eight. He never got her to explain what she meant by that. He’s starting to think maybe he gets it now.

“Daryl.”

She stops him when his foot hits the dirt and he turns, looks back up at her. That strange young-old effect has fallen back over her with the light, and the wind has turned, sweeping her hair across her face. She tries to tuck it back but it escapes her. She looks very small, but she also looks like her body doesn’t contain her, like she’s spreading out into the air around her.

Maybe he’s December. But he’s not so sure she’s May. He’s not so sure it’s that simple.

“Yeah?”

“The flowers were beautiful,” she whispers, and it’s like she’s punched him in the heart.

He would bring her roadside wildflowers every night for the rest of his goddamn life if she would just keep looking at him like that.

He gives her a single quick nod and turns away and goes to work.

~

But he spends all day thinking, and after dinner and before he leaves he finds her again. She’s in the paddock with the mare, riding in a slow walk around the edge of the fence. He leans on the wood, one boot up on the lowest rail, and watches her until she sees him. Not smoking this time. Just watching.

Even walking, it’s incredible to see.
She dismounts and comes over to him, bringing the mare with her. “Hi.”

“Hey.” He can’t stay. It would look weird. He knows this. Everything he wants to do would look weird if he went ahead and did it, and weird is actually more of a best-case scenario. Frankly it was a lot easier when he was the only one who knew about this whole thing. Everything was somehow much more innocent.

There wasn’t this spark flicking around every time they look at each other.

“They didn’t want me to ride, either. Here I am anyway.” She gives him a smile that’s more of a tiny quirk of her lips than anything else. “Headin’ home?”

“Ain’t got nowhere else to go.”

She gives him half a nod, stroking the mare’s flank. “So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

He hesitates, then pushes ahead. He’s not actually all that nervous about this, not about her answer or what she’ll think of him for asking in the first place, but he still feels that he should be careful with the asking part. Because this is important. It’s all important now. Not that he should play up the seriousness to an obsessive level or anything, but it is. “What’re you doin’ tomorrow? After school?”

“I…” She cocks her head, a wider, quizzical little smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I mean, I just come home, usually. Why you care?”

“Why you care if I care?” He’s glad that’s back. He liked it. He likes that they have a Thing and that the thing hasn’t changed even if literally everything else seems to be doing so. “Is there anythin’ you can say you’re doin’? Say and they’d believe you? And not check?”

“I…” She adds an arched brow to the smile, all more quizzical. “Yeah, I could think of a couple things. Why?”

“Can I pick you up somewhere?”

“Daryl…” She breathes a soft laugh and shakes her head. “What’s this about?”

“I wanna show you somethin’.” He’d thought he might feel at least a tiny bit of jitters at this part, even just at the prospect, but he doesn’t. He’s calm. “Can you do it?”

For a long moment she looks at him in thoughtful silence, chewing on her lip, and he lets her look. Has no problem with her looking. He’s run out of things to hide from her. Almost.

Finally she narrows her eyes. “This is where you serial kill me, isn’t it.”

Solemnly, he nods.

“I knew it. All this time, just workin’ up to it.” She sighs, bites back what’s clearly a much wider smile. “I guess if you gotta do it, you gotta do it. Alright, Mr. Dixon.”

“So where should I meet you?”

She thinks for a moment, still stroking the mare, hand moving over her dark, glossy neck. The mare noses at her hair and nickers. “When you go down the road with the football field on your right,
make the left at the intersection there. Go three blocks. I’ll be on the corner at three-thirty.”

“Alright.”

He waits another few seconds, just gazing at her. This time he can feel her letting him look, and taking pleasure in knowing that he’s looking. He can’t be sure—the light makes it a little tough to see it clearly—but he thinks he might detect the slightest flush in her cheeks. That last night in her room, almost dozing with the soft, warm swell of her breast in his hand, he had been aware of nothing more than her smooth skin, how perfectly she fit in his palm, and the slow rhythm of her heart against his wrist and fingertips. He had wanted to stay with her but he hadn’t wanted to fuck her. Somehow the idea had been distant. Not terribly important compared to what he was feeling then: the greatest part of the peace that’s worked its way into him.

It’s not distant now. That low heat in him is uncoiling as his attention drifts over her. It’s like it’s safe to want her again.

When she’s ready.

“I’ll see you,” he murmurs finally, pushes away from the fence and turns, walking away without glancing back. But she’s following him with her eyes. He can feel it.

He doesn’t imagine he’s the only one who’s been waiting for it to feel safe. Safe to want something.

Safe to have it.

Chapter End Notes

Song is “Two Points For Honesty” by Guster.
He doesn’t wait when he gets home.

It’s not that he intends to not wait. He doesn’t really intend anything either way, and that might be why it happens. Merle said some stuff, some really fucking painful stuff, and the truth is that aside from some of the worst of it, which he’s shoved away from him—what Beth really wants from this, what she thinks of him, what she means to do when she’s tired of him, because of course she will be—he still believes it. Merle wasn’t wrong. At least not completely.

If he was smart, if he was in his right mind, if he had an ounce of survival instinct, he would find a way to end this right now. End it if she can’t, or if she refuses. He’s not a creep and he doesn’t ruin everything, but he doesn’t have anything to give her, and while she’s very good for him, he doesn’t think that in the long run he’s good for her. Not because he’s a bad person, because he’s not. She doesn’t think he is. She’s told him, and he’s running out of any options other than to suck it up and believe her.

You’re a good man, Daryl Dixon.

There is another ending to this old story. And Merle knows it. Told him. Even if that was a worst-case kind of thing, even if it didn’t end up that bad…

Beth Greene deserves better.

If he was smart about this he would try to find a way to let go.

If.

Though he’s dressed in a grimy tank and pants that might very well stand up on their own and even walk around a bit, Merle appears to have actually attempted some laundry when Daryl comes in. He’s bent over the couch, sorting through the pile of rumpled clothes and muttering to himself. Merle has historically been confused and aggravated by the simplest kinds of housework. Daryl occasionally wonders what Merle did when he was out there on his own. It’s not exactly like the guy was getting domestic in any sense, but there are some things he’d assume everyone picks up from somewhere.

Daryl makes his way over to the couch and peers down at the pile. His stomach is jumping a little. After talking to her like that, seeing her ride, of course it would pick now to do its jumping around. He wonders if it shows.

Merle turns a quick glare on him. “Why the fuck does shit disappear?”

Daryl shrugs. He has no idea. It just does. The world is full of mysteries.
“Whatever.” Merle grunts irritably and returns to the task of pulling socks out of a tangle of pants and tossing them against the back of the couch. “What’s up with you?”

Daryl takes a breath, and something about the quality of it—so he gathers, the way Merle freezes for a fraction of a second, head slightly turned, every joint and muscle locked into an attitude of keen attentiveness—is indicative. That jumping in his stomach is increasing in intensity, and while it’s not unpleasant, it makes him feel like he might have to do something, like tear back outside and run around the block a couple times to shed the excess energy.

Instead he stands, hands loose at his sides, and when Merle straightens up he doesn’t look away. Keeps himself steady. He is steady, jumping aside. He’s sure.

“Brother…”

“I can’t.”

Simple. Two words. Really they’re all he needs to say, though he knows he’ll say more. The room is dim and it’s a little hard to get the full gist of what Merle is thinking from his features alone, but he gets enough. Knows that Merle gets enough. And Merle takes his own deep breath.

“Don’t, brother.” Merle shakes his head slowly. “Don’t.”

“I can’t let go of her,” Daryl says, soft. He doesn’t need to inject steel into it. Beneath it, foundational, it’s already there. “I can’t, bro. I won’t.”

Merle looks at him for a long, cold moment, stubbled jaw working slightly. Finally he shakes his head again, even slower, and turns away. This was expected. He didn’t actually think Merle would argue. Not about this. Not now. Before, that hadn’t been arguing either. It had been, he’s certain, exactly what Merle said it was.

An attempt to help.

“You’re fucked, baby brother. Completely. Just so you know.”

“I know.”

He grabs a relatively fresh shirt off the pile and heads toward the bathroom. “Wanna get fried chicken or somethin’?”

Merle does. They do.

~

About the serial killing thing; there are rare times when he considers the logistics of the way they’ve been sneaking around, especially when it comes to transportation, and he does see parallels. Not disturbing ones—he actually finds them kind of funny—but they’re there. How he met her the first time. What they do now—making sure they minimize the chance that someone will see her getting into the truck, minimizing the chances of someone being able to report the last time and the last way in which she was seen if someone else comes looking for her. Not that she’s ever been gone long enough with him for that to be an issue, but still.

There are a lot of dimensions to this. Obviously by now a lot of them aren’t innocent.

She’s on the corner when and where she said she would be. It’s a residential neighborhood more wealthy than a lot of the rest of the town, the houses larger and more spread out than elsewhere, wide
green lawns and well-trimmed hedges and low ornamental trees—dogwood and redbud and magnolia settling in for the end of the season. He knows why she chose this place and it’s for those reasons: they’re less likely to be seen. After school, people gone home, football practice going on but otherwise…

She hops in, smiling widely with her hair tugged back, braided but slightly messy today and the lace-patterned neckline of her shirt dipping low. His eyes wander there. He doesn’t try to stop them. She leans in, smiles wider, kisses the corner of his mouth and lingers a little, and even though they’re less likely to be seen here it strikes him as daring.

Which is nice.

As he heads down the street something appears to catch her eye and she glances back behind the seat, a mixture of confusion and interest sliding across her face. “Is that a crossbow?”

“Yeah.”

She laughs softly and cocks her head. “What’re you doin’ with a crossbow?”

“What do people usually do with ‘em?”

“Are you takin’ me huntin’?” She doesn’t sound exactly incredulous, nor does she sound unhappy about it, but as he pulls onto a larger road heading out of town he sees her looking down at her newer jeans, at her freshly lacquered fingernails—soft pink the color of the tee she wears to bed—and arching a brow at him. “Shoulda told me. I’m not really dressed for it.”

“You’ll be fine. We’re not goin’ huntin’. Not exactly, anyway.” He looks over at her again, smile tugging gently at the corner of his mouth. He wouldn’t have wanted her to wear anything else. She’s perfect. Someone else might think it would be out of place, given what he has planned, but they would be very wrong and he would tell them so.

“So you’re gonna be all mysterious about it.”

“Oh huh.”

She shoves lightly at his arm, the brass beads around her wrist clicking. “You’re bein’ a jerk again.”

“Yep.” He goes ahead and smiles at her, because why the hell shouldn’t he? “What’ve you been tellin’ me ‘bout surprises?”

She makes a little hmph noise, but he can tell she’s pleased, and she turns up the radio and sits back in the seat, puts one boot up on the dash, looks half out at the fields rolling by and slips her hand out the window to sine wave in the breeze. Her pink nails flash in the sun.

“You ever been huntin’?”

She shakes her head, not looking at him—and then pauses. “Otis goes a lot. He takes Shawn sometimes, took me once when I asked. I was twelve. I was all excited, but.” She shrugs, and suddenly the set of her jaw is less comfortable. “Otis got a deer. Buck. Took it down right away, he’s a good shot and I guess it didn’t suffer, but I saw it, the blood, and I…” She sighs. “I didn’t like it. I mean, now I get it. I like venison, it’s not like I got no idea where it comes from, and God, it’s not like I never see stuff killed. I live on a farm. We slaughter things.”

She’s silent for a moment, gaze fixed out the window, and when she speaks again her voice is soft.
“It was just different. I dunno why. It didn’t scare me or anythin’, but it… It made me sad.”

It’s not what he expected. Yet somehow it is. He watches her out of the corner of his vision, studying her as best he can with his focus on the road. Other people he’s known would be scornful about this, call her a baby, call her a stupid little girl, but they would be stupid themselves. She’s not a little girl. Not at all.

She says it’s sad and he agrees. He *does* like hunting now, and he doesn’t think it’s even because it was beaten into him. He likes hunting because he *likes* it, and it truly is that simple. He likes what it consists of. He likes what it takes, what he does. Tracking. Sighting prey. Even the stuff that’s ultimately less important—a well-placed shot and a good kill.

But it’s sad, to see something beautiful and wild die. He never stopped feeling that, though he never had the words for it until this moment.

“We’re not goin’ huntin’,” he says again, just as soft. “I do, but we ain’t doin’ that.”

He lets quiet creep in for a moment, under the radio.

_I am a poster girl with no poster_
_I am thirty-two flavors and then some_
_and I’m beyond your peripheral vision_
_so you might want to turn your head_

“So you still ain’t gonna tell me?” The smile she gives him—just for a few seconds before she turns her head away—is small and sweet, and he gives in, because it’s only them and the road is mostly empty this far out of town and he knows she’ll let him, and he runs a fingertip down the line of her jaw. She hums and leans into the touch, and it’s all he can do to keep from pulling the truck the fuck over and dragging her in.

He could. But he doesn’t.

“Ain’t gonna tell you.”

“Fine.” She flips her hair back over her shoulder, a pretense at being huffy, but he can see her smiling.

They don’t say anything else until they reach their destination and he pulls partway into the turnoff—where he went that day weeks ago now, when he went into the woods and tracked the doe and decided to let her live. He climbs out, taking the bow with him, and she follows, looking quizzical again.

He jerks his head in the direction of the woods beyond the grassy roadside, green and lush all around them. The sun is bright, though it’s lowering, and light scatters and plays over the ground. Over her.

“You ever shot a crossbow before?”

She shakes her head, gaze shifting from it to him. He nods—had already been pretty sure of the answer—and slings it over his shoulder and against his back.

“I’m gonna teach you. C’mon.”

He starts toward the treeline and he knows she’ll come, and she does, drawing up beside him with her strides long—longer than it looks like hers should be. She told him she was fast, that first day she took him to her ruins, and he doesn’t doubt it. He has every reason not to.
He also knows she won’t argue with this, won’t reject it, won’t even privately think it’s stupid. She’ll get it. She wanted to show him something of hers. He’s shown her a lot, more than he’s ever shown anyone before, but it’s all been things he wishes he didn’t have. Things he would have preferred to not have the option of sharing. Nothing like the place she took him to.

He doesn’t have anything to give her—or he doesn’t have much—but he does have this. It’s a piece of him. He knows without having to ask that he won’t need to explain.

He knows without having to ask that she’ll understand.

He leads her under the cool, shadowy cover of the trees.

~

The forest isn’t all that dense, and he finds his way back to the track he followed with very little trouble. No fresh spoor there now, but he recognizes the place and starts to walk along it again, letting himself slip partway into that focused/unfocused state where he sees everything as a whole and only a few things in complete isolation. Smells and color, movement, shapes, the closest and most distant sounds—untangling them. Laying them out and admiring their elegance, their delicacy, what they can tell him. What he can learn.

“You go huntin’ a lot?”

“Not so much now. Used to.”

“You miss it?”

“Mnhm.” He’s distracted but it’s an easy kind of distraction, a spreading-out of his attention rather than a weakening of it.

“What do you like about it?”

For a few moments he’s at a loss regarding how to answer, not because he doesn’t know but because—like always, because this is just how he is and probably always will be—he doesn’t have the words. The reasons are myriad, so rich and so complex, and they exist in a context he has no idea how to explain either. So he works through it for a while, padding quietly over the ground—she’s doing her best to match both his pace and his relative stealth, which he notes and is pleased by—and finally he rolls a shoulder and tilts his head briefly back, watching the leaves as they flutter and listening to the soft creak of bending branches.

“Why d’you like that mill of yours?”

“Oh,” she murmurs, and he can hear her smile without having to see her face.

Another short period of silence. He can sense her scrutinizing him, studying what he’s doing and how he’s doing it, and he waits for the questions. He won’t have to go fishing for them. She’s never shied away from presenting them for his consideration.

“So what’re you doin’, anyway?”

He gives her a quick glance. “You know trackin’?”

She starts to shake her head, then stops. “I mean… I know what it is. I don’t know how to do it. Otis does it some, I guess, but he never talks about it. I guess maybe ‘cause I never asked.”
“Alright.” He stops and lays a hand on her shoulder, gently halting her. “Just take a look around a second. Tell me what you see.”

She does indeed take a second—longer than a second, when it would be easy to give her surroundings the most cursory of scans and wait for him to continue. She looks, really looks, takes in everything she can. Absorbs. He watches her; she already knows how to pay attention. It was one of the first things he learned about her, one of the first things that made him feel like she was different. She sees. Because she looks at the world and she perceives things very much worth seeing.

*I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.*

“I see…” She takes a breath. “Trees. Of course. But they’re thicker over there.” She points ahead and to the left. “Beech. Most of the rest of these are oaks. That one, the fallen one…” She nods at it, a few yards distant. “It’s not rotted too bad. Wood’s still light. So it didn’t fall all that long ago. I dunno why it fell, though. That one there… That hole down there at the base, somethin’ might live in there. What we’re followin’… We are followin’ somethin’. Ain’t really a path, but it’s all thinner through here. Maybe it is a path? Not people. Deer, could be.” She hesitates, then fingers the splintered branch of a sapling just beside her. “Somethin’ broke some of these.”

Something twinges in him, deep and bittersweet, and he folds himself around it. “Close your eyes. What d’you hear?”

Again she pauses and he can feel her listening, feel her breath slowing even though he’s no longer touching her. “Wind,” she murmurs. “No—not wind. It’s just a breeze. Leaves. In the trees, but I think… on the ground too. Branches are creakin’. There’s… Cars. Ways away. Birds, I know one’s a dove, but the others…” She shakes her head.

“Tanager,” he says softly. That twinge is twisting into an ache. He didn’t expect it to be like this. Maybe he should have. “There’s a whippoorwill couple hundred yards away. Couple’a catbirds right over you.” He does touch her then, because he has no idea how he’s supposed to keep from doing so; he lays his hands on her shoulders and loosens when she leans back. “What about what you smell?”

“Dirt,” she says, smiling again. He can smell her hair like this, wants to bury his face in it and inhale. “Not, like, dirt. I guess you’d say soil. It’s wet. Cool. It’s been cooler under here all day. And… Leaves. Like they’re broken. Somethin’ crushed ‘em. Maybe nothin’ did, it’s just strong. Water, I think. Like… Rotting leaves in water. Moss. It’s like the creek. By the ruins. The mill.”

“What d’you feel?”

“Sun. Shade. Breeze.” She pauses, and when she speaks her voice is just the slightest bit lower. The slightest bit rougher. “You.”

“Good girl.”

He tugs her the rest of the way against him at the same time as she presses, back to chest, and he simply holds her like that for a moment, arms slipping around her, and he closes his eyes and lays his cheek against the crown of her head and breathes. All the things she mentioned and also her, clean and sweet, and he thinks about the goldenrod and the cardinal flower, about asters and meadowsweet, fresh grass in the sun.

He’s hard. She must be able to feel that too. But he doesn’t rock his hips against her, and she doesn’t press back any more than she is. It’s more pleasant, at least right now, to keep the coals banked down.
“Trackin’?” she whispers, and he nods, touches her jaw and turns her head just a little and kisses the edge of her ear. A fine shiver runs through her and she sighs.

“It’s just payin’ attention. To everythin’. That’s all it is. You learn to pay attention. You see.” The corners of his mouth curve. “The signs are all there. You just gotta know how to read ‘em.”

“Alright,” she says, tipping her head back against his shoulder. Her eyes are open and she’s gazing up at the light in the trees, which passes through the leaves and makes them glow green and gold as if they possess their own illumination. “Alright.”

He holds onto her for a few seconds longer, feels her breathe, her ribcage expanding in the circle of his arms, sure he can feel her heartbeat against his chest—he can. It is. It’s there. She’s not gone. She’s here with him and everything is alive, and everything he told her about, the box of darkness he gave her, it’s in a box. He carries it around, but he doesn’t have to live in there.

God, he wants to tell her. He wants to say it so much.

He steps away from her, touches her arm. Her elbow. Cups it in his palm.

“C’mon. There’s more.”

Chapter End Notes

Song is "32 Flavors" by Ani Difranco.
just pin your heartbeat up against my heartbeat and you'll see how well we rhyme

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack for the latter half of this chapter. If you care.

When they walk again it’s once more in silence.

It’s not in response to any request from him. It’s just what happens. They’re not actually hunting so he has no reason to request it anyway; if they were he would ask her for minimal conversation if any at all. But they’re walking, her beside him—close enough that he imagines he can feel the gentle heat radiating from her—and he can tell that he slipped her into a kind of trance from which she hasn’t emerged. Hasn’t wanted to emerge. She was already so intensely present, so in the world, so much a part of it and so unafraid of it, but somehow that’s deepened even further. It’s almost like she’s vibrating with it. The light catches her and she’s even brighter than before. When she looks around, scanning everything, her eyes are wide. Her lips are slightly parted and wet from the slow passes of her tongue. Now and then, watching her out of the corner of his eye, he sees her nostrils flare.

She’s perfectly at home here. She’s a little wild creature. He thinks again of the doe.

He hadn’t had a specific place in mind—hadn’t remembered from when he was here before—but he knows it’s perfect when he sees it: a large grassy clearing encircled by young sycamores. Thick trunks but not too thick and not too slim. The shadows are starting to lengthen but the sun spills into it and he can tell it will for a while. They have a few hours before they’ll lose the light. A few hours before they have to head back.

Gnats drift in clouds in the flood of sun. He stops, takes a breath, and she stops with him, looking around.

“So this is…”

He unshoulders the bow. “Said I was gonna teach you. Here.” He holds it out to her, and with a look of mixed faint skepticism and considerably greater interest she takes it and holds it in both hands. He watches the slight strain in her muscles as she lifts it—not to her eye. Not even high enough to hit anything but the ground. A ripple of approval runs through him but no surprise: even if it’s not loaded or cocked, she wouldn’t just point it at something without knowing what she’s doing. Of course she would know not to do that.

“Not too heavy?”

He’s teasing a bit, and she gives him a look that’s clearly doing the same. “Yeah, I’m gonna drop it any minute.”

He doesn’t quite smirk at her, walks to one of the thicker trees and unsheathes his knife. He can feel her watching as he carves a deep X in the bark, curves a circle around it, and steps back to look it over. He glances back at her and moves aside.

“You see it from there?
She nods. He nods back and returns to her.

That odd fluttering sensation is back and making a home low in his stomach. Once it freaked him out, but he understands by now what it actually is: he’s excited. Not to the point of jumping around, but just a bit. He’s excited and he’s happy, and he wants to do this, and there’s no reason why he shouldn’t, and he doesn’t have to worry about her making a face and turning away from him and demanding to be taken home.

“Here.” He holds out a hand for the bow. “Gimme.”

A smile curves her mouth, her head tilted to the side, and she hands it over. He lowers it to the ground limb-first and tugs the string smoothly upward until it catches. Again, he can feel her watching him—closely attentive. She didn’t ask to know this, probably didn’t want to until he brought it up, but if he’s showing her, she’s clearly more than willing to learn.

The fluttering intensifies.

“This is cockin’ it. Guess you know this is first.” He lifts it up, and when he shoots her another glance she’s smiling wider. Observing him. Studying. Enjoying it, and he wonders on how many levels. She said he looked good that day when he was splitting logs, and he’s now aware enough of himself to be able to imagine some of why. It’s warmer and his arms are bare today, and he knows how the muscles there must be flexing.

And that doesn’t freak him out either, having her look. It’s weird, he still doesn’t totally get it, but if she does, if she likes what she sees…

You’re beautiful.

He’d very much like to believe that someday he’ll be able to hear that without a profoundly instinctive cringe.

In the meantime, he’s busy.

“Watch what I do.”

It’s smooth. Easy. He doesn’t have to think about it, hasn’t in years upon years. When he started doing this he carried on doing it, over and over, until it was pure muscle memory. He has the bow in his hands and his body takes over and does what it does, and like the tracking, it isn’t about killing anything. Not really. It’s precision, exactness, pure effortless focus; for the longest time his body has been purely for utilitarian things, but that doesn’t mean he hasn’t been capable of taking any pleasure in the feeling of it being used well. Of being set with a task and performing it perfectly.

He’s good at this. He’s very fucking good.

Bow smoothly up, braced against his shoulder, solid stance, aim, breathe, hold, stillness, squeeze.

And keep the stillness as the bolt flies.

It doesn’t hit the dead center of the X. It’s about a quarter of an inch off. Beside him, he’s dimly aware of Beth’s soft exhale.

“Wow.”

He lowers the bow and the look he gives her—he’s sure he must appear questioning. He is questioning. On some level he gets it, why she might be impressed, but it’s been so long since he
thought about it like that. He didn’t want to show her this to impress her. That’s not what this is about, and not what it was about when he got the idea.

It’s just about *showing* her.

He swiftly recocks, reloads, and holds out the bow, silent. A little more cautiously this time, she takes it.

“Alright. C’mere.” He takes her shoulders, firm but gentle, and again he feels how slim her frame is, how she isn’t exactly tiny but still small against him. How he likes that, gliding his hands down her upper arms.

But he’s not touching her like he wants her. He absolutely does, that ever-present burn deep in him, but on the surface it’s all cool, calm. This is business. He said he was going to teach her. That’s what he means to do.

“Get your feet about shoulder-width. Don’t lock your knees.” He feels her move, easy and without much awkwardness, her body sliding into a stance he recognizes as, if not practiced, more than good enough for a beginner. “Alright. You wanna put it against your shoulder. Get your cheek in the middle of—Yeah. Just like that.” A smile comes to him, pretty much hits him in the face, and it aches. He remembers learning to do this, and he remembers it being nowhere *near* this pleasant. He remembers very little in the way of tolerance for imperfection.

No one was allowed to be a *beginner* with Will Dixon. You were adequate or you were a *useless little fuckin’ retard*.

This… This is how it was supposed to be. He deserved better. He knows that now.

He slides his hands a bit further down her arms, feels her muscles, her wiry strength. “Keep your elbows in. What you’re gonna do is you’re gonna sight the target, you’re gonna take a deep breath, and you’re gonna let half out. Only half. You hold the rest. Then you squeeze the trigger. After you take the shot you don’t move. You follow through the way I did.” His voice has been dropping steadily as he looks over her shoulder, as he feels her body shifting into what it should do almost like she already knows, and he doesn’t think it has anything whatsoever to do with his skills as a teacher. He’s never taught anyone how to do this before.

Another *I never*. There are so many of those with her.

He steps back, hands leaving her without moving her. “Ready?”

Very slightly, she nods.

“Alright. Breathe.”

Her upper body swells, releases halfway, and he watches the stillness come to her. He sees it before and above and beyond the shot itself. It settles over her, into her, and it’s like watching her begin to *pay attention* the way he told her to: something pure and natural with no hint of artifice. Really no hint of effort. Maybe he’s never taught anyone to do this, but he does know that someone shooting for the first time might overthink, might be too conscious of themselves, might under or overcompensate for an imagined fault. But she isn’t. She *is* her body, and when she moves she moves without thinking at all.

She’s not perfect. There *is* awkwardness there. And when he looks past her at the target he sees that the bolt is near and just outside the right lower edge of the circle.
But that stillness remains in her as she stands and slowly lowers the bow. She’s still looking at the target, like she expects it to do something.

It’s so beautiful it hurts him. Catches his breath, hooks it through his ribs and ties knots in the ends.

“‘s good,” he whispers.

She finally gives him a glance, half smiling and shaking her head. “I was outside, though.”

“Yeah, well. Ain’t that big a target anyway. Trust me, it was good.” He walks to the tree and pulls the bolts carefully free of the bark, returns to her with them. “You wanna try again?”

Her smile widens. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

That hooked, knotted breath in him warms like the sun is touching it, and he nods.

They practice for what he guesses—by his own internal reckoning and the movement of the sun—is nearly an hour. At the final shot the bolt strikes the target just to the left of center, less than an inch away, and she lets out a soft breath that’s almost a laugh. When she turns to him she’s grinning, flushed and a little breathless when she speaks.

“I’m gettin’ good at this.”

“Could be. Don’t get cocky, Greene.” But he’s pleased, overwhelmingly pleased, and he knows she can tell.

He gathers up the last bolt and pauses on his way back to her, looking up. There’s nothing especially strange about it, but the sky is so piercingly clear, edging toward the subtler blue of the later afternoon, and it’s lovely, and he can’t remember the last time he had a day like this. A day that felt this good. With her he’s had many good days, many good nights, but this is different. Not even better, not necessarily. But the breeze spins around the clearing and when he lowers his head she’s there, and it seems to spin around her, gather up her hair and set it dancing. For half a moment she closes her eyes, her head tilted slightly back and a smile still playing over her mouth, and she fits there, right where she is, like she was just waiting to be there. This isn’t the apex of her life, this isn’t the entire point, because there is no one point, but everything has been leading to this, because this is happening. It’s happening right now.

I do know how to pay attention.

He’s there with her in the time it takes him to blink, and he would be a little confused by the abruptness if he wasn’t entirely distracted by the ease with which his hands slide into her hair, fingertips over her braid, and then distracted by the taste and the warmth of her mouth when she angles it against his with a soft mm, one hand closing on his arm.

She drops the bow. He drops the bolt. He doesn’t care about either of those things.

For a few moments—or maybe it isn’t, he has no fucking idea—he simply kisses her, curling an arm around her, hand at the small of her back and pulling her in close and tight and fitting so perfectly against him. Her lips were wet—she was wetting them with her tongue, and now he wets them with his, nudges them apart, slips into her mouth as she moans softly and then not so softly. Louder. Louder enough that it sends a hot pulse rolling through him.

Not in her bed. Her bed was nice but this is better. Not even in the hot tub; that had been so nice but now they’re in the sun, in the open, and he’s so hard for her, rocking against her and finding the pressure of her hip. Her breath catches, her teeth grazing his lips.
“Daryl.”

“I want you,” he breathes, and he thinks about the night in the field, telling her that, telling her that he wanted to fuck her when she was ready and God, he does, he wants it so bad.

She sighs and kisses him again, combing a hand into his hair and tugging him down, licking back into his mouth, and he thinks his knees might buckle.

So he decides to take that potential issue out of his consideration.

*I do know how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed.*

They don’t quite fall but it’s close, and they roll and she’s under him, arching and spreading her legs, setting her knees against his hips as he braces himself over her and runs a hand down her side—rouglier than he has been, but it’s okay, it’s all okay, because she’s tough, she is, and she knows it, God, she does.

“*Christ, Beth.*”

She’s already moaning and she answers him with another one, deeper and almost strained, pushing her hands under his shirt, up his back—his *back*, her fingers on the lower edges of his scars, and he doesn’t stiffen. He doesn’t pull away. It’s like she’s tracing him with fire and he presses back against it, wanting more of it. *Needing* more. He’s never going to be afraid of that again. Never again. Not with her.

“Take it off,” she whispers against his throat, and he feels her smile, her tongue against his skin. He shudders hard—at the words, at her tongue, at her beneath him, at the whole thing, and he ducks his head and bites gently at her jaw.

“Take what off?”

“Oh.” She tilts her head back and tugs him down by the hair, baring her neck, and it’s absolutely clear what she wants. And after he bites her again—just as gentle—when he pulls back enough to see her, she’s smiling and blushing, her hair spread out around her head like a halo. “Oh, take off… Take off…” She laughs. “Take off everything.”

As he pulls back further and fumbles at his shirt, watching with vague incredulity as she pushes up on her elbows and fumbles at hers, it occurs to him that she still hasn’t said she’s ready. It also occurs to him that he doesn’t care, doesn’t care at all. He’s all hard heat, pounding against his skin with how much he wants to be inside her, but it’s also… This. He just wants *this*. He wants to see her like this, naked and sun-bathed in the grass, and he wants to be with her, and he wants to give her anything and everything she asks for and take nothing she doesn’t want to give him.

He wants to be idle and blessed. With her. That’s what he wants.

She tosses her shirt aside, works her bra off and tosses it too, and leans up and clumsily kisses him again, laughing and squirming as she tries to get out of her boots and jeans and panties with only one hand. So he tries to help her and that’s clumsy too, and somehow they manage it, manage his, but the clumsiness doesn’t go anywhere; it settles into them and between them, and he rolls with her, laughing into her hair, hands sliding up her back and groping at her hips as he presses his cock against her belly and she rocks up to meet him. He doesn’t even know where his mouth is anymore. Her neck, her collarbones, the hollow at the base of her throat. Suddenly they’re almost wrestling, almost play-fighting, and she comes close to pinning him, getting a leg over his waist as he brings her
up on top of him, but she only did that because he let her and seconds later she’s under him again.

She’s found a rhythm and when she presses up just right, her cunt against his thigh, he can feel how wet she is and he loses all distinction between a laugh and a groan.

“Stay there,” he whispers, and she shakes her head, still laughing at the sky, beating her small fists against his shoulders. He bites once more at her neck, sharp little nips that pull equally sharp little gasps out of her, and he murmurs Stay, girl, stay. Stay.

Oh, God, stay with me.

He somehow manages to line himself up alongside her, one leg slung over hers, and she’s turning toward him when he nudges her legs further apart with his hand, fingers slicking through her, and she gasps his name, sliding into a shaky moan when he circles her clit with a fingertip.

“Daryl…” She laughs again, shaky—Jesus, there is so much laughing here, more than he ever would have believed there could be—and rolls her hips up against him, seeking. “Daryl, ah… ah, please, oh my God.”

He licks up the side of her neck, tasting her salt, and it floods so hot and heavy through him, pulsing between his legs. But this is her. This is all for her. “Please what?”

“Your fingers, I… Just touch me, please, I want you to…” And the words sort of collapse in her mouth and fall into another long moan as she tries to grapple with his wrist, gives up, closes her hands tight over his shoulders and presses her mouth against his throat, her breath fast and shallow like she’s come already.

He’s not good at saying no to her. Never has been.

Her clit is so swollen and he could almost swear he can feel it throbbing under his fingers as he rubs her in slow circles, and she moves mindlessly, not just her hips but her whole body, letting her head fall back and gasping half-words at the sky. He’s not in any hurry; he raises himself on one elbow and watches what he’s doing. Watches her legs fall open wider and wider, the way his fingers glisten, the sun catching beads of her juices in the tight curls of her pubic hair.

“You’re so wet, Beth.” Whisper in her ear, a hint of teeth at its edge. “Can you feel that? Feel how wet you are?” She whimpers in protest when he lifts his hand away and draws a little abstract design on her stomach in swooping, shining lines. “Like that. Ah, fuck, you’re so wet for me, you’re…”

And it’s his turn to trail off as he slips a finger into her and she lets out a soft cry, bucking her hips up under his hand, forcing him deeper. He should remember this but it’s like it’s the first time, like it never happened at all, and anyway they’re not in the water now—now it’s all sun and warmth and the slickness of her up past his second knuckle, and the feeling of her cunt tightening and releasing around him as he slowly begins to fuck her.

It’s like she’s not even there anymore, and yet so completely there she’s near to bursting open and scattering glittering pieces of herself into the trees. She’s moaning in a hard rhythm, matching his with her body, whispering his name when she can find the syllables but otherwise without words at all. She’s already getting close, her movements faster and urging him to meet her, but he slows, slows enough to give himself time to do what he’s been wanting to do since that first day he really understood that he wanted her. He shifts lower, trailing his mouth over her skin and over the swell of her breast, and when his lips close over her nipple and he feels it harden under his swirling tongue she lets out another cry and clutches at him, his hair, Oh my God, oh Jesus, Daryl. Daryl, yes.
It doesn’t take much longer. He knows it won’t. He’s moving fast again, back to being clumsy though she doesn’t seem to care, fucking in and out of her and trying to nudge her clit with the edge of his thumb, sucking at her, and when he takes a chance and closes his teeth over her nipple and gives her a careful bite she spasms and this time her cry is almost a scream, her whole body twisting and arching, groping frantically at him as she floods against his hand.

He fucks her through it, sucking more gently now, and inside his head he’s a rainfall of words.

*You’re so blessed, you’re so blessed, girl, I love you, my beautiful girl, we’re blessed together and you’re so fucking alive, so alive, my God, I love you. I love you. I love you so much.*

He has no idea how much later it is when she starts to go loose, starts to float back down, shuddering now and then with the aftershocks and giggling as they wash through her. His finger is still in her and she reaches down, closes a hand over his, and her other finds his hair and combs through it. Strokes him. He’s released her nipple but his lips are against her skin and he can hear her heart, hard and slow and steady. *There.*

“Oh. God,” she breathes, and giggles again as another wave of trembling takes her. “Daryl. Oh… Wow.”

He smiles, flicks her with his tongue.

And for a while there’s nothing.

He lies against her and she relaxes and relaxes, stillness stealing back over her as she keeps working through his hair. At some point he withdraws his hand—she sighs and shudders lightly—and he licks his fingers clean with his head resting on her breast. And there’s sun and the breeze cooling the sweat on their skin, the smell of warm grass, trees swaying gently all around them, and the calls of the catbirds and the tanagers, the low question-answer coos of the mourning doves.

Paying attention. He’s paying very close attention. She is too.

At last she stirs, draws him back up and nestles into his arms and kisses him for a while. He’s still so hard, pushing against her belly, but there’s nothing needy about the way he presses, seeking a rhythm; it’s as slow and easy as everything else, and like before he thinks there isn’t anything he truly *wants* but this. Her, sweet and glowing and humming with life.

But she reaches down and wraps her hand around him, and he stiffens and draws in a sharp breath. “Beth…”

“I want you to come,” she murmurs against his jaw, nuzzling him. “I… I wanna make you come, Daryl.” She smiles and it pours through her voice, feels like it reaches right down through her fingers and into him. “I wanna see it. I wanna watch you.”

He has no fucking idea what to say to that.

So he just nods.

She squeezes him, her thumb stroking against the underside of his shaft, and he holds onto her, his hand against her jaw and his breath stuttering, because it’s… “‘s good, Beth.” He closes his eyes and groans, lips against her brow, wondering how long he can last. “You’re so good, you’re…”

Then suddenly her hand is gone, and he hears himself make a little sound that’s half confusion and half *wait no come back*, but she’s rolling onto her back again and tugging him with her, and he really has no option at all except to follow.
But she kisses him, barely a brush of her lips, and shakes her head, staring up at him with her eyes clear and very wide.

“I want you on top of me. I want you…” She touches the top of her stomach, close to the undersides of her breasts. “Here. Close. I like when you’re over me. I wanna…” She laughs and flushes again, her eyes dropping briefly. She’s actually embarrassed. It’s fucking adorable. Especially given that he thinks he’s starting to understand what she’s asking for. “I wanna really be able to see.”

It’s not something he would have suggested. It’s not even really something he would have imagined. He merely gazes down at her for a moment or two, searching her face, and she looks back—still flushed but completely unafraid.

She wants this. All he wants to do is give her exactly what she wants.

Slowly he nods, and pushes up and away from her, up to his knees. She reaches for his shirt above her head and drags it in, makes a pillow of it and settles herself with one hand on his thigh, and she watches him and bites her lip as he moves on top of her, straddles her, and takes his cock in his hand.

And he can’t quite breathe. Because she looks so small under him and he feels a surge of power that has nothing whatsoever to do with violence, a kind of power that somehow manages to be soft at its core.

He had no idea any of this existed.

She lays a hand over his, licks her lips, and that alone pushes a moan through him. Her mouth. Fuck, her mouth.

Other ways in which he might have that. Take it. Jesus. Part of him shrinks away, can’t deal, but the rest of him is lost in this and he never wants to be found.

“Let me,” she whispers, and his hand drops away as hers takes its place.

He watched her in the storage shed when she cornered him. He watched her slip her fingers into his fly and pull him out, stroke him, explore him, discover how she could touch him to absolutely undo him. But this feels even more like exploring than that did—how she touches him, curls her hand around him and just holds him, clenches to feel him throb, almost twitching against her palm. She strokes him with both hands, runs her fingers over him, glides over his skin, travels slowly up to the head and down to the base again. Like before she seems fascinated by his balls, grazing her fingertips over them, weighing them, squeezing them gently, and it’s all he can do to keep himself upright, all he can do to keep his eyes open.

He wants to. He needs to see this. He doesn’t think it’s very likely that anyone else will ever touch him this way.

He doesn’t think it’s very likely that he would ever want them to.

She slides her fingers back up and tugs carefully at his foreskin, her eyes widening slightly when she pulls it back and reveals the dark, glistening head. She just looks at it for a moment, still pulling lightly at him, then flicks her gaze up to his face, lips curved.

“It’s kinda ridiculous,” she says softly, and he laughs. He can’t help it. He drops his head forward between his shoulders and laughs at himself, because she’s right, because it’s ridiculous, sex is ridiculous, everything is ridiculous, and everything is so wonderful.

“This is what everyone makes this big thing outta,” she continues, musingly now, and gives him a
firm enough stroke that all his laughter deepens into a groan. She’s still looking up at him, still smiling, and now there’s something mischievous about it.

Something almost wicked.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmurs, and strokes him again, firm and steady. The exploring seems to be done; now she’s all direct intention.

“Beth…”

Her voice drops to a whisper. “You’re beautiful.”

“Stop,” he manages, but it’s nothing more than a whimper, his head finally falling back and his eyes closing, losing himself in the motions of her hand and trying to brace himself up on his thighs. He feels her free hand closing over his, turns it without meaning to, and their fingers weave.

“You are,” she’s saying—Christ, he can barely listen to her. She’s relentless. Everything she’s doing to him is completely relentless. He should be worshipping her, even if she’s no goddess, because she’s something much more fearsome. “You’re beautiful, Daryl. You are. You are.” Almost in time with the rotations of her wrist, and he whimpers again, tries to keep from rocking forward, gives up and does it and starts to fuck her fist.

And shit, she’s still talking. Like her voice—that clear, sweet, perfect voice—is an extension of her fingers. Reaching into him and stroking him until he falls apart.

“C’mon, Daryl. Yeah… C’mon, I wanna see it. I wanna see you come, please, I want—”

Like in the barn he tries to warn her. Why, he’s not even sure, except that it feels vaguely like something he should do, but she wanted him here, she asked him, she said she wanted to see, and he hears her gasp and feels her fingers tighten in his as her name wrenches out of him and he shudders in hard waves, and opens his eyes in time to see himself spilling all over her hand and running down her wrist, spattering onto her breasts in shining drops and strands.

And all he can do is breathe. Or try. He’s not having the best luck, though he’s still clutching her hand and somehow that’s steadying. Grounding.

He’s drifting but he’s here.

“Daryl,” she whispers, and he swallows, shudders again—with his own aftershock or with something else, or some combination of any number of things—and eventually, trembling, he lifts himself off her and falls against her side.

He can’t say anything. Fortunately she doesn’t seem to expect him to. When he can focus on her she’s sliding her fingers through the streaks of come on her breasts and lifting them to her mouth, and the world blurs away.

When he comes back she’s turned toward him, arm slung over his waist and one leg between his, and her eyes are closed and her face is half sunlit, her hair damp and tumbled over her shoulder, her body rising and falling so slow. So relaxed she might be sleeping.

Maybe she is.

He slides an arm under his head and just looks at her for a while, looks at her in that way he loves—when she doesn’t know he’s watching, when she’s completely unaware. He trails his fingertips up her arm, across her collarbone, along the line of her neck—lifting strands of hair out of the way—and
she murmurs and stirs but doesn’t open her eyes.

He can smell her. He can smell her sweat, the faintest hint of the shampoo she used, and he can smell her cunt, and he can smell himself. They’re covered in each other.

She said she wanted to wait, and they are, and he will, for as long as she wants. As long as she needs. But he’s not about to kid himself. Not in the slightest.

They’re fucking. Even if they’re not.

_I love you, girl._ He might almost say it, leaning close, his lips moving against her brow. He might come close to figuring it out, to loosening that knot in his throat that keeps it all back, crowds it into his chest, too much to escape him. Caged in his ribs. He might teach himself how to say what no one ever taught him.

He might.
“You didn’t ask me if I was ready.”

Daryl shifts on his back, looks over at her where she’s lying on her stomach, braced up on her elbows, toying with a blade of grass. She has one leg bent back with her foot in the air, bobbing gently, and it’s yet another thing she’s doing that should be childish and almost is… and isn’t. She turns too, hair spilling over her shoulders and all down her bare back, completely unbound now except for her braid—and even that is starting to look a little messy.

He simply gazes at her for a second, in no hurry to answer her, his head pillowed on his bent arm. The sun is still flooding into the clearing, pooling on the grass, making everything glow sharp around the edges.

“You didn’t say you were.”

“But you didn’t ask,” she persists, half smiling. She reaches out and tickles his nose with the grass, darts her hand away when he bats lazily at it. “I dunno, I just figured… Guys would ask. About that.”

“You think I’m in some kinda hurry?”

She cocks her head, shifts her gaze down to her hands, teeth worrying a little at her bottom lip. She doesn’t appear worried herself. Not exactly. She just appears thoughtful, her brow furrowed. “You just…” She sighs, and suddenly she seems reluctant, and maybe he should be worried but he’s not, and not just because he doesn’t think he has the energy for anything other than what he’s doing right now. Watching her. Watching her think.

“Stuff about girls… girls my age. And older guys. There’s this idea that you’d be takin’ advantage of me or somethin’. Tryin’ to push. Y’know? Push stuff faster. Tryin’ to get somethin’.” She looks up at him again, smiling far less than half but smiling all the same, and gives him a tiny shake of her head. “You’ve never done that. Like… Ever.”

He frowns. He gets what she’s saying, of course he does. He knows about that story too, and he knows what people think, and he knows in his bones that it’s the primary reason why no one can know about this—especially not her family, whatever else they might think of him now—but at the same time he honestly doesn’t get it. How someone would do that. What’s going through their minds, to look at someone and only see this thing you can take. What’s going through someone’s mind when they hurt someone that way.

He knows it, but he doesn’t understand.

“Why the fuck would I?”

“Well, I’m pretty hot. Just for one thing.” She giggles and rolls closer to him, dropping the blade of grass and laying her head down on her arm, her fingers tracing over his bicep. “Someone else would. That’s all. I think someone else would.” That smile is still toying with her lips, and there’s something behind her eyes that startles him even as it mirrors him.

Something like wonder. Quiet and deep.
“You’re a good man, Daryl Dixon.”

He didn’t have any idea what to say to that the last time and he doesn’t now. No idea at all. None. He starts to look for a response and gives up almost immediately; what do you say to that? When a girl like this says that you’re good?

Nothing overblown, which he would immediately reject. Nothing literally unbelievable. He’s not amazing. He’s not incredible. He’s none of the words he applies to her in his mind, all of which he thinks are entirely appropriate and in no way, shape, or form hyperbole.

He’s good. Simple and real. Good. He’s a good man.

And right now he believes her. He does.

He gives her a small, crooked smile. “Didn’t have no rubber anyway.”

“You mean you don’t carry one all over?” She grins and digs a fingernail into his arm, and he swipes at her again, catches her hand, threads his fingers through hers. It feels so natural to do that now. It feels like he’s been doing it for years.

She holds onto him for a moment, looking at their joined hands, and her mouth twists a bit. “That’s somethin’ else. Some guys… They’re jerks about that. Becca, friend of mine at school, she broke up with her boyfriend ‘cause he wouldn’t wear one. Told her it didn’t feel good.” She hesitates and her gaze flicks back up to his. “Does it? Feel different?”

He rolls his shoulder. “I dunno.”

“You never did it without one?”

“No.”

She strokes her thumb along the outside of his, quiet for a few seconds. “Ever want to?”

This is a very odd line of questioning. But he doesn’t mind it. Once he probably would have. Once, when he was first getting to know her and her many odd questions, he probably would have brushed her off, told her to mind her own fucking business. But she’s asking him these things now, and he’s looking back and he’s…

Seeing. He’s looking back at everything and he’s suddenly paying attention.

“I never cared,” he says softly. “Never cared about it. Never meant nothin’.”

“Really?” She frowns and studies him, very close, and not for the first time he wonders what exactly it is she’s seeing that has her so interested. “Why not?”

“Just didn’t.” He studies her right back. She genuinely appears confused, which he’s not sure what to make of. He knows that she has no silly romantic illusions about anything—or she doesn’t seem to—and of course she’s always thought it would mean something for her, and for her it was certainly reasonable to think so. But for him, assuming it would mean something for him…

He hasn’t even had a girlfriend.

“How many times you been… Y’know. Been with someone?” She flushes a little and it’s hard to keep from smiling at her again. For someone who just got done asking him to let her watch him come, let her make him come, let her get right up close and personal with it, that she would be
blushing over this question is the best combination of funny and profoundly cute.

*Cute.* Jesus. *Cute* never used to be a word he applied to anything.

“I dunno. Not that many.” He gives her hand a squeeze—not entirely sure why except that he wants to—and looks at her, briefly distracted when a breeze sends light dancing and dappling across her shoulder and arm and breast. He feels like he should add something, make things clearer, and maybe he also feels some kind of vague need to confess.

He’s confessed a lot to her. She *does* contain some spark of the divine.

“I never really wanted to. Never really liked it.”

Now she seriously looks confused, and he thinks he does get why. There’s what he did to her, with her, how it appears he made her feel, and every time with her has been good. Even if he hasn’t been inside her. *Especially* since he hasn’t been inside her. He never would have believed, before, how much you can do with someone with just your *hands*.

“Why didn’t you like it?” She huffs a laugh. “I thought… Everyone likes it.”

“Guess I ain’t everyone.”

“No, you’re…” Concern flashes across her face, not intense but there. “Daryl, I didn’t mean…”

“Relax. ’s fine. I know I’m fuckin’ weird.” He releases her hand and tugs lightly at a strand of her hair, and she flushes a little deeper, and he wants to drag her against him and kiss her some more but he can do that in a minute. For now…

Well, for now he actually wants to talk. *Wants* to. And who the hell knows how long *that’s* going to continue.

“I didn’t like ‘em,” he says after another moment or two of silence. He fumbles around for the words, the truth, and there it is—simple. He already knew. “The people. I just…” He pulls in a slow breath, and the air is fresh and cooling and he can smell her—sun on her just like the grass. “I didn’t wanna be with ‘em. I didn’t even know ‘em. Not most of ‘em.”

“So why did you?” Her eyes are very big.

“Felt like I had to.”

“You don’t have to do anythin’.” She lays a hand against the center of his chest and pushes nearer, her head on his shoulder, angled enough that she can look up at him. “Anythin’. Not with that. Daryl… You should only do it when you want to.”

He arches a brow at her, his fingers combing into her hair. It sounds so easy when she says it like that. And maybe it is. Maybe he’s just been making it hard. Or letting people make it hard for him, and maybe he always had more choice about that than he thought. “That simple, huh?”

“Yeah. That simple.”

She looks very serious. Almost solemn. Once he might have laughed at something like this, but he doesn’t want to. At all. It doesn’t seem like something to laugh at. It feels like something touching him, cracking him, breaking him open. Something else that’s always been true but that he couldn’t even conceive of: that he didn’t *have* to. That he didn’t have to do *anything* that made him feel wrong like that.
That if he had wanted to wait like her, wanted to put the whole thing away until it felt right, he should have been able to. Even if it meant waiting until now.

“\textquote[I want to,]” he murmurs, slides his fingertips over the weaving curves of her braid. “With you.”

“Me too.” She turns her head and presses her lips slowly against his shoulder, near his collarbone, and he closes his eyes and sighs.

And for a while no one says anything except the trees, who whisper continuously to each other as if they have a lot of opinions about everything that just happened and are really into sharing.

“That’s the other thing, though,” she says finally, raising her head. At some point she moved even closer and now she’s almost half on top of him, hand on his chest making a pillow for her chin. “What we’re doin’… We’re already pretty much there. I mean…” She glances down at him, at herself, and laughs. “Well. Y’know. Maybe it’s stupid, to keep this one thing. Say I’m not ready for it. Maybe I should feel stupid. Like one more thing shouldn’t matter. Like it shouldn’t be this big deal.”

Abruptly she’s solemn again, lifting her other hand to touch his face, the ridge of his cheekbone, pushing his hair out of his eyes. “But it does matter. To me. I dunno why, but it does. And you… You don’t make me feel stupid for it.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid,” he whispers. And he doesn’t. Maybe once he thought there were rules for this, but she’s tossed him into the deep end of a pool he had no idea was there, and all the rules are gone. He’s just swimming.

He doesn’t think anything she could want like this would be stupid. It would be what she wants. That’s all he would need to know.

“I’m not a virgin, Daryl,” she says softly, still tracing the lines of his cheek, his jaw. “I dunno what I am.”

He covers her hand with his—not stopping her. Feeling her fingers, small and slender and fine-boned, feeling how they move against his skin. He’s watched those fingers strum a guitar, run across the keys of a piano, make music out of nothing, and he’s watched her touch him, stroke him and play with him until he’s falling apart in her hands, and it’s new. He’s new. It’s his first time. There’s never been anything like this before. She pulled him free from something and now he’s in that deep water, and maybe he should feel like he’s drowning, but he doesn’t. He lost the shoreline a while ago but she’s here with him, her hand in his, and she’s not going to let him sink.

She’s going to help him.

Looking up at her with the sun soaking into her, so warm, radiant in every sense of the word.

\textit{Girl.}

“Me neither.”

She smiles at him. “You just are.”

“Beth…”

She presses up and tugs him down, finds his mouth with hers, her lips and her tongue, and she swallows whatever else he was going to say. Which was probably nothing. He doesn’t need to say anything at all.
All he needs to do is pay attention, and be idle, and be blessed.

He doesn’t realize he’s been crying until he feels the tears cooling on his face, until he feels her kissing them away.

~

Of course they have to leave. They always have to leave.

But they don’t rush as they gather things up, pull clothes reluctantly on, and he finds himself watching her dress with the same kind of attentiveness he might have watching her doing the exact opposite. Watching her bare skin vanish under her panties and bra, her jeans, her shirt. He feels an odd urge to go to her, dress her with his own hands, and he beats it back because he has no idea what to do with it, and because he’s not sure, even now, that it’s something he should actually attempt.

He’s not afraid of her anymore. But he’s still finding his courage.

She tries to comb her hair back with her fingers, restore it to some kind of order, and laughs when she realizes there’s no way it’s happening. He already has the crossbow slung over his shoulder and he observes her for a few seconds, finally shakes his head and pulls her in. This is easy, this feels right, and he tucks a couple strands of hair behind her ear and kisses her brow.

“I’m a mess,” she murmurs, lips moving against his neck, and every word sounds like it might break into another laugh.

“Yeah, pretty much. Nothin’ you can do.”

She tilts her head back and beams up at him. “You’re a mess too. You always are, though.”

He doesn’t know that he’d argue with that, but he gives her ear a sharp little pinch and a tug, and she lets out an indignant squeak and swipes at him. He catches it on his arm, and it takes every last iota of his willpower to keep from grabbing her and tossing her back into the grass and following her for another round of the whole thing.

Instead he steps away, hand on her back, and lets it go.

“C’mon.”

The shadows are long by now but there’s still a fair bit of daylight and no real need to hurry. Without meaning to he finds himself slipping back into the quiet walk from before, tracking without really tracking anything at all, and she walks just as quietly beside him. But after a few minutes of moving through cool shadows, catching glimpses of birds hopping and flitting from branch to branch, something grabs him, curls a hand around his attention and tugs, brings him up short. He stops before he knows he’s going to, and Beth almost stumbles over him.

“Daryl, what—”

He drops swiftly into a crouch. “C’mon down here.”

When he glances up at her she’s clearly bemused, head cocked, but she follows him down and peers at the soft earth. “What is it?”

He shoots her a tiny smile. “You tell me.”
“Oh.” A breath more than a word, and she’s quiet; like he’s discovered he can, he feels her attention, her focus, its keen edge. What he’s showing her isn’t honestly all that subtle, and in fact she could probably have spotted it on her own. But she didn’t. He did. And now he’s going to see what she does with it.

She reaches out toward the small twin depression, though she doesn’t touch it. She moves her hand as if she’s outlining it in the air, her fingers curving, and when he lifts his gaze to her face her lips are moving very slightly, silent until she speaks.

“It’s a deer.”

“Yeah.” Without thinking he lays a hand on her back, feeling the lift and fall as she breathes. “How old?”

“I guess…” She bites her lip, eyes narrowing just a bit. “Pretty fresh?”

“Yeah. Know how you can tell?”

She looks up at him and hesitates, clearly waiting for him to speak, but when he doesn’t she looks down at the tracks again, and this time she does lay a fingertip at an outer edge. “The lines are sharp,” she murmurs—almost to herself. “Those points…”

“Good. So which way was it goin’?”

She gestures ahead of them. “It’s the path we were walkin’ earlier.”

“Yes. How d’you know that?” Shivering warmth all through him, and it’s not about wanting her, not about what they did in the clearing; right here, right now, that might as well not even have happened. As with the bow, he’s watching her expand herself, move into this space, discover what a new part of her can do. See things and know what she’s seeing. Be in the world in a way maybe she wasn’t before.

His father never felt this. Or if he ever did, it had been so withered and stunted that it never found the sun.

“The sharper ends. They’re pointed that way.”

“Otis show you this?”

“No.” She’s not looking at him now, and the half absent tone hasn’t left her voice. It’s that focus again, that near-trance. The stillness and the ease with which she located it inside her. It’s the ruins again; his mind tumbles back there and he thinks about how perfect she looked in them, how much she belonged, how perfect she looks here too. She has her place and he has his and they’ve shared, crossed those borders, and now he’s wondering if the borders in question were ever there at all.

If they’ve always been here together. Occupying the same space.

It’s a deeply strange thing to think. But today has been strange.

“So.” He lifts his hand and straightens slowly up, scanning ahead. The tracks continue—of course they do—but he’s not going to nudge this in any particular direction. Might be enough for her that she’s seen them, identified them, been right about them. Might be enough for today. “Whaddaya wanna do?”

She glances at him, brows raised—you kidding me? “I wanna follow it.”
He grins. He didn’t actually expect her to say anything else. “Alright.”

He doesn’t have to tell her to stay to the side of the track. That’s something else, and honestly what he expected—it’s the kind of thing she might know simply by instinct. But he sees her eyes too far down too much of the time, and he touches her arm.

“Eyes up. You don’t wanna just see the track right under you. Remember, you wanna see everythin’.”

“So it’s not just the tracks? The hoofprints?”

“No. That broken branch you saw?”

“That was it?” She gestures at the tracks and he hears a tight thread of excitement work its way into her voice. “What we’re followin’?”

“Could be. Could not be.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.” He pauses briefly and tilts his head back, closing his eyes and scenting the air. What she said before, it’s all still there: growing things and dead things, moss and water and soil. The way dust smells when the sun warms it. “Sometimes you just ain’t sure.”

“What d’you do then?”

“You follow your gut. You got instincts, you gotta listen to ‘em. You gotta learn.” He looks down at her, reaches out and strokes her hair back from her face. She’s eager, gaze sharp, lips parted enough that he can see her teeth, and he’s not thinking about a doe anymore. He looks at her and he sees a little she-wolf. Little predator, all delicate strength, potential speed.

“You’re an animal,” he murmurs, and she leans into his touch. “Just like them. We forget that, but… Y’are.”

“You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” She says it in a whisper; he knows it’s another poem and he smiles.

Something about this still feels like a dream.

“Keep on trackin’.”

She turns away from him and she does.

Her estimation was right: it’s a fresh track, and it’s not very difficult to follow. The shadows continue to lengthen but it feels like time is slowing, like they’re not moving through it the way someone else might be. Again, like the ruins: this is a place apart from everything else, and it’s not a single place; they made it between them and they’re carrying it now. She moves steadily, pausing now and then to look around, and after a while she turns off the main path and follows a thinner one that passes through stands of ash trees, hardly visible at all, and he says nothing about it but the wave of pride he feels is almost overwhelming.

It takes him a bit to realize what it even is. He never felt it before he met her. Pride in anything. Pride in himself. Maybe once, but that got killed pretty early on and it never returned.
“Think it’s gettin’ fresher.” She glances at him. He’s been running his fingers over the scruff at his chin as he watches her and he doesn’t pause, doesn’t even look at her directly, but he guesses she can probably see the edge of his smile and she knows she’s right.

They crest a rise and look up, and there she is.

He puts out a hand to halt Beth, but she’s already stopped, staring, and when he falls smoothly into a crouch she follows him.

It can’t be the same one. Yet he supposes it probably can be. These woods, this territory—it could very well be the same as the doe he saw. Those faint remains of white speckles along her flanks—now fainter—and that awkward youthful grace, the warm hues of her hide where the sun touches it. Like when he saw her, she’s grazing, nosing at the leaf litter and pausing now and then to raise her head, ears pricked.

He left his bow cocked—habit—and it’s also habit to have it immediately in his hands, lowered but ready to lift and fire. Beth’s gaze snaps down to the bow, up to his face, and she doesn’t speak but he can read her frown.

Do you have to?

He looks at her for a few seconds, then shakes his head and sets the bow aside. No, he doesn’t have to. He doesn’t want to. What would he do with it, anyway? With Beth’s help he could probably haul the carcass back to the truck, get it butchered somewhere or find a place to do it himself, but it seems like a lot of trouble.

And he doesn’t want to. And not just because she would prefer he not.

The doe keeps grazing—doesn’t seem to have any idea they’re there—and Beth watches, clearly captivated, still and tense and breathing slowly. Naturally she’s seen deer before, probably hundreds of times, and so has he, but it was different then and it’s different now. Even if he can’t say how. Can’t say why.

But he sort of feels why. Feels it deep. That gut he’s supposed to follow. Those instincts he’s supposed to listen to.

She’s very close to him, just in front of him. Moving smoothly, trying not to move at all, he slides his arm around her and tugs her backward into the hollow his body makes. She lifts a hand and lays it over his forearm, presses against him and sighs softly.

“You found her,” he whispers in her ear—not sure why and not fully sure what he means, because it’s not just the obvious. Not just the surface. “All you, Beth. All you.”

A little shiver runs through her and everything in him tightens and melts simultaneously, and it’s confusing, but by now he’s mostly comfortable with being confused. He has to be. It’s going to keep on happening.

For a while they stay there, quiet and motionless and watching. The doe wanders through patches of sun, noses, keeps grazing, and he’s more and more certain that it’s the same one. Her spots have faded, she’s a bit larger, but there’s something about her, about the way she moves. The way she is. Those instincts again, scratching at him, whispering that he’s right. That he should trust. That he should trust himself.

He thinks he can.
At last the doe lifts her head a final time, her ears twitch, and in response to nothing he can identify she turns and leaps away into the underbrush, tail up and bright, and she’s gone.

It’s like coming out of a dream. They stir against each other, separate just a bit, and he pushes his hair back from his face and glances around. Not long until dusk, now. They’ve been in the woods for hours.

He touches her shoulder. “We should get back.”

“Yeah.” She nods, shakes herself and straightens up. As he does the same and looks her over, he detects slight melancholy in her. He’s sure. She smiles at him but it’s not a wide smile, and if it’s sweet there’s a bitterness around its edges.

She doesn’t want to leave. That makes him happy. Even if it’s bittersweet as well.

They walk back to the truck in silence.

~

Like usual—now—he stops at the oak tree and pulls over, and what begins as a glance at her turns into something more lingering when the last of the reddish sunlight falls over her hair and makes it into tangled strands of fire. She’s looking ahead but then her attention drops to her hands, and she seems to be considering something, her brows slightly drawn together.

He’ll wait. He doesn’t have to push. She’ll come to it when she’s ready. And right now, the unknown of whatever it might be doesn’t worry him.

Finally she looks up, meets his gaze. There’s a quality to her eyes that’s at once warm and hard—determined. She’s made a decision.

“Be here tomorrow night,” she says softly. “Midnight. Okay?”

He nods, doesn’t hesitate. Okay. He doesn’t have to ask her. He doesn’t have to know. It’s enough that she wants him here. That’s all he needs.

“Alright,” she says, even softer, and she touches his jaw and leans in, kisses him for a long, sweet time. Long enough that when she pulls back the last of the sun is curving above the horizon, shimmering in the high streaks of cloud.

And he does what he was wanting to do, what hasn’t felt right until now: he lays his fingers against her face, strokes her cheek, and his forefinger finds the edge of her cut and runs lightly along it. Carefully. Feeling its rough texture, the ridges of the stitches. He doesn’t expect her to hate it, to be annoyed with him, but he thinks she might flinch. Might even ask him to stop.

But instead she closes her eyes and hums deep in her throat, closes her hand over his wrist and keeps him there. Like she wants it.

Like it feels good.

They both know when it’s time for her to go. No one has to say anything. She climbs out of the cab, and when she starts back down the road toward the farm she doesn’t look back. That’s normal now, that’s how it always seems to go, and he watches her, because that’s normal too. And after he can’t see her anymore he stays there a while longer, radio on low, thinking. Mouthing words silently. Practicing.
At some point he’ll *have* to say them. At some point he won’t have any other choice.

Chapter End Notes

Lyric snatch is "Shine" by Collective Soul, little poetry scrap is from "Wild Geese", by Mary Oliver of course.
shots in the dark from empty guns

Chapter Notes

Only semi-related to this chapter but heavily related to the last one: some meta on this thing and sex and what's going on in it. If you're interested.

“She let you fuck ‘er yet?”

In his head Daryl snaps himself upright, sits up in the truckbed all clenched and angry and very much inclined to toss out some punches, because maybe he was trying to beat the shit out of Merle last week, and maybe that was fucking awful, but he’s delivered lesser and more benign beatings-the-shit-out-of, and he’d be willing to do it again. For this. For that. For talking about her that way, with all the crude nastiness behind it. Talking about them.

About today.

Except not. What he does in his head remains there and after a few seconds it’s over, and he merely feels mildly irritated. Nothing has changed in this respect, no matter what else has happened: Merle is an asshole. Merle will always be an asshole. Merle will be an asshole regarding just about anything put in front of him, and Beth is most certainly included, and he knew that the second this whole thing began in earnest. The second he saw her singing in that fucking coffee shop and his heart broke open.

And here’s the thing: if this is what he was so afraid of—or if this is the worst that happens—it actually isn’t all that bad. He had a good day. He had an amazing day. The odd trance state it pulled him into hasn’t left him, and he’s feeling sleepy and warm, lying on his back and staring up at the turning stars and the moon barely shy of full, and it’s not just because of the very pleasant buzz he has going. Merle can’t ruin what he had today.

Right now he feels like Merle can’t ruin anything.

He inhales deeply, lifts the cigarette from between his lips, blows smoke at the sky and listens to a gust of wind sweep across the meadow, making it hiss like a coiled snake. “Fuck you, bro.”

“Yeah, see, that’s the point.” Merle is sitting with his back against the side, bottle of Four Roses dangling between his bent knees. He takes a swig. A big one. “So you’re in love with her, you stupid motherfucker, fine, so that’s even more reason to nail ‘er. If you need one. I ain’t in your head, thank the good fuckin’ Lord.”

“Don’t need one,” Daryl murmurs, still not looking at him. He inhales again, lets the smoke drift out through his nose in a slow cloud. “We’ll do it when she’s ready.”

“Who is this bitch, you makin’ some kinda big sacrifice for her?”

In the periphery of his vision, in the deep shadows the moon is throwing, Daryl sees Merle make an exaggerated face, all incredulous scorn. He recognizes it as less than genuine, and he sighs.

Whatever.
“Ain’t a sacrifice.”

“You ain’t gettin’ laid, little brother. She’s a fuckin’ cocktease.”

Yes, this was expected, and he continues to be nowhere near as wrathful as he might have thought he would be. In addition to the irritation he feels, that’s the other thing Merle is rousing in him most often these days and has been for so damn long—though he’s uncomfortably aware of the deeper stuff lurking underneath. It was only a week ago that they both got a good look at the stuff in question. It feels like a month, but it was a week. He’s done with it what he always does with things like that, even if nothing before has been that bad: He put it away, because the alternative is too terrible, too final. He can’t afford that kind of rage. Not now.

Nothing much was going to change in a week, and it’s still the same old shit: he feels tired. At least for the moment, they’re apparently going to keep plodding along this endless stretch of road.

But that doesn’t mean he’s going to be a fucking doormat about everything. That shit is over.

“Why the fuck you so interested in what happens to my fuckin’ cock, bro?”

Merle is silent for a long moment. The quality of the silence is drunkenly shocked. Daryl coolly waits it out. Again, as far as they’ve both silently agreed to be concerned, last Friday didn’t happen. They’ve gone back to this being out of character for him, even if they both know what a pile of bullshit that is. Even if they both know a number of new and very unsettling things about the true nature of his character in question.

Somewhere in the distance, a fox screams.

“Someone’s gotta get you some tail, little brother,” Merle says at last. “Sure as fuck ain’t no good at gettin’ it for yourself. You ain’t never been good at it. Didn’t start with this.”

Merle might intend for it to be a growl, but it’s not. It’s a bloodless thing, raspy, far too thin to get as far as grumbling. Daryl listens to it, picks it apart on his head, and decides there’s almost something pleading about it. Which tightens him up, twists at him, but even that can’t ruin how he’s feeling. At least not enough for him to make a thing out of it.

He’s also tired of making things out of anything here.

Yet here we are.

“You always assumed I wanted some. Never thought to ask me ‘bout it. It’s my fuckin’ cock, man, so maybe you let me deal with it from now on?”

Another period of silence, and it’s significantly longer. Daryl closes his eyes against the night and he thinks about Beth resting her chin on his chest, looking up at him with those big blue doe eyes and all that solemnity, nothing remotely ridiculous about it. Giving him permission for something, except all she did was inform him of the fact that he never needed anyone’s permission in the first place.

“You never asked me,” he says again, quieter. The cigarette is burning down to his fingers and he leans up and drops it into a half empty beer bottle. “You coulda asked me. You never did.”

“The fuck was there to ask about?”

Now Merle simply sounds bewildered, and Daryl gets it, gets why, doesn’t even blame him anymore. Doesn’t blame him for any of this, if it comes right down to it. Doesn’t blame Merle for shoving him at women he didn’t want to be with, doesn’t blame him for the shit Merle dragged him
into, the drinking and the fights and the bad company, all the stuff they did that should have landed him in prison thirty or forty times over and landed Merle exactly there in the end. All of it. Because this is the aftermath of what happened, the fight and the drugs, and before that the fucking money in the fucking sock—which is still there and accounted for, no suspicious withdrawals or deposits. This is the real aftermath. Of telling Beth about it, and before that, the terrible, terrifying night in the ruins, and everything since then, every rare second he’s forced himself to sit down and think about this. Really think about it.

Here it is: yes, Merle is an asshole. Merle is a piece of redneck white trash, Merle is no good, Merle is no good for him, is doing him no favors, and while he loves his big brother so much it’s like his heart is a fist punching itself over and over, the fact of the matter is that even on the best days Daryl doesn’t like him. Isn’t sure he ever really has. But what Merle spat at him when they were still throwing words instead of punches—what made Daryl so angry then, because it was being spat at him by a man clutching a bag of poison that could mean the end for both of them—it wasn’t completely untrue. At least not from Merle’s end. Merle believes it. He looks back on everything before, not necessarily at the details but in aggregate, and Merle meant it, what he was spitting, and that was why it hurt so much. Hurt both of them.

He’s tried to take care of Daryl.

He has. He sucks at it, has almost exclusively done more harm than good; that’s become piercingly clear as well. But he was trying. All of it was his awful, sad, broken way of trying to take care of his little brother, maybe even trying to make up for some lost time, trying to atone for some things, because there was a period—a space neither of them wants to think about or look at directly—when no one took care of Daryl at all.

And this is included. Getting his pathetic little brother some tail. He was just doing for Daryl what he would have wanted for himself. It’s the Dixon remix of the Golden Rule, and Daryl bites his cheeks to keep back his laughter.

Merle asked a question. So.

“You coulda just asked. Coulda asked if I needed your help. Wanted it.”

“You sayin’ you didn’t?”

“Yeah,” Daryl says, very patiently. “Didn’t need it. Didn’t want it. Coulda left me alone, man. I woulda been fine.”

Merle coughs a laugh. The laugh turns into a genuine fit of coughing, which goes on for a while. Once more, Daryl waits it out. “Brother, you’d still be a fuckin’ virgin if I’d done that.”

“Yeah.” Quiet. Agreeing. There’s nothing to disagree with. Not only does Daryl think it’s possible he would be, he thinks it’s probable. Left to his own devices, yes: he can see himself a virgin at thirty eight. Sees himself that way and sees himself not minding, in isolation from being externally given all this shit for it.

You should only do it when you want to.

“You…” And Merle is utterly silent again.

Daryl supposes it’s possible he’s actually broken him.

The fox screams again; there’s the answering call of an owl, sounds about the same distance away, and Daryl has a surreal image—rising and quickly sinking again—of an owl and a fox locked in
combat, rolling over and over in the meadow scrub, clawing and pecking and biting, ripping and gouging, feathers and fur and blood everywhere.

There’s something desperately sad about it.

“Just drop it, bro.” He sighs and sits up, swiping a hand down his face. He feels okay, but he can tell Merle doesn’t, and this… This isn’t about placating, and it isn’t about dancing around something difficult or letting Merle have his way. It’s about how he’s not going to get anywhere. If he tried to explain what happened today, even a little, what he learned, it would be like running headfirst into a wall made of belligerent incomprehension—a wall that can be hurt by the thing smashing into it. Walls don’t understand. They just stand there. This isn’t about cutting the wall-that-is-Merle a break because his own head is hurting.

This is about kindness.

“Mm?” Again, bewilderment—and Merle sounds like Daryl woke him up from something. Which might be exactly what happened. Daryl turns and studies his brother’s face in the low moonlight, and all he sees are mountain peaks and gorges, canyons and dry riverbeds. Walls, landscapes; everything he thinks of when he looks at his brother is hard and barren.

This problem isn’t going to go away.

Which he knew.


Merle says nothing. After a moment or two he lifts the bottle again, and Daryl figures things are, if not okay, then at least as okay as they’re likely to be right now. He pushes off the tailgate and stretches, feeling what seems like every single one of his vertebrae crack at once. The truckbed is way more comfortable when he’s in it with Beth, which makes complete sense and isn’t in the least surprising.

“Gonna take a piss.”

Merle grunts. Daryl hesitates; he could do it right here, it’s not like either of them have ever been shy about this shit, but suddenly he doesn’t want to be here at all. Just for a few minutes. He wants to be out there in the dark, out in that half-seen meadow. Alone. There’s the road not far away, but it’s a backroad and no one else has passed for a couple of hours. Not a single house is visible. It’s only the truck and Merle and a sea of night.

He doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to do. The other side of that coin?

He can do things he wants to do. Within reason.

So without excuse or explanation, he wades into that sea.

~

Last time he did this, he realizes, it wasn’t much different from how it is now. He dropped a bomb on Merle and left him behind in the rubble to work things out for himself. This is a lesser bomb, smaller payload, but it’s just one more, and if he follows this analogy all the way through—and why not, it’s not at all a bad one—this particular bombardment has been going on for a while now.

Too late to call the planes back. It’s done.
This isn’t the same big open stretch of land he walked into the last time he did this—when he told Merle to fucking leave if he had a problem with what Daryl was doing—but it might as well be. It feels very similar. High scrub, some patches of grass, distant woods. There’s a dip and a rise not too far away, and on the rise—set against the sky like an evil spider-fortress from some kid’s fairy tale—is a radio tower. A single red light blinks at its top, over and over, like a winking eye.

He stops and stares at it. He’s not sure for how long. Wind whips up through the scrub, pulls at his hair, dies away.

He could climb it, he thinks suddenly—madly. It’s stupid and he knows it, doesn’t entirely know where it’s coming from, but he could; he could do anything. She cut him loose and now a whole collection of new things are possible, more all the time. He could climb it right now, fuck all the reasons not to, and hey: if he jumped, isn’t it remotely possible that he might fly?

Isn’t it? Isn’t everything at least a little bit possible now?

This has the potential to be dangerous. But he knew that too. Really, he’s known it from the beginning.

The fox screams, very close, and he doesn’t have time to jump before it lunges toward him out of the rustling scrub, a small dark bolt with its legs beating the ground like a rabbit’s heart, there and gone past him and vanished again in the time it takes him to process that it’s even happening.

No owl. Silence.

He stares at the place the fox disappeared into for a few seconds, feeling a spot of odd blankness descend and settle. Then he shakes himself, breathes a laugh. In theory he came out here—maybe as much as a quarter mile away—to take a piss. He should do that and get back.

But he can’t simply get back. He’s in this space now, where everything is weird and dreamlike—in a moonlit meadow as much as a sunny clearing—and none of the rules apply anymore. Where the sense he used to make of things might no longer work, where it might get tangled like his fingers in Beth’s hair, hopeless even if he wanted to get free. Where things might come at him out of the dark and be gone just as fast, no time to grapple with them. Where winged wolf gods hear and answer prayers.

And in a country like this, it’s also remotely possible that he might be able to make some rules of his own.

He came out here to take a piss. He should do that and get back.

So he does that and he goes back.

~

As far as he can tell Merle hasn’t moved, though by the time Daryl returns he estimates something like half an hour has passed. He expects Merle to comment on Daryl’s apparent difficulty in locating his own dick, but Merle says nothing at all, and continues to say nothing when Daryl sits back down on the tailgate and lights up another cigarette.

The moon is higher. In the distance he can see the red on-off wink of the radio tower.

“Tell me somethin’.”

Here it is. Before, he told Merle to drop the subject of his cock out of kindness, and this could erase
any benefit that kindness might have conferred, but he’s here and Merle’s here, and this was such a strange and strangely wonderful day, and there’s something about the quality of this night that’s fucking with his head in ways he doesn’t think he’s inclined to call bad.

He’s ready to take some jumps, and for a week he’s needed to take this one. He could have wings in there someplace. Waiting under his skin. Trembling under all those scars.

Merle grunts, and it’s impossible to read but it doesn’t sound like *no, I refuse*.

So.

“What was the deal with the money, man?”

In all honesty he doesn’t expect an answer. It makes sense for there to *not* be an answer. He can’t think of an answer Merle would *want* to give him, not voluntarily, not even a lie—which he doesn’t think Merle would attempt to offer. Not now, not about this. He didn’t catch Merle with the sock in his hand, didn’t catch him with a roll of bills, but he knows, and Merle *knows* he knows, and it might be good to be straight with each other about what they know. Not that he anticipates the whole thing being reciprocal, but he’s at least going to do his part. He knows. He wants to know. Expectations or not.

So it’s something of a surprise when Merle gives him one.

“Had some extra. Poker game. Figured I’d stick it in there.”

Daryl looks sharply at him. Merle’s face is still difficult to see clearly, all that craggy landscape, but one eye is visible, and that eye… Sober. Like when Daryl staggered out of bed the night after the flood, like when Merle was waiting for him, and everything felt different all over again and at the same time ached with how it was probably never really going to change.

“Why?”

Because Merle has never in his *life* failed to spend *extra* when he has it. Merle can find some pit to toss it into, without fail.

But Merle shrugs. “I had it. Why not?”

“Merle…” Okay, well: he just conceptually smacked Merle in the face a couple times not even an hour ago, so he probably deserves this. It’s probably only fair. “You coulda… You don’t…”

“Do shit like that?” Calm. Knowing. Of course Merle *knows*. Merle is well aware of all of this, and if he didn’t know the full painful depth of Daryl’s feelings before, he sure as shit does now. Merle isn’t stupid. Merle isn’t oblivious. Daryl suspects that Merle is every bit as good at lying to himself as Daryl is—that might be kind of the family business—but at some point even that runs out of road. So Merle gives him a thin, sharp half-moon of a smile and shrugs again. “You said you were thinkin’ ‘bout a better place. That’s what that money was for, ain’t it?”

“You thought that was bullshit.”

“It is.” Merle lets out a long breath and leans his head back, staring up. “But what the fuck. That hole we’re stuck in, that’s bullshit too. ‘s all kinda bullshit. So why not?” He pauses for a few beats and toys with the bottle. “You’re still outta your fuckin’ mind over this girl, you know it. You know it’s not gonna go anywhere good, man. Just a world of hurt. But yeah. Just ‘cause you wanna fuck your life all up, don’t see why this’s gotta be part of that.”
Daryl gapes at him. Maybe he shouldn’t be so surprised; there were a limited number of things that
extra cash could mean and this was a fairly obvious one. But hearing it. Hearing Merle say it. That
he’ll more than tolerate it. More than humor Daryl’s stupid little fantasy.

That he’d help. That he even was.

“So you wanna…?” He can’t do words right now. There aren’t any. Fortunately Merle picks him up
and carries him along.

“You wanna. I got no reason to be a dick about it.”

“Man…” Daryl has no idea what he wants to do. What he can do. Sit there and stare. Try to thank
him and probably fail. Tackle him, hug him, actually fucking hug him, because this is everything,
everything—exactly what he wanted so desperately two years and however many hundreds upon
hundreds of circling miles ago, what he always wanted, what kept him going when nothing else did,
when the world was trying to beat him to death and there was nothing to believe in, what he never
stopped wanting even as they kept running and running and he became more and more convinced
that it was never going to happen. His big brother back and all that shit left behind and moving
forward for real and everything better. This is what he never stopped wanting even when he was
almost positive that his chance to have it was over. That this dragging, weary thing was all there was
ever going to be.

And now.

You want to?

You want to.

Like that’s enough.

He drags in a breath and it catches halfway down his throat. It’s always been a mistake to show this
much, and he can already hear what’s coming next—what, you gonna cry about it, you damp pussy?
Fuck off with that shit, Darylina, all I said was I wasn’t gonna try to punch how fuckin’ stupid you
are through your thick fuckin’ skull—but it doesn’t. That’s not what comes.

“You find a place,” Merle says softly. “You find one, we’ll haul ourselves over there. Tell that Elmer
to shove it up his ass.” He smiles, very faint. “Be happy to see the last of that fat fuck.”

Daryl manages to take a breath and put it behind a word. “Alright.”

He whispers it. That seems to be all he can do. Sit there and whisper and try to understand.

None of the rules apply anymore. None of them. Not a single one.

~

Later, on his back in the dark, staring into it and thinking about how it might be one of the last few
nights he spends in this particular darkness, his teeth worry the healing cut on his lip and he drifts
through the other side of this. Because it’s not just about looking back and seeing what he didn’t
have, what he wasn’t allowed to have. What neither of them were. How it took them this long to
reach for it, and how he was terrified that they never would.

It’s not just about what’s behind them.

Beth found him. Came to him. Pulled him into her circle of light and warmth, and then it became a
whole fuck of a lot more than a circle, and she’s pulled him into something much bigger and brighter, something that burns. She took his hand and led him into something, got her own hands on him and in him, started moving pieces of him around, and he’s changing. Everything is changing. All the rules, all the premises on which he used to operate, all the foundations on which he used to build. Shifting, falling away, unrolling beneath him like a road.

Beth is taking him somewhere. He wants so much to go. He was certain—absolutely certain, certain and cold and hurting with it—that his brother wasn’t going to be able to follow him.

Until now.

*The good days will happen again.*
I pull up to the front of your driveway with magic soaking my spine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He doesn’t get a lot of sleep that night. But the next day he’s at the farm at dawn.

He doesn’t wake up and go straight there. He’s up when it’s dark, only about three hours of real rest under his belt—and vivid, hallucinatory dreams, nothing frightening or unsettling but ecstatic, like flying, maybe even literally flying, and he heard once that when you dream about flying you’re really dreaming about having sex, but he really thinks this was about actually and for-real flying.

Wings at his back. Stars above, fields below. Heading straight for the moon, and not alone.

Plunging back down, her skin warm in the grass, slipping inside her and worshipping her with himself. With every part of him. Her saying his name like a prayer. Like she does know what one is. Like they both do.

He opens his eyes and turned onto his side, drops a hand between his legs, goes to the shower and he’s still half dozing when he lets everything go with a deep, shuddering sigh.

He used to think of sex like the plot of a story—which, though he never got as far as his sophomore year in high school, he does understand. You start, you build and rise, there’s a climax, and then it’s a slide back downhill into a flat denouement. But with Beth it’s not like that. Not anymore. You rise—long and slow—and then you ride wave after wave, and it’s not minutes or even hours but days. Weeks. It’s a state in which you exist. He wants her all the time. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but it’s all the fucking time, and while he’s not sure how long it can continue like this, he doesn’t see any way it might stop.

Well. He sees a couple of ways. But he’s not going to entertain them.

Dressing in the dark, and walking out the door into the cool air, which isn’t so much a breeze as a gentle shifting, how a body of water behaves in the mornings and evenings. It isn’t yet cold, though it will be. Last day of the first week of October, and if before every day felt like a step toward something unknown, now it feels like he’s walking faster and faster. He should be terrified. He keeps telling himself that, like he needs reminding. Like he needs to keep a kind of perspective, even if he’s not sure what purpose that would serve.

He gets into the truck, rumbles and rattles the engine to life, and drives. Drives all over, down empty silent streets, past windows dimly lit by other early risers, small tacky houses and larger, more stately ones, flat streets with patchy lawns and others with green hedges beyond sidewalks lined with spreading oaks. People living lives not unlike what he’s used to—all he knew—and people living lives that used to make him hate them. But those other, better lives were never truly real to him, back when the world was small. None of it was. Sure, he was looking at apartments, but while he was audacious enough to be hopeful and he was doing math in his head and he was tucking money away, he now understands that he never imagined it as a real possibility. He could dream, but that was all he could do.

It wasn’t for him. It was never for him. He could be here, he could go to the farm, eat with Beth’s family, work alongside her father and brother, wander into that world for a while, but never stay.

Except yesterday he fell down into the grass with her, and it was like the water. He didn’t realize it
until later, but he came up changed.

He’s not going back. Not now.

Merle. Merle with him. He never really imagined that either.

Maybe he should have had more faith.

He drives back to the main road, past a tiny auto dealership, past the low, blocky high school with its track and its football practice field, past the corner where he picked her up, out of town and out toward the farm. By now it’s getting light, though the sun hasn’t touched the horizon, and the last stars are going out. Those autumn constellations: each one of them is also an old story. The sky is full of them and they never had to end.

He drives down long country roads with the windows down and the radio blasting, and though the wind is forcing itself into his lungs it’s difficult to breathe.

Apropos of nothing apparent, he remembers that bike. That fucking long-lost bike, riding for the first time, roaring over the road like a demon. There was never anything else quite like that, after.

The sun is up by the time he goes to the farm itself, though only just, and Hershel is waiting for him. Better to begin things as soon as it’s light now, and he knows Hershel was up a while ago. Farm workdays start early, especially when the days themselves are getting shorter. As has become the usual order of business he gets coffee, a few minutes to sit, open up to the day, and he gets to see the school bus pull up at the bottom of the drive and Beth come out the front door with her hair pulled back into a rough ponytail, blue peasant blouse off one shoulder, tight jeans that show off her ass—yes, he can notice that now and not feel creepy about it—backpack, those boots, and a tiny smile tossed over her shoulder, quick and subtle so no one sees but him.

She didn’t know what she was. She is.

what you feel is what you are and what you are is beautiful

He works all day, works himself hard, works himself into sweating under a sun bright and warm enough to still be summer, and it feels so good.

~

She comes home. Disappears for a while. Comes downstairs for dinner—honey-glazed pork chops, Jesus God. And like the morning, he sits outside with a cigarette and watches the last of the sun vanish and listen to the birds in full evening swing. Tonight, quite out of nowhere, he remembers being a kid—not even sure how young, but way earlier than from when he usually remembers things—and his mother on the porch, watching him play, that porch and that mother which years later burned together, and of course she was sitting with her own cigarette and her wine, and she was talking to him. Sort of to him. Also to herself. He was playing with some flimsy plastic dinosaurs—a T-Rex and one of those things with the duck bills that Merle hadn’t broken—and he remembers his mother’s voice, meditative and soft and more than half drunk.

Never shut up, do they? Like they don’t know how. Like they can’t no more. Christ, what a racket.
Ash tumbles onto the steps.

“Hi.”

He glances behind him; it couldn’t be anyone other than her, standing there with a book in her hand, silhouetted in the light through the screen door. She gives him another one of those tiny smiles and turns, heading for the porch swing a few feet away.

It’s light enough to read, he supposes. And there’s some glow through the living room window.

He gives her a little nod and nothing more. No one else is out here, but still.

“Still warm,” she murmurs as she sits, book held against her chest, and his little nod transforms itself into a little smile. They’ve reached some kind of apex of intentionally bland conversation: they’re now discussing the weather.

But she’s right. It’s warm.

“Ain’t gonna last.”

She cocks her head, her smile turning a touch sardonic. “It’s October, Daryl.”

“Don’t get fresh, girl.”

“Or what?” Suddenly not bland at all, and he fights back a slight shiver. He’s meeting her later tonight and he doesn’t for a moment expect the meeting is going to be innocuous in nature; he’s not sure whether or not it’s a good deal to be thinking explicitly along these lines right here and now. Though it’s not like he pretty much wasn’t already.

He could pinch the fuck out of her. He could do a lot of other things.

So instead he just shrugs and smokes at her.

“Whatcha readin’?”

“Poetry.”

“Homework?”

“No. Wanted to.” And he knows what poet it is—the identity, though he never caught the name on the book. It had to be; maybe he’s moving inexorably forward, but there’s also a cyclical quality to everything that’s happening now. Not a spiral anymore but a Möbius strip. Around and around and looping over. “I was just… I was thinkin’ about it. Wanted to go back to it.”

“Anythin’ in particular?”

“Want me to read you somethin’?”

Answering a question with a question, not completely connected. But it is. He remembers when she last read poetry to him, how it was so much like her singing—clear and musical. Reaching in and touching something deep.

He nods. She opens the book, thumbs through the pages, stops at one and takes a breath and speaks with that same rhythm and cadence, like it’s a song but not exactly. Which—he supposes, not that he’s an expert or anything—is what poetry is.
Just before dawn
three deer
came walking
down the hill

as if the moment were nothing different
from eternity
as lightly as that
they nibbled

the leaves,
they drank
from the pond,
their pretty mouths

sucking the loose silver,
their heavy eyes
shining.

Listen,

I did not really see them.
I came later and saw their tracks
on empty sand.

But I don’t believe

only to the edge
of what my eyes actually see
in the kindness of the morning,
do you?

And my life,
which is my body surely,
is also something more
isn’t yours?

I suppose the deer waited
to see the sun lift itself up,
filling the hills with light and shadows
they were leaping

back into the rough, uncharted pinewoods
where I have lived so much of my life,
where everything is so quick and uncertain,
so glancing, so improbable, so real.

She falls silent, and the silence stretches out as the dark creeps closer. The last of the cigarette is a miniscule red beacon, like the top of a radio tower. Even the birds are quieting down and settling themselves.

He might almost say it. Because she’s lowered the book into her lap and she’s just sitting, not looking at him, her face thrown into half-light and slightly raised, knees drawn together and her hair tossed over one shoulder, the cut on her cheek a thin dark line that accents her cheekbone, and she
looks so young and so beautiful, and he might almost say it. Here, where someone might be by the open window or at the door and might hear him and know everything. And she would too. Which he’s not afraid of. He’s not afraid of that.

It’s just that no one ever taught him how.

“So you never read poetry?”

He laughs quietly—not annoyed. “You know me, you think I been readin’ a lotta fuckin’ poetry?” He exhales smoke and it fades into the dusk. “Told you I didn’t know any.”

“Not like in school or anythin’?”

This, he didn’t tell her. Not with any specificity. “Never really did a whole lotta school.”

“Oh.” But she doesn’t sound surprised. Sensible girl, insightful, she could connect the dots, but he also understands that she didn’t want to insult him by assuming. And instead of getting angry about it, being reminded of something he frankly regrets now and would be embarrassed by in certain company, he just appreciates the thought. Appreciates it a lot.

“Do you like it?” she asks then, her voice low.

He told her he did in her bedroom, but they both know that was something particular and special, isolated from a lot of other things, related but self-contained. And she was talking about that specific poem, and she was talking about the part of herself she opened up to him that night. And the night in the water.

Not about this. Not in general.

“Yeah,” he says, unhesitating. He doesn’t need to hesitate, doesn’t need to think about it. He likes her singing. He likes the music she makes of herself. He likes this too.

“Good,” she says, and her tone is all slow smile.

They’re quiet for a while, and like always it’s gentle and comfortable, and he leans into it like it’s her, like it’s her shoulder against his. Her head against his back.

But when she speaks again, she breaks it.

“Are you alright?”

The question comes out of nowhere, out of the dark, and suddenly she’s looking directly at him. It’s so abrupt that he nearly jumps. “What?”

“Are you alright?”

“Like…” He frowns. “Right now?”

“Like… At all. I just wanna know. Are you?”

It’s a very simple question, and he has no idea how to answer it.

He told her, is the thing. He told her, that night in her room after she came home from the hospital, how not all right he is, how he hasn’t been all right basically ever. How he doesn’t even know what all right means, what it feels like. How he doesn’t know how people get to be that way, what it’s like to walk around without so many scars. And now she’s asking, and he thinks he knows exactly how
and why she’s asking it, and it shakes him.

Is he?

“I dunno.”

She nods, apparently satisfied with the answer. “Okay.” She pauses, looking down. “How are things? With… with your brother?”

They’re talking kind of a lot. She was already taking a risk with the poetry. He should cut this off and go. But instead he’s answering, and as he does he realizes he wanted to tell her, was even excited to tell her. Because what she saw was horrible, and he doesn’t want her to think that’s all there is. Even if he’s pretty sure she already knows.

“Why you care?” Teasing. But when she answers she sounds very serious, and she’s not following their little script.

“Because I care.”

Well.

“They’re alright.” He looks down at the cigarette, stubs it out in the grass. “He’s… We’re gonna get a new place.”

“Where?” More smile in her voice and he gets warm all over.

“Dunno yet. Gotta look around, see what we can do.”

“That’s good. I’m glad.” She laughs. “That place was gross.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t no good.” He’s quiet for a moment, looking down the drive at nothing in particular, then, very softly, “I think things are gettin’ better.”

She’ll know. She’ll know what that means.

“Okay,” she murmurs, and she doesn’t say anything else, and he doesn’t either.

It’s officially dark. It’ll be another couple of hours before the moon starts to rise. Tonight it’s going to be full.

“I should head out.”

“Yeah.”

He gets up, and he’s about to walk to the truck, pull down the drive, go to wherever he’s going to go and do whatever he’s going to do before midnight, but on impulse he turns back to her, and what he sees on her shadowed face…

She’s frightened. A bit. Just a bit. Not like something horrible might happen. But like she’s going to do something and she’s not totally sure about it. Not that she doesn’t want to, but that…

After, there’s no going back.

He has no idea how he can tell the difference between these things, but he can.

Her lips move. She might be about to go on. But she keeps that silence, and he doesn’t pierce it. He
gives her a nod, and he walks away.

~

The moon is high and bright enough to throw sharp shadows behind and over everything when he pulls up to the tree and stops, leans over and opens the door for her. Even with the headlights it’s hard to see her clearly, but when she hops in and turns to him she’s flushed, her eyes wide and bright, a smile playing around the edges of her mouth.

She’s carrying a bundle of blankets in her arms.

“Let’s go.”

He looks at her, bemused. Fluttering like a little bird, deep inside. “Where?”

“Guess.”

He pulls back onto the road, glances at her once more, and takes them to the ruins.

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Slide" by the Goo Goo Dolls, poem is "The Pinewoods" by Mary Oliver.
the stars are blazing like rebel diamonds cut out of the sun

There have been full moons since he got here. That’s how physics works; also time. But he can’t recall seeing any others, and maybe it’s just because this one is bright enough to blot out almost everything else. Bright enough to obscure a lot of the stars. Halfway to the ruins—sure, it’s not safe, but he hasn’t seen another car in about two hours and he’s feeling impulsive—he cuts off the headlights and they coast through the silvery dark. The night flows in through the windows and wraps itself around them, and it muffles everything except the wind.

Not that they’re making a lot of noise anyway. The radio is off. They aren’t speaking. The silence is comfortable, but there’s a deeper quality to it that hasn’t been there much before. Something like a held breath.

The fields blur past and the trees creep toward the edge of the road, and at last they reach the turnoff. And even here, bumping over the gravel, the sounds remain muffled. With less speed the wind has died down to a breeze, and now there seem to be mockingbirds everywhere, all around the car, maybe following them. Floating from branch to branch, running through their repertoire with wild enthusiasm. Trills and squeaks and low whistles, laughter, little sighs.

“I love mockingbirds,” Beth says softly. She’s gazing out the window and toward the last visible edge of the meadow on their right, her elbow up on the edge and her hand combed into her hair. Her face is pale in the moonlight, but it doesn’t look bloodless.

She looks profoundly alive.

“How come?”

“They don’t have one song. They’re always singin’ somethin’ different.” She shoots him a quick smile. “They do covers.”

He doesn’t respond, but he can feel her looking at him again, and after a minute or two, as they turn into the deeper woods, he feels her hand sliding across his thigh, squeezing lightly. Small and warm, and the heat she sends surging through him is about wanting her… and also not.

There’s that wildness in him, same as the night before—and the kind it seems like he finds whenever he comes into these woods. Wildness coming into him not from anything outside but from somewhere buried deep that not even days upon days of hunting the animal back into himself has uncovered.

He wants to run with her. Grab her hand, run back with her into that silvery meadow, run and run under the moon until they fall down gasping.

But that’s not where she said she wanted to go.

~

It seems like a long time later when they finally reach the top of the slope and park in the deep shadows.

Beth pushes the door open and hops out, taking the blankets with her. He follows her, standing for a moment and breathing in the cooler, moister air drifting up to them from the creek, listening to the mockingbirds hurl songs at each other, congratulate and heckle, returning the rustling of the leaves with the sounds of their own wings. He’s lost enough in it that he doesn’t realize Beth is close until
she’s right there at his side, touching his arm.

“You wanna go?”

“I.” He pauses, clears his throat. It’s been a while since he really felt awkward around her—or it feels like a while—but he does now. A little. “I guess. Yeah.”

“Okay.” She takes his hand and threads their fingers together, and the moonlight catches her smile just before she turns away and begins to lead him toward the slope’s edge.

The mud has long since dried and the going isn’t particularly tricky. She goes down first, handing him the blankets before she begins her slow, controlled slide, the scuffing of her boots and the rattle of the pebbles she’s dislodging carrying into the trees. He goes down after her, skidding a bit when he reaches the bottom, and looks up at the broken stone walls and low towers—not so low now. The moon is still casting everything in silver, but somehow the stone appears almost crystalline, cloudy but semi-transparent around the edges. That can’t be, but every time he’s been here alone the same kind of rule-suspension has been in play.

He steps forward into the thick grass, carrying the blankets, and when he glances back at her she’s watching him, small and delicate, strands of hair falling all around her face, and while she’s motionless she looks like she might leap off into the trees at any time. Run into the dark like the deer he always thinks of when he looks at her.

Almost always. Because he’s seen how she might hunt if she was inclined to do so.

“Where to?”

His voice is low, barely rising above the chuckling of the creek. He feels the need to speak quietly, like he did before. She smiles again and pushes up on her toes and kisses him, soft and quick.

“You know.”

He supposes he does.

Across the remains of the old garden path and through the arched doorway, and inside the mill’s wide open interior the moon pours itself over the grass and the walls sparkle gently with flecks of mica. He can still hear the mockingbirds but they’re more distant now, and it’s just the leaves, the creek, and their own nearly silent movements as they walk. She’s right, he already knows: he knows where she’s going to stop and she does, halting in the center and tipping her head back.

The moon is almost directly overhead, and it smooths out every part of her except her cut, the only thing marring her, and it isn’t even a fault. It’s a single vein of darkness in white quartz. She looks unreal. Literally unreal. He stares at her, blankets forgotten in his arms, and everything else fades into total unimportance.

Some tome ago, it occurred to him that he’s never going to have these moments again. These are the things you know in an ambient, background kind of way: you move through life in a linear fashion, you get older every year, at some point you die, and if you’re lucky you carry some good memories around with you but memories are all you have in the end. You never get back the things you live through. As soon as you have them you lose them forever.

He never really knew what it was to feel *old* until he met her.

It’s not actually so bad.
She lowers her head and turns, extends a hand to him, and he goes to her.

Together they spread the blankets out in the grass—old blankets, thin but very soft, and the grass is soft too so the thinness doesn’t matter anyway—and lie down. He’s on his back, one arm slung behind his head, and she turns toward him and lays her cheek against his shoulder, her hand on his chest, rising and falling with his breathing. Her hair is tickling his nose and he combs it back, but not because it’s exactly bothering him. The moon is almost—almost—bright enough to make him close his eyes.

“Wish we could see stars better,” she murmurs. “Always thought that was kinda unfair, that we can’t have both. Moon this bright and stars.”

“Life ain’t fair, girl.”

“Seriously? Hadn’t noticed.” She laughs quietly. “I never got that. Why shouldn’t it be fair?”

“Didn’t say it shouldn’t be. Just said it ain’t.”

“Then we could try to make it fairer.”

She sounds very reasonable, very practical, very her, and he smiles. “You gonna pull the moon outta the sky?”

“Witches can. I…” She hesitates and laughs again, and now she sounds the slightest bit rueful. “If Daddy knew he’d be so mad. Witchcraft and everythin’. But Becca—the girl I told you about, broke up with her boyfriend? Her daddy is the pastor over at First Presbyterian and she says he’s a pain in the ass, so she’s always doin’ stuff he would hate. She looked at these websites on witches and once when I was at one of her slumber parties she wanted to get us together and try this ritual.”

His smile widens a little. There’s something so perfect about this, so quintessential, something he recognizes regardless of how alien it is; when he was younger, teenage girls were even more of a vast uncharted territory than he imagines they are for most boys.

Which makes what he’s doing now a touch ironic.

“Did you do it?”

“Yeah,” she whispers, as if she’s imparting some big secret. Her fingers are moving across his chest, tracing abstract designs. Runes, he thinks suddenly. Sigils—somehow he knows that specific word. She’s enchanting him. “I knew I shouldn’t, but it was… It was excitin’. Y’know? I dunno if I really thought anythin’ would happen, but I wanted to see. Thought for a few minutes maybe I would go to Hell… It was just this stupid thing. I know what they say at church, but I don’t think God would send me to Hell for somethin’ like that.” She pauses. “Do you?”

“I dunno.” He’s quiet for a moment, unsure if he should say this. Unsure if he should tell her, if it might upset her somehow.

But nothing else he’s said has. And he’s told her some pretty awful stuff.

“I dunno if I believe in God.” He traces his tongue over his healing lip. “I don’t think I do.”

She lifts her head. Her eyes are clear and curious, and of course he can’t see any sign that she’s judging him. None at all. “Why not?”
Usually he has to search for the words. Usually with something this deep and raw he would shrug, maybe look away. *I'unno*. But he does know. He knows it in a way that pierces him. And she’s enchanting him, and he thinks he could tell her just about anything. The words… He could find them. He does.

“If God was real, he woulda helped me.”

He half expects her to argue with him. He knows this is the kind of thing about which religious people argue. But of course she’s different, because she’s different in every important respect, and after a few seconds more she nods and lays her head down again. Not necessarily agreeing with him—but granting his logic.

Trust him to know himself.

Everything in him knots up and he pulls in a long, slow breath, nose full of the clean scent of her hair.

“So did anythin’ happen?”

“The ritual?” She releases another laugh, a rolling, tuneful sound. “No. She said she was gonna *draw down the moon*, and we all got in a circle in the grass, held hands, chanted somethin’. She took it real seriously, but I think she made that part up. The chant. I think she made most of it up. She talked funny for a while, said she was *filled with a goddess*, but it was… Well. It was kinda bullshit.” She’s silent for a short while, then adds, “But it made her happy.”

“People believe a lotta shit ‘cause it makes ‘em happy.”

“Yeah, they do. I used to.”

His fingers haven’t left her hair and now they’re working under where the strands are drawn tight against her head by her ponytail, rubbing gently against her scalp. “Like what?”

“Well I’d have this perfect life. Graduate, meet this perfect guy, have this perfect weddin’, have this perfect house, these perfect kids… Everythin’ would be great. Perfect. Especially the weddin’.”

He turns his face further toward her and presses a kiss to the crown of her head. Silhouetted against the moon’s glow, the trees are swaying, and as he watches them he feels himself lulled. Not sleepy but something deeper. That enchantment again, the spell she’s weaving. He doesn’t believe in God, and he doesn’t really believe in any goddess, either, but he does believe in her, and he believes she can manipulate the universe.

“Tell me how it was gonna be.”

“Oh.” She sighs, and when she speaks next her voice has dropped, the words a little halting, a little shy. “I mean… It was gonna be in church, and there were gonna be flowers everywhere… I wanted roses. Of *course* I wanted roses, all pink. And I was gonna have this long dress with all this lace, and I—” She stops and lifts her head again, gazing up at him with an awkward half smile. “I gotta tell you?”

“You don’t gotta do anythin’.”

She doesn’t immediately continue. But then she does, still looking at him. “I was gonna have this party at the farm, outside, with a tent and white tablecloths and crystal, and lanterns… and pretty much everyone was gonna be there, everyone was gonna be tellin’ me how pretty I was, and I was gonna dance, and it was just….” She lets out another sigh and shakes her head. “It was just gonna be
Another long pause.

“And I was gonna go back to this big perfect hotel room with my perfect husband, and I was gonna have my first time, and there were gonna be candles everywhere with this huge bed, and it was gonna be this thing out of a stupid movie. Perfect.”

She almost sounds scornful now, and he’s confused. He doesn’t understand why she would sound that way. It’s pretty much what he assumed most girls wanted.

But she’s not most girls. He should stop assuming things. He should know better.

“Why don’t you believe that no more?”

“’cause it ain’t real.” She lifts her hand from his chest and touches his face, her slender fingers so smooth and cool, stroking down his cheek. “Nothin’ perfect like that is real. It’s silly. Maybe you get it in the end, but even if you do, I don’t think it’s like that. I don’t…” She bites her lip, her eyes so big and so bright. Little stars in their depths. “I don’t want perfect, Daryl. I want somethin’ better. I had that bad year, and I came back, and I…”

She lowers herself and tucks her face into the hollow of his throat, and he’s sure he can feel her mouthing words. Saying them like prayers. He doesn’t have to hear her to know what they are.

 Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do?

He doesn’t say anything. He has nothing to say. Nothing to add, nothing he can offer to augment it. She says things sometimes, and they strike him as sharp enough and wise enough that they should stand on their own.

So then it’s only the mockingbirds and their setlists of calls, the leaves above them, the water.

Until she leans in and kisses him, light at first and deepening, nudging his lips apart and gliding her tongue alongside his. He sighs, cups the back of her head, slips into her. Inside her.

And he isn’t in the least surprised when she raises her head and herself and looks down at him with her hair a silver halo, licks her lips, and whispers, “I’m ready.”

He just nods. He knew.

And it just comes, easy like it was always going to be, both his hands sliding into her hair and tugging it free so it falls all around her, and there’s perfect and there’s perfect and she is.

“I love you.”

Her breath hitches as she pushes into his hands, something almost like pain flitting—moth-like—across her face, and a shudder runs through her.

He’s not upset. He’s not hurt. He put it out there between them, let it go, laid it down in front of her like a gift, and she can do what she wants with it. He expects nothing from her. He wanted nothing more than for her to know.

“You don’t have to—”

“I love you,” she breathes, lays a hand against his, turns her head and presses her lips to his palm. “I
—I think I have for a while now. I think…” She smiles into his touch, so warm. “Daryl…”

He pulls her close, lifts himself and takes her and lays her down beneath him.

It’s not like before. Before, in the clearing, it was like tumbling: it was falling down into the grass, barely controlled, no need for control, wild and half mad and chaos like the beginning of everything. And this is wild too, no need for control here either, but it’s soft when he puts his hands on her, drifts his lips from her mouth to her cheek to her brow, her jaw, kissing her everywhere, and she sighs and settles her hands against his shoulders, his arms, closing over his muscles. When he kisses her he can feel her smiling, can hear her murmuring something, but he can’t make it out and he doesn’t think he has to. He gets enough of the sense of it when she spreads her legs and hooks one over his hip, tugs him down against her and pushes up to meet him as soon as she feels the outline of his cock pressing into her hip, her belly.

This can’t be fast. He knows that. It happened fast in the clearing, even if he tried to take his time, and he can’t do that now. This is so different anyway, because they’re in the grass but before it was all warmth and sun and now, when he raises himself slightly and looks down at her, everything is drenched in the moon.

He moves again, watching her face, and she gasps softly and her lips part. They’re trembling. She’s not afraid.

“Feel that?”

She nods. “Daryl…”

“Christ, girl, that’s what you do to me.” He ducks his head, teeth scraping her jaw and his hand running down her side, looking for the hem of her shirt. She moans, fingers in his hair and tangled and pulling just a bit. Just a perfect bit. “I wanna fuck you. I wanna fuck you so bad, Beth.”

Talking simply isn’t very hard around her. Not anymore.

“Then do it.” She laughs, her neck arched against his mouth and her hips already rolling. “Daryl, I almost died, I don’t wanna wait anymore.”

His hand is halfway up her shirt, fingertips grazing the undersides of her breasts, when he stops and lifts his head again. “I don’t got—”

“I do.” She’s breathing fast, suddenly grinning at him, reaching down and fumbling in her pocket. “Stole it from Shawn.” A thoughtful look crosses her face. “I actually might’ve stolen more than one.”

He simply stares at her for a moment. She looks back, teeth at her lip again, affecting wide-eyed innocence. Those doe eyes.

She doesn’t fool him for a second. Then again, she’s not really trying to.

“Girl—”

“He ain’t gonna miss ‘em. Trust me.” She curves her hand around the back of his neck as she pulls her other free and he hears the crackle of packaging. She hasn’t taken her eyes off his, and now the mischief is gone from her face. So is the innocence.

This is hunger. Still low, but it’s there and it’s hot, and all at once she’s burning under him.
“Fuck me, Daryl.”

He can’t do this fast. But he doesn’t have to be gentle. Not entirely. And when he lowers his head again, when she tugs him in, he bites at the juncture of her throat and shoulder and he does it hard enough to drag a soft cry out of her, flying up and colliding with the glittering stones.

This much is like before: there’s no order to how they get out of their clothes. It’s awkward and fumbling and clumsy, and as he pulls his shirt off over his head and she drags at it with him, he swears he hears something tear. Her bra, their jeans, boots, everything, and she’s naked under him and spreading herself open, rolling her whole body up in waves, and it feels like she’s trying to wrap all of herself around him as she traps his cock against her stomach and grinds her cunt against his thigh.

And now that she’s said it once she can’t seem to stop. This girl from whose mouth he’s hardly ever heard anything above a PG rating is pressing her lips against his brow, the corner of his mouth, under his jaw, and breathing *Fuck me, Daryl, I need you. I need you, I’m ready, God, fuck me, please.*

But he isn’t going to do this fast. He doesn’t want to. He wants her so bad it’s setting him on fire, filling his veins with magma, the inside of his skull boiling, but out here it’s all cool, all quiet, all whispers and birdsong and her gasping against his skin, her mouth open and wet on his, and what he wants her to understand, what he *trusts* she understands, is that this is his first. His only first.

He’ll never have this again.

Neither of them will.

He pushes himself up on one elbow and slides half off her, one leg still tangled and spreading hers open, and reaches down, sliding over her belly and her bush—petting her—fingertips dancing around her clit. She gazes up at him with a delightful confusion of loose pleasure and frustration, and she closes one hand tight on his upper arm, nails digging into him.

“I told you to do it.” Her whisper is coarse, almost hard, and though she’s smiling and she sounds once more close to laughter, he’s never heard her like this before. Not a goddess—a girl. He should have known everything that would mean.

“I’m gonna.”

She gives in and giggles, bucking her hips and chasing his teasing fingers. “*When?*”

“When I want to.”

“I thought I was decidin’ that.” She leans up and presses her parted lips against his throat, closes them over his adams apple and sucks her way lightly downward, stopping when she’s near his collarbones. “I thought… Daryl, come *on.*”

“I will.” He’s laughing too, rumbling in his chest, skipping her clit entirely and pressing a finger into her with a quiet, wet sound. Because she *is* wet, so fucking wet, more even than she was in the clearing, practically dripping down his knuckle—and it’s like she’s getting wetter every second he pushes into her, arching her back and whispering his name. Cursing him occasionally, which he supposes he’s more than earning.

Once she thought this would be romantic. Soft. Candles everywhere. Not being fucked in the moonlight and the grass in the ruins of a forgotten mill by a rough man twice her age. He wants to laugh again and he doesn’t know if he would stop.
Doesn’t think he would want to.

“What about this?” He’s sliding himself down now, flicking his tongue beneath her throat and over the smooth, hot skin of her chest, fucking her in a slow, deep rhythm. “This ain’t good?”

“It’s good.” She’s weakening. Needy, even needier now, but softer, panting, both hands in his hair and trying to hold on like he’s all that’s keeping her here. “It’s so good, but… Daryl… Oh…” Trailing off as he circles her nipple with the point of his tongue, swipes at it with the broad flat—

And that’s when he knows what he wants to do with her.

“Just hold on,” he murmurs, and he’s not even sure if he’s speaking in terms of time or her hands in his hair, and it doesn’t matter. Suddenly all he cares about is shifting on top of her again, pinning her with his hands on her hips as he settles between her legs and moves more rapidly downward, kissing each bump of her ribs as he passes them.

Right around then—he’s pretty sure—is when she realizes what he’s doing, and she almost squeaks, a high, desperate little sound, and she actually sounds nervous. “Daryl, you’re—”

He lifts his head. He’s so close to her cunt already. God, he can smell her, and he knows how good she tastes and he knows how wet she is, and he wants to be in her more than he could ever say, but this...

“You want me to stop?”

She releases him with one hand and pushes up on her elbow, staring down at him. She looks stunned. She looks like she might be about to attack him. Silently, she shakes her head.

“Good girl,” he breathes, and spreads her legs wide.

He actually wishes there was better light. The moon is bright but it’s not the sun, and in the sunlight she got to see him. She got to watch herself explore, watch herself touch and stroke and play. He’s been here, he’s done those things, but not this close, not with his lips and his tongue, and for what feels like a long while he just looks at her and at what he can see, her soft folds and her clit swollen beyond its hood, all of it glistening in the pale light. Ready for him. He could just fuck her now. Get that fucking condom on, drag himself back up her, hitch her thighs high on his hips and bury himself in her.

No.

He spreads her with his fingers and she shudders, moans, and does both louder when he leans in and kisses her.

He licks his lips and thinks he might quite simply be unable to go any further anyway. He’s not sure he can survive this. Surely dying in the middle of it would be fine. That has to be the best he could ever hope to do.

No, he already knows he never wants to stop doing this.

He raises his head and she’s still looking at him, mouth fallen open and her small breasts heaving. “God, Daryl…”

“I never done this before.”

Just for a second or two she stills. “Oh.”
He’s not even sure why he told her. Not that he’s surprised he did, but the reasons… Not that he’s afraid he won’t be good at it. If he was worried about being able to satisfy her, that stopped being the case weeks ago. That’s not it at all.

This is his first. His first. She is. She has to know that.

“I love you, Beth.”

He swipes his tongue long and firm up her lips to her clit, flicks experimentally at it, and she drowns out his thick moan with her thicker sob.

He’s exploring. He’s exploring just like she did. He plunges into it, utterly focused, and even her sighs and whimpers and hard groans fade into the background. It’s just her cunt, shining so wet in the moonlight, the way she trembles when he gently pulls her further open and licks at her entrance, carefully tongues her labia past his lips and sucks, swirls around her clit slow and then fast and then slow again. She would be writhing if he wasn’t holding her down, and he’s barely sparing any attention for even that. This is all he wants, playing with her like this, teasing her and teasing her while she flows so tangy-sweet into his mouth.

He wishes he could talk to her as he does it, wishes he could tell her—Christ, Beth, how you taste, oh my fucking God, my God, there’s nothing like this, nothing, I want to drink you, I want to fucking drink you, just let me have this forever.

He can hear her, less faint now as she rises in volume. Her hand is tightening in his hair, he’s suddenly aware of that too—yanking hard enough to cascade tiny sparks of pain across his scalp. “Daryl… Oh my God oh my God, oh my God, oh… oh, Jesus, you… Your mouth, your—mouth—Daryl, oh, please—”

She’s speaking in tongues. Glossolalia. Appropriate. He chuckles against her cunt and licks her harder.

Apparently he’s doing okay.

He could do it for hours, assuming a superhuman jaw, but it’s only another minute or two before she’s clutching at him with both hands, her little ah-ah-ah rising in a crescendo and her heels digging into his back, and he clamps his lips over her and sucks at her clit as she bucks up hard against his mouth and wails at the sky, a flood of her juices onto his tongue and down to greet the moan rising in his throat as he laps her in and swallows her.

Then she’s shoving at him, pushing his face away, hissing God it’s too much Daryl Daryl it’s too much and he lets her go, collapsing with her, hands loose on her hips and his head pillowed on her thigh.

Both of them gasping. Wind and mockingbird song and her wet cooling on his face, licked off his lips.

“Oh my God.” A breath, hardly there, he has no idea how much later. Her hands are still in his hair and they’re combing, stroking, shaking almost imperceptibly. “Daryl, you…” She giggles softly and he smiles, helpless and a little giddy, kissing the damp curls just above her clit.

And on lazy impulse he slips a finger back into her. She stiffens and he expects her to push his hand away, but instead she covers it with hers and moves him, pushes him in deeper and withdraws him, using him.

Fucking herself with him.
He groans, and suddenly he’s aware of his own cock with such intensity that it nearly hurts, stabbing fire into him. He presses his hips down into the blanket, looking for pressure, friction, anything, and somehow she knows because she laughs—not a giggle but a full-throated, happy sound—and tightens her grip on his hand, starting to roll with it. “You actually gonna do it now?” He doesn’t look up but he can hear her grin in her voice, and it’s wicked. “You want to yet?”

“Fuck, Beth.” He tries to push himself up, still licking her off his lips, but he meets the resistance of her hand—her hands, holding his wrist and tugging him back down by his hair. “What—”

“You want to?” She laughs again, and he looks up and sees her arching her back and—yes—grinning at the moon, her breasts perfect little proud curves, her legs fallen wide open and her cunt so wet, and she’s a girl, she’s like the first girl in existence, glorious and wild and fucking herself on his hand and laughing at him. “Tell me how much you want to, Daryl.”

“Beth, please… God, please lemme fuck you.” He has no shame about this at all. Whatever she wants him to do, to give, he’ll do it and say it and mean it, because he wants to be inside her so bad it’s agony even though he could live between her legs if she would let him. Just fucking pitch a tent down here. And he could also take her hands and pin them to the ground, lift himself over her and kiss her until she’s the one begging, but he doesn’t want to. Can’t even imagine it.

She has him.

“I don’t believe you.” She’s moving his hand faster, thrusting him into her cunt, and he’s wet to the wrist with her and just about losing his mind. “Make me believe you, Daryl.” Half asking him now, not holding on as strong, but he’ll give it to her. Give her anything.

He doesn’t have very much to give her, but she can have it all.

“Beth.” Clenching his teeth and grinding himself against the blanket, and that’s doing fuck-all. “Beth, I need.” He hauls in a shaking breath, churns it in his lungs, throws some words in front of it and kicks it out again. “I need to fuck you, Beth, I—Christ, I’ve been waitin’ so fuckin’ long, please.”

“You love me?”

He freezes. Except it’s not freezing. He’s a blast furnace. He’s sure he must literally be glowing like a coal. He’s fallen into a kind of animal brain, completely locked into the present, but suddenly he sees everything from the beginning, meeting her in the rain and that first kiss and all that teenage daring, and coffee and rides and singing, sun and rain and so much water, drowning in her, and she’s his fire and his baptism and he’s been waiting for her his entire goddamn life, and it’s something he would have laughed at before now, something out of a stupid movie, but swear to the God he doesn’t believe in, he would die happy if he could die in her arms.

He looks up at her and she’s staring down at him, moonlit and perfect. Waiting.

Girl.

He feels like everything in him is bleeding. Pouring out of him into the night, red into black, leaving emptiness for her to fill with herself.

“I love you so much, Beth.”

“Daryl.” She releases him and falls, goes loose, sprawled and open for him.

I’m ready.
He slowly pushes himself up and braces himself over her, cock hanging throbbing and heavy between his legs, and her smile makes him want to sob. She frames his face with her hands, and no one has ever looked at him like that before and he knows no one else ever will.

“I love you.” And she grins again, teeth closing on her lower lip as she arches herself up and against him. “Now fuck me.”

Another blurry period. He told himself he had to go slow, but suddenly he’s going so fast he can’t stop his hands from shaking, fumbling for the packet and tearing it open, pushing back on his knees so he can get the thing on, and she’s watching him, watching his cock, her lips parted and wet, and he feels like an animal again. Like they both are. Here in the woods—maybe the world ended. Maybe that’s what these ruins are. Maybe she’s not the first girl but the last, she’s the last girl and he’s the last man, and all they have and all they need is each other.

That world out there can go to hell.

She’s hooked her legs around his again and she’s pulling at him, practically kicking him, breathing Daryl, God, c’mon, I need you but like before something else occurs to him, and he wraps his arms around her waist and rolls them, brings her up on top of him. She lets out a soft, surprised oof, her eyes wide, and she straddles him simply in the process of trying to keep herself upright—

And she stares down at him, hands on his chest, his cock nudging her ass and his hands finding her thighs and resting there, gentle, waiting to see what she does.

“Daryl,” she whispers. “I…” She glances around as if she’s trying to get her bearings, and there’s something so cute about it that he laughs. Can’t help it. He laughs and her gaze snaps back to his, still a bit stunned. “Like this?”

He nods. “Like this.”

“I didn’t…” She pushes her hair back from her face and ducks her head, smiling—not to him. To herself. “I didn’t think…”

He smooths his hands down her thighs to her knees. She looks okay, just surprised, but he’s… “This alright?”

Now her smile is for him, and it’s wide and bright and flowing warm over every part of him. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s good.” She lifts herself a little and reaches back, wraps her hand around the base of his cock, and before he has time to take a breath she guides him to her cunt and slowly lowers herself onto him.

He hasn’t. He hasn’t ever done this.

And it is different.

All he can see is her. He hardly even feels himself, though he knows he’s tense and hot with sharp pleasure, gritting his teeth with the effort of not thrusting up into her. It’s only her, her head fallen back and her mouth wide, her hair tumbling down her back and shoulders like streams of silver rain, her hands curling and her nails digging into him.

He can’t tell if she’s in pain. For a second that draws out and out, she doesn’t even look human anymore.

Somehow he finds her name and that’s a place to start from. “Beth—Beth, are you—”
“OhmyGod.” Soft, strained little breath. She gulps air, moves her hips, bares her teeth and whines. “Oh my God, you feel so big. I just—Daryl—”

He’s not, not like that, but she’s tight, or it merely feels like that, and it feels so fucking good, his fingertips tingling, but he’s worried. Worried enough to jerk himself loose from this, drag his forebrain out of the background, and find her hand with his.

“Beth, y’alright?”

“I.” She turns her hand under his and presses in, threads their fingers, and breaks into a smile that’s at once familiar and unlike anything he’s ever seen before. “Yeah. Yeah, I just need—” She moves again, a careful roll of her hips, and a moan falls from her that sounds nothing like pain. “Oh Jesus, it feels good. Oh. I—” She bites her lips, another roll, and she gropes for his other hand as she sits up straighter, slipping into a slow, slightly unsteady rhythm. “It feels so good, Daryl.”

It does. He can’t say it, can’t say anything, but it does. He’s never actually fucked anyone. Never. None of those times counted, because none of those times was real. This is the first, the only, and he’s crashing back to when he understood that it was all right, that he could dream about this, let himself want it: he sent them to the ruins and laid them down in the grass, and she rode him, wild and free and taking everything she wanted. Like she is now, fucking herself on him, fucking him, still slow but picking up speed and sighing his name.

He’ll never be able to tell her how much he loves her. Never.

But he can try to show her. He can do that. He’s been trying pretty much from the first day, trying before he even knew he did. She moves and he moves with her, clasping her hands and matching her rhythm and moaning like she’s playing him. Her name, other words, things that aren’t words at all. She can do this, all her; she can go faster, deeper, harder, pulling her hands loose and leaning back and bracing herself on his thighs. She’s bent, curved, hipbones standing out and her waist stretched and long, breasts and shoulders and throat soaked in unreal light, her gold heart pendant gone silver and bouncing against her chest, and she’s laughing again, laughing and sobbing and dropping a hand between her legs and giving herself her frantically working fingers.

Daryl. Maybe she isn’t even speaking, but he can hear her. Right in the center of his fucking head, over the sharp thrum of his blood. I love you. Fuck me, I love you, fuck me, fuck me, fuck—

She goes rigid, every muscle straining and the tendons standing out in her neck, all ivory and silver, and she bursts upward and outward, impaling herself on him, and mockingbirds explode out of the trees as she howls at the moon, seizes it, draws it down.

He doesn’t realize he’s joining her until he’s already there, and by the end she’s tumbling onto him and he receives her, wraps his arms around her and shudders and releases.

Gives her everything.

~

I can take you home. It’s gotta be a couple miles still, c’mon.

What do you want?

You look cold.

Yeah, ‘cause I am.
I ain’t a creep or nothin’.

No, huh?

I don’t think so.

I kinda think that's the sorta thing a creep might say.

I’m just sayin’ I can drop you off. I’m headed that way.

I can’t get any wetter.

You could get dryer.

Sure you ain’t a creep?

Pretty sure.

Alright.

~

I love you, he whispers into her hair, against her brow, tasting the sweat on her skin. She’s still trembling, still burning. Burning into him, glowing with moonshine. If it rained now she would steam. I love you, Beth.

I love you so much, girl. I love you.

I do.
She fucks with time. She really does.

He knew that, but there are points when it slingshots back at him, forward at him, reminds him of how things have been and how they’re likely to continue to be. It feels like hours later when he can focus, but the moon is directly overhead, so it can’t have been more than a few minutes.

Then again, she can manipulate the universe.

At some point that he can’t clearly remember she must have rolled off him, one of them must have removed the condom and gotten rid of it, and now she’s lying tangled with him, curled boneless into his arms, and her breathing is simultaneously hard and slow, shuddering in and out of her lungs. Her skin is gleaming, shining; she’s still glowing but differently. There might be no end to the ways in which she captures and holds and releases the light.

His hands are buried in her hair, damp strands wrapped around his fingers. She’s cool in the light breeze, the air kept by the water and the stones. Her hands are drifting mindlessly over his skin, his side, his arm—no real object but apparently unable to remain still.

He has her.

A little while. Just a little. The moon slides further across the sky—maybe a finger’s width. Finally she stirs and her lips move against the hollow between his collarbones. He’s pretty sure it’s his name.

He kisses her brow. “Y’ alright?”

Pressed to his skin, her lips tug into a smile. “Yeah. Really alright.” She pulls back enough to look at him, her eyes so big and bright. “I dunno if I feel any different.”

“You thought you would?” But yes, she must have thought that. Part of her, anyway. Because people are told that. You do this thing and afterward you’re different in some fundamental and eternal way, like your very DNA has been rearranged. Like you aren’t who you were and never will be again. But it wouldn’t be like that. That doesn’t make any sense. You don’t change all at once that way.

This has been going on for some time now.

“Maybe.” She sighs happily and lowers her head. “You know they all say that. But I felt like this before.”
“Like what?”

“Like I can do anythin’,” she whispers. Once again, it sounds like she’s telling him a secret. “Like anythin’ could happen.”

Sometimes she talks about pieces of herself and he hears and believes but on a deep level he doesn’t understand. But sometimes she talks and it’s like she’s putting words to things he couldn’t quite reach. Like climbing the radio tower, like jumping, like maybe being able to fly. Like that day on the bike, as if he could out-ride everything.

So he has nothing to add. He just nods, and he knows she’ll get it.

After another few moments she shifts away enough to lie flat on her back, one knee raised and her hands on her belly, all ivory and silver. He moves more fully onto his side and lifts his head, rests his cheek on his hand and cups her breast with the other. It’s like in her room, staying with her until she fell asleep. He wants her, but mostly right now he wants to feel her breathing, feel the steady beat of her heart.

She covers his hand with hers. “Jimmy said he loved me once,” she murmurs thoughtfully. “He… I don’t wanna talk about him like he was this bad person, or he was stupid, or I didn’t actually like him. I did. I do. He’s a good guy. But I think he was sayin’ it ’cause he thought it was somethin’ I wanted to hear. Or he thought he meant it then, but he didn’t. Not really.” She shifts her gaze from the moon to him, reaches up and touches his mouth. “Nothin’ like how you said it.”

“I mean it.” Hushed. Once again this feels like a place where he can’t talk full-voice, where it might be disrespectful to something. Sighs and moans and sobs and laughter, cries, wild sounds—those are all welcome here, and probably the louder the better. But he thinks he should tread carefully when it comes to words.

“I know.” She smiles. “I do too.”

“Did you say it back to him?”

She nods. “I didn’t mean it. I wanted to. I wanted to be in love. I was hardly even seventeen, it was… after. Y’know? I wanted that. I felt like I didn’t have a lot of time to do anythin’. I didn’t die, but I still felt like… I could. Anytime. Maybe soon.” She pauses and takes a breath, looks back up at the moon. “Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? I don’t think I really got what that meant. It doesn’t mean you have to be in some kinda hurry.”

“What does it mean?” He watches her carefully. It’s not that he doesn’t know, or at least not that he has no idea; he does, or at least he has some idea of what it might mean for him. But this is her, and he needs to hear how she puts it into words. Her words.

“I think…” She’s quiet a minute, thinking, her brow slightly furrowed. “It’s what comes after. Precious. You don’t have to hurry. You don’t have to rush through stuff to get to the next thing. You don’t have to live your whole life in a year. Or a month, or a week, or whatever. But you have to…”

Suddenly she turns, leans up and kisses him, and it’s long and slow and very, very deep.

“You have to pay attention,” she whispers against his lips. “To everythin’.”

She isn’t exactly kissing him anymore, but she doesn’t move. She stays with her mouth lightly against his, breathing him, letting him breathe her, and when his hand tightens on her breast hers tightens with it. He nuzzles her jaw as his thumb finds her nipple and circles it slowly, still with no real object directly in mind, but he smiles when it hardens.
Yes, he’s paying very close attention.

“To you?”

She laughs softly and nuzzles back, pressing more firmly into his palm. “Especially to me.”

He does for a while. As slow as he has been, almost aimless, stroking one nipple and then the other, drawing little designs around and over her with his fingertips, kissing her when her breathing quickens, deepens, when she sighs. It’s just that, nothing much more, and while he can feel his body regrouping, feel heat starting to gather between his legs again, there’s no urgency in it whatsoever. There are so many other things they can do with each other.

So he slides down her body enough to use his mouth on her, replacing his thumb with his tongue and his lips and his teeth, and he licks and sucks and bites gently at her until she’s tightening her hands in his hair and gasping. And when he runs his fingers up and down her ribs her gasps turn to hiccuping giggles and she squirms, and that’s how he discovers that she’s ticklish.

Which he should really have known about before.

He rolls her under him and goes to work on her sides and stomach until she’s squealing and shrieking and kicking clumsily at him, beating at his back and arms, and there’s a desperate, helpless quality to her laughter that’s completely infectious. Irresistible. He can’t help it. It’s his own laughter that gives her the upper hand—or really he just doesn’t care if she gets it or not—and she twists herself free and scrambles over him, slams him down flat on his back and straddles him and sits there wearing only an adorably triumphant grin, and he pretends that he couldn’t easily flip her under him again and make her pay.

He’s hard now and nudging her ass, and she reaches behind her and gives him a slow stroke, mostly—it feels to him—because she can. And when she rolls a little, rubbing herself against him, it feels like it’s for the same reason.

He glides his hands up her thighs to her hips and rests them there, light and easy. On top of him in the moonlight there’s still an unreal quality to her, but whatever enchantment she spun earlier has dissolved a bit and left something softer and lazier in its place, and she looks less wild than she did.

And more, somehow. They’re rolling naked in the grass, play-fighting, touching and kissing and biting—they’re animals. They’re remembering.

They both belong here.

She tugs her loose tangle of hair over one shoulder and—looking like something’s occurred to her—she reaches between her legs, seeming to feel for something.

“What?”

“I just…” She lifts her hand and peers closely at her fingers. They glisten and a low, warm ache twists in him.

“Beth, what?”

“I don’t think I bled any.” She cocks her head and breathes a laugh. “Thought everyone does.”

“You ain’t everyone.”

“It didn’t even hurt.” She continues as if she hasn’t heard him, and now she sounds thoughtful. “I
mean… Maybe a little, right at first. There was this sorta… burn. But it went away. Didn’t really hurt at all.” She lowers her hand and looks down at him, her face soft. “I always heard it was supposed to hurt.”

_We’ve been told a lot of things_, he thinks. _We’ve been told a lot of lies._

He takes her wrist, pulls her hand to his mouth and sucks slowly at her fingers. She closes her eyes and sighs his name, her fingertips against his eager tongue as he takes every bit of her taste that he can, and gradually she lowers herself until she’s lying on his chest like before, her head tucked under his chin and his arms around her.

“Love you, girl,” he murmurs, and it’s so easy that he’s not sure why it took him so long. No one had to teach him at all.

Unless it was her.

She lifts her head and cups his cheek, slides her fingers into his hair and combs it back from his face. “I love you, Daryl.”

So he kisses her again, and that eats up quite a bit of time.

They’re both breathless when they break apart and he rolls them gently onto their sides—and at that point they’ve basically come full circle. He wonders if they might cycle back around again, but maybe not, because it _does_ seem like they’re starting to move in a particular direction. She curls close to him again, but this time his cock is trapped between them and she arches her back and slings a leg over his, pressing in a slow wave. She’s teasing him, sure, but at this point any teasing is going to be extremely mutual.

He lowers a hand to cup her ass. “So how many of those things _did_ you steal?”

“Two.” She has that wide-eyed look again, all innocence, _virginal_, gleefully dancing sparks behind it. “Didn’t wanna risk more. I dunno how often he actually _uses_ ‘em, but… Y’know.”

“Yeah.” He smiles faintly and lets out a harder breath; he’s moving slowly but steadily against her, that low heat rising higher and hotter, and there’s still no urgency but that doesn’t mean there isn’t need. He doesn’t imagine there _wouldn’t_ be. Ever. “So we got… one more.”

She’s moving with him, just as slow and just as steady, her own breath beginning to get ragged around the edges. “Mhmm. Better make the most of it, Mr. Dixon.”

But like she said they shouldn’t be, he’s still not in a hurry. He remembers what it was like before she knew, when this was something tiny and terrifying he was carrying around by himself, how there was something painfully wonderful about just _wanting_ her, and then later, kissing her and grinding against her, practically feeling her soaking through her jeans, but neither of them came and there was something indescribable about tearing hand in hand up to the edge of that cliff, skidding to a halt, peering over, and backing carefully away.

It can be so nice to just _burn_.

So something like a signal passes between them and they ease off a little, stay tangled and rocking together but looser. Almost back to lazy. And she laughs softly, closer to a low hum than anything else.

“You gonna make me wait again?”
“You got somewhere to be?”

He’s kidding, it’s obvious, but she leans back and gazes at him, and as she does her fingertips trail over the lower edge of one of his scars. He doesn’t quite shudder, and he knows she meant to do it.

“There’s nowhere else I wanna be, Daryl. Nowhere.”

“Girl.” It’s low and rough, and when he kisses her this time it’s almost as rough as his voice, and just like that there’s a flash of desperation that dies away just as fast—or almost does. It’s not completely gone.

Neither are her fingers.

“Can I touch them?”

He doesn’t know why it pierces him that she’s still asking. Because it would be easy for her to not ask. Someone else might not, probably wouldn’t. She’s asked once before, it would make sense to assume it applies to pretty much all times and places. That once he’s opened that door to her it’s propped open.

But she doesn’t assume. And he shouldn’t either.

He doesn’t ask her why. He doesn’t need to know her reason. He nods. But as he does he takes her left wrist and holds it gently, and tugs at the leather cuff she’s wearing by way of his own question.

She wasn’t completely naked before.

She nods too, silent and pulling in a breath through her parted lips, and he unsnaps the cuff, lets it fall into his hand, sets it aside and turns the inside of her wrist to him.

Before when it was like this, he saw it in the starlight and the world was bright enough that he could make it out. And he’s seen it since then. But this is different, and he holds her so carefully, delicately, examining the thin pale line. He thought there was something beautiful about it before and he thinks that now—paler even than the rest of her in this light, etched over the darker lines of her veins. He looks at it, running straight across winding courses, and he thinks about a bridge over rivers.

Everything it means.

“I love it,” he whispers, and he surprises himself with it but he doesn’t worry. She won’t be freaked out, won’t be upset, won’t be offended. If anyone in the entire world might understand, he thinks it would be her.

But a faint tremble runs through her, and when he looks up at her he has no idea how to articulate what he sees there. She’s not about to cry. Like he believed she wouldn’t be, she’s not upset. It’s something else. Something deeper. “Daryl…”

“I do,” he says, and he does what he did then and lowers his head and kisses it, lips against the warm flutter of her pulse, the echo of the stronger rhythm of her heart, and she sighs.

This is something she gave him, and it’s so obvious that he has no fucking idea why he didn’t think about it in these exact terms before: that he can do this at all. That he would dare. It’s her courage, her strength in being willing to let him, but she put him in a place where he can ask, and extraordinary doesn’t even come close to getting at the heart of what it is.

Wanting to be with someone like this.
He would like, very much, for her to be the one place in his life right now in which he’s never frightened. Never ashamed.

So he releases her and turns onto his stomach, because this is something else of his—one of the few things—that he can give her.

She’s as gentle with him as she was the night by the swimming hole, barely touching him at all at first, ghosting her fingertips over him and tracing the lines, up and down and across in slow, smooth motions. She’s like a luna moth flying over him. At first he’s tense and tight under her hand, eyes shut and fists clenched and fingernails digging into his palms, but bit by bit he loosens, breathes deep, and she lies along his side—small and cool like moonlight herself—and strokes him until everything coiled up in him is uncoiled.

And it’s actually nothing like last time. Not really at all. Tight, yes. But no real pain.

_I always heard it was supposed to hurt._

Her soft little hand comes to rest between his shoulderblades and he feels her smile against his arm. “You gonna freak out if I say I love them?”

His head was turned away from her, and he turns it back and looks at her. Her cheek is propped on one hand, her hair tumbling over her shoulder and the blanket, and that smile is still playing around her mouth. Her doe eyes, large and knowing. She’s kind. He knew that from the beginning. There’s a relentlessness to her, she’s ruthless and unafraid of him, but more than anything else she’s kind.

He swallows. It burns. His eyes, too. Not much.

“No.”

“I love them, Daryl.”

Stop.

But he doesn’t want her to.

~

Another subtle warping of time, expansion and contraction. The moon doesn’t move, not as far as he can tell, but eventually he turns back onto his side, pulls her into him, and he’s burning for her. Burning even hotter. He was soothed, tamed, but now he’s awake and hungry, and when she breathes his name, reaches between them and closes a hand around the base of his cock, he knows she is too.

_I want you._ Yes, yes. Always.

He takes her by the hips and pushes her gently down as he shifts on top of her, nudging her legs apart with his knee. He grazes her cunt with it and once again she’s so wet for him, and she gasps and grips his shoulders, slides them down to his arms, stares up.

“Daryl…”

“What?”

“Like this.” She almost laughs, shaky little breath, and hooks a leg over the back of his thigh. “I want you like this.”
He ducks his head and nips at her jaw, and at that her laugh is a lot more than a breath. He grins, bites her again. He had been meaning to tease her some more, maybe use his mouth on her a second time and make her beg him, see how loud he can make her moan, but the way the words are trembling out of her... “What, other way wasn’t good or somethin’?”

“It was good.” Rolling press of her body, and when she groans it’s a bit strained. “God, it was... It was really good, Daryl. But I want... This, I want this.” She swallows hard. “Please.”

She doesn’t have to beg. There’s this thing where he wants to give her everything, take the whole world just so he can put it in her hands, and here, with returned mockingbirds trilling all around them and water echoing off the stones, he feels like that might be possible. Like everything is within reach.

They grope for the second condom at the same time and their fingers collide, and he laughs against her cheek as she hands it to him.

They didn’t make it complicated before and they don’t now. She angles herself up, gaze locked on his face, and she reaches between them and curls her hand around his shaft and guides him.

He sinks into her, it’s like falling, and as a shuddering whimper slips out of him he manages to focus on her, on the tension seizing her features, her slightly bared teeth—almost a grimace, almost pain. Not quite. He doesn’t think so. Her breath stutters and she hooks her nails into his back but she loosens almost immediately and smooths out, knees high against his hips. He feels her flex, feels her tighten briefly around him, and he squeezes his eyes shut because he can’t really do anything else.

“Do I feel good?” Voice low, rough, still a bit tense—but she sounds like she’s close to smiling. “Daryl, I... You do. You feel so good... like this.”

“Beth. Oh, God.” He can’t hold up his head, his muscles suddenly unreliable, and it hangs between his shoulders, hair falling around his face, and it comes to him in one of those weird outside-moments how he might look to her—she had been so bright over him, drawn down the moon and captured it in herself, but he’s sure he must be dark, all shadow, looming.

He doesn’t hate that image. Not at all.

It feels right.

“That a yes?” She shifts under him, arches—encouraging, he thinks. If she needed to adjust to him it appears that she has.

“Yeah.” She moved and now he does, withdrawing—almost pulling out of her entirely—and she sobs softly when he thrusts in. Not fast, not even especially hard, but deep. Deep into her, deep as he can go. He doesn’t want to hurt her, he realizes—oh my God, no—but he does want her to feel it. Feel him. “You feel so fuckin’ good, Beth.”

The sound she makes is affirmation, though it’s not a word, and her hands are tightening on him again, one of them sliding into his hair and tugging him down. He thought about this, he remembers it as he kisses her—thrusts his tongue into her mouth in sync with his cock in her cunt. In the barn. Lifting her, fucking her up against the wall, kissing her, making her as happy as he could.

He has dreams and apparently in one form or another they come true.

Her head drops back against the blanket when he starts to speed up, going harder, hooking a hand under her knee and lifting her higher. Spreading her. It seems like she’s not sure what to do with her hands anymore and she’s clutching at anything, fingers woven into his hair, clenched over a fold of the blanket, her mouth fallen open and her breath coming with sharp whines.
“Daryl—Daryl, Jesus, go—harder, I want it harder, I want—” Trailing off into a moan and he obliges, panting, because of course she can take it, of course she’s not going to break under him, and she wants it, and she’s going to have what she wants. Beautiful girl, beautiful little wild thing, she caught him but he’s taking her now.

He slides a hand under her, pressing against the small of her back, and lifts her, pulling her tight against him, nearly pounding into her and growling as he does, growling over the smack as their skin collides. It’s rough, but its own kind of sweet. Rough because he loves her, because he wants her that much, because he can control himself but it feels so fucking good to not have to for a while.

“Jesus Christ, Daryl. Oh.” Trembling laugh as she wraps her legs around his waist. “I wanna feel you come, I want—Please… Please, I want it.”

And maybe it makes no difference, maybe he shouldn’t care, maybe it shouldn’t do anything for him, but he imagines that, exactly in the way she says: no condom, just him inside her, coming in her, giving her that too, dripping sticky between her thighs, and he does care, he cares about every way in which he can fuck her, every way it might be possible in that big scary future, but doesn’t follow that further; he presses his bared teeth against the side of her throat and snarls, hauling her against him and stiffening and shaken by a deep quaking that rolls through him and leaves him far too soon.

But it’s good. It’s so good.

She’s panting along with him as he slowly drifts down on top of her, and although everything is getting even fuzzier around the edges, after a few moments he has the presence of mind to pull out of her and peel off the condom, tie it and toss it away into the grass.

He’s not spoiling anything. They’ll take care of it later. This is why they’re here.

He pulls her close again and she’s murmuring things, blurry as he feels—Love you, I love you, it’s so good, Daryl, I love—But it’s not as good for her as it could be and he slides his hand down over her ribs and belly, and she parts her legs as soon as his fingertips brush her clit. It’s easy and it’s also fast—he strokes her with fingers wet in her juices, rubs her in quick little circles, and it feels like seconds and probably is before she whimpers and shudders, fumbles at his wrist and clamps her legs tight around his hand.

Coming softer than before. But it might be time for everything to be soft now.

After, he dozes. In his arms, legs tangled with his, he’s reasonably certain that she dozes too.

When he finally stirs the moon has slipped further down the sky, nearly touching the top of one of the crumbled stone walls. The breeze has picked up but it’s still a warm night, and more than anything it feels like a hand caressing across his skin. She’s still almost limp against him, and she doesn’t resist him or particularly help him when he turns her over and arranges her so her back is to his chest. She moves a bit when he drops a hand between her thighs, and she moves more when he starts to work his fingers feather-light over her clit, but though she’s moaning quietly and rocking her hips he’s not entirely sure that she’s fully conscious. And when she comes this time it’s like a gentle wave, easy and smooth, and she sighs through it, if anything relaxing even more.

He dozes again, hand curved over her mound and fingertips resting against the slick folds of her lips. He might whisper it against the back of her neck—I love you.

He’s not sure he can stop saying it now.
When he opens his eyes next the moon is lost in the trees, and he knows it’s less than a couple of hours until dawn. They have to leave.

They always have to leave.

“Beth.” At some point she turned toward him again, nestled against his chest, and he kisses her brow, strokes a hand through her hair and slips the strands between his fingers—waking her up as slow as he can. She murmurs and presses close, her arms tucked against her sides. Once again she feels so small.

“We gotta go.” He kisses her again—her brow, her temple, and her eyes flutter open. “C’mon, Beth.”

She blinks, rolls—really almost flops—away from him and stretches, yawning. Smiling up at the sky. The stars are brighter. Much brighter.

“I don’t wanna.”

He sits up, wincing as his back pops. “You’re gonna get me shot.”

“Yeah, I actually don’t wanna get you shot.” She stretches again, her entire body lifting in a sensual arch, and for a few seconds the urge to launch himself at her and make use of the couple of hours of remaining night they have is almost too much for him. But he can’t fuck around. Not with this. It’s an indication of his state of mind that he finds the phrasing amusing.

They reluctantly find their clothes, reluctantly drag them on, reluctantly gather everything up. The world is sharper around the edges, he thinks as they pass through the door and across the grassy lawn toward the slope. They entered a different world and now they’re leaving it. Tangent universe. Splitting off, maybe because of something they did.

He believes they can return, though.

The mockingbirds are silent as they climb through the dark, as they get silently into the truck and the engine mutters to life, as he backs them onto the road out. The forest falls away from them on the left and then on both sides, and by the time they reach the main road the stars are brilliant, an hour or so to shine before first light erases them.

They don’t speak until he pulls over beside the oak tree, and she just sits for a moment, her head tilted back and her eyes closed. She doesn’t seem fully aware of him. So he looks at her and he feels like he’s been broken open, and he’s felt like that enough times by now that it no longer hurts.

“I wanna see you on Sunday,” she whispers, and he murmurs wordless agreement. He does too. He wants to see her every second. “I’ll tell you when. Where.”

“Alright.”

She opens her eyes and turns to him, drifts to him like a spirit and kisses the breath slowly out of him. His hands find her hair, her face, her neck, and it’s that tangent universe again, slipping into it for just a few scattered fragments of time. The place she made for them. Except now he thinks maybe they made it together.

They’re not children anymore. But they also are. Even more than before, they are.

First and last girl. First and last man.
This might not be the story he thought it was.
heard your voice in between the lines

Chapter Notes

There's a bit in here that owes heavy inspiration to Schwoozie's "If You Love Me Like Music (I'll Be Your Song)" because awesome and really that just needs to happen in any version of this universe. For practical reasons and other reasons as well. :D

Daryl has never in his life beamed.

Not once. It’s never happened. Granted, you don’t remember the years when you’re still new to the world, when you’re learning how to have a memory at all, and then there’s a lot he doesn’t remember after that for a lot of reasons, but he knows he wasn’t smiling much then anyway. There wasn’t a lot to smile about. Even a little.

There never has been, actually. Not real smiling. Not the kind he means.

So he’s never beamed. He knows this. And he isn’t going to now, wouldn’t even be sure he possesses the requisite muscles, but…

Driving home with the sun rising behind him, long shadows in front, brilliantly pink and gold sky. Deeper gold across the fields he passes, and purple in the green of grass and trees. Starlings swooping and wheeling overhead, crying sharply into the morning like they’re heckling the light. He couldn’t go home in the dark. It just wasn’t an option.

He needs to be awake for this.

It’s not like he’s beaming and it’s not like the world is remade. But something has happened. Not to the world—unless it has. Is the world, on some level, aware of what happened last night? Is that massively inflated self-importance? He never felt like he was important before. Maybe that’s why; maybe he has no control yet, he’s so unused to it. He doesn’t know how to handle it, being significant. Maybe he’s overdoing it.

Like it matters.

It cooled in the hour between moonset and dawn, and with the windows down it’s almost chilly. The starlings are everywhere, absolutely everywhere, and five miles outside town—cutting through a sparser stretch of patchy trees, not thick or numerous enough to be called woods, meadow still visible beyond—he abruptly recalls what a flock of starlings is actually called.

A murmuration.

It’s not their voices that murmur. The calls of starlings are shrill rapid-fire twirrs, nothing soft or subtle about them. But all their wings at once, hundreds of wings in simultaneous flight… those blur together. They murmur.

He doesn’t need to know what about. The business of starlings is their own.

He had her. He did.
He drives through silent Saturday morning streets, parks, moves with an unusual lack of squeaking up the rusty side-stairs, sinks onto the couch and finds an hour or so of unconsciousness in which there are no dreams.

He already had his dreams for the night. He’s more than satisfied.

~

He wakes up all at once. None of the slow drifting from before, from with her—the easing into and out of half-sleep. He’s awake and he’s ready to go, even if he’s not sure yet what he’s going to or for. Doesn’t matter; it takes him only five minutes or so to figure it out.

He just about kicks Merle awake. He can’t scrounge up a single fuck to give about Merle’s cranky protests. He throws clothes at Merle, suggests coffee, suggests that he has some things for Merle to look at and offer his opinion on.

Merle notes that he told Daryl to find a place. Daryl explains patiently that they’re both going to be living there and he’s not going to be solely responsible for this decision, because he’s not going to be solely responsible for carrying the load of all the bitching Merle is going to do when he invariably finds a whole bunch of things wrong with it. If Merle is in this with him, Merle is really fucking in it with him.

By the time he’s done talking he’s not so patient anymore. But his good mood is absolutely invulnerable. He sits on the steps in the sun with a paper cup of uncomfortably hot coffee held between his palms and he thinks about the many blessings Beth Greene has bestowed upon him.

Her softness and her sighs, the way her hips roll when he’s inside her, her hair falling all around her shoulders when her body arches, how she lies naked on her back in the moonlight and dispenses wisdom like a goddamn oracle. How she draws down the light, how she holds it. Keeps it. Shines it at will, according to her kindness.

All of these things confer protection. He’s sure of it. She’s a girl and as such she’s powerful.

He closes his eyes into the warmth and the light. Beams of it, the whole world stretching itself into a smile. Like something else out of a stupid movie, fucking cute little foxes and birds and squirrels dancing around and singing about how great everything is, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel it. A rippling through him, low and constant.

Things are getting better. The good days are happening again.

~

He shows Merle the places he’s already looked at, all two of them. They haven’t improved since he saw them. One of them was actually taken but there’s an identical unit in the same building. Merle ignores the looks his still noticeable nose earns, pokes around and mutters, but the muttering isn’t entirely ill-humored. Daryl finds himself doing what he wasn’t last time—doing it in both places—and moving more slowly through them, imagining furniture, light, somewhere they might live. He’s never set up a place like this before and he knows it would still probably look kind of like shit, kind of trashy, especially given how things will probably go if Merle is involved—which, hey, Daryl insisted on, so not much room to complain there—but he wants to try.

This is completely new. He had a place while Merle was inside—couple of places—but he didn’t care about them. They were places to sleep and keep his stuff, which was all junk. Nothing important. Really the only thing he cared about was the crossbow.
Except no. One more thing. Several things. He stands by one of the two small windows in the cramped space that passes for the living room in the second apartment, and he thinks about it. About them. Hasn’t in a long time. Wasn’t much point. He purposefully forgets things when they serve no purpose except to hurt him. Or he tries.

On the windowsill in both of those shitty places he lived in, he kept a collection. Tiny items picked up in pawn shops and thrift stores. A couple found in the street, dropped by someone careless or fallen out of the trash. A couple of trinkets of faceted plastic covered with some kind of iridescent veneer. A few pebbles of polished purple glass like you put in the bottom of fish tanks. A couple of pieces of quartz. A long, flat, thin sheet of mica, flaking and brittle, its edges translucent.

A crystal wolf with eyes stained blue. That, he bought. He was never sure why.

He threw them away when Merle got out. He didn’t want to get shit for them, which he knew he would.

He sold the wolf. It bought a carton of Morleys.

Both of these places have sills. They’re on all the windows. Narrow but sills nonetheless. He could keep things there. Catch the light with them. He doesn’t think he cares about Merle giving him shit for it. Not anymore.

He’s not totally sure Merle even would. Not much, anyway.

On the low front steps of the second place he sinks down and pulls out his cigarettes, lights one, offers the pack to Merle. “Whaddaya think?”

Merle takes and lights his own, inhales deeply and blows a long stream of smoke, hands the pack back to him, doesn’t say anything for a moment or two. Daryl waits in silence and is happy to do so; this much time between question and answer indicates that Merle is giving the business some genuine consideration. It would have been easy to blow the whole thing off immediately if Merle were so inclined. It would be typical.

“I dunno,” he says finally, and rubs a hand over his graying hair. “This all there is?”

Daryl shrugs. “Ain’t looked in a bit.” The question… He has no idea what to do with that question. It’s making his insides jump. Making him edge once more toward something dangerously like hope. He’s already way too close to that, pretty much camped on that lawn, but he’s getting closer and closer to its interior. Wants to.

He should be able to hope for something.

“Maybe look again, then.”

Daryl studies him. Merle’s expression, his affect—inscrutable. “You don’t like these?”

“I dunno. Just don’t think we gotta jump into this.”

That’s… Once again Daryl’s at a loss. More than before. There are a number of ways to interpret this, and the only one that makes any sense in terms of how things have historically gone is that Merle is purposefully—or maybe not exactly on purpose—dragging his feet.

It doesn’t feel like it, though. So everything continues to be very confusing.
“Alright,” Daryl says slowly. He doesn’t get this, but he didn’t before. Okay. And he thinks Beth might tell him that he doesn’t have to get it. That sitting here on cool, bumpy concrete with his big brother and watching early afternoon traffic roll by, lazy Saturday, a couple of girls pedaling past on ten-speeds, someone mowing a lawn somewhere… It’s enough. Don’t second-guess. Question, don’t be a fool, but don’t question too much. Be content to know that sometimes things are simply good, and there doesn’t need to be a reason.

One of the girls skids and almost falls, the one behind her laughs, and the one who skidded calls whirls and her just about every impolite name Daryl imagines she can think of, but they’re both still laughing. He almost smiles.

“I didn’t hate ‘em,” Merle says softly after another few minutes. “They were alright.”

Alright.

“Yeah.” Daryl watches ash fall to the ground, rough gray on rough gray. “They were.”

~

behind Target on rt 1, 4:30

go shopping before :)

~

And then of course, thinking about it later, there’s also a room of his own—and a bed.

This part, he knew. Of course he did; it was one of the first reasons why he started entertaining this whole idea in any serious way. Just the idea of a space actually for real to himself seemed like fabulous luxury. Unimaginable. Yet he was doing the imagining. And he was doing it a tiny bit in this direction anyway by the time it started seeming vaguely plausible, but the relentless fact of Merle’s existence stopped that line of thinking very effectively. Stopped even the fantasy of it, though it probably shouldn’t have.

But here it is again. Because Merle seems to have, after his fashion, accepted it. Accepted Beth. Accepted that Daryl intends to destroy his life over her. So now he can think about it. Leaning over this scuffed up pool table in one of the circuit of varyingly terrible bars Merle has identified within a reasonable distance, lining up what he thinks is a pretty good shot, part of his mind can drift off through the blare of the jukebox and the wall of yells and raucous laughter, through the haze of stale smoke and stale beer and bottom shelf liquor, drift free of everything and into the night, under the waning moon, and slip sideways into that tangent universe he and Beth made between them. Not the ruins but a place he could build within that universe, that space: a bed, an actual fucking bed, nothing fancy but a mattress, something soft, sheets to wrap her up in, covers to pull over them both. A place where they can play.

Play hide-and-seek, where he can tickle her again, make her laugh that hard, where she can pin him like she did, where they can roll over each other and he can hold her, she can hold him, and he can make her sigh and moan and sob his name. They can sink into each other. Lose themselves.

And he can make her smile. That alone.

They don’t need a bed. He’s not even sure that’s where he and she truly belong. They belong to the grass and the trees, the sun and moonlight and the birds, water, the sky. It might be ridiculous, it might be something any sane person would laugh at, but he’s not sane, doesn’t want to be, and
they’re wild, the two of them, fucking slow and hard under the moon.

But a bed would be nice. A bed and her, and time.

8 ball, corner pocket. Two hundred dollars. By the wall, Merle looks up from an intense conversation with a man who looks like a possum and grins. Daryl almost grins back.

He wasn’t cheating. It wasn’t a hustle.

He’s just good.

~

It’s three in the morning when they get in, and it’s three-ten when his phone vibrates.

And naturally it’s her.

Merle is too drunk to really be aware of him, staggering off to take a piss and headed for bed after. Daryl sits down on the couch and puts the phone to his ear, mildly surprised through the buzz he has going.

“Hi.”

He smiles, faint, and rakes a hand through his hair. “Ain’t it past your bedtime?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” She’s talking very softly—of course—and he can hear her smile too. “Wanted to see if you could help.”

“You just figured I’d be up?”

“Figured you wouldn’t care either way.” She goes quiet and he can hear her breathing, hear her exhale. He imagines her curled up under her own sheets, maybe in the camisole she was wearing when he last came to her—it had been cool, smooth. Silky.

It would be nice to touch it again.

“You there, girl?”

“Yeah.” She’s smiling a little wider. “I like when you call me that.”

Talking to her on the phone—actually talking—is still weird. But good. Pleasant. Her voice in his ear like this, intimate in a different way than if she was lying beside him. He leans back and toes off his boots. One of them flies across the room and thuds off the doorframe, and from the bedroom Merle drunkenly mutter-yells something.

Daryl ignores him. “Why?”

“I dunno. Just do.” She pauses again, and when she speaks next she sounds slightly hesitant. “I… Look, you know I don’t care that you’re older. I don’t even feel like it most of the time. You’re just… You’re you.”

He’s not worried about the direction in which this seems to be going, but it’s puzzling. Tugging at him. “Yeah…”

“But sometimes I think I do. A little.” She laughs—hardly more than a rippling breath. He closes his eyes and he can practically see her blushing. Her cheeks would be so warm to the touch. Against his
fingers. His lips. “I think I like it sometimes. It’s not a big deal or anythin’, I don’t wanna make you feel weird, I just… I dunno. I dunno, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.” That word might want some expanding. “I mean… Don’t say you’re sorry. ‘s fine.” He’s not sure what he’s feeling, not sure exactly what he wants to say, and all he can think about is how in the kitchen she told him he didn’t act his age. How long he spent, in the back of his mind, trying to work out exactly what that meant.

“Doesn’t freak you out?”

“No.” Because it doesn’t.

“Okay, good. ‘cause I don’t want you to stop.” He hears her shifting, hears what could be the rustle of her covers. “It’s not just that it makes me think of that. You call me that… Somethin’ about how you say the word. I can’t… I dunno how to explain.” She sounds almost dreamy now—not sleepy, exactly.

She sounded that way talking to him in the ruins. Unhurried. Bemused by the world.

“You don’t gotta explain.”

No idea how to tell her he’s been calling her that in his head since the beginning. Been using that word like an invocation. Like something as powerful as she is.

“I don’t, do I?” she murmurs. “Not with you.”

He starts to shake his head, then realizes she can’t see him and stops, amused by himself. “Not if you don’t wanna.”

“Sometimes it’s nice anyway. To try. Like I told you before, I like just talkin’ to you.”

“I like listenin’ to you talk.”

“Yeah?” Now she sounds thoughtful, faintly speculative, like something’s just occurred to her. “Y’know, I…” She takes a breath. “I was… thinkin’ about last night a lot today.”

This seems like a bit of a subject change, but he’s fine with it, especially given the subject. His eyes drift open but they’re unfocused, moving absently across the water stains in the drop ceiling, that messy brownish-white atlas of some world or other. “Me too.”

“I was… I didn’t wanna leave,” she says—whispers. “I wanted to stay with you. Didn’t even matter what we did, it was just… It was all so good.” Her voice roughens on the last word—almost imperceptible but he knows her voice and he know it’s there, and a slow pulse of warmth rolls down his spine.

“Yeah, it was.”

“I wanted you to fuck me again, Daryl.”

She’s said it before now. She was telling him, begging him to fuck her, fuck her harder, hissing it and moaning it, gasping it as she rode him and worked her fingers so fast over her clit. So it shouldn’t hit him this hard through a phone. But it does. That breathy little voice in his ear, saying that, and the pulse of warmth becomes a jolt of heat straight to his cock.

“Girl…”
“Yeah, see?” She sounds delighted. She also still sounds rough, rougher than she did. “It’s how you say it. I did, I’ve been thinkin’ about it all day.” She pauses, exhales, and he’s beginning to get an inkling of what’s really going on here, and it is not a subject change, and the heat isn’t at all dying back. “I’m thinkin’ about it right now.”

“Now, see, you got me thinkin’ ‘bout it too.” He’s smiling again, small as the heat dies back to a decidedly pleasant throb, and that buzz is making all of this way easier than it would probably be otherwise. He’s not self-conscious. He’s not worrying about saying something wrong. He’s not worried about anything.

He’s happy to be doing this at all. Happy with an edge.

“Want me to tell you?”

“Tell me what?” But he’s teasing. Teasing with that gentle flutter low in his belly. This is something else he’s never done, if he’s right about where she’s headed. Merle’s done it but Merle’s fucking paid for it, and he imagines that the difference is at least sort of significant.

“Exactly what I’m thinkin’ about.”

“Yeah.” Then—obeying an impulse—before she can say anything else, “What’re you wearin’?”

“Oh, I’m…” Soft giggle. “Just a t-shirt. Pajamas.”

“Take ‘em off.”

“Daryl.” She doesn’t quite laugh this time. It actually sounds closer to a breathless moan, and he wonders if her free hand has been idle since she started talking along these lines.

Wonders how wet she is.

“You gonna do it for me?” Not that he thinks she won’t, not that he worries she wouldn’t say no if she didn’t want to, but she doesn’t answer immediately, and he’s about to prompt her when he hears more rustling and the quiet huff of her breath.

“I did it.”

“Alright. Tell me.” He closes his eyes again and imagines her, still curled under the covers but now all smooth skin and wiry strength and perfect little curves. Naked for him. Because he told her to. This isn’t how he expected his evening to go. As a point of fact he expected to be passed out about fifteen minutes prior. This is much better than unconsciousness. He reaches between his legs—almost absently—and cups himself, feeling himself, rigid and already close to aching. For her.

“I was thinkin’ about your mouth,” she whispers. Not every syllable is clearly articulated, and he gets the vague sense that she’s still the slightest bit shy, fighting some awkwardness, even if she spearheaded this particular thing. “About… your tongue. It felt so good, what you were doin’, you…”

“What was I doin’?”

“You were lickin’ me.” Definitely shy. But there’s heat there. A lot of heat. Her voice is even rougher, shaky at the edges, and maybe there isn’t much shyness left at all. “How you were doin’ it everywhere, everythin’, like you couldn’t get enough. When you had your lips on my—my nipples. How you were… with my clit.”
How she says the word, he wonders when she last said it aloud to someone, if she ever has, and the heat isn’t a jolt but a hard wave, and he bites back a groan. And he’s sure she can hear it anyway.

“When you were lickin’ my clit. God, Daryl, your tongue.” No more shyness. Or if it’s there it’s buried under the thick breathlessness that’s entered her, and the last word comes in a moan. “You made me come so hard.”

“Tell me what else. Tell me what you wanted. If we stayed.” His hand is moving, squeezing, giving himself pressure in a slow rhythm, but he’s already hard enough to be very irritated by the concept of jeans, and he thinks he’ll probably fix that soon.

Merle won’t stir for hours.

“I told you.” She laughs, moans, laughs again, and he’s sure she’s not doing nothing with that hand, and that’s what gets his zipper down. “I wanted you to fuck me.”

“Fuck you how?”

“I liked bein’ on top of you. I liked watchin’ you.” She sighs and he hears the sheets rustle again. “The way you were lookin’ at me.”

“You were so fuckin’ beautiful.”

He hears her breath catch and he stops for a second or two, halfway past his fly.

“Daryl…”

“You were.” His hand slides in and he grazes himself with his fingertips, teasing, letting out a trembling breath. “Are you wet?”

“Yeah.”

“How much?”

“I’m…” He can hear her shuddering, only in her voice but that’s all he needs. “Really wet. Just as wet as you made me.”

“You just check now, or you been touchin’ yourself this whole time?”

“This… This whole time.” Maybe it starts as a giggle but it ends all moan, deep and low. “Pretty much. Are you?”

He shifts on the couch enough to get a better grip, enough to work himself free and heavy and burning in his hand, and gives himself a long stroke from base to head. “What d’you think?”

“Oh, God.” There’s a rhythmic quality to her breathing now, panting. Quiet, though. Quiet as she can. “I wish I could, I wish I could touch you. I loved… I loved touchin’ you, I loved watchin’ you come. All over my fingers, I love it.”

Fuck. He closes his hand tighter around his shaft and presses into the grip, thinks about her laid out under him and her eager hands and her exploring fingers and her wide, fascinated eyes. “Thought you wanted me to fuck you, girl.”

“Can’t I have everythin’?” A real giggle, unexpectedly loud, and it sends a hot shiver through him. “I want you in my hand, I want you inside… God, Daryl, I just want your cock, I… It felt so good.” She swallows, moans again, and now she sounds utterly desperate. “You were so hot, felt so big in
me. Felt like you were fillin’ me up... over and over, oh God, I want you to fuck me hard.”

He can’t go slow. It’s literally not possible. Gradual, easy buildup is a joke. His hand is stroking firm, steady, speeding up, the rhythm pulsing through him and into his lungs, and he’s sure she can hear it, what he’s sure she’s imagining... “Christ, Beth.”

“Yeah, Daryl, I... It feels good, Oh... oh, Jesus, tell me—Tomorrow, I want you to fuck me so hard tomorrow, please say it, say you’re gonna—”

He doesn’t want to be this close, not so soon. Yet here he is, his cock in his hand and her gasping voice in his ear and the image of her in his head, hand between her spread legs with her fingers shining and wet, sticky with herself, circling her clitt, plunging into her cunt and giving herself what he’s not there to give her. Her tangled waves of hair surrounding her flushed face, parted lips, her breasts, those perfect little nipples aching for his tongue.

He’ll say anything she wants. Anything at all.

“Shit, girl, you come for me right now and I will.”

“You too.” There’s no distinction anymore between her words and loose whimpers. He can only just understand her. “I want you to come too, you come with me, please...”

It’s not going to be a problem. Nothing he’s going to have to work for. He clenches his jaw and everything gathers in him, tight and pounding, impossibly compressed, and the words flow from a part of him barely even awake yet. “I’m gonna fuck you, Beth. I’m gonna fuck you ‘til you scream.”

Through the earpiece comes a high, strangled sound, almost like she’s in pain, and as it fades and muffles everything in him wrenches and snaps upward and his teeth close on his lip as he comes with a hard whine and lightning in the center of his head, rolling flashes and pleasure that stabs and releases him.

He doesn’t notice that he’s dropped the phone until about—by his very rough estimation—the better part of a minute after he does. He fumbles for it, gets it back to his ear. He doesn’t have to ask Beth if she’s there. She’s laughing, quiet and happy.

“Gonna hold you to that.” She sighs deeply. “Jesus, Daryl.”

He has no idea what to say. He feels a little like someone kicked him in the face. In the nicest possible way someone can kick you in the face. The words... Words always come easier with her, but they’ve never been that easy. Just not so much right at the moment.

He wipes his hand on his jeans. He needs to wash them pretty badly anyway. “Beth...”

“That was okay, right? Daryl?” Softer—not exactly concerned. But it sounds like she’s checking something, and it takes him a few seconds to realize that she’s checking on him. Making sure.

Making sure he’s all right.

“Yeah. It was.” Okay. Christ, he doesn’t have a word for what it was. She makes his life so fucking strange. “Beth, I.” He swallows, tries to focus. Really only one thing applies here for certain. “I love you.”

“Oh,” she whispers, and she sounds almost awed. They said it, before, but it was in that tangent universe, and while they’ve brought pieces of it back with them, and while it’s not closed off to them even now...
Saying it. Hearing it.

“I love you,” she says, still in that same whisper. “Oh my God…”

“What?”

“It’s just. Sayin’ it. Hearin’ it.”

Yes.

“I know.”

“I don’t even care whether or not you fuck me,” she murmurs. “I don’t care what we do. I just wanna see you.”

“You’re gonna.” It’s taking everything he has to keep from getting in the truck and driving out there to wait in the parking lot. “But I am goin’ shoppin’.”

“Oh. Good.” She releases another one of those lazily happy scraps of laughter. “I mean. You did say.”

“Yeah. I did.” He sighs and looks around the room as if seeing it for the first time since coming in: the beer cans on the rickety table by the TV, more on the rug near the sofa, dirty dishes, pitted fake wood paneling, other assorted bits of junk, some actually trash and some not, and the dim, sallow light the single lamp is tossing over everything…

He’s going to do a lot better. Not just for her.

“Think you can sleep now?”

“Yeah. I think I can.” She makes a low mmm sound and he can see her rolling over, stretching. Like she did on the blankets in the moonlight, her whole body pulling into a graceful arch. “Thanks. I’m glad you were up.”

“Glad you were too.”

Pause. Then, in perfect, uncanny unison:

“I wish I was there.”

“I wish you were here.”

Silence. Then laughter, also in unison, soft and slightly embarrassed.

“Yeah.”

“Alright.” She sighs again. “I love you, Daryl.”

“Love you too, girl.”

He doesn’t feel weird about calling her that. If anything he just wants to say it more. Call her that all the time. The whole package, which feels so perfect in his mouth, on his tongue.

Love you, girl.

Sweet dreams.
He doesn’t go to see her coming out of church.

There are a number of reasons for this, not least among them a strong sense that the fewer convenient chance meetings there are between them—at least where her family can see—the better. But the other reasons… He’s not sure about those, not sure how to articulate them to himself at all. Something about having been so close to her, as close as it’s possible to be with someone, physically but not even just that: how she was already under his skin and nestled into his ribcage but somehow two nights ago she found a way to go deeper, found her way into the paths of his marrow. She pushed deeper into him the second he was inside her, and she burned him, seared him, and all he wanted when they were done was more.

But it’s good to burn. Seeing her would do that to him, a puff of air on the coals, but he thinks not seeing her might do that even better.

For so long it was all just in his mind—his fantasies in lieu of anything outside his own damn skull. He thought he would want to be done with that if he ever got this far. If they got this far. To the extent that he dared to think that might be possible. But there was last night, so deep in his head and so good with her, and it’s just one more thing that isn’t working out the way he thought it would.

He wants her everywhere.

He does go by the church, early in the afternoon. The doors are closed, the parking lot over half empty but still dotted with a few cars; he supposes some things must happen after the regular service is done. The building is very white and very clean in the equally clean sunshine. The day is clear, sky aggressively blue and cloudless, like the whole world is still clean from the washing of last weekend’s flood.

Last weekend. Only last weekend. That fucks with him. It doesn’t feel like it’s been a week. It doesn’t feel like it’s possible for so many things to have happened in that short a period. He’s not certain even Beth Greene could fuck with time to that degree.

What happened happened. It is what it is. He can’t conceive of wanting it any other way.

Lost in this, he leans against the brick, lights a cigarette and looks at the church for a while.

It’s not just that it was a week ago. Not just that so much happened in seven days. It could happen. It does appear to have, and the world was supposedly made in six. That seems wildly improbable to him, but he’d have to own—if someone dragged him into the conversation—that anything’s possible.

Like falling in love with a sweet, brilliant, inhumanly powerful eighteen year old farmer’s daughter who inexplicably loves him back.

It’s not just that week. Not just that at all. He looks at the church, at the closed doors, and he thinks about her in the rain, coming out in her white dress like a young bride, crowded with Shawn under their umbrella, laughing, happy and scrubbed and Nice with her family and friends and all the good Christians and that world he was never supposed to come near let alone start eating regular dinners there, drinking coffee and talking to mothers and holding the hands of daughters under big dining room tables.

She met his eyes then and froze.
That wasn’t The Moment. There is no Moment, not even when he saw her sing at the coffee shop and knew he was hopeless. There is no singular point at which this begins. He’s well aware of that. But he thinks about her eyes, what it did to him when they seized and held his own, reached across the street and fucking pinned him, and it was barely two months ago. Barely two months to fall deeper and harder into this than he ever imagined it was possible to fall. For him. For anyone. He didn’t know shit like this existed. Thought it might all be a lie. A pleasant lie people like to tell, like a hundred thousand others.

But it’s not a lie. She locked eyes with him, held him, and as far as Moments go he figures it works about as well as anything else.

He drops the cigarette onto the pavement and crushes it out with his heel.

She’s a nice girl. Sweet. But long before Friday night he knew about her wicked side, knew about her clever little hands, knew that she saw what she liked and went for it, knew that her innocence was both wise and unafraid of wanting. She was innocent the moment he met her and she’s still innocent now, but innocent and virginal don’t always have a huge amount to do with each other. So he thinks about her in church this morning in her pretty white dress, her hair gathered neatly back and braided, gold heart pendant around her neck and delicate pale beads around her wrist, and he thinks about her standing with her hymnal, her beautiful voice lifted in praise—and how she sounds when her voice is lifted in something else entirely.

Nice girl in church with all the good Christians, and none of them know that she has the strength of a saint, that she baptizes in her own name, that she says fuck me like a prayer, and that she looks like an angel when she’s riding him with her head thrown back and her hand between her thighs, when she’s coming like the sky cracking.

None of them know that she arches naked in the grass, drenched ivory in the moonlight, and she laughs the birds out of the trees.

None of them have any fucking idea.

He almost feels sorry for them.

~

There are more romantic places for an illicit rendezvous than a parking lot behind a Target. There are many less romantic places as well. It’s a good thing that neither of them cares much about that part of this. That was true long before now. She’s pragmatic. So is he. No amount of I love yous is going to change that.

Whatever works. This works. It’s like she said: he doesn’t care. He just wants to see her. They could merely sit in the fucking truck and he would be satisfied.

He did go shopping, though.

He waits, focused on things he can’t see, and the world fades into endless blacktop, line of dumpsters, giant block of a building like a god-child’s toy sent tumbling out of Heaven, sky so wide and blue it’s like something he could fall up into. He thinks about wings again. He’s been thinking about wings a lot lately. Birds, wolf gods. What might be involved in learning to fly. Whether that’s the kind of thing you can learn. Whether it’s just something that happens.

He doesn’t think you really learn. Like walking. People say learn, but he thinks it might simply be something you do. A lot of falling, but sooner or later you’re off and soaring through the world.
He closes his eyes. Gin Blossoms again. *I didn’t know I was lost at the time.*

Sooner or later you do figure it out.

Soft tap at the window. His eyes snap open and he turns just as she’s climbing in, and it’s like he imagined: hair in a neat ponytail and correspondingly neat braid, pale beads, gold pendant and butterfly studs. All she’s missing is the white dress.

Tight jeans. Pale green tank top, knit cardigan falling off one bare shoulder. She tugs it back up and it promptly falls down again. He doesn’t think she really wants to keep it up at all.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

Then he’s quiet, just looking at her, bemused. She looks back and lifts a hand, bites adorably at her blue-lacquered thumbnail. “What?”

“You gonna tell me where we’re goin’, or what?” The corner of his mouth creeps upward. “Unless you just wanna hang here rest of the day. I mean, those are some interestin’ fuckin’ dumpsters and all.”

She breathes a laugh. “Who says I had any plan?”

“You were the one told me to meet you.”

“Yeah, well.” She leans in and presses a slow, lingering kiss to his jaw, and his eyes slip half shut. Her lips are so light, so soft, they almost tickle. “Just drive,” she murmurs. “I don’t care. Just take me outta here. Just drive anywhere.”

*Alright.*

He pulls around and out of the parking lot, and he drives.

~

He finds the main road, state highway, goes southwest. No reason; the direction feels right. Something pulling at him. Back when he was considering trying to get Merle behind leaving Georgia entirely, back when he was considering where they might go, he found himself—more and more—thinking north. North just as a direction, not any specific state, and in fact he hadn’t been sure why he had been nursing that budding fixation—because it would have reached that level of intensity. He can tell. He knows himself that well, even if he didn’t and still doesn’t know why he kept looking up the globe toward places he had never imagined he might go.

He thought vaguely about the Carolinian Outer Banks. He thought about Ocean City. He thought about the Atlantic a lot, about that immense stretch of undulating steel-blue. He has no idea if it would actually be that color, but of course he’s seen pictures, seen it on TV. He thought about Virginia, he thought about the Potomac. He thought about Washington. He thought about the Chesapeake, and though he’s never been much of a fan of cities he thought about Baltimore and Philadelphia, and he had the remarkable daring to think about New York. Beyond that, even. Maybe beyond that and further. They might not have to stop. They might be able to just keep going.

There wouldn’t have been any reason to stop. There would have been nothing to stop for.

But now he goes southwest, chasing the day, and she seems satisfied with the decision. Like she has
before, she pulls off her boots and socks and props her feet up on the dash, extending her toes into the sun, which winks off the shine of the matching nail polish she’s wearing. She leans back, turns up the radio and rolls the window entirely down and slides her hand into the wind, sine-waving gracefully up and down. Her hair drifts around her face and outward, like it wants to join her fingers.

He considers her hands as things that might play the world. Him. This. Everything. He keeps his eyes on the road but it’s difficult. There are cars. A lot of the drivers in the world are bad ones, and a lot of these drivers are making bad decisions, and that’s distracting him from something way the hell more important.

So he cuts off down the first side road he sees and then another, and turns them back north at last, sun to the left and to the right all the sky it’s made into its bright wake.

Soft hills, stretches of field. Pasture. Cows graze, scatters of white and black. The brownish blurs of rail fences. No other cars. No one at all.

Slowly her fingers hang loose. Her eyes are almost closed. But she’s not sleeping. He can tell. Among other things it’s her breathing: he knows what it looks like when she sleeps now, and she’s breathing too quickly, too hard; almost imperceptible, and he knows someone else would probably miss it, but it’s there.

He reaches over and lays a hand on her thigh, and she lets out a soft breath. Lowers her own hand, takes his in hers, lifts it and places it over her breast.

He glances at her, amused, as it feels like his blood thickens. It wouldn’t take much at all to work him into a simmer. He’s pretty much already there. “You wanna get into this when I’m drivin’?”

“You could pull over,” she murmurs, then squeezes his hand and shakes her head. “Don’t pull over. Just touch me. Just like this.”

He doesn’t remove his hand. There are no cars in sight and the road is straight and relatively even, and anyway he couldn’t say no to her. She angles herself sideways in the seat to make it easier for him, draws her legs up and turns toward him, and he cups her breast and kneads gently, runs his thumb across her nipple, and she whispers his name.

She wanted him to touch her all the time, even before they broke through that last door. Always looking for excuses, when it was safe. Making it clear that she was hungry. That there were things she wanted. But now it’s like the floodgates are open, and she can want, and she doesn’t seem to be able to get enough of it.

Like she said. She almost died.

Twice.

“Never been touched like this before.”

“What’re you talkin’ about? We done this.”

“No, I mean…” She shakes her head slowly, eyelids raising just a bit. “Like not even doin’ anything else. Just drivin’. That’s all we’re doin’. Except this.”

He’s not sure he completely understands, but some of the sense of it is there. That feeling again of something between them being removed, broken or opened, and now everything they do to and with each other and everything they can do is free-floating, unpackaged, and doesn’t need to come all at once. Like how lazy they could be in the grass, how she could touch him, get her hand on his cock
and work him slowly, and it would feel so good but it wouldn’t have to go anywhere. Nothing else has to happen.

There’s nothing they have to do. Except what they want.

He doubts a lot of people proceed along that assumption.

She’s looking at him with more overt directness. “You never did this either?” Because she can do the math, and she’ll know by now that she’s not insulting him. He told her. There wasn’t anyone.

This is his first.

He shakes his head. “Never. Never wanted to.” He lets his hand drop back to her inner thigh and rests it there, stroking her with the edge of his thumb. “Never… Never really liked touchin’ at all.”

She cocks her head. Her eyes are wide open now and brightly curious. “How come?”

He shrugs. I’unno. He does, though. And some things are still difficult to say. “Just didn’t.”

“But you like touchin’ me.”

“No, I just fuckin’ put up with it.” He hooks his fingers, digs them in a bit. “Girl, what d’you think?”

“No one ever really touched you in a way you liked, did they?” Her voice is very soft, very gentle—like it always is when she becomes relentless. He grits his teeth slightly. This much still isn’t so easy. Stop. “No one ever really touched you so it felt good.”

He sighs, but doesn’t remove his hand. “Guess not.”

“No guessin’. I know it.” She’s looking at him and she absolutely refuses to look away. This is nothing new. And he can take it. He can bear it—carry it. He’s strong enough. He’s learned.

“You know a lotta things.”

“You deserve it, Daryl.” She runs her fingertips lightly up his arm and he shivers. “You deserve to feel good. You gotta know that. You deserve it.”

“You just goin’ ahead and decidin’ that now?” The corner of his mouth curves, thin and sardonic. But behind that it’s difficult to breathe. Because she talks like this and he believes her, and even now part of him is sure that might become a problem. “You the boss of that?”

“Ain’t about decidin’.” She sits back again, head tipped against the seat, and when he shoots her another glance she’s smiling, very small. “I’ve been tryin’ to get you to understand that since… Since a long time. Someday you will.”

Someday. Time. Time to teach him. She’s talking like there will be. Time together.

Or she’s talking like he’ll be able to learn without her.

No, that isn’t true.

“I changed my mind,” she says softly. “Pull over.”

He guesses what this is. It’s not a tough thing to guess, and the guess is an educated one. It’s in how her legs are parting, how her hand is tighter on his arm. Her breathing. When he flicks his attention to her, the wide blue of her eyes. Those doe eyes, knowing and alive and taking joy in being caught.
Begging him to catch her.

Okay. He can do that. It’s not like he has to run fast. Not like he has far to go. And she’s left him plenty of signs.

He’s forcing himself to focus enough to look for a turn-off, somewhere sheltered, somewhere with a little privacy, but suddenly her hand leaves his arm and plunges between his legs, closing insistently over him, and he jumps and sucks in a breath. He was already hard but all at once he’s hard, practically pulsing in her hand as she rolls her palm against him, heartbeat in his throat and between his ears. The road is wavering in front of him, shimmering like summer haze. Nothing on either side but cornfields.

“Shit, girl, you’re gonna make me fuckin’ cra—”

“Here.” That wicked edge in her voice, and the edge is ragged, her hand as hot as he feels. “Right here.”

*God, don’t fucking argue, don’t fucking*—“Ain’t no cover.”

“Don’t care. I don’t see anyone comin’, do you?”

He does pull over, pulls right the fuck over, if for no other reason than so he can stare at her. She’s always been the daring one here, right from the very beginning, right from the very first night when she kissed him—it’s who she is—but this.

Might not be much of a step further, not at all given what they’ve already done, but it feels like it. This isn’t the forest. This isn’t the moonlit ruins. This is her wanting to fuck him right here in full view of the road.

“You sure about this?”

But she’s unfastening her seatbelt, pushing herself forward, reaching for him and raking her fingers into his hair, nails scraping his scalp and making him want to purr like a goddamn cat. “Don’t I seem sure?”

She does. She really, really does.

It wasn’t fast before—not when she rode him and not when he pushed her down and fucked her with her legs wrapped around his waist. It was hard, deep, but not rushed, not even when he was going out of his mind over her, not even when his chest felt like a goddamn volcano, not even when it felt like his heart was throwing itself against the inside of his ribcage in an effort to get to her, to be in her. He went slow then because he didn’t want to hurt her, because he wanted to make it so good for her, but this can be good too.

He was never worried about that and he isn’t now.

She’s sure as fuck not going slow with her clothes. She’s not careful. She clearly doesn’t have any care to spare for it. She shoves herself backward, grinning and already panting, dragging off her cardigan and pulling her top over her head but not bothering with her bra. And he knows this is going to be very awkward, probably uncomfortable for one or both of them, but he doesn’t give a fuck, his hands colliding with hers as she fumbles at her jeans and jerks them down. He grabs them at her knees, hauls them off her, and it’s just her in her bra and panties—soft white cotton, plain and nice, practical farm girl to the skin—and she tears the latter down before he can get to them, her legs already falling open and her cunt glistening beneath wet and equally glistening curls.
As he stares—unable to do much else for the span of a breath, everything in him locked with overload—she pushes herself up sideways in the seat, still grinning. “You said. You promised.”

Yeah, he did.

She turns over and crawls clumsily to him, tugging at his shirt. They don’t have to be naked, don’t even really need to take much off at all, it’s not necessary, but there are a lot of things he doesn’t technically need to do that he nevertheless very much needs to do anyway. He manages to get his shirt off—bangs his elbow on the steering wheel and hisses as sparks shoot all down his arm but otherwise moves on with his life—and laughs, rough and breathless, as he works at his fly with fingers that feel too big and completely devoid of dexterity. Stupid fingers. God, they are so fucking stupid, come on.

“What’d I promise you?”

“God, you jerk.” She joins him in the project of yanking at the waistband of his jeans, tugs them and his shorts down enough to let him spring free, and it’s not exactly cool in here but the air is somehow still a shock and he gasps. She doesn’t seem to have noticed. Her gaze has locked onto his cock, rapt, and she licks her lips and reaches for it.

“No, you don’t.” He catches her wrists, grasps them firmly, and a frustrated little giggle bursts out of her. He likes teasing her, it’s fun, but he’s also not sure where he’s getting this level of self-control from, not sure how the fuck he’s not just letting her do whatever the hell she wants with him.

“What’d I promise you? Tell me.”

“Oh, I…” She moans and twists in his hands, squeezes her thighs together. When she parts them again he catches another glimpse of shining wet on their insides, slick to their creases, and sense memory surges across his tongue. She was so sweet, so sweet. “You said you’d fuck me, Daryl.”

“What’d I promise you? Tell me.”

“Bet your ass. Wanted to make sure you did.” He tugs sharply at her; his jeans are pulled only partway down to his thighs and it’s not ideal but he thinks he can handle less than ideal if fucking her is involved. Thinks he can make do. “C’mon, then.”

“You’ve got—”

“Glove box.”

Her hands are shaking as she gets it open. In fact it falls open and spills out a fair number of things—empty pack of cigarettes, lighter that doesn’t work anymore, pens that also probably don’t work anymore, crumpled receipts, a battered map that might or might not not be hopelessly out of date. The box of condoms comes with it and she catches it, ignores everything else as she tears it open, hands him one. He’s seized by hectic laughter as he rips at the end, tosses away the wrapper, rolls it on with a quick gasp—the contact, the pressure, how fucking close she is and how he can have her now.

And she’s already trying to climb into his lap when he presses a hand against her chest, mutters Just a sec, Jesus fuckin’ Christ, girl and slides the seat back as far as it’ll go.

Which is just far enough. She’s small. Thank the good sweet Lord, she’s small and she’s swinging a leg over him, so wonderfully clumsy, and when she closes a hand around his cock he whimpers and fumbles at her hips. She’s small and she can ruin him with a touch.

“I told you I wanted it,” she breathes, lips brushing his, her free hand gripping his shoulder for leverage. “I—” Her breath jerks to a halt in her chest as she lowers herself onto him, head falling back, and as the blood pounds in his head he holds onto her, arms curled around her and his mouth
against the underside of her jaw, filled with the taste of her sweat when he licks at her.

Fucking loving it.

“Yeah, you did.” He scrapes his teeth carefully against her throat—that skin so delicate, so soft—and she shudders, rolls her hips and shudders even harder with a needy little sound. “I said I was gonna.”

But he’s going to wait for her.

She rolls her hips again, makes another one of those sounds—weak and broken at the ends—but it’s like she’s reached for and found some kind of center, some balance, settling herself and sliding her hands up his chest as her breath deepens. “Oh God, Daryl, you…”

How she says his name. Like that, like it’s one of the few words she can find, one of the few things her mind can hold onto. Like he might be doing that for her. Like she might be able to take that from him. Like it was real, before, what they did. What he gave her. Like it happened.

Because even now there are moments when he’s not so certain.

He scatters kisses over her neck, tongue flicking against her pulse, closes his lips and sucks briefly at her, and she trembles, moans with no trace of words. It occurs to him that he might leave marks, and he’s risked that before, and then she only made a pretense of caring. He doesn’t think she cares at all now.

“Good?”

“Yeah.” She tips her forehead against his and a shaky laugh escapes her. “I feel… It’s tight, I’m tight, I’m… But it’s good.”

She is. Tight around him, tensing and loosening up again, and it’s so good, it’s amazing, how like this she feels almost like a hot, slick hand around him, but he pulls their bodies flush and runs his hands up and down her back, panting into the hollow of her throat, trying to soothe her if she needs any soothing. Trying to show her that this is for her. She can have him. She can have whatever he has to offer, leave whatever she doesn’t want.

“You can take your time,” he whispers, shifting in the seat, trying to give her more control. Like he thought, it’s not terribly comfortable. It would be difficult to express how much of a shit he doesn’t give. “Fuck, Beth, you’re… You can.”

“Don’t wanna take my time.” She moves again, rocks forward, tightens her knees against his hips. Her moan is threatening to shatter, cracked at the end. “I said I wanted you to fuck me hard. That’s what I want.” Another laugh, low and rough, and her mouth arches against his all open and wet, her tongue flicking against his lips. Pushing into him, withdrawing, moving in her own mouth like she’s savoring his taste. “Fuck me, please…”

But she already is. She doesn’t even really need him. There isn’t a lot he could do anyway, not like this; she’s pinning him to the seat, riding him every bit as much as she did in the ruins—cramped, clearly unable to get the speed or the rhythm she wants, but doing her best, doing very well, her nails digging into his shoulders as she bounces in his lap. He’s just trying to hold on, hands tight on her hips and his mouth against every inch of skin he can reach, groaning mutilated versions of her name as she pounds his own pleasure through him.

And she’s talking, or she’s trying, hissing in his ear and against his jaw, words scattered and fragmentary but clear enough for him to get most of them, and they scorch their way into his brain: I want your cock, Daryl, oh Jesus, give me your cock, give it to me, I love it, I love you, I love you, I
Grinding against him, her words and her breath winding tighter, and he knows she won’t need any help from him here either.

But he can help anyway. Or try. He can still give her this, as her words trail off, give her his own words if he can catch them, as he closes a hand tight on her breast and hooks the other around the back of her neck, fingers finding her nipple and pinching. *Fuck, yeah, take it, Beth, fuckin’ hell, look at you, you feel so fuckin’ amazin’, your pussy, oh my fuckin’ God—*

Might be the word—words do things to her, that much is abundantly clear, and she can use them in ways he never expected. Might be the pinch. Might be anything. Might be that he’s getting it right. She jerks her head back and snaps her hips forward and holds on for dear life, spasming, and yes—Yes, she does scream.

She screams so fucking loud.

*Beth.*

Like she’s given him permission he comes what feels like seconds after her, rocking him like the crash of a wave and slamming him into her, and the back of his head hits the headrest so hard he sees stars.

And this really is very uncomfortable. One of his feet is jammed at an angle beside the brake pedal. His loose seatbelt buckle is digging into his hip and he’s pretty sure his skin is raw from the waistband of his own fucking jeans. The sun has been pounding on the cab this whole time and it’s officially hot, even with the windows down, and they’re slick with sweat, slick with each other, sticky.

It’s the most perfect thing he can imagine.

Her head flops forward against his shoulder. Her whole body sags, trembles, and it takes him a few seconds to get that she’s laughing again. He strokes her damp hair and smiles, and the smile feels weak in the best possible way. Everything feels crooked, knocked askew

“*You gotta get off me.*”

She nuzzles her nose against his ear and hums happily. “*Don’t wanna.*”

“*You gotta. C’mon.*”

He pushes at her and she lifts herself with a disappointed huff, which catches when he slides out of her. He disentangles his fingers from her hair just as she tumbles back into the passenger’s seat with a soft squeak of laughter. For a second or two all he can do is gaze at her; he’s dimly aware of how ridiculous he must look with his softening cock hanging out of his jeans, but it’s inconsequential next to what he’s seeing right now. Shining with sweat, lips swollen and hair mussed, bra strap slipping off one shoulder, legs slightly parted as if she’s inviting him back inside. Like always, she’s glowing. Little fragment of fallen sunshine.

She smiles at him and swipes strands of hair out of her face, and yes, please God, he wants to fuck her all over again, but he also wants…

He doesn’t even know.

He looks ridiculous, this is ridiculous, the day in the clearing she said it was ridiculous and she was correct right down to the bone, and none of that is a reason to not say this and keep saying it forever.
“God, I fuckin’ love you.”

A giggle rolls through her and she turns on her side, fishing around on the floor for her clothes. “Not exactly what I had in mind when I used to think about romance, Mr. Dixon.”

For a second he’s worried. A little. It’s knee-jerk, he knows he shouldn’t be, but he looks at the long stretch of her back as she grabs her jeans from where they’re wedged a good way under the seat, and the worry forces its way in anyhow. It feels like a gritty floor under him, like sitting on the broken fragments of something. No, this is not romantic, and it doesn’t have anything even to do with meeting her behind a fucking Target. There is nothing romantic about this. He’s not equipped for romance. It didn’t come with his model.

A nasty whisper hissing through his brain: he doesn’t have anything to give her.

But she raises her head and she’s still glowing, that smile, and he’s reminded that he doesn’t have to be worried anymore.

Instead he gives her a look and pulls off the condom, and tosses it out the window into the ditch. “Thought you didn’t want that shit.”

“I don’t.” She takes his face in her hands and turns it back to hers, and suddenly she’s very close to him. She’s gotten her panties on but otherwise nothing else, but all he sees is her face, soft and bright, her lips slightly parted.

“Beth…”

“I don’t want that. I want this.” She combs his damp hair back from his face and kisses him, and it’s slow, almost chaste. “I told you I wanted somethin’ better than perfect. Perfect isn’t messy. This is… Everythin’ real is messy. It doesn’t fit. There’s nothin’ neat about it. There’s nothin’ easy.” Like before, she tips her forehead against his, and he closes his eyes and leans into her. He wasn’t worried, not really, but when she talks like this, when she touches him this way, she’s reaching into him and stroking him smooth again, pulling him further into that circle of light she takes with her everywhere she goes.

“I love you,” she murmurs, “and this is what I want.” She smiles again; he feels it when she presses her lips to the corner of his mouth. “And I’m the boss. Remember?”

He nods. He’s smiling too—a tiny bit—with laughter fluttering in his throat, but the thing is that it’s true. She’s the boss. Of everything. What she says goes.

He’s extremely comfortable with that. Whatever else might be uncomfortable.

“Get your clothes on.” She bites lightly at his lip and is abruptly gone, back to her own dressing. “We’re not goin’ back yet.”

He watches, still almost smiling, as he yanks his jeans back up and searches around for his shirt. “No?”

“Nope.” She turns her attention back out the window to the field beyond—no cows, no horses, no buildings in sight. Just high green corn, leaves fluttering, crows chasing each other through the rows. It might go on forever, to whatever is past the edge of the horizon. Her smile is smaller, warmer. A secret thing.

“Let’s go, Daryl. We got a lotta light left.”
She’s the boss. He pulls them back onto the road, rumbling north, a thin line of gray cloud chasing behind.
Once upon a time, many years ago in a life that every day seems to have less and less to do with the one in which he’s found himself, Daryl thought all the time about doing something like this.

Not a little boy’s impractical conception of running away from home. For him it never felt like a home to run away from, and anyway, where would he run to? What was out there? Then Merle left and rather than inspiring him it only made the rest of the world feel more unattainable. More unreal. Made him feel caged. Chained to what was happening to him, as it got worse and worse and worse. Merle got away. Daryl wasn’t strong enough for that.

And if he didn’t make it, if he didn’t actually get out, if he got hauled back, everything would just get worse—because yes, that was possible and he knew it. It wouldn’t even be about punishment. It would be about reminding. He wouldn’t be allowed to forget his place. Who and what he was.

But he did think about it. About this. It was a tiny secret rebellion. Lying awake at night on his groaning mattress, wrapped in dirty sheets, hurting and tear-streaked and trying to find his way back into his own body, he would stare up at the cracked, leaky ceiling or out his single dingy window at the night and he would think about somehow being in a car, in a truck… on the back of a motorbike. How maybe Merle might come back and take him away, at least for a while. How they would just drive and drive, down dark roads with no people and no light but the moon, the stars—or sometimes a brilliant sun—and they wouldn’t have anywhere to go. Nowhere to be. They would simply drive, ride the road like an asphalt horse all black and faintly sparkling, and it would be perfect. Better than perfect: it would be okay. For a little bit of time he would slide into another universe and he would be free.

Long before a certain life-ruining girl, these were his most intense and most abiding fantasies.

Then—of course—he got them in the flesh, in the solid real. He got what he wanted. He got two years of it. And it was horrible.

But the last few weeks have been one long process of reeducation. His fantasies, his dreams… He can have them. Maybe.

And they might be better than he ever dared to imagine.

They’re driving. Just driving. Her hand is out the window again, rising and falling in those lovely arcs made even lovelier by the fact that it’s her hand, small and slender, and the honey-colored afternoon sun is spilling itself out past him and onto her hair, bathing them both but naturally giving her more attention, attracted to her. Like to like. Her head is tilted back and her throat is pulled into a graceful line, a flow straight down to her collarbones and the swells of her breasts beneath her neckline. She’s ditched the cardigan—it’s warm in the sun even with the breeze—and she’s all long limbs, a thing made to run. Made for speed.

Out of nowhere he imagines her on a bike. On the back of one. The back of his. Arms wrapped around his middle, hair streaming in the sunset like rocket flame. They could ride.

Strange. But he’s aware that if he has that fantasy now…

Goddamn, it might just fucking happen. Might actually do so.
They’re driving and he feels like they’re outrunning everything, like—and God, he knows this is so untrue and in the background it’s sort of killing him—he might also get that part of his fantasy, the part where they keep going and they never stop. Because he thinks he might be happy with that. Definitely could be happy with just her. The only thing at all his, and she isn’t. She isn’t his.

But for a while she might let him pretend that’s how it is.

Later he’ll realize that in this fantasy, Merle might as well not exist.

But that’s later. This is a glorious Now that stretches out and out, and he does love this country, does like being here, and he loves her so much it feels like his heart is exploding out through his breastbone, making a firework of itself. Rumbling down a road on which they still haven’t seen any other cars, any other people—only fields and occasionally cows, bird on the wheel overhead, murmurations of starlings and exaltations of larks.

They’re moving too. Everything is Now, but the cold and the dark is coming.

But not here. Apropos of nothing she cranks the volume again and grins at him and sings along, and he wishes Dan Wilson would be quiet so he could hear her better.

*all alone on the overpass*
*wired and phoned to a heart of glass*
*now I’m falling in love too fast*
*with you or the songs you chose*

*and all the stars, play for me*
*say the promise you long to keep*

*I can hear you sing it to me in my sleep*
*I can hear you sing it to me in my sleep*

Being in love is the most utterly ridiculous thing anyone was ever stupid enough to do. It’s not a smart move. It’s a questionable decision at best.

Sweet blessed Jesus Christ, it’s the best fucking thing he’s ever done.

“Daryl!”

She grabs his arm tight, and her voice is bright and delighted and close to laughing—her face as well when he jerks his head around to her. She’s pointing out the window. “Oh my God, Daryl, we have to go there."

For a moment he peers out her window and at the landscape along her side of the truck, and he can’t see what she’s so excited about.

Then he does, and well. Yeah.

They basically have to.

~

It’s very big.

Beth stands right under it—in its shadow—and stares up, her head craned, mouth hanging open. Daryl is torn between looking at her and looking at what’s looming over them, because both are
honestly pretty great.

“It’s really somethin’.” She sounds even more delighted than she did in the car. She sounds thrilled.

Daryl isn’t sure he shares quite that level of enthusiasm, but he can’t deny that it’s the largest fiberglass Tyrannosaurus Rex he’s ever seen. Probably will ever see. It has to be at least twenty-five feet tall, painted all over in swoopingly abstract rainbow hues with a wide mouth and white teeth that give it the appearance of wearing a mildly crazed grin, and with the lowering sun gleaming off its flank…

He wouldn’t call it majestic. But it’s definitely something.

About thirty yards away across a dusty patch of packed dirt is an ancient picnic table and a sad-looking ice cream stand manned by—Daryl guesses—the guy who built the thing. Daryl kind of wants to ask him what he was thinking. Not in a disparaging sense; Daryl has made worse life choices. But he still wants to know.

There’s no sign by the side of the road announcing it, either. Nothing naming it or identifying it as any particular attraction. It’s weird. The T-Rex would be weird enough, but even so. It’s just sitting here surrounded by more cornfields, like it fell out of the sky.

Beth has started walking around it, gazing upward, one hand out and fingertips gliding along its immense hind leg. She’s painfully beautiful standing under a fiberglass dinosaur. She’s painfully beautiful no matter where she is. He watches her and he happily soaks in the pain.

“You gonna climb it or somethin’?”

She tosses a brilliant smile over her shoulder. “I’m gonna take it home. How much money you got?”

“You’re gonna have to pick this thing or ice cream.”

“Shut up, I got money too.” She hops nimbly over the tail and he thinks about moonlit puddles, the taste of her lip gloss. “It’ll fit in the back, right?”

“Room to spare.”

“Yeah, speakin’ of, I don’t think it would fit in my room. And I dunno if Daddy would want it on the lawn.” She comes back to him, mouth downturned, regretful. “Guess not. How about ice cream?”

They get ice cream. The stand is indeed sad-looking, slightly crooked at every angle, the pictures of the available fare peeling and faded, but they’re allowed to sample and the ice cream itself is good, and she gets them both chocolate cones with rainbow sprinkles. They’re about to turn away when Daryl gives into his curiosity, because for all he knows they’ll never come back here again.

And he’s reasonably sure that paying attention—as an approach to life in general—means going ahead and asking questions. At least sometimes.

“So, uh.” He jerks his head in the direction of the T-Rex. “Gotta ask… Why did you—”

The man—small, balding, wearing a stunningly green Hawaiian shirt decorated with pineapples and toucans—arches a brow. “I need a reason?”

“No,” Beth says, beaming and tugging at Daryl’s arm. “You sure don’t.”
Daryl supposes he doesn’t. No one should need a reason to do something like that. Looking at it, towering and grinning and aggressive in terms of its very existence, he thinks that aggressive existence is reason enough. It doesn’t need to justify itself by anything other than that it’s here. The world needs shit like this.

Ice cream also.

~

He drops the tailgate and they sit on it side by side, looking out at the fields and the patches of trees, a couple of distant farmhouses and barns, and go to work on the cones. The sun is very low now and the day is cooling off, the air gentle. Pleasant. Ice cream season is almost done—it’s a little surprising the stand is even open, though surprising is probably par for the course with the guy—and it feels like they’ve grabbed for and caught another final shard of summer.

Watching her lick melted ice cream off her knuckles. Jesus.

“You really didn’t know about this place?”

“Never been out this way.” She nods to the short packed dirt drive and the lack of a sign. “Does it look like he advertises? Aside from the actual thing, I mean.”

On a whim he pinches her side, and she swats at him and squeaks a laugh.

“What else’s out here you don’t know about?”

“I dunno.” Her smile softens, and once again it takes on that quality of secrecy. Wisely childlike solemnity behind it. “We should find out.”

They should. They really should. He wants to—go exploring with her, go anywhere, take that small whim that made him pinch her and blow it up large, fly it like a flag. But this isn’t a fantasy. Not actually. And the sun is going down, sky streaking gold and red, and it’s a long way back to town. “I gotta get you home.”

“I know.” She leans against him, biting into her cone and crunching a hefty piece of it off. “But some other time.”

“Yeah.” He’d like that. He’d like that a great deal. Because fucking her was so good, fucking her was everything he wanted and so much more, his hands on her, the taste of her skin, her mouth, the sounds she made as she bucked against him, but there’s also this: sitting with her and talking and sucking sticky chocolate off his thumb, looking at an enormous fucking rainbow dinosaur, and it’s just as good. Every bit.

She wanted to be friends. They are.

“There will be some other time,” she murmurs, and it sounds just as much like a question than a statement. He turns his head, watches her for any indication of something more, but she just crunches down the last of her cone and keeps her attention fixed on the T-Rex, not looking at him at all.

“I mean… Yeah. Why wouldn’t there be?”

“You’re talkin’ about gettin’ a different apartment. Better. So you’re… You’re stickin’ around?” She hesitates, hand halfway to her mouth, and glances at him. “’cause I bet Daddy would keep you on. There’s stuff to do over winter. Not really so much, but… He likes you.”
“Enough to keep payin’ me even if he don’t need me?”

“He would. Otis used to work for him, stayed on all year round. Lived in the house for a while, till he got married and bought his own place.”

For a moment he says nothing. Big scary future—he hadn’t thought this far ahead. Not in detail. It seems like he does that: he gets as far as wanting, as far as allowing himself to want, making some plans and throwing some money at them… But nothing more. Nothing with any specificity. He might just still not know how. He’s new to this. He picks things up fast, but this might be something else.

*Stick around.*

He can’t imagine not sticking around. If it’s possible.

And she wants him to.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “Yeah, I mean… I could.”

“You kinda have to.” She leans against him more fully, and—because he can, because she’ll let him and because it feels so right—he slides an arm around her shoulders and rests his cheek on the crown of her head.

Her clean, fresh scent. The world full of her.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m the boss.” Smile in her voice, tiny but warm. “And I love you. So there’s that.”

He can’t argue. He wouldn’t dream of doing so. He squeezes her, presses his lips to her temple and closes his eyes into the setting sun. *Love you, girl.*

~

He gets her back to the Target shortly after dark. She’s going to meet some friends, get some dinner before she heads home. But she doesn’t let him go; she turns and frames his face, tugs him in, nudge his lips open with hers and kisses him—his mouth and jaw and the top of his throat—until his joints are loose and shaky and he’s so hard he aches against his zipper.

She pulls back with a wicked little grin. “Sorry,” she murmurs, reaches between his legs and kneads him, and breathes a laugh when he grits his teeth and shudders. “Didn’t mean to.”

Another flash of that grin, a quick kiss on his cheek, and she hops out of the cab and walks away toward the front of the building, not looking back. Leaving him there diamond-hard and no one to take care of it but himself.

*GIRL.*

Chapter End Notes

Lyric snippet is "Singing In My Sleep" by Semisonic.
On Monday the clouds roll in. On Tuesday the rain begins.

It’s not like before. It doesn’t feel like *ominous* rain, rain acting as harbinger for things far worse than being unable to escape the wet. It’s a gentle kind of rain, almost soft enough to not force the use of an umbrella if you’ll only be outside for a few minutes. People in town seem nervous about it, jumpy, and it’s not hard to understand why. On Tuesday night when Daryl stops in at the diner a few blocks away from the feed-and-seed—a pleasantly greasy place with a correspondingly greasy all-day breakfast menu and a large matronly waitress named Bella who seems to like him for some reason—the people in booths and at the counter are talking in low mutters, heads bent together as if they’re afraid the weather will overhear them and start getting ideas.

Maybe he should be worried. Maybe he should be terrified. Maybe he should be terrified for the very reason he’s *not* terrified: he’s halfway through wolfing down his roast beef sandwich when his phone buzzes.

*miss you*

He just sits for a moment, looking at it, sandwich still in his other hand and meat juice running down his fingers.

Two words. Simple. Innocuous. It’s not like she hasn’t said them before. It’s not like they’re some big new thing.

Except they are. All her words now are new. Because everything is new. Because he didn’t realize it at the time, didn’t understand it until now, but when the world flooded the world *itself* went into the water, was washed clean, remade, came up changed. It doesn’t seem like anyone else is aware of it—more than once in the last couple of days he’s wanted to grab someone and demand to know if they’ve noticed anything different about everything—but that doesn’t make it less true.

It’s not just him. It’s not just in his head. Everything is different. And he’s not terrified, because a few miles outside of town there’s a girl who misses him and wants him to know it.

He puts down the sandwich and gropes for a napkin, turns his head toward the window, snapping the phone shut and closing his fingers around it like he’s trying to keep the words from spilling out all over the countertop. He’s staring at the rain going slate-colored in the dusk, staring *through* it at nothing at all. He doesn’t even see it. He sees the elegant ivory curve of her back, tendrils of silver hair. He sees her hands dancing through the dark.

He should reply.

He doesn’t know any poetry—none except what she’s given him—but he would really like to compose a sonnet or something, text it back to her.

So then he’s laughing silently. He’s laughing at himself, the rain, his sandwich. Fucking hell, he thought he was crazy *before*.

In the end he settles for three words. They’ll do.
girl thrown in at the end, like a fingertip pressed against the seam of her lips.

~

It’s a school night, obviously—Christ, that still fucks with him sometimes—so he can’t sneak out to her and she can’t sneak out to him. Or shouldn’t. They really need to be careful now, because now the opportunities for being stupid are so much greater. But there is the phone.

There is most definitely the phone.

So then he’s gripping himself in a tight, torturous fist, telling her to come for him, imploring her, beseeching her to give herself everything because he can’t. Thinking but not saying, because he’s not sure how, that if he deserves to feel good then she deserves ecstasy and she deserves it constantly, but he’ll settle for hearing her make herself come, knowing that for these few gasping, shuddering seconds she almost has it. What she should have all the time, every second of every day. What he would give her if he could.

He used to suffer because he wanted her like this and knew he couldn’t have her. Now he suffers because he can have her, just not right now.

It’s okay.

After, they don’t hang up. They talk in low murmurs, not about anything in particular. Like usual she does most of the actual talking, and that’s fine. He loves to listen. He lies on his back, staring at the trickles of orange-gray rainlight on the ceiling and he loses himself in the flow of her sweet voice. Telling him about her classes—there’s an English Lit midterm coming up that she’s mildly stressed about. Telling him about the ridiculousness of the student council elections in full swing. Telling him about the pep rally on Friday afternoon which everyone has to attend and which she’s desperately trying to think of ways to get out of—time better spent with him, God, yes—and about how Jimmy always used to be into the football team, like a lot, and she just never got there with him. Not a big deal at the time, but now it’s one more thing.

He would like anything she likes, and if she didn’t like something he likes he would well and truly not give a fuck.

But no. That’s silly. That really is childish, and not in a good way. She’s herself. He’s himself. He loves her so much he still thinks it might genuinely kill him, but he’s not her appendage.

She would hate that.

“Read me somethin’,” he whispers—just as he’s close to slipping into a doze and he can tell she’s in the same place—and she lets out a soft breath and disappears for a couple of minutes. When she comes back he hears a rustle of pages.

“You care what?”

“Surprise me.”

“You don’t know any of these. Any of ’em would surprise you.”

“This ain’t the same from before?”

“Same poet? No, this is different.”

He smiles. It feels like it runs down the back of his throat and through his arteries and into all of him,
warm and smooth as her skin. “Kinda takin’ a risk, ain’t you? Switchin’ shit up on me?”

“Daryl.” She laughs, so soft he almost doesn’t hear. “Hey. Remember the stuff about surprises? You’ll like this. I promise.”

He trusts her. Never a doubt. Not about this.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

She’s quiet for a short time after. So is he. His throat is stuck, closed around itself, and the streaking rainlight is blurring away.

Little boy in the woods, the only true kind of running away he had. All bruised, scraped, fresh scabs and other things no one could see but he felt worse and more keenly than any of the others. But there he was in the trees, in the stillness, making his way down to the pond to look for frogs—not to catch or hurt them the way he’s sure Merle would but just because they were interesting—hands smooth against the ferns and feet soft against the carpet of pine needles, heading for cool mud, and everything else went away. The sun and shadow, never the same twice. The mockingbirds and the tanagers. The woodpecker’s rattle. The rustle and scurry of creatures skilled in the practice of keeping themselves out of sight. Green and brown and gold smells, rich and heady, filling him.

His secret places. Somehow he was never chased there. Somehow he was never found. He could do what he always wished he could do when things were so bad. He could disappear.

He could be nothing.

“How do you know?”

He says it in a thin breath. What she says back… He’s not sure he really hears it. Not sure he really said what he said. It could have happened somewhere else. That tangent universe crashing in on this one, gentle and ruthless. Like her, tearing everything apart and emptying everything out to make room for itself.

How do you know?

Because I love you.

~

The rain doesn’t stick around. By mid-morning on Wednesday it tapers off and by noon it’s stopped entirely. The sun comes out, warm, and the puddles steam and the air feels saturated with water, but everyone palpably relaxes.

The flooded end of the street is being repaired. The damage is bad but not as bad as people feared. They actually got pretty lucky. Daryl catches a quick thing about it in the local paper: work should
be done in a month or so. By Thanksgiving for sure.

He’ll be there to see it. Now that it’s solidified in his mind as a genuine decision, he stands on the sidewalk in the twilight and looks at the silent hulks of the construction equipment, and he thinks about a concrete, singular point in the future for which he’ll be present. A line from A to B. Something to follow, something to fix his attention on.

The place where he almost lost her. Patched over and healed.

What will that mean?

He takes a look at the rental listings. There are another couple of possibles. One of them comparable to the other two they’ve looked at and one a little high in terms of rent, but all the utilities are included in the latter, and it’s less shitty, or it seems like it. Better part of town. Slightly, anyway. He knows the area; it’s quieter. There are more trees.

Second floor of a house. There’s a small black and white photo. Grainy, but it seems like a nice house. Victorian, or Victorian-ish. The windows, the ones visible, appear sizable.

He looks at it for a while.

He shows it to Merle. Merle looks at it too, looks up at him; his expression is dubious, which it has been through this entire process so far, but he nods. *Guess it can’t hurt.* Some old lady on the ground floor, maybe. More space than she needs, looking to supplement social security. Merle cracks a beer and mutters something about a hundred cats. Daryl allows himself a tiny smile and makes no attempt to hide it.

He likes cats.

They had this routine before, this method of operation: They have to minimize contact. They have to be very, very careful about when and how and how often they see each other, speak to each other, even *look* at each other. Nothing new. Except everything is, *everything.* Every time he catches her eye there’s a new weight behind it, a new heat—a tether stretching between them, hooking, tugging. On Wednesday, Thursday, Friday their hands touch under the dining table—not even necessarily holding but just grazing, whisper of skin on skin, like what their bodies can do in miniature—and it’s all he can do to keep from moaning aloud.

Late Wednesday afternoon he’s coming back to the house from the barn, toolbox in one hand, and he’s on the phone—Merle has called him about a food run, what exactly the fuck they need, like Merle is incapable of looking in the goddamn fridge and figuring it out—and his foot slides in a muddy patch. He doesn’t fall but the phone does, and she’s there, at it before he can get to it, and before she straightens up he sees right down the scoop neckline of her shirt: perfect little handfuls cupped in soft blue cotton.

She smiles at him as she holds out the phone. Her wide eyes are sparkling. He’s sure she intended for him to see that. Sure it was a present and a tease both at once.

No one in earshot. “Girl,” he whispers, and she flushes, licks her lips.

Eating dinner that night, she holds his hand as Hershel says the blessing—hot and small and curled against his—and he thinks about doing more under the table than a grazing touch. He thinks about slipping his hand between her legs, pressing and moving just-so with his fingers, seeing how long and how well she can keep it together.
It would be fucking suicide.

But he can think about it.

~

Thursday: cooler. Much cooler. Not yet cold, but he’s back to long sleeves, at least until work heats him up. He’s thinking again about the next few weeks, swinging back and forth between vagueness and vivid clarity. New place. Repaired road. He wonders what they’ll do with the park. Those paths, the ones they walked, that stand of eucalyptus, those half-tended flowerbeds. The footbridge.

Some things probably can’t be fixed. That’s just an ugly fact of life. There are scars and they don’t fade.

But there’s a lot of beauty. There’s a blue sky, crisp wind, and that morning he sees the first gray flocks of wintering juncos, fluttering and trilling, hopping around the ground near the henhouse. Peak won’t be for another couple of weeks at least, but there are already hints of red and gold and orange in a few of the trees. Promises of coming fire.

Less than two months until December.

He’s not afraid.

~

Thursday night before he leaves she texts him. There’s a ruined barn at the end of the south pasture and he meets her there. The moon is rising earlier now—waning gibbous—and it’s just above the treeline, huge and golden, already bright enough to cast shadows. He could swear he sees it reflected in her eyes when he shoves her against the wooden planks of the half-fallen wall, obscured by him when he cups her face in his hands, thumbs against her jaw, tilts her head up to capture her mouth. It is like capture; she clutches at him, hand fisted in his shirt, and it might be mistaken as struggling for a few seconds before she surges into him with a soft moan.

She’s wearing a skirt. He’s sure she meant to. It’s short and light and it’s easy to drag up, get a hand under it and between her thighs, slip his fingers under the waistband of her panties and into her slick folds. He’s so fucking hard with no condom—maybe he should just start carrying one around—but all his focus is locked on her anyway, how she’s trying to hook her leg around his, knee pressing his hip, trying to open herself wider as he slides a finger into her soaked cunt and fucks her slow and as deep as the angle allows.

No words this time. Just her whimpers, her gasps. Not even his name. There’s something about that he likes, his teeth closing lightly on her bottom lip. As if he’s taken all her words away from her and left her only with her desperate incoherence and his hand. And he works her slowly, dangerously slowly but he wants so much to take his time, teasing her clit with his thumb until she’s pulling his hair with both hands and whining through her clenched jaw, and only when she pulls hard enough to hurt him does he give her what she’s begging for, sending her over with rapid circles of the pad of his thumb and finger as far in her as it’ll go. She snaps her body forward and back, mouth open in a silent cry trapped in her throat, and falls shaking into his arms.

Like always he licks her off his fingers. She laughs against his neck, kisses him. Slips a hand between them and cups him, tracing him with her palm, but he shakes his head. He’ll take care of it. Later.

And he doesn’t want to yet. He wants this fire in him all the way home.
He waits for ten minutes after she leaves, then follows her.

One thing definitely hasn’t changed: they love teasing. They love being teased.

Love to burn.

~

She can’t get out of the pep rally on Friday. She’s very annoyed. It does mean they’ll be let go from school half an hour early, and she has no reason to go to the football game that night. But: she can use the football game as an excuse, can’t she?

She can.

Warm weekend. Will it be warm enough for the swimming hole?

It will.

Chapter End Notes

Poem is "The Peace of Wild Things" by Wendell Berry.
breathing is the hardest thing to do

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday is warm and increasingly so as the day goes on, dry but with a kind of motionless heaviness that could go one way or the other. By early afternoon the warmth turns to actual heat, like another one of those last fleeting tastes of summer, but even now there’s an edge in the air, a reminder that fleeting is exactly what this is. Enjoy it, mortals, say the weather gods, but don’t rely on it to be here tomorrow.

That’s fine. Daryl only wants it for tonight.

During lunch, sitting in the shade with his back against one of the old gnarled trees near the house, he makes a call to the number on the ad for the Victorian-ish place. The person who picks up on the other end is indeed, by the sound of her voice, an elderly woman, and she does indeed have more room than she needs and could use some extra income and that is indeed why she’s renting out the upstairs, so Merle was right about two out of three and Daryl’s guessing that there probably is at least one cat somewhere in the mix.

But he’s not going to ask. That would be weird. He wants to avoid too much weird. He can already feel himself falling into the trap of hoping this might work out—sight unseen, but he just has kind of a Feeling—and he doesn’t want to fuck it up, at least not before it’s unavoidable. Which it might very well be. Because he asks her if he can come by and see the place Saturday afternoon and the answer is yes, absolutely, and he mentions that he has a brother looking to rent with him, and that’s when he realizes that he’ll pretty much have to bring Merle.

Which he was going to. Of course he was. Merle came along to the other two places, why not this one? Why the hell shouldn’t he? Why is this suddenly an issue?

That’s a stupid question. He knows exactly why. And it’s kind of awful, and there’s nothing he can do, right in this moment, to change it.

Daryl thanks her and cuts the call, lowers the phone and looks vaguely out at the sun pooling in the grass around the house, insects buzzing lazily in its beams. He feels unsettled. There’s a lot here that’s still unsettling. Not all of it is stuff he can put a name to.

Nothing was going to be fixed all at once. He knew that. Doesn’t mean it’s not getting better.

But he’s unsettled for the rest of the afternoon, until Beth comes home and he has something else to focus on.

~

They’re going to have a time gap between when she comes home and when they meet—a few blocks from the high school, and he elects to fill part of it by staying a little later after dinner and doing some basic maintenance on Hershel’s ancient tractor. It’s running all right, nothing in imminent danger of breaking, but it could probably do with some cleaning here and there and some greasing in a few other places.

Lying on his back, neck aching a bit and his hands naturally covered in engine grease, it occurs to him again that they’re doing something immensely stupid already, that this entire thing was stupid pretty much from the beginning—how long did it even take him to stop thinking of it as a mistake?
—and that stupidity has been increasing by several orders of magnitude since they actually started fucking. And it doesn’t matter that it wasn’t such a huge step up from what they had been doing before, doesn’t matter that to date they’ve only done that specific thing three times; for other people, he knows, that is sort of the clincher. That’s what gets your head in the noose. For Hershel Greene— for anyone, really,—the much older drifter farmhand feeling up his teenage daughter is definitely bad, fingering her until she’s wailing is very very bad, but the much older drifter farmhand fucking his teenage daughter in the front seat of the drifter farmhand’s shitty pickup…

That would probably be a hanging offense.

And maybe he and Beth are doing something stupid, but he’s not stupid enough to think that Hershel and Annette liking him is going to mean he gets anything even remotely resembling a pass.

No. He’ll hang.

That he loves her more than he imagines anyone has ever loved anything… He really doesn’t think offering that as a defense would go very well.

He sighs, lets his hands drop to the ground and just lies there for a few seconds, everything else slipping into the background. He hasn’t been thinking about this directly. That no one should find out, the reasons why they shouldn’t—yeah, sure, he knew all of that. Knew it perfectly well. But she almost died, and everything after that was its own particular kind of horrible-wonderful chaos, and it still is wonderful, so fucking wonderful he can’t handle it…

But/and/now/so – somehow—there’s so much more to lose.

Finished, hands rinsed under the pump and walking to the house in the early twilight to tell them he’s heading out, he sees Beth getting into the car with Shawn—who isn’t going to the game but is instead meeting some friends elsewhere—cardigan hanging loose off her bare shoulder, and it comes to him suddenly and with considerable force that once in another situation like this he could have offered her a lift and she could have taken it. They were aware that it might look a little strange if it happened too often, but they didn’t really worry, not really. There wasn’t anything to worry about. They weren’t doing anything.

There was such an ease in that, and even if he hadn’t known what to do with it—and then later it started pulling out all his guts and cheerfully tying them in knots—it had settled into him and opened him up. Confused him, sure, and in fact it did worry him for a bunch of different reasons, but there was something about it that helped him breathe a little easier. When he was with her.

Outwardly—he hopes—nothing much has changed from those days. Everything still looks normal. Normal enough. Inside, of course, it’s all different, every part of him, as specified, pulled out and shifted around, rewired and patched up—and it’s been good. It’s been good for him. She’s so good for him.

But he hesitates for a fraction of a second, and catches her eye when she looks out the window as Shawn angles them down the drive, and what he’s feeling…

He thinks he might see it in her face. Maybe.

They’ve lost something.

~

The light from the football field is bright enough to be seen what feels like halfway across town, and Daryl looks at it from where he’s parked—shady side-street, almost an alley, no one around that he
can see—and listens to the dull roar coming to him along with those lights, and thinks once again about a world he was never part of and never particularly wanted to be.

It would have been nice to have something approaching a few bearable teenage years. It might have been nice to… Yeah, it might have been nice to finish high school. But this part was something in which he never took a lot of interest.

There’s something about sports in the classic sense that he’s not sure he’s ever fully understood.

Beth is at the game simply to make sure she’s seen there, that she can establish at least some element of presence if it happens to come up – and it shouldn’t make any difference considering all the sneaking around they’ve already been doing, what they’ve done in the course of said sneaking around, but… It does. It doesn’t feel good, and the un-goodness in it is something he’s not certain he wants to unpack.

At least not right now.

It’s early yet, but the moon is already lifting itself through the trees, traveling slow – continuing to wane, as moons do. Fading along with the warmth but still fat and golden, like it’s harvesting itself. Reaping itself away.

These are slightly morbid thoughts. Yesterday he was blissfully happy. What the actual hell.

A huge roar from the stadium. Somewhere a dog begins to bark, deep and rough. Big dog. He hears a chainlink fence rattle. An answering bark further away, a few rounds of that, then quiet.

The crowd noise also dies down, and just as Daryl’s checking his phone it buzzes.

halftime, be right there

He sits back and drums his fingers on the wheel, lips moving silently along with the faintly thuddy murmur of the radio.

promises of what I seemed to be
only watched the time go by

The song isn’t even done before she’s coming up beside the truck, slapping her hand lightly against it and pulling the door open, doing her usual springing hop in and onto the seat. She’s grinning, breathing a little hard, and her hair is slightly tousled. He wonders if she’s been running.

“Hi.”

“Hey.” He presses into her with a low humming sound when she leans in and curves her mouth against his, lips parted, and he feels himself sinking into her. But the tension is lingering in his core and naturally she can sense it—because she tenses as well, almost imperceptibly, and pulls back enough to look at him, cool hand against the side of his neck. Her face is half thrown into shadow, the lines of her features strange, the cut on her face standing out sharp and subtly flowing with the rise of her cheekbone.

“What?”

He shakes his head and shifts his gaze away from her before he can stop it, knowing he’s already screwed. “Nothin’.”

She arches a brow. Most of the time he loves how perceptive she is. Then there are times like these.
Not many, not anymore, but apparently they're sticking around.

“Yeah, I think it’s somethin’.”

“I’ll be fine.” He really will try to be. He takes a breath and makes an effort to sound convincing, and he might manage it. He’ll hope. One hand finds her thigh and rests there, squeezes, and she loosens a bit and kisses him one more time before she sits back.

Still looking at him, though. He returns the look, keeping it even, summoning up a kind of centeredness and finding his own gravity. He’s not going to get all defensive. He’s not going to prickle. He’s not going to fucking do that. Whatever this is, whatever the reason it hit him so suddenly and so hard, he has to deal with it, because she’s here and there’s this, her lips and their taste and the way the top of her thigh fits under his palm, and he can’t fuck this up after everything they’ve been through, even if fuck this up merely means fucking up an evening.

*Because who knows how often you can afford to have this now.*

Stop.

“You got towels?” she asks softly, and he nods. He bought some specifically for this. He spent a while picking them out, which was stupid because in the end he just went for plain and unpatterned—a soft blue close to what she seems to like to wear.

He really wants this to be good.

He’s overthinking again. But fuck, somehow all at once the stakes feel way too high. From every angle. Calm *down*, for the love of *God*.

“Let’s go, then,” she says, just as soft, her hand covering his—so cool and smooth—and like she did, he loosens. A little.

It’s not that he doubts that she wants to be here. He thinks he might be through with doubting that. What’s gnawing at his gut and hissing softly like an annoyed rodent is something else entirely.

The lights from the football field seem to swell. He shudders the truck to life and turns them down another quiet street and away from that light, further into the moon-thrown shadows. Where—he can’t stop circling this thought, round and round and closing in like water spiraling down a drain—it’s safe.

*~*

But outside town, rolling through the dark, it feels better. It always does like this, maybe because this is foundational, the beginning of everything and back to the roots: the night, the radio, movement and her. Her elbow is resting on the edge of the window, her hand extended outward, but arcing no sine waves through the air, no rise and dip of her fingers. There’s something about when she does it that he finds fascinating, nearly hypnotizing, and now he can’t stop noticing its absence, though he’s not sure it means anything. Her head is tilted back, her neck bobbing when she swallows, and he thinks about skimming his fingertips down its graceful line, and everything is better still.

They pass the farm—the house an angular bulk against the sky, lights burning in the kitchen and parlor and one upstairs room—and as they do she lets out a slow breath, sounding almost relieved, and he studies her out of the corner of his eye.

Maybe she’s nervous too. Maybe she perceives all the reasons they have to be just that.
She doesn’t have to direct him. He remembers the way, couldn’t forget it now, and anyway it’s not
difficult. He remembers the turnoff, the bumpier gravel road lighter gray in the moonlight and cutting
across the empty fields, the rise and the house further on to the right, lifted against the sky with its
tiny lights winking like captured stars. He remembers the left fork, the gentle drop and dark seas of
grass, the glitter of water in the distance, the old trees stooped and extending their branches over its
glasy surface.

He’s imagining this as much as he’s seeing. He doesn’t often remember his dreams, but he knows
he’s dreamed about this place. Way more than once.

They’re still some distance away, rolling slowly over the rougher stretch of road, when he thinks
about how she wanted him to touch her when they went exploring, casually and with no obvious
purpose except to do so, and he takes his right hand off the wheel and reaches over, presses his
fingers gently between her thighs and cups her in his palm. She stiffens, glancing at him and curling
the tip of her tongue to her top lip, and then she sighs and rolls her hips up, pushing against him.

He doesn’t press harder. He simply lets his hand rest there as he reaches the bottom of the slope and
pulls to a gradual halt, the pond laid out shimmering in front of them. He knows they aren’t here only
for this, but they’re here for this all the same, and he gives her a gentle squeeze—and feels oddly
possessive as he does so.

Possessing her isn’t a concept that’s ever asserted itself.

He’s not sure what to make of it.

She sighs again and turns her face toward him. “Like that.” The corner of her mouth creeps upward.
“That’s what I was talkin’ about.”

“Yes. Think I get it.”

“You get a lotta things. You always have.” She reaches down and covers his hand with hers, holds
him there for a moment as her eyes half close. Her breathing has slowed and her neck is pulled into a
curve so slight it’s almost not there, but in that line is all the grace he saw before. It’s always in her,
hiding in her body like the songs in her bones and just waiting for the right time to emerge.

They’ve been in the water but he’s never seen her dive. Not really. Maybe she’ll let him see it now.

“I’m tryin’,” he murmurs.

She nods, lifts his hand away from her and raises it, turns it, kisses his palm. It’s feather-light and it
tickles, tingles into his fingertips and flows warm up his arm. It’s all right again, or as all right as it’s
going to be tonight, because she has the power to do that. To make it so.

Even if he’s starting to wonder just how far her uncanny powers extend.

“C’mon.” Her lips brush the pads of his fingers. “I don’t wanna waste any time.”

He leans over to get the towels from behind the seat, and when he turns back she’s out of the truck
and bending to pull off her boots, leaving them where they are and walking barefoot and silent over
the grass toward the water. For a moment he simply stands and watches her as she’s thrown fully
into the light of the moon—higher and paler and smaller now—once again a lithe little creature of
silver and bone. Unreal. Not like in the ruins, not the same kind of rule-suspension, but this place is
special too. Special for them, but it was special before they got here.

Too many people have come here, been here, left parts of themselves and taken other things away
with them for it not to be.

He toes off his boots and leaves them beside hers and he follows.

~

Something happens between the truck and the water.

Both times they’ve been here it’s been like something reached out of that refracted light and curled around him, tugged him toward itself. The first time angered and frightened him—made him angry because it made him frightened—and the second time it stripped him bare and stripped her too, in more senses of the word than he thinks he could identify. Now it takes him again as he draws up beside her, and it’s like the water settles over and into him before he even touches it, his eyes full of reflected moonlight. Full of her, because of course she’s drawn it down again. Collected it into her skin. She touches his hand and stops him a few yards from the nodding cattails, turns toward him—her back to the water—reaches up and lays her hands against his cheeks, and she’s brilliant.

“I don’t wanna waste any time,” she says again, her voice low and serious, and he can sense a spark of playfulness dancing around the edge of this, but only the edge. He drops the towels, lifts his hands and closes them over her wrists, delicate bones under his fingers and her beaded wire bangles clicking and sounding oddly like crickets in the stillness.

“So don’t.”

A slow smile curves her lips, though the seriousness remains. “Okay.”

She lets go and starts to tug the cardigan the rest of the way down her shoulder, but he stops her, fingers against hers. Like so many times, it’s an impulse, a strong one, and now he sees no reason to not obey it.

“Can I—?”

She looks at him for a few seconds, eyes glittering like little pools of her own, difficult to read. Except that smile is lingering, as if she’s gently amused by something.

Then she nods, and he slowly begins to undress her.

He’s hardening as he does it, heat flickering bright in him almost as soon as he exposes her shoulders, but it’s nowhere near the center of his attention. What he wants right now isn’t to fuck her but to see her, like he has before and also not, because they’ve never been here like this and they’ll never have this moment again. The agitated paths in which his thoughts were beginning to move before have returned, but now they’re only lurking outlines, a background that highlights the truth. That this is precious.

He can’t ever forget.

He lets the cardigan fall and slips his fingers under the hem of her top and over the warm smoothness of her belly, and she pulls in something that isn’t quite a gasp, her eyes fluttering closed. It’s easy to lift the thin fabric over her ribs, hands gliding up her sides and over the small swells of her breasts, and she shivers, twitches and breathes a laugh, and he doesn’t fight the smile that plucks at the corner of his mouth.

Tickling her in the grass, in the blankets, playing with her in the moonlight. Wild.

Here in this carved-off portion of time, he can’t believe they won’t always have that.
Her top follows the cardigan and she stands motionless in her jeans and bra, waiting for him. But he takes the time she doesn’t want to waste and gazes down at her, stroking a hand over her hair, over the silky weave of her braid.

Since he realized that this feeling was even a Thing he’s been trying to find ways to tell her how beautiful she is, and he’s been certain he’ll always fail dismally—and what kind of hope did he ever have? When has he ever been able to articulate anything above the most basic necessary sentences? But he sees her like this and he wants to try so hard for her, wants to collect all the poetry he can find, every line of every song, select just the right words, stitch it all together in just the right order and present it to her. Finally get it out there where she can look at it, and he can point to it and say See? That’s what I meant.

Except she doesn’t need him to do that. She never has. She requires no grand gestures. He worried about his essential lack of romance; she doesn’t want that anyway. Her expectations aren’t extravagant.

Though he thinks, sometimes, that her standards are still fairly high. Which has implications.

But now he lets out a breath and smooths his hands up her arms and shoulders to her neck, her jaw, staring down at the milky oval of her face and the spun silver of her hair, and his fingers find the band holding it in place and tug gently, pulling it free and letting those gleaming strands flow.

“You’re so fuckin’ beautiful,” he whispers, and she laughs and ducks her head—not embarrassment, he’s pretty sure, but simple delight.

“This is where I gotta tell you to stop, right?”

He sighs. “Beth…”

“I’m teasin’.” She touches his hands again, her fingertips drifting over his knuckles and rippling a shiver up his arms to nest beneath his ribs. “Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t.

He’s never taken her bra off, never like this—really never anyone’s bra—and he’s worried for a second or two that he might suddenly transform into a fumbling teenager, be clumsy when it seems important to not be, but his fingers find the hooks and undo them, slip the straps down her shoulders and send it to join the rest of her clothes. He cups her breasts, her nipples pressing into the creases of his palms, and she gasps softly and arches, her lips parted and her hands settling on his upper arms.

“Don’t stop,” she whispers again. “Daryl… Please don’t stop.”

He kisses her, fleeting but deep, his tongue curving alongside hers, and a quiet groan escapes her when he takes hold of her hips and kneels.

And this is suddenly very different.

He’s thought about this. Only half in literal terms, and mostly about how he feels—overwhelmed by her, weakened and shaken, and back when he was spending a lot of time thinking of her as a goddess his imagination would occasionally frame things in weird, unclear terms of actual worship. But that doesn’t feel right, now. That’s not what this is.

He’s not worshiping her, staring up as her fingers comb into his hair and push it back from his face. He wasn’t clumsy with her bra and he’s not clumsy with her button and her zipper, even if he’s doing it all by touch, his attention lost in the thick fall of her hair and the half-shadowed lines of her
face. Every part of this is very simple and this final part is the simplest, and he hooks his fingers under the waistband of her jeans and panties together and pulls them slowly down so she can step out of them, leaving him crouched in the grass with one hand on her knee, forehead against her lower belly.

Maybe this was always where he was headed.

“Daryl.”

Just a breath, a slight hitch in it, because she knows what he’s doing, knows it perfectly well as he closes the last of the distance and kisses the tight curls of her bush, and a shuddering sigh escapes her as he tucks his thumbs into her folds and spreads her enough to allow him to press his lips to her clit.

He leaves them there for a moment, feeling the hot little nub beneath them and her fingers curling in his hair, and if he needs some kind of permission, that’ll do perfectly well. He smiles, nuzzles her, and her gasp fills his ears like wind as he bends his back and licks his way into her.

This is no longer something entirely new and intimidating for its newness, but the newness hasn’t completely worn off, and a tremor hums through him as he tongues her slowly, spreading her wider as her legs part to accommodate him. There something about that, about how she’s opening for him that reaches inside him and bursts, and he presses his face against her for a few seconds, almost burrowing into her warmth and her wetness with her pulse beating into his mouth, and she lets out a strained whimper and clutches at him.

And he pulls back and flicks hard at her clit and she jumps, giggles, tugs him in again.

“Jerk. Oh… Oh God.”

Yeah, he can be.

It’s like a dream drifting over him; there’s no longer anything but her. Low, insistent need is coiling around the base of his spine but it can wait. Outside its tension there’s no urgency in any of this, no reason to hurry. The whole world is flowing over and through him like the flow of her into his mouth, slick and sharp-sweet on his seeking tongue. There’s no pattern to it and it doesn’t feel like one is necessary; he’s following wherever the soft curves of her cunt are directing him in slow laps and circles, and her moans are rising, tightening, sliding into a rhythm that he meets and matches.

“Daryl… Oh, that’s so good, oh God… Don’t stop, don’t… stop. Right there, right there, don’t…”

And he laughs, heat sluicing through him and covering all his jagged ends like a tide over broken pilings. It lifts him and carries and he wants to lift her too and send her flying—and he knows how. His tongue dances over and around her swollen clit in quick swirls, and it’s only a few more seconds before she sobs his name in a torrent of other unformed words and grips him, nails scratching along his scalp, her legs shaking and body rolling into him and her shudder blooming up from inside her and through her in waves beneath her skin, his hands.

He doesn’t want to let go of her. So he doesn’t. He knows he has to stop, knows it’ll be too much, but he leaves off with a final rough swipe that has her whimpering, trembling in one more hard surge and then releasing, muscles going soft and lax.

Then the quiet descends, stretching out into the dark and around them like a cloak. He leans against her, licking her off his lips, lifting a hand to his face and gathering her juices from his cheeks and chin and carrying them to his tongue. She hasn’t released him either, her fingers still tangled in his hair and her breath coming in quick little pants, things that could easily twist into laughter.
“God, Daryl.”

He raises his head, fingertips against his lips and that hot coil tight in his belly. Wanting to uncoil. Wanting to do that uncoiling inside her. “Come down here.”

She shakes her head, and the hands in his hair are suddenly tugging at him. “You come up.”

“Why?”

She changes the angle of her head just-so and the moon catches her in a new way, revealing her smile. That amusement is back and sparkling in her eyes, excitement joining it. Like she’s had a wonderful idea. “cause I wanna do you.”

“You—” He freezes, mouth open, blinking at her as he processes all the possible meanings of that particular arrangement of words, and settling on the ones he’s just about positive she’s using. “Beth, I…”

Her thumb strokes down over his cheekbone, her head still tilted and her expression now faintly curious. No concern that he can see, but. “You don’t want me to?”

He’s not sure what he wants. He should be. It’s insane to not be sure. But somehow this is a place he hasn’t completely and directly ventured into, not even in his fantasies, not even the few times he’s let himself get what he felt at the time was daring. Not even straddling her and watching her explore his cock, watching himself spill all over her hand and wrist, her breasts, watching her slide her fingers into it and lick them clean. Hints of the idea, but only that.

He really should have thought about this. Somehow he didn’t. And for some reason, faced with it now, he’s nervous.

“I don’t have to,” she says softly. “I don’t… Daryl, we don’t have to do anything.”

You should only do it when you want to.

He hasn’t moved. The world is creeping back in around the edges of his perception—the smell of the grass mingling with the smell of her cunt, the rustling of leaves and the low croak of a frog, and the glow of the moon directly above them, catching them in a beam, as if it’s been searching for them. His knees are aching slightly—not unpleasantly—and so is his jaw. But she still dominates everything, her perfect curves and lines rising over him, her hands on him like she’s delivering a blessing.

He let go of the goddess thing, but he sure does seem to keep circling back around to it.

That grabs his mouth, pulls it into his own crooked smile.

“Daryl?”

He understands. All at once he gets it—yes, he gets a lot of things. More and more of them all the time. This also circles around, makes a malevolent little hook in his brain and connects further back to every nasty thing he ever saw and heard about how the business of sex is transacted—just that: a business. A transaction. At best.

And what he was taught then—from a certain degree of experience—was that this, what she wants… This is something people just don’t really like to do. They do it, but they don’t like it, and men in particular are ugly about it. They use it in ugly ways. He saw too much of that. Learned too well. Men shoving women to their knees, hissing abuse, fucking roughly into their mouths and
making them gag and fumble with tears in their eyes. Unhappy tears. An unhappy thing.

But he was lied to. It doesn’t have to be that way. With her, like this, it’s not.

It’s nothing like that at all.

He reaches up and takes her hands in his, and he shoves all that bullshit away. “I want to.” He swallows, pushes a bit further. Committing. All in. “I want you to.”

“Good.” Warm, pleased—but with a hint of breathlessness that he isn’t sure has much to do with how recently she’s come. She could be uncertain about this too. That’s eminently possible.

Jesus.

Maybe that shouldn’t make him feel better, but it does.

She tugs at him again, gentle. “Come up.”

He gets to his feet with a groan, his knees lodging a sharper complaint, and when she touches his hand and her expression turns questioning again he gives her a faint, wry smile that he hopes is providing at least some cover for the flutter in his gut.

“Gettin’ old, girl.”

“Bullshit.” She breathes it against his neck, tipping her head back to look up at him as her fingertips start to work beneath his shirt. But she pauses, her eyes searching his face, and he knows what she sees there because it’s pulsing through him, and he doesn’t think his skin can fully contain it.

This shouldn’t be such a big deal. But she said it was a big deal for him to finally be inside her, and she didn’t seem to feel the need to mount any kind of defense for it. It just was.

She won’t make him defend this. She won’t make him defend anything.

“Are you okay?”

His tongue touches the cut on his lip—almost healed. He nods. He is.

Somehow.

So she pushes up his shirt, fingers skimming over the plain of his stomach, lightly tracing his muscles, and they jump and he sighs, and suddenly he suspects it’s not just about the infectious nature of the past, and it’s not just about whatever residual shame he’s feeling now. She’s seen him, seen all of him, seen parts of him he’s never shown anyone and explored them with her own body, learning him. Only not like this, revealing him inch by inch, and there’s something about it that edges toward pain.

But she’s showed him a different side of pain. Taught him. So he stands and he takes it, and she drops his shirt into the grass, leans forward with her hands against his ribs and lays a kiss over his heart.

He closes his eyes and whispers her name. She’s soaked in the moon and he can’t look at her.

“It’s all right, Daryl.” Her cheek against him, the ridge of her cut. Rubbing just a bit, like a little cat. Marking him. “It’s okay.” Another kiss; oh God, she’s lower, the tip of her tongue running along the uneven landscape of his ribcage, and he clenches his fists and his teeth and almost whimpers.
He’s so fucking hard, so hot. Burning. In flames for her.

Yes, it’s okay.

Hands curled over his hipbones, she sinks to her knees.

And now he’s afraid to look at her. Terrified. Maybe he won’t be able to take it after all. Maybe his skeleton will collapse, dissolve, and he’ll tumble into a boneless heap in her arms. He feels her working at his fly and his head droops and he moans, tries to say her name, hands still at his sides because he’s not sure what he should be doing with them and he’s only half aware of them anyway. The world has contracted again, irising closed around her stroking fingers and her mouth scattering kisses across the muscles low on his belly, nearer, and the whimper finally flies loose as she tugs everything down and his cock bobs free, pounding blood in the cooler air.

Rough fabric sliding down his thighs. Her mouth open against his hip, the smooth swipe of her tongue.

What do you feel?

She lays a hand on the knob of his ankle and helps him step out, and he’s naked in front of her, over her, trembling. Because she might be the one on her knees, but he’s spinning into the darkness behind his eyelids and there’s nothing to hold him to anything except her.

And she is holding him. She curls a gentle hand around the base of his cock, and he forces his eyes open, stares down at her, struggles for oxygen with lungs clenched as tight as his fists.

She licks her lips, bends closer, grazes his glistening head against the corner of her mouth. Oh, Christ. “I want to,” she breathes. “I wanna taste you.” She pauses, moving her head slightly, and he sees a shining smear of precome against her cheek and his moan is weak and shivering. “I wanna make you feel good.”

Oh God, you do, you do so much, you do every second, girl, you make me lose my fucking mind. But he can’t say anything, can’t do anything but jam his nails into his palms as she extends her tongue and licks—experimentally—at his slit.

And it all grinds to a halt. He can’t. His breath and fists and hips stutter, jerk slightly, and his hands uncurl and grope for her head and still her. She looks up at him again, brow furrowed and lips parted. “What?”

“Not—Not like this.” He drags in air and clutches it, extracts everything he can from it, releases it in a ragged sigh. “Please… I just—”

I can’t look down at you.

That’s not where you belong.

For what seems like a long moment she does nothing, says nothing, and fear lances through him—that despite his best efforts he’s gone and fucked this up, like his first time here, unable to open up to her the way she wants, not strong enough to be that raw. That defenseless.

Even if he wants to so badly he thinks it might split his head open.

But: “Alright.” She kisses his hipbone again, takes his hand in hers and threads their fingers and pulls.
And he lets her lay him down.

The grass is so cool against his bare back and it gives under him as if it’s receiving him. He watches as she crouches over him, pale and shadowy with her hair tumbling around her face, and she looks even wilder than before, something risen from the water to consume him – and he wants that, God, he does. She strokes a hand over his head, fingertips resting against his temple, and she lifts a leg and lowers herself onto him, straddling his hips, bracing herself on his chest. Like before, it’s just like before, and he has to look up at her, can’t look anywhere else, and this feels so right.

This, right here… This is where she belongs.

His hands find the top of her thighs, her hips, making a half circle and joining his thumbs in the center of her stomach, and again her muscles jump and tremble, her breath shaking into a soft laugh.

“Let me.” She might be talking about anything. She could be; a yes from him would apply regardless. She can do anything. Anything she can think of, anything she wants.

She bends and relaxes, breasts soft mounds against his chest and her hands resting over the tops of his shoulders, and nestles, tucks her head under his chin. Without pausing to think he wraps his arms around her, fingers splayed over the bumps of her spine. He can feel the air rushing in and out of her through the back of her ribcage, and sense memory rushes in with it: mouth against hers, cold under him, forcing that same air into her lungs.

He shudders, and she doesn’t ask why. Her lips graze his collarbone, and as they do and he takes a shallow breath she rolls her hips and suddenly that breath is a lot less shallow. Because he had almost forgotten his cock—trapped between his belly and hers—but she’s reminding him, and she’s reminding him why she’s here.

She kisses his collarbone again, the base of his throat, and slips through his arms like water as she begins to work herself down his body.

There’s no way she was going to do this fast. Because she’s merciless when she has to be, and she knows him, and she kisses her way over his chest, drags her lips slowly down his side, scrapes him lightly with her teeth. He has scars here too and he doesn’t have to see her to know that she’s tracing them, mapping them with her mouth, and he’s fumbling at her shoulders, one hand sliding up to the back of her neck, her head, his moans tripping over themselves on their way out of his throat. Everything in him is wrenched; he knows someone who wasn’t so fucked up would just be fucking enjoying this, but as she trails her tongue in a slow line down the center of his stomach it feels as if she’s peeling his flesh from his bones.

He gave her his back, before, and that was so difficult, that was more than he would have believed himself capable of. This is…

He doesn’t know what this is. But he should have expected that this place would hurt him again.

That she would.

Her weight leaves him and he feels her settling between his legs, nudging them wider. Somehow he finds the strength to push himself up on one elbow, staring down at her, fingers brushing the strands of her hair spilling across him, and she smiles and flips it over one shoulder.

Fuck, she’s so close.

“I want to.” Her whisper is rough, her eyes shining as she takes hold of his shaft. She looks simultaneously so innocent and so wise, nothing even vaguely naive about her, and very sure of
herself. “Daryl… Please.”

He ran out of options a while ago. He ran out of them when he decided to remove all but one.

He nods.

Her smile widens and she leans in and her breath is so warm, and her lips part, and she curls them around his cock.

This isn’t his first time. This has been done to him—done to him, because like everything else it was essentially something he tolerated—and it was fast and awkward and he didn’t feel good about it after. Felt like he should apologize or something. But it wasn’t his first time when he fucked her, either, except it was, and he’s never felt anything like this. This soft, wet heat slowly taking him in, spreading out and up, shooting through his veins and dancing little flames along the branches of his nerves. He keeps himself up just long enough to see her head sinking down, her beautiful lips stretched around him, and then he falls into the grass with a thump and gazes up at the sky, nearly blind, the fading curve of the moon the only clear thing.

It’s not even how it feels. It’s that once again she’s opening him up, taking all of him, wanting all of him, doing none of this out of any sense of obligation. And again she’s exploring and that’s part of it too: she shifts a little to find a more comfortable position, like she intends to stay for a while, and pulls back to lick the underside of his shaft, tracing the line of him, circumnavigating and returning to kiss his exposed head. When she laid herself under him in the clearing and played with him he could tell it was for her even more then him, and this is the same; she’s not moving with any rhythm, not trying to meet any conception she might have of skill. She’s just doing what she said she wanted: tasting him, feeling him, holding him in her mouth and weighing him on her tongue, ducking her head to lap at his balls, stroking all slick up and down and over him and seeing what’ll make him arch and quiver and moan.

And everything is. Every fucking thing she does. He’s not fully aware of the sounds he’s making but he’s aware enough to know that they’re almost constant, low and ragged and breaking behind his teeth, partially formed versions of her name and other things that might be words and fall massively short of any coherent shape. His head is a sunstorm and his heart is a swollen bruise—and it does hurt, it still hurts so much, and part of him wants to plead with her to stop, because it’s stupid but this is killing him and he doesn’t know how much longer he can stand it.

It’s not about pleasure. Coming is barely a light on the horizon. It’s about how she’s breaking him with her hands and her mouth and her relentless, insistent determination to have what she wants.

What he needs.

She’s… God, she’s. She’s. She.

“Beth.” Tight hiss. He can’t manage anything else. His head is rolling in the grass as thunder builds, hands tangled hopelessly in her hair, and he hates how he thinks he should warn her but he can’t stop it. He can’t stop any of it. He can’t stop. He can’t. “Beth, oh Jesus, I’m—Ah, fuck, I’m gonna come—”

He reaches for her, finds her hand with his, and she unfurls under him like a road and he stretches out his arms and flies.

~

Summer storms roll in quick and hard, assault the ground with rain, shatter the sky and move on as
fast as they come.

Everything they leave behind is green.

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Interstate Love Song" by Stone Temple Pilots.
what if our love is the cost

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

He lies there for a while, waiting—patiently—to be able to do anything again. He can think, sort of, but he doesn’t have to, so mostly he leaves that project alone. But he can see, and the moon has traveled a little way from zenith, and he’s capable of scraping together enough cognition to be aware that they can’t stay here too much longer.

And they haven’t even been swimming.

His laugh is hardly more than a trembling breath, but it feels good.

“What?” She lifts her head from where she pillowed it against his chest; he doesn’t remember her half draping herself over him with any real clarity but apparently it happened, and she’s warm and tucked so perfectly against his side.

“Nothin’.” He has no idea how to explain it. The part of his brain in charge of words is mostly out of order and he’s thinking in sensations, scents, his thumb stroking over the angle of her shoulderblade, her weight and the tickle of her hair against his nose, her breath on his skin and her fingertips sketching idle shapes over his collarbones. “I just…”

She smirks at him. “Did I break you?”

“Yeah.” He nods and smiles at the sky. In a low-key kind of way he almost feels giddy. “You did.”

That’s exactly what she did.

Again.

Silence for a while, comfortable, just their slow breathing and the mutter of the frogs, an owl calling somewhere in the distance. He’s still returning, floating back into himself—except he didn’t go anywhere. He went deep, folded in and curled around his own core, and was fully present, fully there. It was always pain and fear that made him leave, turned his body into a place in which no one in their right mind would want to remain.

She guides him back.

He thinks maybe he’s been waiting for someone to show him the way for over thirty years.

“Daryl?”

“Mm?”

“Can I ask you somethin’?”

He sighs, turns and presses his lips to the top of her head. Her hair is loose but her braid is still in place, and once again—like he loves, like he can’t seem to stop doing—he’s tracing its curves, weaving in and out, and ghosting before his eyes is the image of her hand in the wind and its smooth dolphin arcs. “Yeah, you can.”

She lays her mouth briefly against his skin, less than an inch from his nipple, and it does something to the nerves there and he shivers. “Why didn’t you want me to? At first, like that?”
Why.

The muscles at the top of his chest clench, close up in a way that reminds him of crying without
bearing much real resemblance. There was no way she wasn’t going to ask this, and he isn’t
surprised, but that doesn’t in any way make it easier. Neither does knowing most of the reason.
There’s knowing and then there’s telling, and maybe the latter is becoming something he can
approach without so much stumbling, but she can’t open all his doors and she can’t clear all his
tunnels. There are blocks and places too narrow to get through. There are a lot of old cave-ins in the
less well-traveled parts of his mind.

But she makes him want so much to try.

“I didn’t…” He trails off, and frustration twists that clench higher. “There’s… I thought maybe
you’d…” The memories, what they did to him, how they twisted him up, and how they made him
look at her and look at himself and at this and how he hated that, and it’s simply not coming. He
shakes his head, jaw tight, and she reaches up and lays her fingers against his mouth.

Kind girl.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she says softly. “I just… You liked it?”

“Beth, I.” He wants to laugh again. He can think of no possible way to adequately answer that
question. Utterly inadequate will have to do. “Yeah. I did.”

He feels her smile, and can also feel somehow in it that she’s deeply pleased. “I was… I mean, I
never did it before, I was thinkin’—”

No way is he letting her get any further along that line of thought. At least not aloud. Not after
everything she’s done, everything they’ve done, the way she can lift and carry him with a brush of
her lips. “Beth, it was fuckin’ amazin’.”

And he hesitates—he can’t help feeling like this is a far more awkward question than any she could
ask right now but he needs to know anyway—and lifts his head, trying to focus on her face. She
raises hers just as he does, and her eyes are large and dark.

He already knows the answer.

“Did you? Like it?”

She breathes a laugh and pushes herself up a bit further, turning to rest her chin on her hand. “Yeah,
I did.” She pauses, her other hand moving over his chest again, returning to his nipple and traveling
in lazy circles. Another shiver runs through him and with a faint pulse of heat he wonders whether it
might feel good if she did even more than that. “You know it’s this thing people talk about.”

He shakes his head. He knows how the people he’s spent way too much of his life with talk about it,
but he’s reasonably certain that’s not what she means. “No, I don’t.”

“Oh.” She laughs again, sounding the tiniest bit embarrassed. “Yeah. You’re not exactly goin’ to my
school or anythin’. I mean, it’s like…” She tilts her head and the moon casts her half in milky light,
and she looks thoughtful. “We’re not supposed to. Good girls,” her mouth twists, “don’t do it. But
there’s also this thing where boys are always gonna want it. Eventually. So you have to, or…”

She lets that sentence remain incomplete, all its uncomfortable implications plain, and gazes at him in
silence for a few seconds. He slides an arm behind his head, lifting himself enough to see her better.
His fingers are still working through her hair, easy and careless, and maybe their time is limited but
he feels no need to rush things. The idea of rushing is somehow blasphemous.

They’re in that tangent universe. All their time is their own to spend. And if that’s an illusion he’ll make himself believe it for now.

“So I thought it was kinda weird,” she continues, soft—gentle, even, like her hand on him. Soothing. She so clearly doesn’t want to upset him, and this time that clench in his throat is there for an entirely different reason. “Y’know, when you didn’t want it. Not right away.”

He gives her a small smile, and it takes no effort. “I’m kinda weird, girl.”

“Yeah. Me too.” She leans her cheek on her hand, eyes half closed and face relaxed. She looks happy, he realizes, happy just to be right where she is, and he feels every part of him warming. Once more the \textit{ungoodness} he felt when he was waiting for her seems like it was gnawing at someone else. “And I liked it. A lot.” Her smile turns dreamy, but even in the moonlight he catches the flush darkening her cheeks. When she speaks again her voice is even softer, like she’s afraid she might be overheard.

Shy. It plucks at him, trembling him like a string. She’s found another thing that makes her shy.

“I liked… I liked swallowin’. Swallowin’ you.”

If an electric shock could be slow, striking him between the ears and rolling bright and hot down his spine. If it could, and it can, because it’s what he’s feeling. She liked that. Likes it. Taking him into herself.

“Girl,” he whispers, and he has no idea what else to say.

“I love you.” She strokes her fingers down his cheekbone to his mouth, traces the seam of his lips and stops against the split, pressing lightly. As if she intends to punctuate this statement. “Daryl, I love all of you.”

He can say it now. He can say it back to her. He found it, and when he did it turned out it was really very easy. It was just a question of getting out of his own goddamn way. But there are still times where his heart crowds against the bottom of his throat, everything trying to escape all at once, and nothing gets through.

So he looks at her, lying against him in the warmth of this part of the night they’ve stolen for themselves, and he knows he doesn’t have to say anything at all.

They came—ostensibly—to swim, so they do.

They don’t have a lot of time and now that fact is inescapable; she’s supposed to meet a couple of friends, sleep over, and that’s really not something she can risk missing. But she checks her phone and they have half an hour or so, so she drops it back into the pile of her clothes and turns, shoots him a gleeful little smile, and takes off past him and down toward the pond.

Like she claimed, she’s fast, her strides long and full of her strange awkward grace, but his strides are longer and he catches her just as she reaches the narrow strand of grainy bank and hauls her into his arms, tosses her into the deeper water as if she weighs nothing. She shrieks as she hits in a shower of broken moonlight and comes up spluttering, shoving her hair back from her face and—he’s sure—planning elaborate revenge, but he’s already in with her, plunging beneath her and looking for
greater depth.

And this isn’t like before. This isn’t some kind of unplanned, unformed ritual. This isn’t any kind of baring of his soul. He was stripped here once and he’s been stripped again, and now he’s coming into this shriven, penance long since done. But there’s still power here, and down in the wet dark he feels her fingertips against his and something turns over in him.

She’s beside him when he breaks the surface, splashing into his eyes and laughing at him, roughening that laugh into a moan when he pulls her hard against him and kisses her, wet hands combing her hair back, mouth open on her cheek, her jaw, her brow, her fingers clutching at his shoulders and digging in when he licks the trickles of water off her neck.

They can’t stay. But this is a warm night in October, an increasingly precious thing, and like she said, she doesn’t want to waste the time. So he floats on his back and stares up at the pinprick brightening stars through those bowing branches, forgetting her just long enough for her to reach the rope swing, climb onto it and sail through the air, arcing pale and lovely like the dolphin of her hand and cannonballing into the water a foot away from him.

He got to see her dive. Sort of.

When they get back to the shore and start to towel off, he attacks her ribs with his fingers and makes her pay.

~

The drive out was silent and the drive back is the same, and as always the silence is a comfortable one.

Or it begins that way, and he suspects it stays that way for her—at least until he finally decides that he has to give in and say something. But for him every mile away from the swimming hole is one more returning knot to his gut, and the visit to their private world doesn’t seem to have helped. If anything the knots are tighter, rising and winding around his ribs, shifting in time with the driving beat from the radio and the uncomfortably appropriate lyrics.

anyone perfect must be lying, anything easy has its cost
anyone plain can be lovely, anyone loved can be lost
what if I lost my direction, what if I lost sense of time
what if I nursed this infection, maybe the worst is behind

They’re a couple of miles out of town, skyglow ahead burning away the dark, when it finally cracks him open.

“Can I ask you somethin’?”

She turns her face to him, and it’s like she’s coming back from somewhere. She had been gazing out the window, head leaned back and her hair unbound and flying around her face, drying in the breeze. Maybe it had lulled her. Maybe it had been something else. But she blinks, immediately focused, and nods with a warm little smile that makes him feel like a piece of shit, because he doesn’t know that she’s going to be smiling in a few more seconds. He thinks he might be about to slap that smile right off her.

“Guess it’s only fair.”

He swallows, and for the span of a couple of breaths he almost pulls over. He’s not sure he wants to be driving when he asks this. He’s still not sure he wants to ask it at all.
This became such an elevated level of scary because he spent so long not looking at it.

That’s how monsters feed themselves. On being ignored, and on life being stupid enough to get good.

*Just fucking do it, you fucking coward.*

“What happens if they find out?”

The question hangs in air suddenly gone still, in spite of the rush of motion all around them. The interior of the cab has become a kind of enclosed chamber in which the thing is just sitting, and he can actually imagine it glowering at them like a malevolent little imp. He can feel her staring at it, circling it, turning it over in her hands and analyzing it, and he almost clarifies with *your family,* except that would be ridiculously unnecessary.

She knows perfectly well what he’s asking.

She might even know why.

“I dunno,” she says finally—slowly, her face forward as she watches the road coasting past beneath the pool of the headlights. He can’t completely see her expression, but he’s also not completely trying. There’s a degree of avoidance going on here even now. “I… I dunno.” Her voice is difficult to read, and she lets out a small, tight laugh. “I mean, it wouldn’t be good.”

He echoes her laugh, just as tight. He feels tight. Those knots have multiplied and worked their way into every single one of his muscles. “Yeah, I kinda figured.”

“They like you.” Soft, and thoughtful, and he’s not convinced she’s not speaking half to herself, working through this as she talks. Though she has to have thought about it before now. She was the one who said no one could know. “They like you a lot. Especially after you got me outta the water like you did. But they…” She shakes her head, and when he glances at her and catches a glimpse of her face, weirdly lit by the dashboard’s glow, he sees the same tightness that he heard in her laughter and he would give almost anything to take the question back. “Not that much. I don’t think. And you’re…”

“I’m twice your fuckin’ age, girl.”

There’s something almost cruel about how he says it, words bitter and sharp on his tongue. It’s the first time either one of them has actually said it, said it like that—not you’re older or you’re younger but exactly the numerical ratio they’re talking about, with all the unsavory implications inherent in its bluntness.

It hasn’t mattered with her. He didn’t even know what twice your age really meant except as an abstract concept and a collection of potential social consequences. His own internal sense of his age has never been all that coherent. Looking back, he doesn’t think he’s ever felt his own years, his own time. He’s always been in a kind of temporal drift, and now he’s realizing that even if it hasn’t mattered with her…

She changed it. Changed him. She said he didn’t act his age, and it took him a while to understand what she meant by that, but he gets it now.

He was adrift and she moored him.

She’s silent, a heavy silence, and he’s suddenly terrified that he’s hurt her, terrified of looking at her and seeing it on her face, ice twisting itself around his spine and panic spiking into him, but when she
finally speaks again she doesn’t sound hurt. She doesn’t sound angry.

She’s quiet. And a little sad.

“Yeah. You are.”

His jaw is so tight his teeth ache, his tongue thick and useless behind them. But he’s trying to cobble something together, maybe some variant of I’m sorry, when she cuts off his chance.

“That’s why. You know that.” She turns back to him and the sadness in her voice is in her eyes, the curve of her mouth, and it pierces him, slides cold between his ribs like a knife. “Daddy would be the worst. I don’t think any of them would… Maybe Mama.” Mama. Yes, maybe. “But you know what they would think. It was all you. It wasn’t me.” She smiles at him, and it’s a pained smile. “Kind of an old story, isn’t it?”

He nods. Yes. Yes, it is.

He hoped this was a different one, though.

“I wouldn’t be able to see you again.”

Not a question. She pulls in a slow breath and rakes a hand through her hair. Through drying and wind her braid remains intact, stubbornly beautiful thing. “They’d sure as hell try to stop you. Daryl…” She angles her body toward him and reaches for him, laying a hand over his leg—lightly, almost cautiously, as if she’s expecting to have to suddenly withdraw it.

As if he might bite her.

“Why’re you askin’ about this now?”

She asked him why he didn’t want her to suck his cock—or at least why he was reluctant—and he hadn’t been able to answer her. For a moment he expects the same to be true now, the same blockage in his head—knowing failing to translate into telling—but that’s not what happens. The words are there. They don’t cover all the ground, don’t fully reveal the fine details of this particular issue, but they don’t need to do those things. She’s not stupid. She’ll get it.

“cause now it’s real.”

“Oh,” she whispers.

And says nothing else.

Not that he fucked her. Not that she fucked him, that she rode him in the grass and practically flung herself into his lap in the truck. That one act was never the all of it. He was inside her before that; he’s been inside her for so long, and she made a home in the marrow of his bones a week after he first tasted her mouth, first heard her sing.

But he said it. She said it. They came to the edge of the water and they joined hands, threaded fingers, and they jumped.

I love you.

“I don’t…” Again he considers pulling over, but he can’t seem to get his foot to the brake. He’s locked into motion. He should look at her when he says this; she’s looking at him. She’s looking right the fuck at him, her face a pale half-moon, and there’s nothing she doesn’t see.
He shudders. Everything, all that hot sharp everything, pounding against the inside of his skin.

“I dunno if I can lose this.”

She doesn’t move.

Then she does, lifting her hand from his leg and laying it against his cheek, and there’s the thing about how with a touch like that she can utterly undo him, and he shouldn’t be fucking *driving* because all he wants to do is turn to her and go to her and hide his face in the warm shelter of her throat.

“You won’t,” she whispers. And he squeezes his eyes shut and he nods.

Later, alone in the dark and completely abandoned by sleep, he thinks it’s the first thing she’s ever said to him that feels like it might be a lie.

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Falling For The First Time" by Barenaked Ladies.
then I saw on a white space that was left

Daryl stands there on the sidewalk with Merle for a good two minutes or so, and they just look.

It’s not that there’s so much to look at. The scene before them isn’t complex. It’s more that there’s a fair amount to process—at least for Daryl there is. He’s spending that ninety seconds or so processing.

Processing the street they’re standing on, for one. Quiet, seemingly deserted—which is frankly kind of weird for a nice Saturday in early fall—lined with a lot of older model cars. Ancient trees that badly need pruning and are threatening power and telephone lines, sidewalks cracked and weeds doing their green best to widen them, houses all up and down in various states of disrepair. Peeling paint, shutters missing, front yards that are essentially nothing but weeds, gardens overgrown and some barely recognizable as such—but Daryl does recognize them, and it twinges beneath his breastbone, and he thinks of other overgrown gardens he’s recognized in other places.

Every one of these elements is present to some degree in the house in front of them. But there’s something else under all of this, and it’s unmistakable.

This used to be a fairly wealthy area. A nice area.

Because the houses are large, and under the disrepair is a disintegrating dignity, like royalty in exile, and the house they’ve come to see is one of the more dignified of those in view. A bay window takes up almost all of the left front, its upper panes abstract stained glass—which looks like it could use a good wiping, but the colors are still vivid. A turret on the second floor, small but Daryl thinks there’s a decent chance that it’s more than ornamental. The clapboard siding is all light green, and the lightness might merely be fading but it’s difficult to be sure. Darker blue painted gables—again, faded, and here and there bits have broken or fallen away. Elegant cornices of the same dark blue—also peeling, also broken in places. There’s a covered wraparound porch. There are what probably used to be well-kept flowerbeds running around the base of this, now in the same state as the gardeny parts of a lot of the other properties, but a few spindly rose bushes are stubbornly hanging in there. The lawn is choked with crabgrass, but it’s broad. A huge oak tree dominates the center of the right side of the yard, its branches twisted and already shedding leaves.

Bathed in sun like this, it reminds him in several distinct ways of the farmhouse.

And a small, soft voice in his head—that sounds very much like Beth—whispers This is the one.

Which is where the processing comes in.

Because he was never, ever, ever supposed to live in a place like this. Never-fucking-ever. A place like this should have been the antithesis of everything he was and everything he could be and everywhere he belonged. He was never even supposed to like places like this. There’s that softly insistent voice, and then there’s a not-insignificant part of himself that wants to growl and back away like a threatened animal.

He can’t ignore that part. But he also can’t obey it. Can’t give in. Can’t do what he would have done, what he was supposed to do back when that was him. He can’t be that anymore, to the extent that he has any control over it at all. That’s the point. So he stands in silence and he processes, and he waits for whatever internal signal will let him know that he’s ready to proceed.

He’s not sure what the hell’s going on in Merle’s head. He doesn’t feel like asking.
Suddenly the front walk—also cracked and weedy—snaps into a kind of focus, as if he’s been waiting for it to shift into their reality. He glances at Merle, who doesn’t glance at him.

Merle doesn’t look even vaguely comfortable, and that’s because he’s not. Daryl insisted they put on the least awful clothes they own. It was a fight. Daryl counts the victory an extremely shaky one.

“Y’ready?”

Merle laughs, and as he does Daryl abruptly has a hard time not doing the same, because the question. They’ve been in fights that landed them both in the hospital, done very unwise things with very dangerous people, danced around jail cells or worse—and then of course Merle took one false step and that was that. They’ve had guns waved around in close proximity to their heads, had guns shoved in their faces with the safeties off. Usually accompanied by yelling. They have, in short, been through some extremely bad shit, and they’ve come through it together, and they’ve always found a way to laugh about it later and tell each other and themselves that they were never really afraid.

They survived Will Dixon.

Now they’re looking at a slightly dilapidated house in which an elderly woman is waiting to show them its second floor, and presumably nothing else is going to happen, and Daryl isn’t sure about Merle, but he knows he’s nervous. And yeah, Merle might be too. It’s not impossible.

And… And it feels good. Kind of. Standing here like this and facing it down and doing it together. So maybe this really is all going to be okay.

“Oh,” Merle says, and gives him a look that basically amounts to Most of the time I really try to pretend that we aren’t related. “Yeah, whatever.” He jerks his chin at the house. “Lead the way, man. ‘s your stupid fuckin’ idea.”

Daryl doubts that he completely means it. But he’s been doubting that for a bit now.

The porch steps creak. They creak loudly, but they otherwise seem sound, and on the far left in front of the bay window is an old porch swing that looks like it might actually not fall down if someone was brave enough to attempt to use it.

Again, Daryl thinks about the farmhouse. He didn’t expect that. It feels significant.

This is the one.

He pushes the bell.

Nothing audible happens. He pushes it again, waits for a few seconds, and Merle mutters Jesus fuckin’ Christ and shoulders him aside, lifts a hand and gives the door two hard pounds.

This is off to a great start.

For another moment there’s nothing. Then the clacking sound of what might be shoes drifts through the pane of frosted glass set high into the wood, a dark shape appears, and the door opens.

So now there’s more processing that has to happen.

Daryl expected something specifically particular. He knows this. Merle put the seed of an idea in his head and it took root and grew fast and hardy—as Merle’s idea seeds usually do. He expected a little old lady with blueish hair and maybe a cane or a walker, hearing aid, some kind of shapeless
clothing with a flower pattern, smelling of that weird kind of semi-perfume that all stereotypical Little Old Ladies seem to wear. Stereotypical is exactly what that seed of an idea had become. The voice on the other end of the phone—soft and a bit quavery—seemed to back it up with hard evidence.

Well, he was wrong. Very.

The woman standing in the doorway is little, but her hair isn’t blueish. What blue there is lies deep in the thick black in which she’s dyed it, and it’s set in tight curls around a face that bears a fair amount of makeup without overdoing it. She doesn’t have a cane and she doesn’t have a walker. What she has is a cigarette, held between fingers sporting well-manicured nails. No shapeless flowery thing; she’s wearing tight jeans and a pink button-down shirt that’s not all that loose either, and heels that almost match her shirt. Her eyes—behind thick glasses—are dark and keen. Elderly maybe by some standards, but she looks like she could be anywhere between sixty and an extremely held-together seventy-fiveish.

She smells like cigarette.

In the periphery of his vision, Daryl sees Merle’s eyes widen slightly. Surprised as Daryl is, it’s difficult not to smile.

She looks at both of them, gauging and unhurried, and takes a drag, sending a stream of smoke from the corner of her mouth.

“You the ones wanted to see the upstairs, I guess.”

Her voice is that soft, slightly quavery alto Daryl remembers. And when she tilts her head it turns out that she does in fact have a hearing aid.

Daryl nods.

“Okay, so.” Another drag. Her mouth curves the smallest bit. “Which one of you is Daryl?”

Merle flicks a thumb in Daryl’s direction.

“You’re the brother.”

“Yeah. Merle.” Gruff. But not entirely unpleasant and when Daryl shoots Merle another glance, it’s confirmed. Merle is no longer dead-set against this. If he ever even really was.

This might not be off to a great start, but it’s not off to a bad one, either.

“I’m Cathy.” She gives them both a nod and a quick, sharp smile—not unfriendly, but, like her eyes, keen. She steps aside and gestures. “C’mon in, then.”

They go in.

The interior is something else Daryl had—semi-consciously—fixed on as largely stereotypical. Faded wallpaper and doilies and old photos and maybe some creepy china figurines. And again, that stereotype is well and truly bucked; the walls are painted a plain off-white, the floors are all dark pitted wood, and as for photos and figurines...

Well, he can’t see much more than the front hall, a staircase, and—through a wide entryway—part of the living room to which the bay window belongs. But there are no old photos or china figurines in evidence.
What is in evidence is a fuck of a lot of very weird art.

Paintings, mostly, and Daryl knows about a hundred percent less about art than he did about poetry, which means he’s pretty much into the negatives. It turns out that he likes poetry, or he likes the poetry Beth likes, but he’s never cared much for art and he doesn’t expect that to change. And this, as best he can tell, is art that would be considered by most people as modern in that it looks like what might happen to a canvas if a dog sat in paint and wiped its ass all over the place.

There’s also a bunch of furniture, none of which matches and all of which looks like it came out of a bunch of different yard sales, which is an aesthetic Daryl can at least kind of appreciate.

On an alarmingly orange sofa are three unimpressed black cats. Daryl can’t tell if they’re unimpressed with the sofa or with Daryl and Merle or with things in general. They’re cats; the last one is the likeliest.

Three isn’t a hundred, but Merle shoots him a look anyway.

“This way.” Cathy is leading them toward the stairs, her nails trailing against an intricately carved bannister as she starts up. “There’s a separate entrance with stairs around the side of the house, so you wouldn’t be using these.” She glances over her shoulder as they follow her up, her cigarette dangerously close to dumping ash. “When were you lookin’ to move?”

Daryl clears his throat. These are questions he knew he might be asked, but they aren’t questions he’s all that prepared to answer. Even if the answers themselves are relatively straightforward.

He was never supposed to be here.

“Uh… Now, I guess.”

“How come?”

Cathy has reached the top of the stairs and is heading toward a plain white door surrounded by those same plain off-white walls. “’cause someone’s livin’ there now and I can’t exactly kick ‘em out before their lease is up.” She produces a key and unlocks the door, and swings it open on a room full of light.

It’s not actually that much brighter than the downstairs. They follow Cathy as she clacks her way inside, and as Daryl’s eyes adjust and he looks around it becomes evident that the initial burst of illumination was mostly due to the way the sun is currently hitting the large windows that dominate the room. The room itself is a spacious, high-ceilinged combination living room/dining room/kitchen, the latter easily twice the size of any kitchen in anywhere Daryl has ever slept and kept his stuff in for any length of time. The space the current occupants have set aside for dining is also large in a way that’s vaguely jarring—a table to seat four comfortably and maybe more if people are willing to squeeze, and a credenza that looks like it might be an antique. But it’s not like the space isn’t being filled; the room as a whole is cluttered with shelves, books, random decorative things, plants desperately trying to escape their planters, a futon and loveseat covered in wildly embroidered cushions, and—against a far wall—a stack of what appear to be canvases. A couple are turned outward, and what’s been painted on them looks suspiciously like the stuff on the walls downstairs.
The turret is next to them, a circle of tall glass. A narrow cushioned windowseat runs around it, faded and patchy blue velour.

Daryl turns slowly in place, scanning. Letting the feel of the place flow into him. Paying attention to the size, to the way sound moves off the walls and corners and ceiling, to the smell—old wood and plants and paint and lots and lots of dust—and most of all to the sun, which continues to stream through the big windows like God’s searchlight. He can feel Merle just over his shoulder, can feel a similar kind of scrutiny, but when he glances back…

Merle’s expression is unreadable.

At least he’s not making faces. He’s not talking at all. Which is weird. And something worth appreciating, at least right now.

But weird.

Cathy turns back to them and leans over, taps ash into a tray conveniently placed on a crooked side table beside her. “So like the ad said. All utilities included, with cable.” She nods to the small flatscreen against one wall. “There’s the two bedrooms off this room, one bath, and you got a good sized storage closet. Whole thing is a thousand a month even.” She rattles this off almost as if she’s rehearsed it, and stops, looking at the two of them and letting smoke stream through her nose. “Questions?”

Daryl has started to drift past her and he continues, moving and half aware of doing so. Not even entirely aware of her. It’s hard to pin down exactly what it is about the room, as hard as it would be to pin down what exactly it is when he’s tracking, runs out of spoor, and stops and does what he told Beth you sometimes have to do. You follow your gut.

You got instincts, you gotta listen to ‘em.

From behind him Merle asks, voice utterly neutral, “Who’s livin’ here now?”

“Daughter of a friend of a friend and her boyfriend. They’re gettin’ married, gettin’ their own place.” She pauses and Daryl hears her inhale. “It ain’t gonna last, but whatever. Her life to ruin.”

That seems utterly inconsequential. His eyes are slightly unfocused now as he sweeps them over the space in front of him, feeling it, and the truth is that this might as well be tracking. He’s in the same place in his head, and looking from it out at the world in the same way. Massively broad and impossibly narrow.


And, in a corner near the space that serves as the dining room…

He reaches for the book before he knows what he’s doing, takes no time and expends no cognitive power on any consideration of how the action might look or whether it’s inappropriate. His fingers graze it, slide across the spine, and he lifts it off the shelf and turns it over in his hands.

House of Light.

He can’t breathe.
Then, as he raises his head and his gaze flickers dazedly over the other things in front of him, the next thing he sees drags out what little breath remained in his lungs.

On the shelf above the empty space the book occupied is a crystal wolf with eyes stained blue.

~

Yeah, it’s a little weird. A tiny bit. Mostly with Merle, who—as Cathy leads them toward the first of the two bedrooms—jabbing him in the ribs and asks under his breath if maybe Daryl should just get a fuckin’ library card. Cathy either doesn’t hear or ignores, and that’s fine. Daryl is doing a fair amount of his own ignoring, not all of it intentional.

Sure, he’s technically there when they get a look inside the bedrooms—one even messier than the main room with a floor that’s merely a theory under piles of laundry, I told ‘em I’d be bringin’ people up, Jesus Christ, and the other in use as a studio, just as messy—and he notes that while they’re not exactly large they’re also spacious by his standards, way more than he or Merle would need, and just as bright. Big windows, high ceilings, and a curious molding thing around the doors that he hasn’t noticed before. The bathroom is also quite big, speckled black and white and gray tile that looks like no one has redone it since the eighties, but it’s clean and everything appears to work.

Storage closet is big, yes. Whatever, it’s a closet, and he has nothing much to store.

Cathy leads them back to the main room and turns to them with a look of mild expectation. At some point she lit another cigarette, though Daryl can’t recall seeing her pull a pack out of anywhere, and she leans back against the radiator by the window and asks if she can answer any questions.

And, in a voice that he hears only distantly, Daryl asks what she would need from them at this point.

First month’s rent. Okay. He has that much. Doesn’t leave a huge amount left over, but he has it.

Lease, sure. It’s… A lease. The world keeps throwing things at him that were always meant for other people, as if the world’s aim sucks and keeps pulling in his direction.

Credit check.

They’re… They don’t believe in credit cards, credit cards are bullshit. Daryl tries frantically to make it sound like they aren’t crazy or anything, merely think credit cards are bullshit. They are bullshit. Cathy looks dubious. She really does need one. Should have one, anyway. It’s not only credit cards—bills? Cars? Places they’ve rented before?

Daryl asks if he can talk to her in the hall. She looks more dubious still, but shrugs and takes him out there. On the way past, Merle gives him a look that he doesn’t at all like.

At the top of the stairs Cathy turns to him, crosses one arm over her chest, takes a drag on her cigarette and regards him with undisguised skepticism. “Alright. Talk.”

Daryl looks at her. Looks away. Looks at the stained glass, the beads and leaf-like whorls all in red and blue and green, deep purple. Almost flowers. Roadside wildflowers, growing on into winter and blooming bright in the sun. All they need is a bit of dusting to really make them shine.

This is the one.

So. What would Beth Greene say?

Beth Greene would probably just tell the fucking truth.
“Look.” He’s speaking fast and low, his head bent toward her, and he knows as he talks that the speed is in part a defense mechanism. Talk fast before you feel just how nervous you are, before you dwell on what—ridiculously—you’ve decided might be at stake. “My brother’n me… This is like…”

He sucks in a breath. “This is like a second chance. Alright? I kinda… We kinda need this.”

Cathy cocks her head, thin black brow arched. “Why here? You could need anywhere.”

Frustration is winding itself around strange desperation in the pit of his stomach and it feels like someone wearing cleats is walking around in there. People really need to stop asking him questions he can’t possibly think of the words to answer. “It’s just…”

_I don’t know exactly what a prayer is._

“I got a feeling,” he says simply. Helplessly. Tell the fucking truth, tell it even if it’s bizarre; tell it and pay attention and that might, if you allow it, become a prayer.

And something might hear you.

“You got a feeling,” Cathy echoes softly, brow still arched. She doesn’t sound incredulous, is the thing. She doesn’t sound scornful.

She sounds thoughtful.

“Y’know,” she says finally, and the end of the cigarette glows bright as she drags in smoke, “you both look like you’re about to knock over a liquor store.”

Daryl shrugs. He can’t argue with that. They have knocked over liquor stores.

“But.” She sighs. “I do kinda need someone in here ASAP. And…” An odd smile pulls at the corner of her mouth. “I like your face. Don’t care for your brother’s, but it might even out. Tell you what.” Another drag, a meditative stream of smoke. “You give me first and last month’s rent up front, we don’t bother with credit at all.”

“I.” Shit. Daryl shakes his head. Those cleats are back to their pacing. “I don’t got that much. Not right now.”

Cathy sighs again. “Hon, I really am tryin’ to work with you here.”

“I know. I know. I…” Wheels turning, and it feels like they’re spinning in mud. Why _should_ he feel like this about this particular place?

Then it occurs to him. The other places are actual businesses. They’ll almost certainly want to go through this whole process too. And they’re unlikely to be flexible. They’re unlikely to _like his face._

I mean, if he needs a practical reason.

“How ‘bout this? How ‘bout I come by tomorrow, I give you first month, then I give you the rest when we get in here?”

“Twenty-second?”

Daryl nods.

Cathy appears to think again for a few seconds. “You put it in my hand before you bring a single goddamn thing through that door. Cash.” Her eyes narrow slightly, magnified behind her thick glasses. “And you don’t get it to me then, I keep the thousand. This is a non-refundable deposit. Get
Daryl is aware that he’s being taken advantage of. A little. That this bargain is a particularly hard one. Unwise, even. That he might be screwing himself, screwing both of them. That he’s gambling on a hunch.

He nods.

“You wanna go ahead?”

He nods.

“You got balls from here to Sunday, boy.” Cathy smiles, and it’s a warm, sunny thing. “Alright.” She puts out her hand. “Shake on it.”

They do.

Back downstairs. Cathy is talking about the logistics of signing the lease—not complicated, they can do it when they arrive on the twenty-second. What are they actually moving? Daryl is about to tell her that they’ll be moving essentially themselves when he collides with a walking pile of laundry.

The laundry drops in tangles of sheets, and the woman behind it half stumbles. Daryl catches her arm, steadies her, and she looks up at him with a combination of surprise and apprehension.

Slender. A good bit younger than he’s guessing Cathy is. Short gray hair, soft features that nevertheless bear a vague resemblance to Cathy’s own. A tightness in her mouth that tugs at something behind his ribs.

And her eyes. She’s not flinching, but her eyes are.

He didn’t think he looked that alarming.

“Sorry,” she murmurs, and starts to bend to collect the sheets, but he’s ahead of her without even thinking, wrapping them up tighter as he hands them over—she might at least be able to see better that way.

She takes them from him with a nod, a tiny smile. That apprehensive look has faded, at least somewhat, but the tightness in her hasn’t. And before he can say anything else she’s pushing past him and through the door opposite the living room to parts unknown.

“They go in the hall closet,” Cathy calls after her. No response.

Maid, maybe.

Merle gestures at the door with his chin. “Who’s that?”

“Oh.” Cathy rolls a shoulder. “That’s my sister. I’m gonna be out of town the night you’d be movin’. That’s why it’s good to get you in soon as possible.”

Daryl could swear: if he had a thermometer in his hand it would confirm that the temperature just dropped about ten degrees. Though Cathy doesn’t seem to have noticed.

He has a conversation to have with Merle. And it’s not going to be a pleasant one.
“I’ll be gone three weeks. Back in November. So she’s housesitting.” A particularly long drag as she ushers them toward the door. “She’ll handle stuff while I’m gone. Her name’s Carol.”

~

They aren’t even as far as the truck before Merle whirls on him, face reddening like a sunburn. Daryl can only summon up distantly irritated resignation, as well as the hope that neither of the women is watching them. “The fuck you done in there, brother?”

*Just tell the fucking truth.* What the hell else is he supposed to do? “I made a deal.”

“What *kinda* fuckin’ deal?”

“No bullshit with credit, we get her first and last month’s rent up front.”

Merle barks a rough laugh, incredulous… But not actually all that much. “And you just went ahead and made that decision.”

Daryl sighs. It’s shallow. He’s having trouble committing to it. Maybe he’s spent the last of his committing. “Yeah. That’s about the size of it, man.”

“You give it to her already?”

“Yeah, ‘cause I always carry a thousand dollars around with me. No, I’m givin’ it to her tomorrow.”

“You ain’t.”

“I am.” Because: “It’s my money.”

“Well, that’s just——” Merle turns sharply away and stalks a few paces, turns back and throws up his hands. “I don’t fuckin’ believe you, little brother. I just don’t fuckin’ believe you, how you keep doin’ this shit, I’m tellin’ you.” He stalks back toward Daryl, shoulders hunched and center of gravity low as if he’s contemplating charging. Daryl stands his ground, weary but unmoving. He was done giving way before these tantrums weeks ago now. “I’m *tellin’* you, you don’t quit treatin’ me like a motherfuckin’ child, I’m gonna cave your fuckin’ head all in.”

Daryl tilts his head, very slight. Again that weariness, but the steel under it is backed by the full faith and credit of a bag of crystal meth to the face. “You really wanna try that again?”

Merle simply stares at him, a hundred different emotions crossing his face, most of them superseding each other. Anger, scorn, frustration, disbelief, contempt…

And pain. There’s pain there. A lot of it. Somehow, when the rest is gone, that’s all that remains.

*I’m sorry.*

It’s taken him that same period of weeks to understand that he’ll probably never be able to say that. And even if he does, Merle will probably never be able to hear it.

After what feels like approximately an hour Merle shakes his head, and when he speaks his voice is quiet, and there’s no more anger in it. He sounds tired. Tired as Daryl feels. That hurts.

“Just ain’t us, man.”

“Think maybe it could be?”
Daryl is well aware that they could be talking about more than one thing.

Merle shakes his head again and looks away, back toward the house. The sun is lowering, casting long shadows and throwing the finely fashioned details of the construction into sharper relief. That bay window. That turret. The wide, shady porch.

It’s the one. It is.

There’s no God, no gods. But maybe there’s something.

“So,” Merle says softly. “We gotta come up with about another thousand. And we got a week’n change to come up with it.”

“Yeah.” Daryl takes a long breath. “We’ll figure it out. There’s ways. Maybe… I could ask Hershel for a loan or somethin’. For some reason seems like he’s kinda gotten to trustin’ me.”

Merle huffs, back to contemptuous. “Man, you ain’t takin’ nothin’ from him. You ain’t gonna owe him. That ain’t how we do shit.”

We. “So how do we do it?”

Merle rubs his fingers across the hard stubble on his face, thoughtful now. Still looking at the house, though Daryl’s not sure he’s actually seeing it clearly. He’s gone halfway to somewhere else. “I’ll think on it. I maybe got some ideas.”

The cleats jump. Maybe they shouldn’t, maybe it’s unfair, maybe he should give his brother a tiny bit more credit than this, but he can’t, he can’t, because he’s been screwed over so many times, so many different ways, and the worst part—he knows in the deepest core of himself—is that a lot of the time Merle doesn’t even mean to do it.

Possibly most of the time.

“Tell me you ain’t gonna do somethin’ stupid.”

Merle jerks his head back to face him, mouth pulling into an exasperated, twisted sneer. “Man, fuck you.” He turns back to the truck and starts toward it. “I’ll take care of it. Jesus fuckin’ Christ, you’d still be crawlin’ around and shittin’ in a diaper if no one kicked you in the ass.”

Daryl watches him for a moment—the slump of his back, the set of his shoulders, strength lingering under the ravages of a lot of bad years. It comes to him, strangely, that Merle is a lot of things, a lot of things he wishes so much Merle wasn’t, and if he’s realistic about this that likely won’t ever change. Even if things do get better.

But there is something there. Something all those bad years didn’t destroy.

He’s going to do this. He made a plan and he’ll do it. It’s crazy, it makes no sense, it’s probably deeply foolish, but it wouldn’t—he thinks—actually kill him to have a little faith.

He glances back at the house one more time, then follows.
then like falling stars back down to sleep we'll go

Chapter Notes

So we've officially cracked 200k words. Jesus.

Some of you who follow me on Tumblr may recall me saying around the 150k mark that I thought we would probably be done right around now. Yeah. Uh.

So how much longer will this thing be? Man, honestly, I have no idea anymore. At this point all bets are off.

I do have a full timeline now, leading all the way up to the end, but I refuse to depend on that for any guide regarding an estimate of length, because it's still rough and I am sure things will happen that I didn't anticipate. But I do know the end and it's vanishingly unlikely that it will change.

No, I won't promise that it will be a happy one. Sorry. Not saying it won't, I'm just not saying it will. I'm not promising anything other than that it will end.

Once again I'm behind responding to comments, so I'm going to give a general OH MY GOD FUCKING THANK YOU in case I don't get to them which is frankly likely. But you are all amazing. Seriously. You are a m a z i n g

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So he takes the money by on Sunday.

It’s not everything he has. It’s by far the better part of it, though. There’s enough for gas and food—and booze, because even now there’s only so far he’s willing to push the limits of Merle’s willingness to cooperate—for the next week and change. That part of this is done and it’ll work.

The rest of it... Well, like he said. They’ll figure it out.

Rather than merely performing the transaction at the door, Cathy invites him in and sits him down at the breakfast table in the kitchen—which is large, all dark wood cabinets, molding, the table itself—and after she takes the cash and scribbles him a receipt she gives him coffee, she lights up a cigarette and so does he, and it takes him about fifteen seconds to realize that she’s not being hospitable so much as she is—lightly—interrogating him.

He dislikes it, but he doesn’t resent her for it. He would probably interrogate himself too.

Where are they from? Atlanta—it’s technically true in most important ways, and it’s vague enough to obscure all the important details. Where are they living now? He tells her, and he makes no secret of the fact that he’s interested in leaving as soon as possible, which she seems to appreciate. What does he do? No problem with telling her that either. She doesn’t know the Greenes, but she’s well aware that many of the surrounding farms make it a practice to take on a hand or two for the season.

What kind of second chance is this for them?

So now the question is whether truth is still the policy.
Daryl stares at his coffee and considers this for a long moment—as long as he thinks he can make it without becoming suspicious. So far, to the extent that he reasonably can, he’s been honest with her, and it hasn’t served him ill. And she already observed that he and Merle didn’t exactly look respectable. But this is a bit more than that, and just because she doesn’t seem like the type to clutch her pearls—doesn’t seem like she has pearls to clutch—doesn’t mean she’ll take kindly to this.

Then again, she has his money.

“Merle was locked up,” he says slowly. “We both been havin’ a rough time. Tryin’ to turn it around.” He raises his head and gestures vaguely at the house around them. “This feels like... I dunno. I like it. It feels like it could be that. I dunno.”


The corner of Cathy’s mouth creeps upward. She’s lined it in a dark plum, and like the day before it’s the kind of thing that could easily be overdone and yet isn’t. “So you could’ve told me one of you was an ex-con before now.”

Daryl looks levelly at her. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Cathy laughs softly. “Yeah, okay. You’re right.” She curls her hands around her mug and studies him. “Could just throw your cash back at you, kick you out.”

“You won’t.”

“Oh, no? How come?”

Daryl gives her the minutest smile. It’s genuinely meant. “’cause you like my face.”

Cathy regards him in impassive silence for a few seconds. Daryl’s smile doesn’t grow, doesn’t shrink, stays exactly where and how it is.

Then Cathy laughs again, harder—hard, lower and rougher than her normal higher, quaverier register should allow for. And he’s sure he’s in. Short of a massive fuck-up, provided he can get the rest of the money by when she said, he’s in.

They’re in.

And he also suspects very strongly that the non-refundable deposit might actually be refundable. At least partially.

But it’s not going to come to that.

“I dunno,” she says after another moment or two of quiet, crushes her cigarette out in an ashtray shaped like a flat duck and lights up another. “I dunno if I wanna be responsible for your second chance, Daryl. I dunno if I want that kinda thing hangin’ around my neck, if it all goes to hell.” And she’s saying it with a smile, with an almost flirtatious angle in the way she’s holding her cigarette between her fingers—though he’s not sure she’s really flirting—but there’s an undertone of sincerity that he couldn’t possibly miss.

She’s not saying no. He already knew she wouldn’t. But she’s saying something.

He doesn’t answer immediately. He swallows the last of his coffee—black, strong, dangerously hot, in other words perfect—and looks at his own cigarette, which is almost smoked down, little red coal close to his fingers. He hasn’t spent a huge amount of time thinking about what exactly happens if
this all goes to hell. He’s thought about individual things collapsing and blowing up and burning down. He’s thought about them in fleeting, vague terms, and two nights ago he made himself look one of them right in the cold specifics.

Made Beth look with him.

But the whole thing.

What even is the whole thing? Boiling this all down to its bones, to its barest components, what is this place? What is he asking of her?

“You ain’t responsible for that,” he murmurs finally, and stubs his cigarette out next to hers. “All we need’s four walls and a roof.”

~

He doesn’t go straight home. He drives around. Nowhere in particular; around. It’s mid-afternoon and cloudy and cool edging toward a genuine chill, a bit breezy—the warmth has abandoned them, that fleeting taste of summer fled and gone, and this is autumn, real autumn. The breeze is combing leaves off some of the trees, scattering them across streets and sidewalks in rustling flips and cartwheels.

He’s thinking about everything and nothing, his brain running in weird, uneven circles. Mostly he’s doing vague, bizarrely specific, and slightly frantic math. How they’re going to be moving into an empty apartment—the ad said unfurnished and Cathy confirmed that none of what they saw will be staying when the current tenants vacate it—and they’ll have to buy things, actual things, not the junk they have, half of which isn’t even theirs and half of which they pulled out of the trash or places that might as well be. The sofa is theirs, but Daryl is damned to actual Hell if he’s taking that lumpy piece of shit with them. The bed was already there; so was the dresser. So was the recliner. A couple of the tables are theirs. The TV is theirs. Their very few dishes, towels. Sheets, such as they are.

Unless they manage to lay their hands on more than an extra thousand dollars by the twenty-second—or they get very lucky with someone’s curbside leavings—they’re going to be bedding down in the new place in sleeping bags. At best. At least for a time.

They’ve done worse. Way worse.

They can make it work.

But the how is elusive. Merle said no loan; Daryl has been making a practice lately of ignoring what Merle says or going around him entirely when it comes to decision-making, and he could do the same here, but Merle genuinely seemed like he wanted to take a crack at it, and while Daryl has his doubts there, God, he really does…

There’s the whole thing about faith. And it’s been almost two years since he had any real faith in his big brother, in which he once put every ounce he had.

He’s been making a lot of leaps lately. Maybe it’s time to make another one.

He’ll give Merle a couple of days or so. Try to come up with something himself in the meantime, keep the idea of a loan on the backburner, a last resort. He can do that much and not completely fuck this whole thing up. Probably.

But after a while, heading out to the edges of town where the houses are small and sparse and the roads transition from pavement to a mix of pavement and gravel, even that fades, and all he can focus
on is the chill in the air, the gray light—no rain, just gray—and the radio’s quiet drone.

- up the stairs to the apartment
- she is balled up on the couch
- her mom and dad went down to Charlotte
- they’re not home to find us out
- and we drive

And he’s thinking about the ruins, the days with her in a kind of sunlight that managed to be gently, flowingly ecstatic, flooding into his veins and making them both shine. He’s thinking about the clearing, about how clothes had felt like silly unnecessary things when the air was so welcoming and their hands and mouths needed so much free range and freedom to move. The swimming hole, the water and the grass and her, stripping her to her skin under the moon and being stripped to his bones. The ruins in the night, the stone towers and trees, the sound of water and the nightcalls of mockingbirds, and her heat under his body and over him, fucking her, making love with her, and every single time the whole world—which has never been particularly nice to him, never given any indication that it liked him all that much—was kind to them. It made warm, soft beds for them to lie down in and play.

He’s pretty sure that’s over. From here on out, with every turn, it’ll only be colder.

Darker.

If they want beds to lie down in, beds to play in, they’ll have to make those beds themselves.

~

Merle’s out when he gets back around five. For Merle to be gone and not responding to texts or calls isn’t at all unusual, but now Daryl finds himself actively wondering, actually almost worrying, and he doesn’t like that and he doesn’t like the reasons for it that he suspects are lurking in the background. He hangs around, doesn’t do much of anything for a bit. He’s not hiding the money under the sofa anymore—it seemed pretty ridiculous to keep doing that—and instead he’s tucked it into a dusty Tupperware container in an otherwise mostly empty kitchen cabinet. He pulls it out and counts what’s left, though he did that twice before he took the rest to Cathy. Two hundred dollars. More than they’ll need to get them through the interval, so that means they’re at least a little way closer to where they have to be. Assuming no disasters.

Which he maybe shouldn’t assume.

He lies down on the sofa and watches the gray light darken and darken and tries to think. He doesn’t get very far.

After a while he dozes.

~

Merle slaps him awake around what turns out to be seven. Daryl swats at him, growls, hits air. Merle is gone, going to the kitchen, creaking a cabinet open and returning with a jar of peanut butter and a plastic spoon. He sits down in the recliner, flips on the TV, and begins to eat the peanut butter, moodily.

Daryl stares bleary-eyed at him for a moment. He’s not entirely awake, and while he wasn’t entirely sleeping either, nothing feels quite real yet.

The Kardashians appear to be in the middle of some kind of major existential crisis. Everything is
very high-pitched.

He swipes a hand over his face. “What’s goin’ on, man?”

Merle grunts.

Okay, sure.

“ Took the money over.” Daryl squeezes his eyes shut for a few seconds. He wishes it was darker and quieter. He has no reason whatsoever to feel hungover, but he sort of does. “You get any big ideas or anythin’?”

Merle grunts again and spoons peanut butter into his mouth, and just when Daryl is giving the conversation up for lost and lurching to his feet to take a piss and scrub some consciousness back into his face, he says, “Workin’ on it.”

“But you ain’t gonna clue me in.”

“I’ll clue you in when there’s somethin’ to clue you in about, brother.”

Daryl sighs. Fine. Whatever. He’s too weirdly tired to pursue this anyway. He heads for the bathroom and when he comes back he makes Merle share the peanut butter.

Much later, Beth calls.

Daryl knows they shouldn’t overdo this either, because while it’s easier to cover up a suspicious-sounding phone call than being caught in the front seat of a pickup with your panties on the floor, it’s still something that could screw this whole thing up unbelievably. But he wants to talk to her. Needs to. The whole weekend has been strange and kind of uncomfortable and stressful in ways he doesn’t fully understand, and talking to Merle isn’t exactly a balm for anyone’s soul. And there’s her voice so soft in his ear, so musical, and really she could say anything at all and he would simply lie here with the TV on mute, blurry light flickering over his face, and listen.

But there’s what happened on Friday night. She didn’t call him the night before, so nothing has been said yet to pave over that crack in the road, and neither of them is foolish enough to think her promise—or claim or prophecy or whatever the hell it was—did that job. So she’s a little quieter, a little more subdued—not sad and not upset, he can tell that, but turned inward. Thoughtful.

He wishes so much he could just be there. Lying curled up together in silence is perfection. Patches of silence on the phone are just sort of awkward, and even if he can hear her breathing on the other end and imagine her, pretend she’s beside him or he’s there in her room, it’s light years away.

Wanting someone like this, wanting physical proximity in this kind of relentless way… He’s aware that this is yet another thing that makes people in these situations do very stupid things.

About ten minutes in, talking about nothing in particular, he remembers that he hasn’t said anything specifically about the house. About the apartment. Hasn’t wanted to, not until something was semi-final, but now he supposes that’s the case.

Mostly.

“Think maybe we got a place.”
“Yeah?” She sounds more than pleased; she sounds eager, and for the first time he realizes that she might have been wanting this as much as he has. Hoping for it, even if she never said much about it.

And then he remembers eating ice cream with her on the tailgate. How she brought it up.

So you’re... You’re stickin’ around?

He used to think she manipulated the universe to keep him here. Somehow, in those earlier days, it never occurred to him that she did so because she badly wanted him to stay.

Girl.

“Yeah. Second floor of a house. Kinda weird place, but... ‘s nice, I guess.”

No guessing. She would like it. He knows she would.

“Where?”

“West end of town. Magnolia Street.”

“Oh, yeah.” Now she definitely sounds pleased, and the warmth in her voice drifts to him like a breeze and strokes gently over him and he feels better about almost everything. “Yeah, that... Wow, that used to be a really nice neighborhood. Still is, actually.”

“Houses kinda all fallin’ apart.”

“Yeah. I think they’re real pretty, but yeah. More and more of that kinda thing’s been happenin’ since people started movin’ outta town. Kids go to college and don’t come back. Y’know.”

“But you’re stickin’ around,” he murmurs, and his smile is like the caress of her fingertip guiding the corner of his mouth upward.

“You are,” she says, even softer. Then, “So when’re you movin’?”

“Uh...” Uh. “Tuesday after next. There’s some stuff we gotta get squared away.”

“What kinda stuff?”

“Nothin’ big. Just some shit on this end. Got some stuff to sign.”

Alright.” Still brightly cheerful, as much as she can be with her voice pitched low to avoid being overheard, and that’s when he realizes he came dangerously close to lying to her. He’s omitted things—Christ, a lot of things—and he’s dodged her and thrown up smokescreens, and really this isn’t all that different from those, and it’s even pretty much in that category, but...

But it’s closer than he’d like.

“You gotta let me come help.”

“Ain’t a lot to move.” She saw where they live, even if only briefly. He’s sure her imagination filled in the rest of the blanks.

“Well, I’m comin’ anyway. I wanna see it.”

Alright.” He closes his eyes and watches the dim shifting colors on the insides of his lids—deep greens and pale yellows, dark purples and blues. All-pervasive reds. “Not gonna keep you away.”
“Better not even try.”

“cause you’re the boss?”

“That’s right.” She sighs and it becomes a yawn, and he can hear the whisper of the sheets as she stretches. Tomorrow is Columbus Day and school is closed, but it’s late. And he’ll see her tomorrow regardless, so he’s about to say goodnight, when he hears her sigh again—deeper, a slight edge at its end—and he knows with a hot little shiver that goodnight is the last thing she wants him to say.

“‘You’re gonna get a bed?’

“Yeah.”

“Real bed?” Another sigh, very quiet but very audible, and the whisper of the sheets again. “Your own room?”

His hand is sliding down his body, settling between his legs and feeling himself. Feeling himself heating, hardening, pressing into his palm. “Mhm.”

“You gotta show me that too.” Her breath catches. “Oh—Daryl.”

He guides her, slow and easy; her fingers were already on her clit but he directs her, sends them into her cunt and has her fuck herself until he can hear that she’s biting her lip and biting it hard, has her play with her nipples with light, teasing little skims and flicks of her fingertips. Has her do the things he would do, would give almost anything to do—has her draw those whimpers and moans out of herself, all desperately muffled, has her panting his name and hissing how much she wants to come.

How much she wants to come with him inside her.

He doesn’t come until she does, and seconds after her he slams himself against the wall of his own pleasure and shudders and releases so hot over his fist, and as he does he imagines it in her mouth, on her tongue, her doing with him what she’s already done on her own and licking it off his hand.

And it’s like another wave rolling over him.

The world is so much bigger than he ever imagined.

After, breathing slower and deeper, he’s opening his mouth once more to start to say goodnight and once more something intervenes. This time himself.

“Sing somethin’?”

He’s half expecting her to say no. He can tell she’s tired. But she hums softly—happily—and he can hear what must be her turning over in bed. “What d’you want me to sing?”

“I don’t care.” Picturing her curled on her side, legs drawn up, and curling himself around her, stroking her hair, pulling her back against his chest. Smelling her, that scent he knows so well by now and loves so much—her shampoo, her warm, clean skin, her cunt.

Some people might separate one of these three things from the other, think of it as a different kind. But he can’t imagine doing so. It’s all her. Each thing only makes the others better.

“Okay,” she breathes. And what she starts to sing is like a lullaby, slow and floating, and it closes over his head like a blanket and pulls him in like her arms, her voice erasing the distance between them. She’s here. She’s here with him. All he needs is her voice and she’s here.
fold yourself against  
me like a paper bird  
tonight we’ll fly awhile  
just give me the word

and hold onto me  
like I hold onto you  
a steeple holds a bell  
the night sky holds the moon

melting flakes of snow  
will catch you when you fall  
baby, that’s not all

Everything’s going to be all right.

Chapter End Notes

Songs are "Brick" by Ben Folds Five and "Baby That's Not All" by Josh Ritter.
Monday is grayer, colder. Hershel is indeed talking in a vague and vaguely suggestive kind of way about winter, about the things that need to be done right now to prepare for it and the things that will need to be done during the months that follow. There’s more maintenance that needs doing on the equipment they’ll only just have finished using. There’s trees to be cleared and hauled. There’s hay to be baled. There are a hundred tiny things that add up to a lot of time, more time than one would think. His vague suggestiveness doesn’t sound entirely conscious, and Daryl thinks it’s possible that Hershel is working through the idea of keeping Daryl on rather than vaguely suggesting something already worked through.

So he’s quiet and lets Hershel talk, and he does his work, and he brings the harvester in and helps Shawn with the milking, and he can’t quite keep his eyes off the sky.

For reasons unclear to him, he keeps thinking about snow.

melting flakes of snow
will catch you when you fall
baby, that’s not all

He usually breaks for lunch outside—he likes the farmhouse but he can’t imagine that he’ll ever genuinely feel comfortable there—but it’s chilly enough today that he makes the first of what he imagines will be a series of exceptions so consistent that they’ll become the rule and eats at the breakfast table in the kitchen. Annette is putting together a marinade for the roast she’ll be making for dinner; she makes small talk and thankfully doesn’t appear to mind when most of the talk in question is on her end. She knows him by now. Well. She sort of doesn’t.

Daddy would be the worst. I don’t think any of them would… Maybe Mama.

Except no. Because maybe Hershel would be the worst in terms of a reaction, but he thinks about Annette finding out and looking at him like she might do, like he imagines she would—with shock, with anger, with betrayal, with disgust—and he can’t take it.

That would be the actual worst.

It’s not even Halloween yet but Annette is talking in an idle kind of way about Thanksgiving, about Maggie coming home, about the boy she’ll apparently be bringing with her, and Annette seems both excited and apprehensive about meeting this boy. The latter is subtle and Daryl is halfway through his sandwich before he picks it out, but it’s there, and after that he starts picking out some of the even subtler reasons why it’s there.

She doesn’t really know anything about this boy. Maggie had a rough time right around when Hershel remarried and they’re still a bit concerned about her even if it’s not completely fair. They love—Annette loves especially—the idea of their daughters getting married and having kids and her and Hershel getting to be grandparents because who wouldn’t want that, but you always worry. You want the best for your children. You want them to do well. You watch them growing up, you learn bit by bit that you’re losing control, and that’s terrifying.
Annette wants this to be a nice boy, and she wants to like him and she wants him to like them, and she wants this to turn out to be what she wants for a girl who truly is, as far as she’s concerned, her daughter.

She actually says very little of this. Daryl pieces it together from what he’s picked up previously, from the unspoken sides of the words Annette is using, and from the drawing of his own conclusions.

If it turns out this isn’t a nice boy, the whole thing is going to be extremely awkward with no real avenues of escape.

And Hershel is such a sweet man, but he can be so bullheaded about things. He gets fixed on an idea or an attitude and he won’t be budged from it.

No matter what.

The small talk isn’t so small. Annette apologizes. Daryl gives her a tiny smile that he almost means and finishes his lunch in silence.

~

He hears her voice and the gentle, rhythmic strumming before he sees her. Then he steps out onto the porch and there she is, sitting on the steps with the guitar across her knee and a little notebook open next to her. As he stands for a few seconds, watching her—the way her hair falls from the root of her ponytail, the way her spine curves when she bends over to write something, the flash he gets of one leg stretched out in front of her—he actually hears what she’s playing and singing, and it’s not only unfamiliar but unformed. A lot of what she plays and sings is unfamiliar to him, but this is different.

This isn’t yet a song.

She’s making it right in front of him.

He thinks maybe she did this once before. In the field when they hopped the fence, when he first thought about fucking her under the stars, when she told him she wasn’t ready but that she wanted to, she wanted him, and hearing that was almost as good as if he had. And of course it turned out that it was good to wait. Better than good.

That night she had her guitar and she played a song that wasn’t quite a song, merely a series of chords drifting up into the starry dark, and now he realizes—in a way he hadn’t before—that this girl is a mockingbird but she doesn’t just play covers. She knows the pieces of a song, gathers them in like a harvest, builds her own.

It’s a silly, overly romantic way of viewing the process, and anyway it’s not like he would even know, but to him it seems profoundly mystical.

She draws down the unseen moon.

When he steps forward a board creaks and she turns, pen in her hand, and smiles. Small smile, warm. He doesn’t exactly smile back but he knows he doesn’t have to.

She sees everything.

But for a few seconds he nearly sits down next to her, nearly lights a cigarette and just listens. Like he used to. Maybe says a few things. Maybe asks her about it. Casual, innocent, and he wouldn’t sit too close, but he could still be there and enjoy the simple fact of her presence, look at her out of the
corner of his eye, and it would be fine. Anyone who saw them, it would be fine. It would be nothing.

Except it wouldn’t. And he’s invaded by the feeling that if he did, a bright, burning line might form and extend from him to her, blaze and bend with the wind; they might become flaming Tesla coils, fingers of fire reaching for each other.

Kind of hard to miss that.

So he walks past her and down the steps into the grayness, all the color leached out of the world. But he hears her singing behind him, something that is fully formed, part of that thing she’s creating now completely in that world. Part of it forever.

my cheeks burn red from your kisses
my blue heart shivers and misses
your brushstrokes, a masterpiece made in the rain
made to wash away

That night at dinner his hand brushes hers under the table and their fingers curl before he can stop it. They tangle. He thinks about legs, about tongues, about getting lost in her hair.

She doesn’t blush—he checks—but her hand is scorching his. He imagines her leaving marks. It’s almost unbearable. He clutches at her and he thinks This is out of control.

That isn’t exactly a new development.

But looking around the table—Annette laughing at something Shawn’s said, Hershel smiling slightly, and Beth with her own tiny, secret smile that no one else there will be able to decipher—he knows they have to find a way to get it under control, and right fucking now. Because he can’t lose this. And this is so much more complicated than he thought it would get and it’s getting more and more complicated all the time. He was never supposed to like these people. He was never supposed to give a shit.

He was never supposed to rely on anyone for anything. Except Merle.

I dunno if I can lose this.

You won’t.

He’s completely and utterly certain that when she said that, she believed it. And maybe she can manipulate the universe. But he’s also completely and utterly certain that there are limits to Beth Greene’s power. There are things even she can’t do. One of them is guarantee anything of the kind.

He wonders if she can lose it either.

He wonders just how dangerous this is getting.

In the dark, her voice in his ear. He’s come to equate her voice with her hands, which makes these late-night conversations even harder, even more aching, everything she’s doing to him without even touching him pounding inside his head, like his whole body has become a giant heart. He pours out everything he was keeping in all day, almost whimpers—it’s painful to see her, just as painful as it was before she knew he loved her, before they started doing anything at all—and tells her how God,
he wanted to fuck her, he wanted it so bad, wanted to pin her against the barn wall, lift her against it and hitch her legs high on his hips, or bend her back on the porch steps and just take her. So this time she guides him, tells him what to do, and at first he confirms what she’s saying and he describes some of it, how it feels—the heat and weight of his cock in his hand, the slick of his precome on his fingertips, the dense jolt when he squeezes himself and strokes—but at some point his words melt into moans and gasps, and he fucks his own hand while she whispers how much she wants it, how she can’t wait until it’s her he’s fucking, until he’s inside her and he’s making her feel it, what she does to him, how she makes him wild for her. How she needs his hands on her, his mouth, his cock pumping into her, how bad she wants to make him come—

She says it and he does it, biting his lip to keep from crying her name. Settling for shouting it in his head. Beth, Beth, oh God.

Oh my God, I love you.

Her singing along with him, his favorite of any song he’s heard from her. That song he’s learning by heart.

~

He asks her the next afternoon, a few moments when they’re walking side by side to the stable—her to brush the horses, him to repair another broken stall. It seems safe enough to talk. Also the sun has emerged from behind the clouds, deep late afternoon gold, and it’s lighting her up like a beacon, and he can’t really help being near her. Or he could, he really could, but he doesn’t want to, and the intensity of the feeling almost translates to ability—or lack thereof.

A lot of lines have been and are becoming a good bit blurrier.

“What was that? The thing you were playin’ before?”

“Oh.” She glances at him, smiling a little, abruptly shy. “It’s just somethin’ I’m messin’ around with. Got an idea, I wanted to see where it went.” She pauses, tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and the movement of her hand shakes the beaded bracelets around her wrist and flashes them green and gold. “It’s not really anythin’.”

“I liked it,” he says, very quietly. What he doesn’t like is her saying it’s nothing, when it was so lovely it hurt him. “A lot. Didn’t sound like nothin’.”

“It’s not done.” She doesn’t sound like she’s arguing with him. He glances at her again and she looks pleased, her smile still faint but somehow uncontrolled. A bit helpless. “I’m gonna try to finish it. I was thinkin’… I was thinkin’ maybe if I do, I’d play it at one of the open mic nights.”

“You should.” His turn to pause. They’re near the barn now, near enough to hear the hollow, mournful sound as a gust of wind shoves itself against its side and presses fingers of air through the gaps in boards and slats. Patching up the barn is something else he’s going to have to do.

A lot of things not done, and December fast oncoming.

The big scary future. So the question comes to him and he sees no reason to not ask it. It actually seems like it might be important to do so, like it might be something about her that, for reasons as yet mysterious, he needs to know.

“You think you wanna do that? Be a singer?”

“Like for a job?”
He nods.

“Dunno.” She tips her face down, watching the pace of her boots. “It’s hard. I mean, you don’t make a lotta money. I think Daddy would rather I did somethin’ else. He’s just…” She shrugs. “He wants me to be okay, y’know? He just has these ideas about what is and isn’t okay and it’s hard to talk him outta them. But Mama… Mama taught me piano. Mama got me singin’ in the first place. Since I was tiny. Too little to even get what I was doin’.” She smiles at the ground, as small and warm as any smile she’s ever given him. “I think maybe she’d like it. At least some. I think maybe… She’d get it, anyway.”

Nothing about that surprises him. Not about Hershel. Not about Annette. It’s what he would have assumed, if he hadn’t been told. How it would go.

He pulls open the stable door for her, watches as she enters. Watches how she moves, how the lines of her body shift as she walks. “Kinda never figured you for carin’ all that much about money.”

“I don’t.” She shoots him a wider smile over her shoulder. “Told you. I don’t want perfect. I want real.”

It shivers through him, sharp and hot, what they were doing the last time she told him that. Sense memory again. Every memory with her seems to be deep as instinct. She has access to parts of his brain that he didn’t even know were there.

They both get to work. They’re in adjacent stalls, separated by a wood divider. He kneels down and opens the toolbox, lays out what he needs, and begins to slip into the semi-trance of doing work that takes little of his actual attention but makes soothing use of his hands. Beth is singing softly as she brushes down the mare—named Nellie, and he’s heard her referred to as Nervous Nellie on account of her tendency to spook—and her voice drifts into his distant attention and fills it like a voice in a cave. It echoes, floats in the air—dust motes in a beam of sun. A song he knows he’s heard her sing before.

she said she gave her heart to you
if it was precious why’d you lose it
but if it was golden it’d shine
if it’s big it won’t be hard to find

Her voice and the occasional steady drum of his hammering, the whisper of her brush and the wind through the roof, and he’s so deep in it that he almost doesn’t notice when she speaks, her voice low.

“Tell me what you’d do to me.”

He freezes for half a second. Processes. Jerks his head up; he can’t see her from where he is. She’s quiet, and for half a second more he’s almost certain he imagined it. But then he hears her voice again, so soft, even rougher.

“Right now. If you could. Tell me what you’d do.”

He doesn’t… This is new. This is new and it’s smacked him in the side of the face, kneeling with his hammer poised over a nail, the inside of his head churning in rapid circles, spinning like a whirlwind full of scattered debris. In the debris is an answer, answers, words, but they keep slipping out of his grasp. He knows what he would do to her right now if he could. So many things. And they’ve done this before but that was over the phone and in the dark, a blank space to fill with heady images and sounds and everything that might slide under his hands and cover his fingers with wet slick, his tongue… And now she’s right here, feet away from him, separated from him by a thin row of
boards, and they’re in the open, anyone could walk in, and just because he isn’t actually *doing* those things to her…

“Please.”

Only a breath. Breathless. Almost inaudible over the wind. His fingertips are tingling and he lays the hammer down in the straw, the nail protruding from the wood, and he sits back on his heels and lets out his own long breath. Emptying his lungs. Letting the deep burn of it slip all through him.

Fuck, he’s already rock-hard. And he could handle it himself. But he likes to burn.

Burn so hot for her.

“I’d kiss you.” Because he would. He would start with that. He would also be content to stop with it, to end with it. Just her mouth, her tongue… Her voice released into him, her moan. His name.

“How?”

“Slow. At first. I’d get harder, I’d… taste you.” His eyes are drifting closed, rolling back slightly. He has the words. Somewhere. They might not be elegant or profound or even especially descriptive, because he’s no songwriter and he’s no poet, but he doesn’t think she really cares about any of those things, and what he has will get the job done. “I fuckin’ love how you taste, Beth.”

“What else?”

Fuck, he doesn’t know. Or he does, but what’s in his head is everything at once, and he can’t plan this stuff. He simply does it. He gets her under his hands and he does what he wants with her. He almost never truly *thinks*, never has, and in fact that might in significant part be to blame for this.

But he’ll try.

“Get my hands up your shirt. On your tits—they’re so perfect, they’re… Fuck, just get the whole thing off, get everythin’ off. I want you naked.”

“Yeah.” She sighs, shaky, and he wants so badly to see her, but something is keeping him down here with his eyes closed, not even touching himself though he’s throbbing against his fly. “What then? Tell me.”

“I could pinch you if you wanted. Suck you. Get your nipples hard. I know you like that, I could…” He has to take a breath, his eyes squeezed shut and the world red dancing colors. “Make you make all those fuckin’ noises. I love when you get noisy, girl. But you gotta be quiet in here.”

“I will. Daryl…”

“I’d feel how wet you are.”

“I am. I’m so wet.” She is, she must be; he doesn’t have to touch her to know it. He can practically hear it in her voice, the little tremor sharpening, the harbinger of a moan. A series of them.

“I’d play with your clit. Get my finger in you. I wanna fuck you but I want you to come first, I want you even wetter for me, I want…” The words are tumbling end over end. He stops again and swallows; without meaning to he made a concession and slid a hand down, cupped himself, and he’s kneading slowly with the heel of his palm. Simmering. “I love watchin’ you come, Beth. You’re so beautiful, it’s incredible, you got no fuckin’ idea.”
“Think I do.” She laughs softly, still shaking—if anything shaking even more. “Tell me…”

“I wanna fuck you. I wanna be in you, your pussy, I’d do that—I’d get your legs around me, get you up against the wall, just fucking ram into you. I’d fuck you hard, girl.”

“Daryl…” She says his name in a high little whimper, and he knows. He knows what she’s doing—has known for a bit now—and all at once he needs to see it, he needs to see it, and he doesn’t care how stupid this is, and that in itself is so intensely stupid. But he pushes to his feet and lays his hands on the top board of the stall, looks over, and there she is against the far divider, fly open and her hand working in her jeans, her other up her shirt and moving against her breast. Stroking her nipple with her thumb, a gasp and hard shiver with every circle as she rolls her hips in time with the rhythm of her nimble fingers. Her breath is ragged, almost those moans her voice was promising, and she raises her half-lidded eyes and looks at him, face flushed and lips parted and wet, and he thinks it could be possible for him to come right there without a hand laid on his cock.

He lays his arms on the top of the divider, like they’re having a regular conversation, and watches her. He thinks he’s doing a fairly good job of playing it cool. He thinks it might not be completely obvious that his knees are about to buckle.

Even if she probably knows anyway.

“I’d fuck you so hard,” he murmurs, the words edged sharper, escaping him in pulses like thrusts. “Fuck you ’til you wanna scream. But you can’t. Someone’s gonna hear. I’d kiss you again, shut you up—God, your hot fuckin’ mouth, Beth, I want all of you, I want my cock in you, I wanna come in you, make you feel it, make you come again, fuck, girl, I want you to come all over me—”

She’s been moving faster, faster, her teeth capturing her lower lip to muffle the harsh whines trying to escape her, and now she stiffens, her head jerking back and the tendons standing out in her throat, her hand clamped down on her breast and her fingers moving frantically as it crashes in on her again and again.

And he watches, neither hand on himself. He watches the last ripples of her pleasure and he feels the agony of how much he wants her, and he soaks in both in equal measure and he loves them both equally.

He should suffer for this. That’s only right.

She sags back, her head hanging and her breath coming in shallow gasps. The hand under her shirt has slipped out and down and dropped limp at her side, but her other is still in her jeans, and after a moment or two she withdraws it and something hot and deep and hungry inside him twists. Her glistening fingers. How he knows she tastes. What he could have.

She focuses on his face again, locks her eyes onto his, and lifts her hand and sucks her fingers clean.

He’s been holding it together. But he cracks, groans, and she laughs gently around her knuckle.

For a moment, stillness. Just the wind and the shifting of the horse against the back of the stall, their breathing—hers loose and heavy and his strained. Tight. As she continues to come back a confused expression flits across her face.

“Ain’t you gonna…”

He shakes his head. He’s not.

“Daryl.” But she doesn’t argue. She sighs and pushes away from the boards and starts toward him,
but he puts up a hand. Outside, not far at all, he can hear Shawn calling to Hershel about something.

They’ve pushed their luck already.

“Don’t.”

“I wanna kiss you,” she whispers, and she looks playful, still heated and still hungry, but she also looks slightly disappointed, and a pang stabs through him. They’ll take what they can get now, but most of the time it’s not going to be quite enough.

“I want you to.” He shakes his head again, slowly. “Don’t.”

She stands for a few seconds, her mouth tightening just a bit, but she nods. She gets it. Gets all of it.

“We gotta be careful,” he says softly. *My girl, I’m so sorry.* “We gotta be so careful now, Beth.”

“I know.” She sighs and pushes her hair back, glances at the door though he hasn’t heard anyone coming. “I just… I wanna be with you. All the time.”

“Me too.” *Me too* isn’t even approaching what he feels. It’s a vague gesture at a fucking blue whale. He doesn’t want to *be with her*. He wants to crawl inside her skin. He wants to make a home in her ribcage. There is no way to describe what he wants without resorting to some frankly horrific imagery.

In fairness, it *is* slightly horrific to feel like this.

“But I’d rather not be with you now than not be with you ever.”

“Yeah.” She glances at the door again and zips up her jeans, reaches into her shirt and does something with her bra. “I should… I should go help Mama with dinner.”

He nods and she picks up the brush, gives Nellie a pat on her flank—Nellie starts a bit—and moves toward the door. But she stops and looks back, her face and her eyes both a little sad, and for an instant he almost beckons her, begs her, *pleads* with her to come back and kiss him, kiss him as long and as deep as she wants. Take whatever she wants from him. He’ll give it all and fuck the consequences. They’re *inconsequential*.

But he can’t. He can’t lose this.

“I love you so much, Daryl,” she whispers, and it’s like a kick to the gut.

He whispers it back to her and closes his eyes against the pain, braced against the stall. He didn’t know it was going to be like this. He didn’t know it was coming at all.

Chapter End Notes

*Songs are "Baby That's Not All" and "The Bad Actress" by Josh Ritter, and "Masterpiece" by Emily Kinney.*
That night he sits with Merle on the creaking iron stairs on the side of the building, watching the last of the evening’s traffic passing, and they smoke, drink, and it’s difficult to be certain of the exact nature of the mood. It’s not bad, not really uncomfortable, but it’s sure as hell not comfortable either, and there’s a tension strung between and all around them that he both understands and is confused by.

It doesn’t feel like their normal kind of tension. The kind he’s become wearily used to.

Merle told him to fuck off, that he would tell Daryl when there was something to tell, and Daryl was willing to humor him two days ago, humor him yesterday, but this is Tuesday night and the clock is ticking louder and louder, and winding itself closer to a halt.

So he waits until Merle seems mellowed a bit and shifts, his back against the brick and a boot against the lower railing, staring up at the moon—exposed since the clouds started to lighten. Waning further, smaller and smaller each night, and gold. Right now it’s traveling behind a haze of cloud, making it look ghostly. Eerie.

“Any news, man?”

Merle grunts. “‘bout what?”

“Money you said you was gonna come up with?”

Daryl is expecting Merle to react badly. To give him shit. To cuss him out, to call him names, to declare that he ain’t doin’ shit no more, and this was fuckin’ stupid to begin with, no idea what the fuck you was thinkin’, brother, ‘cept I know for a fact you wasn’t at all.

But Merle says nothing. Not right away. He takes a long drag on his cigarette, takes an enormous swallow of whiskey. He’s clearly well on the way to being wasted, but it seems to be a gentle kind of wasted, and he isn’t high. Daryl hasn’t seen Merle truly belligerent roaring drunk since the fight. He hasn’t seen him get really high since the fight, either.

He actually can’t remember seeing Merle get high at all since then. He must have, probably when Daryl wasn’t around, because there’s ample time there, but…

But yeah.

And Merle speaks, quiet. Calm. “I’m takin’ care of it, man. ‘s gonna be fine.”

Daryl looks at him for a long moment. He’s not very drunk, but he’s drunk, and his processing power is impaired a good bit. So he’s not only not sure what to make of this but also not sure how to make of this, and he simply looks and waits for something to come to him.

He has a dim feeling—though it’s intense behind the dimness, knowledge of it rather than actual visceral experience of the thing—that something is happening. He felt it before. Hoped for it. But now he feels it, because Merle doesn’t talk like that. Doesn’t do these things; doesn’t walk into a house like he did and talk to a woman like Cathy and not be a jackass. He doesn’t restrain himself; he doesn’t have an ounce of self-restraint in his being, or at least not one he’s ever cared to exercise.
And he’s made a consistent practice of saying he intends to do things and not following through—which Daryl has learned to appreciate, because at least it’s reliable and he can plan around it.

And now.

“You gonna tell me how?” he asks at last.

Merle shrugs. “Won big in a poker game earlier, some asshole owes me a chunk of change now. Said he’d pay up by Friday, I said if he didn’t we’d destroy his fuckin’ kneecaps.” He gives Daryl a small smile full of something that manages to be both triumphant and irritated. “See? Toldja, you fuckin’ moron. Ain’t gotta owe no prick feels like takin’ some kinda pity. Got someone owin’ us.”

“You actually won a thousand fuckin’ bucks in a poker game?” Daryl isn’t quite gaping at him—not that level of surprised—but he’s staring. Merle is pretty good at poker, or he used to be, but he started sucking at it right about the time the substances started getting used hard—like a lot of things started sucking—and at this point Daryl assumes the losses will always outweigh the gains in the end.

But if Merle is cutting back on the meth and the booze, even some…

Yeah, it could happen.

Merle glares at him. “Real vote of confidence there, little brother.”

“I just…” Daryl shakes his head, slow—not denying but as if he’s trying to clear it, which he is. This is plausible. It truly is plausible. Plausible that Merle has come through for him.

After two fucking years, come through for him.

“And you’re sure he’s gonna pay.”

“Oh, yeah.” Merle blows smoke at the moon and looks almost dreamy. “Yeah, he’s gonna fuckin’ pay. And if he don’t, we got a few days to make sure he does.” He rolls his head toward Daryl and his gaze sharpens. “You up for that, man? You are, right?”

Daryl knows what he’s asking, and his gut clenches hard and cold. Because he’s capable of doing real damage to someone and has done so—has put people in the hospital—but it’s been a long time unless he counts Merle, he’s never in his life enjoyed it, and he doesn’t want to do it now.

But money.

Maybe it won’t come to that. He can hope.

He can trust.

“Yeah.” He rubs at the scruff on his jaw. “Yeah, I am.”

“Alright.”

A period of silence, and the tension has dissipated somewhat. Daryl grabs the bottle and takes a sizable swallow, another, and feels deeper mellowness sliding over him. The moon appears bigger somehow. In the distance, faint sirens.

“How’s the teenage dream?”

Daryl starts slightly, jerks a glance at Merle. It’s possible that he had been drifting into a doze.

“What?”
“That girl. She fuck you up yet?”

Yes. Constantly. I hope she never stops. He shrugs and flicks ash down the steps. “Nah, man. Things’re good.”

Merle grunts, and Daryl thinks he might just leave it alone, but then he doesn’t. Of course. Never could. “You never did have any fuckin’ sense. All this time I try to get you some tail, this is how you do it.” He sighs, and the thing is that he no longer sounds scornful except in the mildest way. It’s there, but it’s blunted, and even more… Even more, he sounds amused. “Guess it’s somethin’.”

“She ain’t just tail, bro.” Because if they’re going to talk about this, fine: they’re going to talk about it, and he thinks he’s wasted enough to be fairly relaxed about it. “You the one said it.”

“Riiight.” Distinctly mocking, but not as sharp as once it definitely would have been. “You’re in love.” He shakes his head pityingly, plucks the bottle out of Daryl’s hands. “You know that shit ain’t real, right? That’s your brain givin’ you an extra reason to nail ‘er ‘cause you’re fucked up in the head and you think your dick ain’t reason enough.”

“It’s real.” Soft. He doesn’t want to get into a genuine fight about this and he doesn’t intend to—and Merle also doesn’t really seem like he’s looking for one, merely talking shit like Merle does—but he’s not going to back down. “Just ‘cause you ain’t never had it don’t mean it ain’t real.”

Merle snorts but doesn’t say anything else for a moment or two, and Daryl lets the silence sit, the moon filling up his eyes. Then, “So how is she?”

Daryl turns his head again, blinks. Merle already asked that. He’s reasonably sure. He doesn’t think he’s far gone enough to start manufacturing memories. “What?”

“Is she good? She a good fuck? Good girls ain’t so good sometimes.” Merle tosses his cigarette over the railing and fishes out another, flicks it alight. “Assumin’ you’re fuckin’ her. Finally. Assumin’ you’re doin’ anythin’ with her.”

Daryl merely looks at him. He shouldn’t be surprised. This is exactly the kind of thing Merle would throw out there. This is exactly one of the vaguely imagined reasons why he hadn’t wanted Merle to know at all. But now that it’s between them and drifting into his head, it’s still jarring him.

“Fuck off, man.”

“You don’t get to tell me that. All this shit I been doin’ for you, you can at least give me some kinda details. Some kinda info. She playin’ hard to get? She wearin’ you out?”

Daryl closes his eyes and lets the exasperation twitch through him. He’s not actually that exasperated, not as much as he might be, or at least he’s not feeling it that strongly, and that’s nice. But Merle isn’t going to fucking let up, is going to be an unbelievable pain in the ass about it, and even though Beth might not like it…

Maybe he wants to brag. A little. Because he has something so good, so wonderful, something he now knows Merle doesn’t have the power to ruin.

Something he doesn’t think Merle wants to ruin.

“She’s good.” He says it in a murmur and he imagines being lifted with her, all that laughing and the hot ache of how much he loves her when he’s making her tremble and moan, and he thinks of exaltation, a word he never would have believed in before.
“She’s good,” he repeats, hardly more than a breath. “We’re good together.”

So much more than fucking her.

A pause. Then Merle snorts again, gives him an are you fucking kidding me look, and says, “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“You’re borin’ as shit, man.” Merle leans his head back, hands dangling over his bent knees. “At least you’re gettin’ laid, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Daryl smiles and warmth floods his veins, his bones, and it’s not a bad thing to say. “I am.”

Nothing else, nothing for a long time, and Daryl thinks the conversation might be over. The whiskey level sinks lower and then lower still, and his relaxation drifts into drowsiness. He’s considering making his unsteady way inside, starting to push himself upright, when Merle speaks again.

“You better be careful, little brother.”

Daryl glances at him, slightly incredulous. That Merle would have to tell him that. Surely Merle doesn’t think he’s that stupid.

“We are. Jesus. Ain’t no one gonna find out, we’re makin’ sure. We been—”

Merle shakes his head. “Ain’t what I mean.”

This is weird. This whole conversation has been pretty weird, if it comes to that. “Fuck you mean, then?”

Merle gazes at him levelly, calmly, but there’s something in his face that Daryl can’t pin down, and he no longer looks drunk. He looks abruptly stone cold sober.

“I told you, brother. This ain’t headin’ nowhere good. Can’t. Never does.” He tosses the remainder of his final cigarette into the night. It turns end over end like a falling star and disappears. Daryl watches it go, suddenly and oddly fascinated, but what follows clangs against the inside of his chest like a bell.

“Ain’t headin’ nowhere good. ‘cause believe me, if she don’t break your heart… Man, if she don’t break your heart, you are sure as shit gonna break hers.”

~

Wednesday. Colder. Real wind, and it isn’t trembling leaves off the trees but tearing them off, hurling them around like someone angrily ripping up papers. The leaves themselves are turning faster and harder, burning toward their peak, red and orange and gold. Fire hues. Even as a kid, even in bad times, he liked these couple of weeks of color before the brown death of winter, and he likes them now. It might be cold but the breaks in the clouds have lingered from the night before, and patches of sun slide across the fields and trees.

He feels better. With the dispersal of the clouds the more personal unseen cloud that’s been clinging to his head and his mood has lifted as well, and he suspects that’s in no small part due to the fact that the money issue probably has been taken care of. Persistent little doubts are still gnawing at him, but they’re little and they’re easily ignored. For the most part; he won’t completely dismiss them. He’ll wait and see what happens. He might be wrong. This all might still go to hell.
But he’s generally good at telling when Merle is lying, though Merle is far more skilled a liar than he is. And he couldn’t detect any lie there.

He really thinks it’s going to be all right.

He doesn’t see a lot of Beth. After she comes home she goes almost immediately up to her room with an armload of books. Midterms are looming on the not-too-distant horizon and there are a couple she’s not so confident about, in addition to her homework generally ramping up.

Her *homework*. Every now and then something like that comes along and fucks him up all over again.

Well.

He gives her a faint smile as she passes him in the front hall. She returns it. It’s understood without words needing to be exchanged that he’ll be available later tonight if she wants a study break.

They’re making use of the phone with increasing frequency, which he thinks makes sense—what they want from each other has been subtly altered and their ability to have it in the flesh is severely limited, especially now that the colder days appear to have truly arrived and intend to stay for the duration. And it’s something, it’s so much better than nothing, but *Christ*, he wants to fuck her. Kiss her. He wants to *touch* her. Anything. After moving day that should be somewhat easier—they can both just suck it up where Merle is concerned, and it’s not like Daryl won’t have a room to himself—but otherwise they’re both just going to have to get used to essentially constant unsatisfied desire.

Which isn’t the worst thing in the world, but it was a lot more fun when it was self-imposed.

He does see her at dinner. Brush of hands under the table. No more than that this time, but he still has to fight back a shiver. Her fingertips grazing his knuckles, feather-light—what else he knows those fingers can do.

*I want you.*

They can’t say it. Not most of the time. Not together, not eyes meeting. Not aloud. So they’ll find other ways. Like he always has, when words—so frequently—fail him.

*I want you.*

*I love you.*

~

He’s at the Kroger in the bread aisle when he sees her.

Slight build, short gray hair, and that tense set of her shoulders as she clutches her basket in one hand and reaches up to get some bagels with the other. He considers simply walking past without saying anything, but she’s basically going to be their landlady after Cathy leaves, so he supposes it makes sense to be cordial. To appear as normal and unproblematic as possible.

But just walking up to her and saying *hi* feels… Weird. It feels weird. He needs a reason to be there. Something to explain his presence. The bottom line is that he’s not good at being *friendly*. *Friendly* has been a completely alien idea since he was about five years old.

He wasn’t going to buy bagels but as long as there aren’t any fucking raisins, whatever.
He walks over to stand next to her, reaches up to the shelf, and he’s not all that close to her but she starts, jerks her hand away, drops the bag. He’s turning to her to apologize—so far their relationship isn’t off to the best start, assuming there’s going to be one at all—and he stops.

She looks panicked.

It’s only there for a fraction of a second, and then her eyes snap back into focus and a curtain goes down, and she only looks a bit surprised. The actual panic is gone so fast that at first he’s not completely sure he saw it at all. But no. He knows what he saw. She was afraid of him.

She was afraid of him, and she stopped being afraid when she realized who he was.

“Uh. Hi.” He bends before she can, picks up the bagels and hands them to her. He doesn’t smile but she does—very small but it seems genuine—and takes them.

“Hi.” She pauses, studying him a little more carefully. “I met you the other day. You’re taking Cathy’s upstairs.”

He nods. Okay, this isn’t going so badly. “With my brother. Yeah.” He’s not certain exactly how one introduces oneself in this kind of situation—handshake? God, that just seems even weirder. The whole thing is weird. The lights in grocery stores—too bright, messing with color—are unfailingly weird. Drifting overhead, Taylor Swift is being weirdly intrusive.

\begin{quote}
midnight, you come and pick me up  
no headlights  
long drive could end in burning flames  
or paradise
\end{quote}

The pause itself is getting weird, so he simply nods again. “‘m Daryl.”

“Carol.” Still with that tiny smile, and the tension in her is palpably easing, though not fading entirely. Whatever freaked her out, it really wasn’t him. Probably.

Huh.

“Yeah, she told us.” He hesitates. No, he’s stuck being awkward no matter what he does. Might as well just roll with it, because if she spends any significant time around him she’s going to notice anyway. So he gives her his own tiny smile. “Carol. Cathy. Last one is a C, right?”

For a few seconds Carol looks mildly confused. Then she breaks into a wider smile and breathes a laugh, looks down. Soft. Not entirely at ease. But better still. Maybe.

“Yeah. Mom and Dad thought they were cute. Thank God they stopped at two.”

There’s another brief pause, and he’s beginning to cast about for either something else to say or an excuse to leave when Carol speaks again, her head cocked and a newly thoughtful expression sliding over her features. “Y’know, you’re not exactly the type I’d imagine taking that place.”

“No?” He wonders if he should be offended. He probably shouldn’t, probably has nothing to get offended about; Cathy said he and Merle looked like they were about to rob a liquor store and she was perfectly correct. He knew the instant he walked into the fucking house that neither he nor Merle belonged there. On the sidewalk, even.

Except for how he was sure he belonged precisely nowhere else.
“Well, I mean… You saw it. You didn’t actually meet them.”

“No. They were gone.”

“Yeah. Well.” One corner of her mouth creeps further upward and takes on the slightest sardonic edge. “You saw the art.”

He’s not totally clear on how to interpret the emphasis on the last word. Once again he resorts to a single nod.

“The guy’s the artist. The girl’s a poet. It’s…” She laughs again, still just a breath, and shakes her head. “Could be out of a goddamn story. Anyway. You and your brother… You’d be a change.”

He rolls a shoulder. “Kinda lookin’ for a change.”

“That would explain some things, I guess.”

“Where’s Cathy goin’?” The question surprises him—he’s not even sure why he wants to know—but he does, and anyway it might amount to safely general conversation. “Y’know. Just ‘cause she didn’t say. Kinda wonderin’.”

“Cruise. She’s been planning it for a while. The people upstairs actually never signed a real lease so they never agreed to give her specific notice way back when they moved in. Them moving out was sort of a surprise and she’s been scrambling. Truth is… She wouldn’t say so, but you both kind of saved her. She hasn’t had many people come look at the place.”

This surprises him also. “How come? ’s nice.”

“You know, I don’t know. It’s strange.” Carol shrugs and glances down at her basket—milk, eggs, tomatoes, utterly nondescript. “Anyway, I should, uh… I have to get stuff and get back quick, she needs things for dinner.” Her smile is smaller now, a touch uncertain, and he can tell he’s being… not dismissed.

He’s being gently asked to leave her alone now. And it’s the gentleness that gets to him.

She’s not very much like Annette. But something about her reminds him of Annette all the same. Something about how she makes him feel, maybe.

He nods. “Alright. See you… Next week, I guess.”

She gives him a response-nod—a farewell-nod, also—and a final tiny smile before she turns and heads down the aisle.

He watches her go for a few seconds. Carol.

Cathy is odd. Cathy is definitely odd. Carol looks bland by comparison. Utterly as nondescript as the contents of her shopping basket.

Except she’s not. There’s something about her—something he can’t identify though he feels close to it—that he thinks might set her apart from the world even more than Cathy.

He’ll be getting to know her, probably. Maybe not well, but they’ll be… They’ll be neighbors, he supposes. Actual neighbors.

He shakes his head. No part of this isn’t weird.
It would be weird if it was normal.

~

Thursday is brighter, warmer. Clear. He’s feeling good—better than he has all week. Work goes fast and well and he enjoys it in a way he hasn’t in a while. It’s not merely a way to pass the time and make what he supposes—and what startles him a bit when it occurs to him—is a living. He’s making use of his body and his hands—good use, and he’s taking pleasure in that.

He knows what it is to take pleasure in that kind of thing when he’s tracking, hunting, when he’s fully present inside himself. With Beth he’s learned to take pleasure in it in all kinds of other ways, and he has the distinct impression that there are places they haven’t yet gone to, territory they haven’t yet explored. But there’s a simplicity in this that’s new as well.

He’s working on a farm, is the thing. Maybe. It came to him not that long ago and only in a dim sense, but it’s gotten brighter, sharper, more completely realized. He’s working on a farm, his hands deep and greasy in machines but also surrounded by life and the making of life. He’s not working in some dusty stockroom or handling bags of fertilizer that smell more of chemicals than anything else. He’s helping bring in a harvest. He’s helping care for animals. After the last of the mid-autumn storms blow through he’ll work the treeline around the fields and clear away fallen timber.

Halfway through the day he stops in the wide expanse of packed earth in front of the barn, in the sun, palms sweat off his forehead and just… breathes.

_Tell me what you see._

Dirt. Faint glittering of mica flecks. Little clouds of it stirred by the breeze. Grass, drying, and further off some of it still green. The shadow of the trees, the trees themselves, scatters of light beneath. Fields in the distance, all gold. The house, large and graceful. The sky, blue as a jay’s wing with a band of white cloud.

_Close your eyes. What d’you hear?_

Lowing of the cows. The quiet nickers of the horses, and further away the mutters of the chickens. The leaves and their whispered secrets and the grass whispering back. Piping trills of juncos and the longer, lower calls of sparrows. Back at the house, Annette calling to Shawn. Out on the road, the breathy hum of a passing car.

_What about what you smell?_

That dry, grainy smell of dust. Sharper scent of crushed grass. Sweet hay. Engine grease and gasoline. The strong, blunt smell of fresh manure, which he’s never found unpleasant. The lingering bite of the last cigarette he smoked.

_What do you feel?_

Like he could have this. Like he really could. Like this is something he could have. Like he could give it to himself. Accept it like a gift.

Like he could open his arms and take the road and fly.

~

Something breaks that night.
They get stupid. Or maybe it’s not stupid. Maybe it’s teenage daring, both of them. Both of theirs.
All those years he was cruel enough to point out dissolve into the haze-halo around the waning half-
moon and it’s only them, meeting by the ruined barn in the dark half an hour after he was supposed
to be gone, him in the shadows and her coming across the field to meet him, bathed in the moonlight.
Soaked in it. It rains down on her the color of thick cream and it streams from her hair, trickles down
over her skin.

He plucks the cigarette from between his lips and breathes smoke like a dragon in a cave. She’s a
maiden; he’s waiting to devour her.

Except that’s not how this goes, because he knows those old stories and dragons always lusted after
the maiden’s purity, and she’s the purest being he’s ever known but there’s nothing pure about her.
Her hands are already working at his belt the second she shoves herself into him, and he does what
he’s thought about, what he told her he would do, and he practically flings her against the ruined
barn wall and kisses her until she can’t breathe, kisses her like fucking her, both hands forcing their
way up her shirt and his fingers toying with her nipples through the thin fabric of her bra. This is
everything, everything he wanted to do, everything for which he’s been aching for fucking days, and
he scrapes his teeth down her jaw as she hooks a leg around the back of his, gets his fly open, gets
her wicked little fingers inside and tugs him harder against her with a grip around the base of his
cock.

Beth. He moans it against her neck, half laughing, her hands raking into his hair, and it’s all chaos,
moving, thrusting against her fist and her belly and they’re both still dressed.

This is so fucking wonderful, her hand on him, his hands tight on her breasts, mouth open and hot on
her throat as she arches and whimpers his name. It’s wonderful, but there’s another side to this, and
beneath the roaring fury of want in his head he’s aware of it. They could have taken their time once.
He could have laid her down, undressed her slowly, kissed every inch of skin as he bared it; he could
have let her undress him, could have shuddered beneath her as she remapped him with her fingers
and lips. They could have found their way into each other, flowing lazily through deltas like twin
rivers rejoining a sea. It could have all been slow, slow and so sweet.

She’s bathed in the moonlight—even now in the shadows with him, somehow she is. The light finds
her, falls all around her. But once they could have bathed in each other. Washed each other clean.

Now she’s kicking her boots away and he’s dragging her jeans and panties down her hips and she’s
almost clawing her way out of them, trying to kiss him at the same time, teeth knocking against his.
Like she can’t bear to stop. Like they can’t waste a second. Because they can’t. Because it’s all a
risk, it’s all insane in a way it wasn’t before. Stripping her from the waist down, hands rough on her
hips, her thighs, fuck, where’s the condom, he almost tears it getting it on and she’s hissing Daryl,
c’mon, oh God, I need you, I need you so bad, please, and he takes her and lifts her, her legs
wrapping around his waist and her hands groping at him, nails digging into his arms, and he has to
bite down on his lip to keep from crying out when he buries himself in her.

She does cry out. He’s aware enough to take it into himself even as he starts to move, thrusting into
her with a kind of frantic need he hasn’t felt with her before. She sounds like something has cracked
open in her, relieved and exulting in it but also something painful, and it’s still there in her sharp
gasps as he curves his palms under her ass and fucks her into the wall.

It’s because it’s good, that he wants this and he wants it so hard and so much. Things are good,
things are getting better, he can have this, he can, and oh God, oh my God, oh, he wants it and he
wants her and it’s like sucking in air, her tongue and his teeth and her cunt on fire around him.

He wants it because it’s good. It’s so good. It’s so good.
Beth, oh fuck, oh my God, oh Beth, Beth, girl, FUCK. Making her name a curse and coming like a snarling dog, rutting in her, her teeth bared against his throat and she’s mouthing things he can’t make out as he convulses against her. And he doesn’t stop, fucks her even harder and she grinds back to meet him, yanks at his hair and jerks her head up and opens her mouth in a silent scream to the waning moon.

Half collapsed against each other. Panting. Struggling to stay upright. She’s heavy and he’s weak and he has to release her, sliding out of her, her legs slipping down his hips and catching herself. But she doesn’t let go; she holds on, arms around his neck, drops a hand between them and peels the condom off him. Tosses it into the weeds and the rotting boards and shadows of fallen stone; no one will find it.

And this place isn’t a sanctuary.

He curls his arms around her and clings to her, and Christ, he wishes they had taken their time. It was so good, but. But he wishes they had.

It’s getting cold and she’s a little flame in his arms but now she’s shivering. He cups the back of her head, lips against her temple. I love you, Beth.

I love you so much.

“I don’t wanna go,” she whispers as she pulls her panties on, tugs her jeans back up. “Daryl…” She laughs, pushing her hair out of her face, and he locates her boots. “God, I wish we could stay.”

He frames her burning face with his hands and tilts it up and kisses her. Kisses her slow—takes the time. A torn fragment of it. Stolen.

He’ll have a place. He’ll make a place. A place for them, just them, and they’ll get all that time back. The world won’t make a bed for them now but he will, deep and warm and soft, worthy of her, and he’ll lay her down in it and they’ll have time.

They’ll have all the time in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Style" by Taylor Swift.
you could hide beside me maybe for a while

He and Merle don’t seem to have A Place. But they do seem to have A Type of Place, and they’re there now. Open ground, not too close to the road but within sight of it, meadow full of scrubby grass, the hoots of owls in patches of woods in the distance. They have the tailgate down again, sitting there and drinking and getting gently, slowly wasted, and Daryl is staring up at that hazy half-moon and thinking about Beth’s legs tight around his waist, fucking her so hard his thighs still ache, how it felt like such a risk but everything feels like a risk now—which is kind of fucked up, because if anything they’re doing less than they used to do. Seeing less of each other. Halfway back to town she called him, said she wanted to sneak out to see him tomorrow night—it’s Friday and it’ll be easier to come up with an excuse to be gone—and he told her not to.

Could be he’s simply seeing the genuine intensity of the risks they were always taking before. Could be it’s fucking incredible that they haven’t been caught already.

They aren’t going to be.

But he’s very, very distantly aware that aside from DO NOT GET FUCKING CAUGHT, he has no endgame.

His endgame is to not lose her. That seems, for the moment, like enough.

He tips back the bottle of whiskey, wipes his mouth on his sleeve, hands it over to Merle. Merle is sitting beside him and letting a cigarette burn down to his fingers. He seems distracted. Contemplative. This entire week, he’d seemed more and more like that—unlike Daryl has really ever seen him. Merle isn’t stupid, he knows that—far from it—but Merle allows himself to become stupid a lot of the time, and thinking just isn’t exactly Merle’s Thing. Never has been. Merle is a creature of impulse, of instinct, and on balance it hasn’t served him poorly.

Until recently.

But now he doesn’t seem that way, and he takes a big swallow and exhales hard, lowers the bottle between his knees and gazes out into the night. His eyes aren’t entirely focused, and Daryl doesn’t think it’s just the whiskey.

And Merle still isn’t high. He can tell.

He follows the line of Merle’s attention. They aren’t where they were the last time they did this, but on the ridge far in the distance he can see the radio tower, the tiny red light blinking on and off and on again. Almost hypnotic.

No, it is hypnotic. He sits there and looks at it and he feels himself beginning to drift, the rest of the world bleeding away at the edges.

Guy said he’d pay up by Friday. Daryl knows people like that; he says by Friday, no way he means before Friday. Tomorrow they get the money. Or they’ll have to break some heads. But he believes it won’t come to that. He has no way of knowing—he’s not any kind of prophet, he’s no oracle, he doesn’t have the powers of a certain little goddess—but he does have a feeling. A strong one. Could be wishful thinking, but he doesn’t think so.

They’ll get what they need.

And they’ll get that apartment. And it might be rough going for a while, at least until they settle in,
pick some stuff up, but they will. He’s going to make that place for her. No more fucking in ruins, in
the truck, in the cold. Unless they want to.

To be perfectly honest, he doesn’t see that losing all of its charm.

He reaches over and takes the bottle. “You meetin’ up with him tomorrow?”

Merle grunts, blinks at him. He appears… Not startled. But definitely like he’s been pulled out of
something, like he has to come back from somewhere in his head, and again Daryl doubts it’s merely
the whiskey. “Who?”

“The guy.” Daryl frowns slightly. Not worried, but Merle needs to be on top of this, and so close to
zero-hour… “Guy owes you money. You remember? The money?” He knocks his knee against
Merle’s and the whiskey burns pleasantly in his throat. “We kinda need that, bro. Kinda important.”

“Yeah, Jesus. I’m on top of it.” Merle sounds annoyed, but only mildly. Mostly he still sounds
thoughtful. There’s a distant quality lingering in his voice, and he swipes a hand down his face.
“Gonna see him at some honky-tonk, he’ll bring it in cash. Like we said.”

Like we said. And again, Daryl can’t detect a lie. He tries: he picks the tone apart, the cadence, the
choice of words, but the only odd thing he can see or hear is simply how quiet Merle is. The total
lack of any deeper irritation, of any real belligerence.

Merle is just… talking.

“When? Later?” More whiskey, more pleasant burn. The moon is floating in the sky, the clouds
around it spinning slightly. “I’m gonna come with you.”

“Nah. I got it.”

Daryl shoots him another glance, questioning—questioning in a way he can’t recall with Merle.
Merle is usually willing if not eager to drag him along wherever, and part of Daryl has always been
aware that this is in part a sense of fraternal obligation and in part practicality but also in part—even
lately, even now—that Merle really does like when he’s there. Merle likes having him around. That
like has found expression in some pretty unfortunate fucking ways, but it’s present.

He blinks. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” Merle nods decisively. “Middle of the day. You get your ass to work. I got it.”

Yeah, but what if “What if he decides to be an asshole about it?”

“Man, he’s like… four-foot-ten and one-forty or some shit. I’m tellin’ you, brother, I got it.”

Daryl shrugs. It doesn’t feel like something he’ll get much out of by pursuing. Merle has, in the past,
overestimated his ability to handle certain situations—usually situations where muscle has been
required—but he’s not drunk and he’s not high and Daryl suspects with unusual intensity that Merle
wasn’t drunk or high when he set this up, either. Or not very much of both.

“Alright.”

He sits for another few seconds, then sets the bottle down between them and allows himself to droop
backward and down into the truckbed, lying there with his eyes open and drifting across the sky. The
haze that gives the moon its partial halo is also obscuring some of the stars, but the brighter ones
pierce through it like the heads of pins through gauze, and his gaze slides over each one. Autumn
constellations, but his mind is turning toward the stars of winter. Canis Major, Gemini, Orion—dogs, 
twins, hunters. Before he was cured of his affection for books he learned a lot of these names, and 
he’s glad in a vague kind of way that he hung onto them. They’re useful things to know, in the way 
he regards anything useful that allows him to be out in the world and know what he’s looking at.

When you sleep under the stars it’s a good idea to know their names. Know your neighbors. Know 
them by sight so you can raise a hand and say hello.

He closes his eyes and imagines Beth Greene’s mouth on his neck, kissing his chest, each bump of 
his ribs. Just lying on top of him, head on his shoulder and the smell of her hair occupying his full 
attention. Next week he’ll make their bed, or the week after, when he can, when he has the money to 
do it right, and it’ll make the agony of every second of not touching her worth even more than it 
already is.

He’ll make a bed for them, and if they can’t share a whole night in it, they’ll take what they can 
have, and it’ll be enough.

His brain is doing some weird things.

“We was never supposed to have this.”

Daryl lifts his head, squinting the starlight out of his eyes. Merle is still sitting, back to him, but his 
head is tilted up as well, and Daryl knows without having to see his face that Merle is also staring up 
at the stars.

“What d’you mean?”

Except he knows. He’s been thinking it for weeks.

“This. Place. Job. C’mon, man. I told you, it ain’t us.”

“Yeah, and…” Daryl struggles to focus, stomach clenching. He didn’t want to have this fight again. 
Doesn’t want to. Thought it was done. Thought it was decided, or at the very least that Merle was 
willing to let it go, willing to try. “Bro, I asked if it could be. Maybe. Like… We could make it 
work.”

“Ain’t sayin’ we can’t.” And Merle isn’t fighting. Not at all. This isn’t an argument. Daryl isn’t sure 
what it is. Before he can formulate any kind of question about that, any query that would shed any 
light on this, Merle is talking again. “Just sayin’ it ain’t us. Not now. I figured… Look, man, we been 
through a lotta shit. Guys like us don’t…”

Daryl is quiet now, pushed up on his elbows, watching the dark nothing-space of Merle’s back and 
the few lines and angles he can see of his face. Hard lines, hard angles. His brother got old. He 
knows this, has known it for a long time, but sometimes he sees it this way and it locks his throat up 
and stings in his eyes like smoke. His brother got old and for such a long time he’s looked at Merle 
and seen himself.

And what he never wanted to admit was that when he looked at Merle like that, saw himself—given 
enough time…

In those visions he was always alone.

“We don’t what?”

“We don’t win,” Merle says softly. “We don’t get to do that, little brother. We fight for everythin’ we
get, we fight like fuckin’ junkyard dogs, but in the end we’re just gonna get kicked back into the shit. Junkyard dogs stay in the junkyard. Ain’t no one gonna take ‘em home, give ‘em kibble. Give ‘em a bed. Ain’t no one wants a junkyard dog near their kids.”

The clench in Daryl’s gut has long since loosened, but it’s slid into a low and faintly sickening roll. He doesn’t like this. He doesn’t like the way Merle is talking. Because Merle sounds sad, and sad is something Daryl has no fucking idea what to do with.

His big brother doesn’t get sad. His big brother gets angry, gets mean, gets cruel and spiteful, gets stupid and cocky and boorish and generally horrible. But not sad. Never sad.

“We ain’t dogs, man.”

“You don’t think?” Merle glances back, and the half of his face turned toward Daryl is lost in shadow. “You think we been livin’ like people, last two years? You think this is how people live?”

“I think…” God, what the fuck? What’s happening? Daryl shakes his head, pushes himself up, leans over, but Merle’s face is turned away from him now. “Man, we been doin’ our best. We been okay.”

He can just see the edge of Merle’s mouth twist. “You always was a shitty liar, brother.”

“Well, we’re…” He’s fumbling. Groping for something. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be, with Merle. This isn’t how things are supposed to go, this deep aching sadness and this deeper and growing desire to reach out, to do something, anything, to make it stop.

This isn’t how it was supposed to be, because before Merle left, before things went to hell and were still merely bad, there was a little boy curled in the corner of his room with a black eye and snot and tears all over his face, and a bigger boy who didn’t make fun of him or call him a pussy or a faggot but merely sat down next to him, reached for him and hugged him and didn’t say anything at all.

And this bigger boy couldn’t protect him, no matter how hard he tried. No matter how hard the little boy wanted him to. They couldn’t protect each other.

But he dared to hope that his big brother might be there beside him like that again, when things got so bad and there wasn’t anyone else. And he dared to hope they might be saved.

He was never supposed to be the one reaching out. He was never supposed to be the one holding. He was never supposed to be the one who had to be strong.

“We’re alright.” And it’s easy to say, because he believes it. They are. “We’re… We’re tryin’. It’s gonna be alright. We got it. You said.”

You said it would be all right.

Maybe he did. Once, in the dark, in that corner. Maybe he said it would be.

Persisting: “It’s gettin’ better.” It’s hesitant, because he’s not completely sure what will happen, and Merle doesn’t like being touched any more than he does—or did—but he lays a hand on his brother’s shoulder and Merle doesn’t flinch. Just looks at him, finally, half moonlit and half shadow, in the half light of the half moon, old crags and sharpness, twisted mouth, and a nose that’s still lopsided, not healing well.

Eyes shining.

Daryl doesn’t actually remember ever seeing his big brother cry.
Merle looks at him for a long moment. His face is unreadable. Then he ducks his head, nods, and Daryl really does see himself there, mirror fucking image, and it’s not…

Maybe it’s not so bad.

“Yeah, man,” Merle whispers. “Yeah, it is.”

He doesn’t say anything else. Not then. He falls silent and Daryl doesn’t break that silence—doesn’t feel like he can. He sits there, hand on Merle’s shoulder, and after a while he lowers it and lays it down in his lap, facing up, looking at it. The deep lines, roughly calloused fingers, thick and powerful. A scar on the heel of his palm where he cut it on a broken bottle. An almost imperceptible crookedness in his little finger where his father broke it while twisting his hand.

They’ve worked so hard to get to this point—even Merle, he thinks, after his fashion. For Merle, getting to the point where he can try at all might be a victory. And they’re here, together, and of course it was always going to hurt. What matters is that they’re here.

And things are getting better.

He’s fallen partway back into a reverie when Merle speaks again, and it’s like a fist to his breastbone. The tone, low and sad, but also the words themselves.

“You really do love her. Don’t you?”

He has no idea how to answer that. Not out of a lack of an answer—of course he knows—but because once again the full force and breadth and depth of that answer is flinging itself howling against the top of his throat and admitting the passage of nothing that could become any useful assemblage of words. Love… He says it to her, over and over aloud and also in his head, desperately meaning it, so desperately needing her to understand, but never feeling like it’s enough. And also—and he doesn’t like this at all, so badly wishes he could shed it—a part of him remains entangled in the habit of trying to think of and say what Merle wants to hear. And right now he has no idea what that is.

But he’s done with that shit. He’s done with it. It’s about the truth now. It has to be. Or as close to the truth as he can get.

Still looking down at his hand, he murmurs, “Yeah, bro. I really do.”

“Fuck,” Merle breathes, swipes a hand over his short, bristling mat of hair, and tilts his head back once more. Then, “Why?”

Another question he has no idea how to answer, never expected to be asked. Why anyone would love her is so evident to him, so obvious, in no words he could employ to articulate it but powerful as waves slamming into the shore of his brain. He has no idea why the whole world isn’t hopelessly in love with Beth Greene. How anyone could look at her and not happily lie down in front of a train for her. It’s frankly inconceivable.

But Merle asked. And he should try.

“I dunno.” He shifts, hands moving over each other, almost dry-washing. Not exactly agitated, but expressive of effort. Because he’s trying. “I mean… Started just feelin’ good bein’ around her. She’s smart. She’s funny. She’s got this way of lookin’ at things… Like everythin’s new. Everythin’ is worth somethin’.

Merle lowers his head, huffs a laugh and reaches for the bottle. “The fuck’s that got to do with bein’
He didn’t expect this to go well, at least not in the beginning. At least it’s not a surprise. In fact, he feels like he’s doing better than he might have done. “I dunno,” he says again. “I just wanted to be around it. Around her. She was… She was sweet to me, didn’t have no reason to be. Got more and more like that. And she’s beautiful, and…” He trails off, shrugging. That’s all he has. He doesn’t know how to say the rest—how they went into the water, how she touched him, let him touch her, what she told him, how she makes him want to be so present and alive. How she’s making it possible for him to look around at the world and fall into awed love with it as well.

Because that last is true. And he didn’t understand it until now. He feels that.

He’s in awe. Of her. Of the simple, brilliant fact of his own existence.

*Your one wild and precious life.*

“You think she loves you?”

Another fist to the chest, harder, deeper. Punching through and taking hold of his heart. If it hurts it’s not a bad pain. Thinking about all the times he’s truly believed. How she whispers that she does, kisses it into his mouth and skin, and it feels like truth so bright and burning that it marks him permanently. Tattoos him with invisible ink.

*Mine.*

“She says so.” He takes a breath. *The truth.* “Yeah. I do. She does.”

Merle merely looks at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nods, and Daryl sees nothing dismissive in him, in his expression or the set of his mouth or his eyes. Nothing scornful. Not even any real disbelief.

“Still ain’t goin’ nowhere good.” He sighs and looks out at the night, at the minuscule winking red star of the radio tower. Or Daryl is reasonably sure he’s focusing on that. He can feel it, or feel something, like a tickling hair at the edge of his temple.


His brother.

“Ain’t goin’ nowhere good,” Merle repeats, lowers his head, and Daryl can make out a miniscule smile twisting at his mouth—strange. Not like any smile he’s ever seen Merle wear. “But alright, little brother.” His hand now, lifted and settling against Daryl’s back, just beneath the nape of his neck. “Alright, man. You love her. You’re outta your fuckin’ mind, but you do that.”

Everything in him wavers. Trembles. Threatens to break. He can’t do this, he can’t let himself crumble, can’t cry in front of Merle like this no matter what was just happening, can’t let the words flood out. He can’t say what he really wants to say, which is *thank you,* because he knows what that’ll probably earn him, and he doesn’t know if he can take even a gentle version of that right now. But this is the last piece of what he wanted, hoped for, *needed*—his brother, trying, willing, with him and looking ahead and looking at a straight road with signs and destinations instead of an endless looping spiral.

So he leans into Merle’s hand, just a bit, and there was this little boy who dared to hope he and his brother might be saved, and maybe it took almost twenty-five years but it happened.
They happened. Are happening. The good days.

Not again. But for the first time.
did you lose yourself somewhere out there

Merle isn’t there when Daryl wakes up.

Not that weird. Daryl barely remembers falling asleep last night, and it’s entirely possible that Merle went back out again and just hasn’t come home yet. Or it’s possible that he went out early; he didn’t specify an exact time at which he’s supposed to meet up with this mysterious guy, and time is usually kind of a fuzzy business with Merle anyway. Conventional temporal measurements often don’t apply in his world.

So whatever.

It’s a clear day to start, but as morning goes on clouds begin to roll in—low, though they don’t look like the kinds of clouds that bring rain. But they do bring more wind—sharp, sudden gusts of it—and birds have to flap harder and they appear generally irritated. Leaves shower from the trees—falling firesparks, glowing with color—and Daryl is halfway between the barn and the toolshed closer to the house when a particularly strong gust slams into him from the side and succeeds in staggering him a bit. It howls and wails through the barn and the horses stamp and murmur, nervous.

Leaning against the side of the shed, temporarily sheltered from the wind, he shoots a text at Merle and asks him what’s up, any news, did he meet the guy yet. No response after a few minutes of waiting, which isn’t in itself alarming. Merle is also incredibly bad about responding to texts, voicemail, picking up the goddamn phone at all. Frequently he lets the battery run down and doesn’t put it on the charger for a day or so. Daryl has become grudgingly accustomed to it.

If there’s nothing in a couple of hours he’ll try again.

Midday, eating lunch in the kitchen, Hershel sits down opposite him and fixes him with a speculative eye, and before he opens his mouth Daryl has a pretty good idea of what this is about. Beth suggested the possibility, Hershel himself appeared to be thinking through it, and Daryl swallows the mouthful of leftover mashed potatoes he’s working on and gives the man his full attention.

His stomach isn’t jumping around. Not much. A little, maybe.

Staying here. Staying with her. Through the winter.

And yeah. Yeah, that’s exactly what it’s about. Hershel has been thinking—about how it’s been helpful having Daryl around in general, about how Daryl is a good worker, about how Hershel isn’t getting any younger and the downside of the farm doing well is that there’s a lot to do, and how when Maggie comes home for Christmas she’ll be staying after, possibly for a while, but it might still be wise to have an extra pair of hands… And if Daryl’s amenable, if he has nowhere else to be, Hershel would be happy to keep him on.

Hershel would be happy to keep him on indefinitely.

Daryl manages to remain calm. Somehow. He says yeah. Yeah, sure. That would be fine.

He would be happy too.

~

By mid-afternoon there’s still nothing from Merle.
Daryl isn’t worried. Not about Merle, anyway. But that he hasn’t heard *anything* … And this is sort of important. This sort of needs to work out. He texts again, waits, calls. It goes immediately to voicemail. He leaves a message—short, not quite terse. It’s irritating, though. Merle knows how much this means. Merle knows how much this means to *him*, and after the conversation the night before, Daryl was prepared to believe that counted for something. That Merle cares, actually *cares*, and even if he remains skeptical about the whole thing—and he clearly does—he wants to try to make it work.

But Merle is Merle. And Merle isn’t going to magically stop being Merle overnight by sheer force of will. Daryl doubts Merle could stop being Merle even if he wanted to do so with every fiber of his being.

So okay, maybe he is worried. Maybe he’s worried a little bit.

He goes back to work and tries not to think about it.

That goes about as well as it usually does.

~

He still hasn’t heard anything by the time Beth comes home. She gives him what’s becoming her customary tiny smile on her way up to the house, and he returns it, but he can tell by the shift in her expression—curious, faintly concerned—that he didn’t return it convincingly.

It’s his ritual to count down the last half hour or so before she comes home, counts it minute by minute and becomes internally more and more antsy—in a pleasant way—like a dog left alone and cooped up inside all day but knowing that the Return of the People is imminent. He counts it down and then when he finally sees her everything in him feels like it’s leaping over a cliff, and then a whole series of cliffs, until she vanishes through the front door. It’s horrible and wonderful, so it’s basically emblematic of every other aspect of this glorious insanity.

But today he forgot. Today seeing her was a surprise. He hadn’t realized time was passing that quickly. He hadn’t realized what time it was at all.

Later at dinner he’s even more distracted. Through grace, through passing the peas, through the process of eating itself—which is something, given that as far as he’s concerned Annette’s dinners have never been anything short of amazing in all his weeks of eating them. He’s probably only working himself up for no good reason. He knows this. He’s invested a lot in this, got all wrapped up in it, and he’s probably primed to freak out about something that seems big but ends up being small. Nothing. A misunderstanding. A snag somewhere that later he’ll feel like an idiot over. A perfectly simple explanation. He could—likely will, in fact—get home and Merle will be waiting there with the money, half drunk, phone dead, and it’ll turn out he just forgot to stay in touch, which would be very, *very* Merle of him.

He needs to calm the fuck down is what he needs to do.

Under the table, Beth’s fingers brush his and he almost jumps. Almost yelps.

He clenches his hand into a fist so hard his nails dig painfully into his palms. Later there are little dark red crescent moons imprinted into the skin, all in a neat row.

~

He gets home—managed to keep the gas pedal off the floor the whole way—and Merle isn’t there.
He flicks the light on and stands for a minute, keys in his hand and the door open behind him, staring at the room as though, if he stares long enough and hard enough, Merle might spontaneously appear. Which doesn’t happen. It’s the same old dim shitty room, same old shitty rug and shitty furniture barely worthy of the name, and no sign of Merle’s presence since Daryl left for work that morning. Daryl has a good memory—not eidetic but quite good—and nothing has been moved or shifted out of place or added or subtracted. The room is exactly as he left it.

Well. Almost. There’s a scatter of crumpled paper towels across the couch, a couple on the floor, and he immediately sees why: he sleeps with the window open at least a crack whenever possible and this morning he never closed it before he left.

The wind.

Just as he thinks it, the thin finger of a gust slips in through the few inches he left and stirs the paper towels, and also the ancient newspaper tossed over one arm.

Other than that? Nothing whatsoever.

Daryl’s mouth tightens, his stomach tightens, and everything else tightens as he crosses the room and shuts the window with a sharper downward shove than necessary, even though it often sticks. It rattles in its frame.

He sits down on the couch, does nothing for a moment, then pulls out his phone and is about to call yet again when it buzzes Beth’s number.

For a second or two he actually considers not picking up. Then he does.

“Yeah.”

“Hey.” She sounds cheerful, mostly her usual self, though unusually there’s music in the background and voices and he can gather without anything having to be explained that she’s at a party, or at least something along those lines. “Just wanted to. Y’know. Say hi.”

He leans back and closes his eyes. Normally her voice would be soothing, whatever the context in which it comes to him. Normally everything would ease as soon as it drifted into his ear. That’s not happening now, and it’s making him feel an odd and very unwelcome species of guilt.

“Hi.” He pauses, presses a hand against his forehead. “Where are you?”

“Birthday party. Kid from school. I don’t even really know him, he’s just in my history class and everyone’s showing up.”

A party. Not the first one she’s been to since that first night in the rain, but though it doesn’t ease very much, it pulls part of him back there, away from the thing that’s chewing on him and chewing harder and harder every hour. Pulls him back to her.

Where he belongs.

“You got a ride?” He’s smiling a little, sure she’ll hear it in his voice, and when she answers he can hear the same in hers.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine.” She pauses. Swell of noise and laughter. He recognizes the music now; it’s Taylor Swift again.

*he can’t keep his wild eyes on the road*
“I think… Sometimes I think about what if you came with me to one of these. What people would say.”

“Be fuckin’ crazy, girl.”

“I know. But I still like thinkin’ about it. They all think I’ve sworn off boyfriends after Jimmy. If they knew…”

If. They both have a secret, exciting because it’s secret and secret because it’s exciting. He understands why she enjoys the fantasy. He might even enjoy it himself, kind of, if he could focus properly on it.

“Are you alright?”

“I…” Not sure how to answer that. Mostly, he realizes, it’s because talking about his fears here will make those fears seem more real. Or he imagines that’s what will happen. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You just seemed real distracted earlier. You seem…” She sighs, and she’s so fucking perceptive, and he will never ever ever be able to lie to her. “You’re not fine. C’mon. What’s goin’ on?”

He presses his fingers and thumb against his eyes and watches the swelling blotches of increasingly violent color. “Ain’t heard from my brother all fuckin’ day.”

“Oh.” She pauses again. “Is that bad?”

It’s a fair question. He’s told her enough about Merle for her to have a general idea of what Merle’s *modus operandi* tends to be. “Today, yeah, it is. He was supposed to pick up… We needed some extra cash for the place. He was supposed to get it from a guy.” Hadn’t wanted to tell her, hadn’t wanted to worry her with complications, but now it doesn’t seem to matter.

“You know who? Where?”

“No.” He takes a breath. This isn’t helping anymore. “I don’t know nothin’.”

Simple fact, cold all down his throat and in his belly like he’s swallowed an ice cube.

*He didn’t tell me anything.*

“Allright.” Her voice is tense—not a lot, but enough for him to hear, and he feels like shit. She was having a good time, she wasn’t worried about him or about anything or about fucking Merle, and he should have brushed her off and not told her about it when he doesn’t even know there’s really anything to tell her. “Can I do anythin’?”

“No. No, ‘s probably nothin’. He’ll turn up.” He takes a breath. “I’m gonna go. You get back to everyone.”

“Allright,” she says again, and then very soft, so soft he almost can’t hear, “Love you.”

“Love you too.” He opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling. The blotches are still there, still swimming, melting into mutant South America. “Call me if you need somethin’.”

*Anything.*

She’s gone. He sits for another few minutes, motionless and silent, the phone still in his hand. Then he dials. Doesn’t bother with voicemail. Dials again. Texts. Lays down the phone.
He flips on the TV.

Half an hour later he flips it off, gets up, walks out the door and down the rickety stairs, gets in the truck, and drives.

~

He starts close in. Works his way out. He’s been to almost all of these places, has helped to find more than a couple—some ten, fifteen miles out, one of them even more. Every shitty little biker bar, roadhouse, honkytonk, places masquerading as eateries, and two strip clubs that don’t even deserve to bear the name, they’re so small and filthy and full of dead-eyed people. He knows them. He remembers them. He can’t know for sure if one of them is where it was set to go down, but he’d bet the money they were supposed to get that it was.

Nearest one—biker bar, actually not as terrible as it could be, decor that might once have been nice, pool tables that don’t look a million years old. ZZ Top on the jukebox, whole place packed with a gang coming through. Younger than he’s used to seeing. Rough crowd. A few white supremacist tattoos visible on hands and arms and necks.

No sign of Merle anywhere. No sign of anyone who matches the extremely rough description he gave. But Daryl would bet the same amount of money that Merle was bullshitting him, at least in part. He had known that at the time.

Maybe should have paid a bit more attention to that knowledge.

He shoulders his way to the bar—fast, earns himself some dirty looks, but when people see him they back off with glowers and mutters. He forgets that he’s imposing until it becomes a thing and he’s barely conscious of it now.

The woman behind the bar—big, well-muscled, as tattooed as anyone in the place sans the swastikas and lightning bolts and SS symbols—leans across and listens as he yells to be heard over the music. Shakes her head. Yells back.

“IN HERE COUPLE’A NIGHTS AGO. HAVEN’T SEEN HIM SINCE.”

Her voice is like thunder. It’s not all about her volume.

He shoulders his way back out again, past an equally raucous crowd leaning on their bikes in the parking lot, chugging beers. One of them staggers to the wall, leans over, vomits copiously. Daryl observes this scene and then turns away, disgust roiling in his gut.

He’s not who—or what—he used to be.

There’s no going back.

Next place: similar. Louder. Bartender also muscular, also many tattoos, black guy with a disarming friendly smile. Daryl vaguely knows him and knows that he’s as pleasant as the smile would indicate, and Daryl also knows for a fact that he can put a troublemaker on the ground so hard and so fast that afterward they won’t even remember what they did to get them there.

Same answer. No Merle, all day.

Same in the place after that. After that. After that, Daryl sits sideways in the driver’s seat, door open and his boots on the gravel, staring down. At his hands. At the weird neon shadows thrown by the signs in the window.
Looking at this from a purely objective standpoint, doing some basic math, he still doesn’t genuinely have any reason—yet—to be completely freaking out.

He is.

He calls again and gets voicemail. He should just stop doing that. Definition of insanity and everything.

Well, he’s already kind of losing his mind over it anyway.

Next place. He’s getting further and further afield, fewer and fewer lights, black seas of trees and fields. Clouds half obscure the moon. Time becomes part of that black flowing sea and it slips through his fingers. Then, suddenly, it’s three in the morning and it’s over an hour’s drive to town and he’s almost asleep at the wheel. He goes back. He doesn’t want to. Tomorrow. He’ll look more tomorrow.

Unless he gets back and Merle is already there, and then how fucking stupid will he feel? Even more than before. Idiot drove around all night to find a guy passed out on the couch, in bed, whatever. Wherever. He panics over nothing. What the fuck is his problem?

He wants panicking over nothing to be his problem.

He gets home, passes out in his clothes. In the early afternoon he wakes up to a couple of texts and a voicemail from Beth. Nothing from Merle. He doesn’t want Beth to worry, knows she would; he responds with a text of his own, that he’s taking care of some things, everything is fine, he’ll call her later.

A lot of the places he’d been looking and planning to look aren’t open yet and won’t be for another few hours. He sleeps again for a little while—no idea how he manages it—until the sun is low and the shadows in the room are long. He gets up, showers in an abstract kind of way, finds some semi-clean clothes, goes back out. The wind is still high, still pushing at the truck’s side. Rattling. He heads out of town. Slightly different direction. One of these places has to be the one.

None of them are.

It’s taking longer and longer to get from one to the other, moving in slowly widening circles. No straight lines. After dark the moon follows him, coasting across the sky—thin. Getting thinner. Yellow as old teeth, yellow like nicotine stains. He stares at it when it floats in front of him, looks for its faint glow when he can’t see it directly. It’s ever-shifting. Inconstant. He can’t navigate by it. He has no idea what he could navigate by, other than his own swelling tide of fear.

Around four in the morning he pulls into the tiny, cracked parking lot of a crumbling non-chain motel and gets an equally crumbling room with a bathroom that looks like it might have had a body dismembered in it at some point in the distant past and grimy-looking sheets he doesn’t want to touch.

Normally he wouldn’t touch them. But this isn’t normal. Not even close. Nothing is anymore. He sloughs his clothes off, moving slow, gripped by excruciating weariness, and collapses on top of the bedspread and sleeps—once again, past noon.

When he wakes up he’s curled into a ball, cold, emerging from absolutely psychedelic dreams—almost as bad as the ones from the mushrooms that time he saw the chupacabra—and with the thick curtains he has no idea what time it is.

Or what day it is. Saturday? Sunday? He feels like he’s been driving forever. He doesn’t know how
far out he is. Doesn’t know how long a drive it would be to get back. Back is a weird idea. And
lying there, staring at the discolored ceiling, he thinks about what he was facing in that first week
when he thought he would have to leave town: the endless trackless road that became an endless
trackless downward spiral, nothing good, only initially slow but increasingly rapid decline. In his
despair and in what he now recognizes as the other downward spiral that is falling in love, he had
seen that trackless road as a kind of almost-oblivion, a near-death. He would get out there with Merle
and live that life again, that life that isn’t a life at all.

Get out there and be walking dead.

Get out here.

He feels dully sick as he checks his phone. Three calls from Beth. Otherwise nothing.

He texts her back. still missing, looking, call later

It’s not going to be enough for her but oh well.

He gropes his way into his clothes and out to the truck, pulls out of the lot and back onto a trackless
road with no signs. Nothing but fields and gray sky and distant, disturbingly colorless trees. Nothing
but nothing.

When he hits the main road he swings back toward Atlanta.

~

Just after sunset. He’s exhausted. Not even from driving; he can drive for significantly long periods.
He has before. It’s not a big deal. This is bone-weariness, bursting from his marrow and pouring into
his blood—an internal vampire, sapping him of everything.

He used to think about Merle like that. A vampire. A parasite. As he climbs out of the truck and
toward the roadhouse’s door his stomach wrenches into a hard, lurching nausea and he’s not sure
whether he wants to puke or cry.

He supposes that they aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive.

The roadhouse is low and flat and brick and sizable, and instead of being out in the middle of
fucking nowhere it’s on the outskirts of a reasonably big, reasonably thriving town. As such, it’s not
as shitty as it might have been, though it’s shitty enough to fit what he and Merle—really mostly
Merle—tend to look for in a place.

They were here before. Weeks upon weeks ago. Such a fucking long shot but he’s so far from being
picky about the length of his shots.

He recognizes the bartender. She’s leaning against the wall at the side of the building, smoking a
cigarette and moodily scanning the rolling grassy horizon, the pink and white beads in her long
braids little spots of color and her deep brown skin even deeper in the dying light. The neon signs in
the windows aren’t lit. Most other places would be open by now but this place isn’t. Or doesn’t seem
to be.

Weird.

He walks over to her, trying to look non-threatening. Trying to appear exactly the opposite of how
desperate he feels. Trying to appear as if he’s not far beyond freaking out and well into the territory
of utterly terrified.
She glances up as he approaches, one arm folded across her chest. She regards him skeptically while he talks. Turns out the roadhouse is closed because their license was only just now pulled for serving underage kids. She’s fuming and in a few minutes she’ll go home and fume some more.

He asks his questions. She listens. The skeptical expression fades bit by bit from her face, replaced with something else. Something horribly like pity. She streams smoke from the corner of her mouth and shakes her head, and he’s ready for another nope, haven’t seen him, and then she speaks.

He was holding his phone in one hand, turning it over and over in his fingers. Anxious. Trying to keep from twitching. As she talks, his fingers slow. Stop. Freeze.

She finishes speaking and his fingers uncurl, suddenly nerveless. The phone drops onto the gravel. Flips open. Snaps right down the middle. The pieces tumble in opposite directions and lie still.

The screen is cracked. It flashes in the last of the sun as the sun sinks away.

Daryl simply stands there. Looks down at it. He’s puzzled by it. He doesn’t understand what he’s looking at. He doesn’t understand anything. Nothing makes sense. Nothing. Nothing has made sense all weekend. Nothing is making sense now.

Phone lying in pieces on the ground. It was useless anyway. It wasn’t getting him anywhere. Now it’s truly useless, pointless in every respect. It’s not worth any particular attention from him. It doesn’t matter.

Everything is broken.
all the dreams you never thought you'd lose got tossed along the way

Chapter Notes

No real note for this except to say that this, for me through this whole thing, is Merle and Daryl's theme. It's perfect. It's everything I feel.

And it breaks the fuck out of my heart.

They keep the glass very clean here.

For some reason that's what he keeps focusing on. That's what he keeps thinking, what he keeps thinking about. Not the chair he's sitting in, which is uncomfortable enough to qualify as a semi-effective torture device, and which he vaguely suspects might be designed that way so people don't stay long. Not the temperature, which they're keeping just barely too warm for him to see his breath. Not the decor—dirty, featureless cinderblock and nothing more, flat and soulless and vaguely hostile. Not the people around him—a range of ages and races, men and women, though no kids, and all of them sad, tired, a few of them openly angry. A few more of them—and this is worse—far more dead-eyed than sad. Not numb but indifferent.

Used to this.

And he's not thinking about the lights, those awful garish fluorescents like needles straight into his optic nerves, lights that grab him by the brain and drag him back to the ER waiting room and his hands between his knees and helplessness like chains around his ankles, Annette silent beside him, knowing that Beth was all right and that meaning everything but also knowing how close he came to losing her, how close she came to not existing anymore, how close he came to a universe without her, and knowing—so deep inside himself, like the last remaining bullet fragment from an ancient gunshot wound—that she had only been there in the first place because of him.

Was coming to see you.

Those needles are stabbing into him now, and that shard of bullet is twisting in him, cutting into him, slicing open scar tissue and organs and barely healed veins. The antithesis of sunlight—not darkness but this.

This isn’t the first time he’s been here. Not here specifically, but… Here. In this place, at this point. This sick weariness, so close to genuine hopelessness. Except before, he managed to scrape together a few pieces of hope and hold onto them. Patchwork and piecemeal. He did it. Even then, so long ago, he did it.

He looks back and he understands that he always had faith. It was anemic, stunted, scarred worse than his body. But it was there. The best efforts of the world and its darker corners couldn’t kill it.

But now here he is. And all he can think about is how they really do keep the glass here extremely clean. He can see through it clearly, no smudges or smears. No scratches. Right through to the other side, to the other half of the room, to the other chair, to the man sitting in it, to the man’s bright orange jumpsuit, to the man’s hands and hunched shoulders and face, tired and sad-eyed and fitting so well with everyone here, and isn’t that nice for him, how he belongs, except Daryl can’t work up
the energy to be angry. Can’t work up the energy to be sad. Can’t feel any of what he thinks he probably should. He’s so fucking tired, he feels like he’s been driving for days because he has, he feels like he hasn’t truly slept in days because he hasn’t, he feels like the rest of the world has crumbled through his hands and fallen into a fucking storm drain because that’s exactly what it’s done.

The glass. Maybe it’s new.

Merle looks at him for a long moment. Daryl looks back. His jaw is working slightly. He has no idea what he wants to say. He’s not even sure why he’s here. He’s not sure why he’s doing anything.

Merle sighs and picks up the phone. Puts it to his ear. Daryl stares at him for a little longer, wheels spinning, letting them spin. He feels no particular need to hurry now, nothing really to hurry for—because everything is fucked and fucked well beyond his ability to repair—but Merle keeps looking at him with those sad, tired eyes, and they’re doing what the light can’t.

Not needles. Waves. Crashing into the jagged cliff that is him. Wearing him down.

Merle has never looked at him that way.

He picks up the phone. He manages to not drop it. The glass. God. Looks like he could just reach through it. Reach through it and grab his brother by the neck, by the hair, slam his face into the table over and over and over until blood drips onto the floor.

Apparently he is angry. Okay.

So far he hasn’t puked and he hasn’t cried, and it would be good in a cold kind of way to maintain that streak.

Voice in his ear—he can see Merle’s lips moving through that impossibly clear glass, but the voice is tinny and scratchy and distant, far more so than Beth’s ever was on his shitty cell phone. So far away. The glass is a lie. His brother might as well be on the other side of the fucking world.

“What’re you doin’ here?”

Daryl almost laughs. He almost breaks into peals of laughter, wild in all the wrong ways, wracked with the insanity that invariably comes with bad, senseless endings. It churns sickeningly in his chest but never actually emerges. Never becomes anything more than a soft, strangled noise deep beneath his breastbone, the creaking of continents, so quiet Merle almost certainly can’t even hear.

Though the elderly woman next to him shoots him a look, which he ignores.

Merle pinches the bridge of his nose—his crooked nose, crooked and oh my God, it bled in a flood, what were they thinking, and Daryl would very much like to break it for him again. “Brother… You shouldn’t even be here.”

“I shouldn’t,” Daryl echoes softly. “I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t.”

“No.”

“Man, that’s. That’s so fuckin’ funny, you are so fuckin’ funny, you are just fuckin’ hilarious.” Words all in a low rush, rocks carried along in a torrent, tumbling and cracking together and left far from their point of origin when the water recedes. “You wanna take that show on the road? Oh, wait, you did.” He leans closer. He’s gripping the phone so hard his fingers hurt, so hard he’s sure he hears more than one knuckle crack. “Two fuckin’ years of it, and now you fuck me right in the ass.
One *fuck* of a final performance."

The woman next to him shoots him another look, much dirtier. Daryl sort of wants to break her face, once he’s done breaking Merle’s. Move on to everyone here, since everything is fucked anyway. Start with the glass. It doesn’t even look that thick. Maybe he could punch right through it.

Maybe someone did. Maybe that’s why it looks so new.

Merle sighs again. “Brother… I know… Can’t you just walk outta here? Can’t you just get up and go live your own fuckin’ life for a change?”

“Can’t I.” He’s back to echoing. Seems like that’s his default when he can’t think of anything of his own. So far it’s working about as well as anything else has or could reasonably be expected to.

“Well. See. That was kinda part of the whole thing where you *fucked me in the ass.*” He leans even closer, and while that numbness still overlays everything, the anger is burning brighter and hotter beneath. A lava dome, pressure building and ominous rumblings everywhere. Without meaning to he’s bared his teeth. “Everythin’ you said we was gonna do. You said you was gonna take care of it. Said you was gonna try.”

“Daryl—”

His name. Not *man* or *brother* or any variation thereof but his *name.* It nearly cuts through, nearly reaches a hand into the flood and pulls him out and onto shore, but the water drags him on. He lifts a hand and he doesn’t punch the glass, doesn’t slam his palm into it; he lays it against that cool, smooth surface and lets the oil and sweat and dirt and grime on his fingers mar its eerie perfection.

No one has him. Beth was another world. Beth feels like a dream. There’s only this.

No scream. No voice in it at all. A breath into the phone, every word thin and sharp as a knife.

*How could you fuckin’ do this to me?*

Merle shakes his head, once, slow. “Man… You knew it was gonna happen sometime. You know you did. You know we couldn’t keep runnin’ forever without someone pickin’ me up for *somethin’.*” He leans in too, shoulders even more slumped than before, and if he looked old in the light of that waning moon, he looks *ancient* in the lights of this dead place. He looks dead himself, and Daryl’s stomach rolls into his boots. “I made one mistake too many. Happens. That’s just kinda how it—”

*Don’t you fuckin’ LIE TO ME.*

It’s not a shout. There’s still no real voice in it; it’s all hiss through clenched teeth, all breath. But behind it is the force and rage of a scream, and Daryl knows in that dim way in which he’s always at least subconsciously aware of his surroundings that more than one person in the room is looking at him now, including very possibly a guard or two.

Whatever.

Because now Merle is staring at him, and there’s *confusion* in that stare, and that actually doesn’t make much sense when you come right down to it, but Daryl *isn’t* right down to it—Daryl is off and running in another direction entirely, the numbness melted away like ice off the crown of a volcano, pouring down his sides, and he feels so sick he’s not sure he can stand.

“Brother, what—”
“I talked to ‘em before I came in here. Found out what happened. What you did.”

Slow comprehension, dawning like the proverbial sun, and now Merle’s tired, sad-eyed calm is slipping off him, his own melting snowcap, revealing something that faintly resembles dull horror.

Though the confusion remains.

“I didn’t—”

“Found the roadhouse, you lying prick. You thought I wouldn’t? You really thought—” For an endlessly terrible instant he falters, all that hard rage run through with cracks, and Merle’s hand on his back and believing that things might be all right, believing that they could both try, and he’s not going to puke but tears sting like acid in his eyes and he’s not certain he can keep the other side of that streak running. “You thought I’d just give up? Thought I wouldn’t keep lookin’? You really thought I’d just do that? You think that’s me? Everything I did? For us? For you?”

“Look, man, just—”

“They didn’t pick you up.”

No more hissing. His voice has slipped into a whisper—soft. Bloodless. Abruptly the rage is gone, killed with those few words, smothered by everything he still remembers from that other world where things were good and getting better and he was going to have a place, a life, and a girl loved him and after so many years he finally found his brother, and they were going to live happily ever after—once upon a time in a faraway land there lived two brothers—and he was so stupid.

He was so fucking stupid.

“They didn’t pick you up. You called ‘em.” He shakes his head, just as slow as Merle, and the world blurs away into that acid sting, that burn through his eyes and throat and gut, veins, skin, and his voice breaks and almost bleeds into silence. “You turned yourself in.”

Merle says nothing at all.

At some point his hand fell away from his face and now it’s lying on the table, limp—a dead man’s hand. Useless. Daryl gazes through that blurred acid veil at them and at him, and Merle gazes back, and finally Daryl sets the phone down and buries his own face in his hands.

He’s not crying. He’s simply floating. Drifting through the moonless, starless dark—nothing there to touch him, hurt him, betray him. Nothing to hope for or want. The room isn’t silent, but he can make all the sound go away. He can make everything go away.

It’s been a long time since he had to, but he hasn’t forgotten how.

Soft tap on the glass. He lifts his head, blinking in the hard, merciless brightness; Merle, hand outstretched, and what Daryl sees in him…

Daryl looks away. Rubs hard at his eyes with the tips of his fingers. Forces himself to look back at his brother, forces himself to pick the phone back up, forces himself to find his voice and join it to some words and shape it all into a pathetic parody of speech.

“Just tell me why.”

And everything on Merle’s face—every twisted, tangled, wrenching agonized thing—evaporates, leaving only bewilderment, and the purest yet. “What’re you talkin’ about?”
“What am I talkin’ about?” Daryl gapes at him. “You… This. The money. You fuckin’… You just cut out, you fucked me, you didn’t even—”

“You didn’t see the note?”

Bewilderment is contagious. But as it hits him, barges its way into him and shoves aside everything else, he has to admit it makes for a nice vacation from abject misery.

“What… What note?”

“Left you a note,” Merle says quietly—almost gently. Still confused, though. “On the couch. Right where you’d see it. You didn’t see it?”

“I.” I. He takes a breath, and isn’t sure what he intends to do with it. “No. Didn’t see no note. Didn’t see nothin’.”

But. On the couch.

Something is starting to pull at him. Gentle as Merle’s voice, but hard. Insistent. Pay attention.

“I left it there,” Merle says, maintaining the quiet. “Swear I did, man.”

Daryl stares. Looks down at Merle’s hands, at his own hands, at the glass. The smudge he left there, the perfect print of his hand. A ghost’s hand, reaching through the center of the glass toward both of them. Reaching out.

“Go back’n look. Look real good. Maybe fell on the floor or somethin’.” Merle hesitates, takes a breath. “Look under. Could be it got pushed there.”

Nothing. No words. The last thing he had was anger, he now understands, and he doesn’t think he even has that anymore, because it’s not like he understood anything beforehand, but now he understands even less, and he doesn’t have to close his eyes and take himself away in order to spin off into that void. He’s there now, off-structure and free-floating, the black yawning to swallow him.

Go back and look.

He does have that.

He lifts his gaze to Merle’s again, and Merle meets him in the glass, steady, unwavering, and the gentleness that was in his voice is now everywhere, all through him, somehow visible and permeating every cell. His brother, fully his brother, not some moonlit possibility of a man but the man himself, whole and real and alive and right there, and reaching up to press his fingertips to the ghost hand Daryl left behind.

And gone. Nothing left but a shell. And that shell twists its mouth into a half-hearted sneer and shakes its head, pushes up from the table. “Get the fuck out. Don’t come back here again. I don’t wanna see you.”

He turns, heads past other prisoners Daryl hadn’t even seen, past guards he had seen almost as little, to a door he hadn’t known was there, and through it into a world Daryl knows he’ll never reach.

That’s it.

That’s all.

He sits there for another few seconds, staring at the glass, phone held loosely—precariously—and all
he can focus on is those ghost fingers. That reaching hand. Two dimensional. Ethereal. Completely fucking useless.

*Once upon a time in a faraway land there lived two brothers.*

And then it ended. Because this is an old story. And stories always do.

~

He has no idea how long it took him to get out there. He genuinely has no idea how long it takes him to get back.

He merely drives. No direction. Technically he *does* have one, but it’s floating out there somewhere in the void his brain has become, and it doesn’t matter very much. The road is markless, trackless like he always thought it would be, except he never saw himself on this road without his brother. Always figured that—even if it was awful and dead and pointless and it sucked all the life out of them and left them shuffling shells—they would walk it together and they would walk it to the end.

To the extent that he could ever bear to imagine being alone, it was never him who got left. It was never Merle who left him.

This isn’t how it was supposed to be.

No radio. He drives in silence except for the wind and the growl of the engine and the rattling of an almost total lack of shocks. The gray sky has sunk lower and grayed even further, thickened, and it’s spitting water—not enough to properly be called *rain*, periodically collecting in a sufficient quantity to turn the windshield to a dull haze.

Wipers. They squeal. It hurts his ears. He vastly prefers the silence.

It was late morning when he got to Merle. He does know that. The grayness is slowly consuming any ability on his part to count time in disparate units, smearing everything into an endless nothing, but if he had to guess he’d say it’s afternoon. Maybe. Sometime. Time does, he supposes, go on regardless of what you do or don’t do.

He wonders in the most distant possible way how many times now Beth has tried to call him. How worried she is. Possibly how scared. He could stop. Find a payphone or something; they do still exist. Find someone and ask to use theirs.

He doesn’t. He just keeps driving.

You don’t realize how much you depend on basic assumptions regarding the nature of reality until suddenly they no longer apply.

Fields, gold. Browning. The outskirts of small towns, all looking the same. All utterly uninteresting. Farms. Woods, light and thick, more and more trees standing bare and skeletal. Lifeless. Flocks of starlings on the wheel, turning overhead in graceful clouds when the spitting lets up briefly. He can mark the time by the oncoming dusk and the lights in the houses he passes. Old farmhouses. Ugly new developments. Gradually things begin to look familiar—certain fields, certain meadows. The fence they hopped, the grassy expanse where she played her guitar and he kissed her for so long and she said she wanted him. And then he looks to his left and sees the turnoff headed over the open land toward the rise, the little house just visible on the distant ridge, and his entire body knots up and tries to turn itself inside out, guts in tangles all over the passenger seat, heart and lungs draped over the steering wheel, skin a loose pile.
She’s still there. She still loves him. Doesn’t she? Why would that have changed? He hasn’t lost her.

But he feels like he’s lost everything.

He passes the turnoff for the ruins and it happens all over again. These places they had, places for them, gone now. Still there—they could go there and be in them—but let’s not kid ourselves: they’re gone. They can’t lie down together, be together, be so close, be inside each other. Love that way. He was going to make a place for them. He was going to do that.

He passes the farm. Lights on. Keeps going. Prays to a God he sure as fuck doesn’t believe in that she isn’t looking out the window. Prays she won’t see him.

Town. Twilight. Those tiny, run-down outskirts houses and then the commercial buildings around the beginning of Main Street. Car dealership. Applebee’s. Evening traffic.

It’s Monday. He realizes it all at once. It’s Monday the twenty-first.

Tomorrow is moving day.

He drifts through the time and the distance and ends up where he was always going. Feed-and-seed, locked up for the night and dark. Apartment up the shaky, rusting stairs. He climbs them one by one, every one a grinding protest. Steps up on the top and turns to the door, opens it. He didn’t leave it locked. Didn’t seem like it mattered.

The place is dark and stale. Worse than stale. The trash in the kitchen badly needs to go out. He stands in the doorway for a moment; outside, the thin, pathetic excuse for rain is starting to fall again, pattering on the windowpane across the room.

He doesn’t bother closing the door. He crosses to the couch, turning the lamp on as he goes. Drops to his knees and reaches under, fumbling through crumpled cellophane and aluminum.

Note. What the fuck could possibly be in a fucking note that would be useful? What the fuck could adequately explain what Merle has done to him? To them? What could account for it? What could provide any kind of justification?

His fingers graze the edge of what feels like folded paper—

And something else.

He lets his fingertips rest against it while he processes what it is. What it must be. Rough fabric, wrapped around something that bulges. Bulky. So familiar.

He pulls out the folded paper, and with it he tugs out a dirty once-white sock wrapped into a bundle. Leaves the paper on the floor and picks up the sock, holds it in one hand, stares at it.

It doesn’t. He isn’t.

It’s.

He straightens it and reaches in, and removes what he already knows is in it.

Or what he thinks he knows. Because yes, it’s a roll of bills, but it’s far, far bigger than anything he ever accumulated. It’s held secure with a rubber band, and when he slides it off it snaps against his fingers, stings, and his hand jerks and the bills scatter across the floor. He’s shaking his hand, hissing, and then he freezes and looks at what’s in front of him.
Hundreds. Lots and lots of hundreds.

His hands are shaking as he gathers them up. Shaking almost too hard for him to grasp anything at all. The first few bills he fumbles for whisper through his fingers. He gropes for them, manages to hold them, manages to hold onto more. His breath is burning in his chest as he slowly begins to count them, and this makes no sense, none whatsoever—nonsense on top of nonsense, total lunacy, but it’s here in front of him and solid enough for him to touch, to number, and he does and drops them and kneels there, rain tapping on the window as though it’s trying to get his attention.

He could be wrong. Probably is. Has to be.

He picks them up again and grips them. Cradles them.

His brother. His fucking brother.

He’s holding almost twenty thousand dollars in his hands.
letters that you never meant to send got lost or thrown away

So heguesses the next thing is probably the note.

He put the money down. He’s not certain when. How long ago. The note is a little white hole in the world made solid and angular, and he picks it up and unfolds it. He’s not sure he even wants to know. Not sure he can focus on it anyway. The handwriting is a scrawl, almost illegible—not because of any particular shit Merle was going through at the time he did the scrawling, at least not necessarily. Merle is far more acquainted with the written word than he would have most people know, but his handwriting has always been terrible.

God, just.

He has to. It’s all he has.

I’m leaving. don’t follow me. I left you something under the couch, use it. don’t be stupid about it. live your fucking life and leave me alone.

take care of yourself

It explains nothing.

And everything.

Before at the prison he was angry. It took him a while to figure it out, but it was true. Beyond angry. Enraged. So enraged he didn’t recognize what it was—not at first. Couldn’t get a handle on the full force of it, the fury of the storm in his head, slamming wind and hail and spinning splintered wood and glass and the ruins of cars. The storm of helpless, hopeless rage that comes when you lose something, when you lose everything, and you don’t know why.

He still doesn’t really know why. But he doesn’t think he’s angry anymore. What Merle was doing… It wasn’t malicious, and it wasn’t callous, and it wasn’t stupid. Wasn’t any of those things. And now he’s on his knees in the place he was certain he was going to get to leave forever, and then in which he was pretty certain he was going to have to stay, and now…

Now it’ll be easy.

Now he’ll basically be able to do whatever he wants.

So it was all worth it, wasn’t it? The last three days and change. All that terror, all that exhaustion and pain, that dead room full of dead people watching his fucking brother walk out of his life —choose to do that, make the fucking choice for him, as if he had the right, as if he has the right to do that after everything he’s put Daryl through, as if he has the right to leave him like this, and that’s when Daryl realizes that he’s shredding the note, not an angry crumple and tear but a slow, meticulous process on the part of hands that are no longer entirely or even mostly under his control.

He’s shredding it piece by tiny piece, his jaw clenched so hard his teeth are grinding, gaze locked down on the stack of bills in front of him. More money than he’s ever seen in one place in his life. More money than he’s ever had. Ever hoped to have. Enough money to keep him in that apartment until next summer. Longer. Enough money to buy furniture, buy everything he could want for it, enough money to fix up the truck, enough money to…

God.
He understands. He understands everything. And he only needs to think about it for a few more seconds to understand where it came from and what it means.

You get rid of the crystal?

Yeah. ‘s gone.

Oh, it was. It was gone. Or he made it gone, all at once or bit by bit, and he said it and even if he wasn’t technically lying, Daryl never asked for more details, never investigated further, never once heeded the tiny warning bells chiming in the deeper recesses of his mind. Was so stupid. He’s been so stupid. The signs have all been there for so fucking long and he didn’t even try to read them.

That last night, what Merle was really saying. What was really going on.

We don’t win. We just don’t get to do that, little brother. We fight for everythin’ we get, we fight like fuckin’ junkyard dogs, but in the end we’re just gonna get kicked back into the shit. Junkyard dogs stay in the junkyard. Ain’t no one gonna take ’em home, give ’em kibble. Give ’em a bed. Ain’t no one wants a junkyard dog near their kids.

We ain’t dogs, man.

You don’t think?

Like he can’t recognize I can’t do this, so goodbye when it hurls itself at him and smacks him in the face with a motherfucking bag of crystal meth.

Those tiny shreds of paper all over the floor, microscopic remains of Merle’s ugly scrawl. Left you something. Use it. Don’t be stupid. Live your fucking life.

Yeah, it was so worth it. Worth it like a bullet in the head.

Oh my God, Merle, Merle… All you had to do was try.

All you had to do was fucking TRY.

The note is down to a few remaining shreds. They feel damp. The air is damp. It’s certainly not from his tears, because there aren’t any. Everything else might be wet but his eyes are bone fucking dry.

He has enough money to do whatever he wants. And somewhere—and maybe she’ll still speak to him after this fiasco—there’s a girl who claims to love him, who he believes loves him, who he loves so much it feels like the sheer force of it might break his ribs, who he was going to make a place for, a place where they can be together in whatever time they manage to steal, and now he can. Easily. He can do that. Live his life and, for now, live it with her.

His life is precious. She taught him that. He doesn’t fully understand it, has a hard time conceiving of it at all, but his life is precious, and he started learning it the moment he pressed his lips to the scar on her wrist.

He can have that. He can have all of it.

Don’t be stupid.

But he is. He is so, so stupid.

So abruptly he’s scooping up the money, clutching at it, his brain lurching vertical and whirling in clumsy, staggering circles. Wild. Beyond stupid—crazy. Sprinting right up to a pit and right over into
it, not falling but diving, nothing but black water at the bottom and a man who insists on not being
saved but there’s a way to save him, there has to be, there have to be ways and he has to have faith
because it won’t kill him, and he always made a way before, found one even if he had to dig through
dirt and mud and shit with his bare fucking hands. He made ways out of spilled blood and broken
bones. He made it, and Merle doesn’t get to do this to him, and Merle doesn’t get to do this to Merle,
just because Merle is afraid.

Afraid to try. That has to be it. That has to be why. There’s no other possible reason. That’s who
Merle is, that’s all Merle can be, and Daryl is going to do what he always does, thumbing through
the bills and fumbling for the rubber band. Daryl is going to go to him and drag his ass off the
ground, drag him to his feet, make him try.

He has enough money to do whatever he wants and he’ll find a way.

“Daryl.”

Of course.

She fucks with time. She can warp it, twist it, turn it back on itself, make of it a swooping, dancing
Möbius strip. Most importantly she can come into it and wind it around her perfect little fingers and
freeze it, keep it where she wants until she’s ready to let it proceed. She dams it up like a river. She’s
always done that, with them. Right from the beginning she’s done it. Enclosed them. Enclosed him.

Made her own places for them. Her own beds.

Now she’s doing it again. Everything has ground to a halt, every clock stopped, and he would bet a
fair amount of the money in his hands that if he let go of it now it would hang there in the air rather
than fall.

He doesn’t let go of it, and he doesn’t turn toward the door.

Because he’s afraid. Because it’s gripped him all at once, jammed ice down his throat, snowy winds
jetting into his brain. His spine. He’s terrified, because of what he’ll see, which is that she hasn’t just
stopped time but wound it back, and the storm is here and she’s seen both of them, seen something
she can’t unsee, and in a couple of minutes he’ll shove himself to his feet and turn and advance on
her, loom over her, back her down the stairs with his body as all that poison in him floods into his
veins.

He’ll do it. She’ll go. And he’ll lose her.

He doesn’t think he’s going to get away with this a second time.

“Daryl.” Soft. Not like before, is the thing. She doesn’t sound surprised. She doesn’t sound horrified.
She sounds soft, she sounds gentle, and she does sound confused but not in the precarious kind of
way that could become something much worse. And she sounds…

She sounds relieved.

Her footfalls, just as soft as her voice. Coming into the room. He can just about feel her heat coming
toward him, radiating against his back and neck like a compact sun. His orbit, swinging back around
to her. He could never escape her pull.

He hasn’t moved. On his knees, clutching the cash. There’s something almost shameful about this,
about how he must look. Like he’s recoiling from the world. From her. He feels craven.
“I was… Why weren’t you answerin’ me? I called you… I called you so many times, I thought maybe you…” She falters. “What’s goin’ on? What happened to you? What the hell are you doin’?”

Maybe not so gentle now. Not angry—not exactly—but there’s an edge, something near desperate, not so much confusion as utter bewilderment, and hurt.

She’s hurt.

He’s such a piece of shit.

Her hands on his shoulders. He does recoil; he can’t help it. She’s burning him. He wants to pull the money against his chest, hide it from her, but a few bills slip free and then his hands are shaking again and all of them cascade back into the floor in that whispering scatter, almost drowned out by the thickening drum of the rain.

It’s always the rain.

Her hands go still. Rigid. Just for a moment. Then she’s crouching behind and beside him, and her hair is a golden flicker-flame in the periphery of his vision as she peers over his shoulder.

“Daryl… Why do you…”

Settle in, girl. Hope you got a few hours to burn, because this is going to take a while.

“He’s locked up,” he murmurs. He’s aware that it doesn’t explain much—even less than the note, at least at first—but it does seem like the most pertinent detail and as good a place as any to start, because all the places at which he could start are absolutely fucking shit.

“Who?” A second’s pause, then: “Merle?”

He nods.

“How?”

He breathes an awful laugh. The ghost of the wind through the loose barn slats. The laugh of the man to whom that ghost hand on the glass belongs. “Don’t matter.”

It does matter.

“What’s all the money for?”

What indeed.

He’s moving. Sharp, hard, frantically gathering it all up yet again, willing the old-man tremors out of his hands. He has to do this and he has to do it now, before this gets any more real. Before it sets into the fabric of everything. “I’m gonna get him out.”

“You—How?”

“I dunno. Bail. A—A lawyer or somethin’. I dunno, I’m gonna.” He’s not looking at her. He won’t. She has nothing to do with this disaster. He wishes so much that she’d just get the fuck out. “He turned himself in, he doesn’t get to… He don’t get to do this.”

“Daryl.” Hands on his shoulder, then one against his back, and she’s pressing close to him and oh, fuck, he actually thought this couldn’t get any worse. “You need to stop, you need to think about this. You’re not thinkin’ at all.”
“I don’t gotta think,” he snarls, lashing it at her and jerking his face away again as he fumbles for the band. “He did this, he—we were… He was gonna be better, we was gonna be better, don’t you fuckin’ get that? All this fuckin’ time, everythin’… He was gonna try.”

“Daryl, stop.”

He wrenches under her hands and shoves his body at her, vicious. *You’re an animal, just like them* except there’s another side to that and you see it when you back one into a corner. “Get the *fuck* off’a me.”

“You can’t help him anymore.”

She doesn’t yell. It’s actually very quiet. But it’s *hard*, it shoots out of her like a bullet, and it strikes him right in the head and reels him back, open-mouthed and throat knotting, every one of his organs crowding against his diaphragm and erasing the possibility of breath. He’s turned finally, on his knees and twisted at the waist, hundred dollar bills crumpled in his fists, staring at her. She’s flushed, eyes shining and wet and her hair damp in its ponytail and tumbled over one shoulder, her beautiful little braid, and she’s *glowing* in the dark and all he wants to do is fall into her and forget everything.

He turns away, bent, almost hanging over the floor. Hanging on his own bones.

“But.” He winches open a space in his lungs and drags in a huge, shuddering breath. “I. He said he was, he told me…”

*He traded. He took himself out of the way. Traded himself for this. For you.*

*He’s in there because of me.*

“Maybe I coulda *done* somethin’.”

It breaks off, choked as the burning blur takes his eyes away, and at the same instant she’s practically throwing herself at him, *onto* him, arms wrapped tight around his chest and her head between his shoulderblades. And it’s still raining, but for a torn fragment of a second, through the blur, he sees what might be a flicker of setting sunlight breaking through the clouds. Catching his face. Holding him like her.

Or it’s lightning. Striking something. Carrying fire.

She only holds him tighter as he slumps, shaking, releasing the bills from his hands and this time leaving them where they fall. There’s no light. There’s merely rain and encroaching dark, seeping into the room and into him no matter how close she holds him and how strong she is.

It should be enough. He has the money. He has her. That trackless road has no claim on him and there’s nothing to drag him back onto it. He can do whatever he wants now.

He’s free.

It should be enough. It really should.

But.

~

He doesn’t know how long it lasts. She does that thing she does with time and as far as his perception goes none of it passes at all. All he knows is that it’s getting darker out there, in here,
colder, and he’s starting to shiver. At some point he stopped crying. Ran out of it. He’s a mess, face wet with tears and snot and his hair hanging in his eyes, hands limp between his knees. He un-limps one and swipes at his cheeks, his nose.

He feels like a fucking kid. Kid in a body way too big for him, a body he doesn’t even recognize anymore, kid who never got out of that fucking house, mother burned and big brother left him, crumpled on his knees alone in his room and hurting so bad and wondering if he was going to die there, going to die there and no one would care. No one would miss him.

And he’s a man, crumpled on his knees and hurting so bad but not alone, because a girl is holding onto him, a girl who loves him in spite of everything rational, in spite of every good reason not to. Here with him and not leaving him.

*Was coming to see you.*

He didn’t get off the road. He just turned onto a different one.

She turns her head, presses her lips to his temple, and he almost starts crying again. Probably would if he had any of it left in him.

Which isn’t what he would hope. Because unlike before, unlike the other times he’s let go and given up and wept in her arms, he doesn’t feel better. He doesn’t feel scraped raw and cleaned out. He doesn’t feel ready to be filled with anything new. Anything good.

He feels empty.

“You gotta stay,” she murmurs. Her mouth is against his brow and her breath is warm and sweet, and he should be happy about this, why the fuck isn’t he happy about this? “Daryl, you just… I know you wanna go, I know it, but you need to stay here now.”

But it’s not about *need*. It’s not about that. He doesn’t even know what he needs anymore.

It’s about how he has no fucking *choice*.

It’s about that, about how he’s never had a choice about *any* of this. Not really. He never had a choice about her, even though he’d gotten to thinking maybe he did, and he never had a choice about Merle, and right when he got to thinking maybe he did there as well, Merle went and chose for him. He never had a choice about the hell of what most people would laughably call his *childhood* and he never had the choice of leaving until so much damage had already been done, and he never had a choice about his mother, never had a choice after he *did* get free because he was a fucking loser, a redneck asshole without even a GED to his name and no real marketable skills except what he can do with his hands, never had a choice about the time he waited for Merle to get out of prison, never had a choice about the day he picked Merle up and they started on this nightmare road trip, the long, terrible journey that led him from there to here in her arms. He’s never had a choice. Never.

That’s bullshit.

“I need somethin’,” he whispers, and it feels like the frame of his skeleton might collapse. What he has to say. No: what he *wants* to say. He doesn’t, he *doesn’t* want to, he wants so badly to not say it, but he also *does*, because there’s almost twenty thousand dollars on the floor in front of him and an apartment with his name on it and his brother as good as lost to him forever, and if he’s off-structure because of these things, there won’t be any structure at all until he figures out how to *make* one. He’s a kid and he’s a man and he has no idea how to tell the difference between those things and he understands now that he never did.
And he’s no good to her like this.

There’s a hideous, twisted thing inside him that doesn’t want to be.

“Tell me.” She squeezes him, and oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. No. “Anythin’. If I can.”

“I need you to tell your dad I’m sick. Make somethin’ up if you have to. Tell him I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Alright.” She doesn’t sound happy about it, and he doesn’t blame her one fucking bit. It’s extremely awkward, how she’ll be the one to convey the message. But he doesn’t take it back. He trusts her to make it work. They’re both going to have to get better at lying.

He suspects she’s already pretty good at it by now.

“But I—”

“And I need you to go.”

It hangs in the air between them. Simply hangs there. Like a spider, something huge and bristling and swollen bulbous with poison. The poison in him—he actually thought it might not be there. But it is, and all the proof he needs is all around him. She’s gone rigid again, not loosening, utterly unmoving. He’s not positive that she’s breathing.

“Daryl…?” Single questioning sound. For some reason it isn’t immediately recognizable as his name. It’s a nonsense word. It means nothing.

“Beth.” He pulls himself away, then. He pulls himself away and it’s horrible, like twisting his own arms off—losing her heat, her solidity, the blessed music of her voice, losing her strength, the way she hadn’t just been holding him but holding him up.

He’s well aware that this might be yet another unbelievably stupid decision. But it is a decision.

“Beth, I need you to go.” Breathing is like walking. When it comes down to steps you take them one at a time. “Please.”

“Daryl, no.” He turns his head slightly; she’s rocked back on her heels, one hand on her knee and one at her mouth, as though she’s about to stifle a cry. “I’m not gonna leave you, I’m not—”

“You said anythin’.”

“I said if I could.”

“You can do this.” He presses his hand against his eyes. He keeps coming back to that internal darkness as if it was comforting, when really it’s extremely not. But it’s familiar, and he feels like he’s short of that right now. “I’m gonna call you. Swear, I am. I just… You can’t be here. You can’t be here right now.”

“You said you were gonna call me before. You actually mean it this time?” Still no anger. Only sad weariness—and he knows she’ll do it. Because he’s asking her to, because she loves him—and because really, what choice does she have? It’s getting well into evening on a rainy Monday night, and he’s not sure what she told her family about why she’s not home—not sure she told them anything—but if either of them want to preserve this, and he really thinks she does, even now…

And he does too. Wants to. So much.
So that’s something.

“My phone broke. Tell your dad that too. That’s why I ain’t called. I’ll get a new one.”

“I don’t want to go.”

Not arguing. Just saying. Like in the field under the stars, when she said she wasn’t ready and he didn’t argue, but he did say it, because he wanted her to know.

I want you.

“I know.” He drops his hand back into his lap and tilts his head back. The rain isn’t hard but it’s steady, and it sounds so loud on the roof. So close. Like it might be about to hammer its way in. “I’m sorry.”

Nothing for a long moment. He waits it out. Lets it fill him, follows it in. Curls, even if he isn’t moving. Compresses. He didn’t explode at the prison, he didn’t explode on the road or here before she came in, and he doesn’t think the tears count as an explosion. But he thinks, after she leaves, there might finally be one.

Which is only part of why she can’t be here.

Her moving—a soft shuffle. Her heat close to him once more, her hands on his shoulders, and he can’t keep back his shivering sigh when she kisses the edge of his jaw. It’s fleeting. A touch so light it’s barely a kiss at all. Then she’s pushing herself up and stepping away from him.

Her mercy is boundless. Praise her name.

“You have to stay,” she whispers again. “Alright? You… You stay. And you call me.”

He nods, once. He doesn’t turn around.

Except for a few seconds of strained rage, he hasn’t looked directly at her a single time since she got here.

“I love you.”

And she’s gone into the wet dusk, the stairs groaning agony as she descends them.

He mouths it. Over and over, he does. The night he said it, in the ruins drenched in that full moon, with her in his arms and hot and ready for him and so sweet, and she said it back and took him in and it was like the sky opened up and every single fucking star fell down over them both in a hail of broken diamonds.

That was another world.

He has to figure out how to live in this one.
there was no answer in the dust and I'm missing you so much

Chapter Notes

Be advised: There's a fairly graphic description of self-harm in this one.

I'm sorry, I know this is relentless. I promise it's all here for a reason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When she goes she takes everything he felt with her.

He kneels there for a long time, staring at nothing. It’s well and truly dark outside, the sallow glow of the streetlight near the window pushing through the dirty glass, and it makes everything look twisted and bloodless and wrong. Endless nights he’s laid awake in that light, sometimes the TV flickering, alone with only her voice on the other end of the phone or her face in his mind, her body, her hands, her mouth. But mostly her voice. Always her voice. Singing to him, singing him to sleep. Singing to him when he got there.

No sound now except the rain. Faint buzz of a car outside. A horn. Very far in the distance, sirens.

He would review his options if he could think of what they are.

Part of him is stepping aside from this scene, this pitiful tableau, and looking down at it with utter confusion. His options are simple—use the money the way they were planning or don’t—and the correct one should be obvious, shining bright as a beacon. He knows all his reasons for constructing that plan and wanting what would come from it and half of them are still there. There are the reasons Merle wanted it, even if those reasons aren’t what he thought they were. Merle made his wishes very clear.

Fuck Merle.

There’s what Beth would want. He has to weigh that in. He has to incorporate that into the halting, semi-incoherent calculations stumbling through his head—once he was so good at keeping the books, so his inability to work through the numbers right in front of him is frankly pretty funny—and he has to use it to balance any decision he might make. He absolutely has to.

But he’s having a lot of trouble thinking about her right now. He’s having a lot of trouble even visualizing her face. And that’s terrifying.

He isn’t terrified. He isn’t much of anything.

After a while his attention starts drifting from the pile of cash and gradually around the room. There’s nothing specific it comes to rest on, nothing that seems more important than anything else. It’s all supremely unimportant, every bit of it. Every scattered piece of trash—because Merle couldn’t ever be bothered to make the trip to the trash can. Every stick of broken furniture—because it’s all broken in some way, every single piece, one leg about to come off the table the TV rests on and patched up with a bunch of duct tape, the shade on the lamp ragged and the whole thing unable to rest at any angle other than a crooked one, the TV itself which has a habit of turning off at random intervals, the recliner with its worn and ripped upholstery, which as it turns out also serves nicely as storage unit
for drugs, and the couch, the fucking couch, just as ripped and worn and all its springs broken and always digging into his back, his legs. He has never once in all these weeks had a full night of unbroken sleep on this couch except when he was too fucking drunk to be conscious.

And he stopped calling that sleep a long time ago.

This is his room. This is his life. He made this room, settled into it, hated it but never expected to leave it—getting back on the road, he’d carry it with him. It’s not even a room. This is not about this particular room. It’s his head, full of trash and broken things, but at least with Merle he didn’t have to live in there alone.

Beth doesn’t count as company. There is no fucking way Beth will ever keep him company in here. He told her about it, told her the truth, opened the door and showed it to her that night after they brought her home, but there is no fucking way he’ll ever let her live in here with him.

His box of darkness.

He isn’t giving that to her. Never. He doesn’t have much to give her and he sure as fuck isn’t starting there.

_I mean, okay, we stick around, you get that fuckin’ apartment, you keep workin’ for her daddy... What then? What’re you gonna do?_”

That is sort of the primary question.

He slides sideways, back, sits and crosses his legs and drapes his hands over his knees and stares at the floor some more.

He can do whatever he wants.

It’s very hard to understand.

He gets up. Goes to the door and closes it. Turns around and walks to the tiny, stubby hallway, walks into it, walks into the bathroom, turns on the light—sallow as the streetlight—and takes off his clothes. Considers what to do next. He appears to be at the point where he’s approaching existence in small stages. Going at it all at once feels like a tall order.

He turns and peers into the water-spotted mirror. He didn’t recognize his own body; now his own face looks unfamiliar. His eyes are shining dully out of dark pits, sunken. He’s never great about facial hair maintenance because he doesn’t give even a little bit of a fuck but now he’s scruffy even by his own standards. His hair is lank, greasy. Might be the awful light, but his cheeks look hollow.

Somewhere out there on the road, he got old.

He closes his eyes and leans over the sink, braced on the cracked, discolored porcelain.

Then he turns back to the tub, cuts on the shower, climbs under spray that he doesn’t bother to heat beyond lukewarm, sits down on the floor of the tub and curls his arms around his knees. He remembers this too. After he got back from the hospital. So tired. Merle on the couch, busted nose, saying nothing to him. All Daryl wanted to do was sleep.

It occurs to him that he is incredibly sleep-deprived and that isn’t likely to help anything. He doesn’t care. He lays his forehead on the tops of his knees and closes his eyes but he doesn’t doze. Not this time.
So that goes on for a bit.

He keeps waiting for that explosion and it keeps not happening.

Eventually he lifts his head, and via a combination of hauling and shoving he finds his feet. Makes a half-hearted attempt at washing himself and barely feels his own hands. This numbness is complex, many-layered, operating on multiple levels. It might be a kind of self-defense mechanism; it doesn’t seem completely alien. But if this is time swung viciously back on itself, if this is some kind of broken mirror-world, that part is also new. He was numb before, but it was simple weariness. He knew he would feel again.

He probably will here, too, it’s just.

It’s hard to see past this.

He cuts off the water and gets out, finds a towel by sheer reflex, walks the few steps to the dim bedroom. Stands there. Tries to breathe.

Merle is everywhere.

Clothes all over the place. Tangled sheets on the bed. Skin mag on the floor. Beer cans and a couple of empty bottles, crumpled potato chip bag. Next to the bed on and by a wooden crate is a midden of everything, and on top of the crate is a meth pipe. A baggie of stuff beside it—nothing big to move or sell but Merle’s own personal stash.

He crosses the room, drops the towel on his way. He reaches the crate and picks up the little plastic bundle and turns it over in his hands. He’s near enough to the window—broken blinds pulled two thirds of the way up—that the light from a passing car slides across the wrinkled plastic and makes it shine.

Crystal. X. OxyContin. A fair amount of the last, almost as much as the first. Daryl wonders just how much Merle was taking by the end.

This, too, is technically an option.

He drops the baggie onto the bed and turns and begins to search through the wreckage for something to put on.

~

At some point he wanders back into the front room, meandering slightly like a confused river. He’s becoming aware that even more than exhausted, he’s starving—he can’t clearly remember the last thing he ate, vaguely recalls wolfing down something greasy at one of the places he stopped to look for Merle, but he has no idea when that was. Could have been day before yesterday. Could have been day before that. Sure as shit wasn’t today.

The things he does to himself, it’s remarkable that he can still function at all.

Whether or not he actually can remains the question at hand.

He should eat. Doesn’t matter what. He should eat and then he should sleep, and tomorrow he should get his ass out of here and never look back.

Instead he looks at the money again. He stands there and he looks at it for a long time.
The texture of it is interesting, all piled in damp crumples, like a small collection of leaves. The way the light catches it, it’s a sullen brownish-yellow—a dead color. Color of winter when snow isn’t there to cover up the truth of it, blanket the wet rotting things with clean white.

He thinks he knows what Merle had to do to get that money. But the truth is that he doesn’t. Not with any certainty. The truth is that he probably won’t ever know.

The truth is that he isn’t sure he wants to.

The rain outside hasn’t hardened and it hasn’t softened. It’s exactly the same—steady and even, a gentle hum like a car’s engine. In an entirely different context it might be comforting. Not the pounding rain into which he ran the night the storm tore the world open, not the fury into which he hurled himself. He could make that place a home for his rage because it was rage in and of itself, everything seething and cracking through his head made physically manifest. So is this. This rain doesn’t bring floods, and he doesn’t think flooding is actually what he’s going to do. He doesn’t think any dams are going to break. This kind of rain merely sends slow gray trickles into gutters, and that feels about right.

He’s not running off to the ruins. There’s no point. There’s nothing there for him, and no sense in trying to run away from this. This hole in the world where the last fragments of his old life used to sit, this directionless absence.

He deals with it here or he doesn’t deal with it at all.

He goes back to the bathroom and gropes through his dirty clothes for his lighter, cigarettes, returns and sits down with his back against the couch, knees bent up and drawn close to his chest and cash between his feet.

He sets the cigarettes down. Keeps the lighter.

He can feel hatred. He can feel that—oh, most definitely he can feel that. You can be numb and still hate. He’s done it plenty of times. Sent himself away, froze off every sensation and every ache and throb of his heart and gut and head, done everything he could to protect himself from that monstrous man. But he still hated. All that energy that would have gone toward feeling other things, freed up for the singular job of hating. As feelings go, it’s vast. Cold as black space. There was that picture he saw of the countless galaxies spinning through the void, but what if they were gone? What if only the void remained?

Something like that. That’s what it is.

Moving suddenly, so abruptly that he startles himself, he bends between his knees and with one hand he scoops the cash together in a more compact pile, and with the other he flicks the lighter open and into flame. It’s so bright it hurts his eyes, so hot it sears his fingertips. Part of him is stumbling back and waving its hands—Christ, what are you doing, don’t, don’t you fucking DARE—but that part is small and difficult to hear over the rain-drone in his head, and easy to ignore.

He lowers the lighter. Holds it very close to one corner of a bill. Close enough to watch it begin to darken, begin to send up the tiniest silver thread of smoke.

Don’t be stupid.

With a sharp clink he flicks it closed. Pinches the corner of the bill. The smoke disappears.

He leans his head back and stares blankly up at the ceiling, lighter held loose, a cool smooth weight in the cage of his fingers.
Not charging back like an idiot to try to get Merle out. Not the baggie. Not this.

So.

He gropes a cigarette out of his pack and lights it, breathes smoke at Mutant South America. The blankness isn’t only in his vision. The hate is gone now and everything is back to feeling that way. That featureless flatness. And he remembers then that while he drove back from the prison in silence, on his way to the prison he had the radio on, and there was a song he didn’t recognize at all. But the words drilled their way into him and he remembers.

\[
\text{so what happens when the heart just stops} \\
\text{stops caring for anyone} \\
\text{the hollow in your chest dries up} \\
\text{and you stop believing} \\
\text{so what happens when the heart gives up} \\
\text{but the body goes on living} \\
\text{the blood crawls to a slow and stops} \\
\text{and flows away} \\
\]

This is all very maudlin.

He plucks the cigarette from between his lips, lowers it. Looks at it. That tiny red coal eating away at it, the dusty cap of gray ash. The white is a little off-color. It’s slightly bent. He’s been carrying it around for a while.

He notes all these things with that same dim flatness, and he spreads his left hand and presses the tiny red coal against himself.

He lifts the cigarette away and gazes at the ashy circle it left, raw flesh darker beneath the gray. He brushes the ash away and he sees that he made a crater, a ring of deep red and pale in the center, already beginning to seep clear fluid. Weeping.

It hurts, he guesses.

He stubs the cigarette out on the filthy rug and lets his head fall back again, closing his eyes. *What exactly did you expect to get out of that?*

He didn’t expect anything. It was just something to do.

He’s out of options.

After a bit he dozes.

\~

He raises his head in dawn light the color of the ash and blinks into it. He finds the rubber band and picks up all the cash, smooths it out the best he can, arranges it in a relatively neat stack, secures it. He lurches to his feet and goes to the bedroom, locates an ancient backpack pushed most of the way under the bed, stuffs some clothes into it. Goes back to the front room and gets his crossbow from the corner in which it’s leaning and slings it over his shoulder.
At the door he turns around once and once only, and looks.

He doesn’t close it behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics are from "What Happens When the Heart Just Stops" by the Frames.
and there's no time left for losing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So things happen.

He finds a loose band-aid in the glovebox and slaps it on the burn. He stops off at a Dunkin Donuts and gorges himself on coffee and sugar. Then he does in fact get another phone.

Same as before—shitty, cheap, not a smartphone in any sense of the word, prepaid. It occurs to him only after he’s out of the store and on the sidewalk that he could have pretty much bought whatever he wanted in there. And again, because of that, it additionally occurs to him that he’s going to have to revise some very basic assumptions about the logic that underpins his world and how he lives in it.

But with something like this, he’s also not sure he sees the point. He doesn’t want a smartphone. He doesn’t want a fucking iPhone or whatever. He doesn’t care. He’s still struggling to care about much of anything, if he’s honest, and he definitely doesn’t care enough to lie. To himself or anyone else, if anyone else happened to ask. Not that anyone would.

He’s not certain he’s completely visible to the naked eye. Not sure he’s completely in phase with everything else.

It’s relatively early—everything open only recently and plenty of stuff not open at all. The rain has stopped and the sun is beginning to emerge—cautiously, as if it’s not sure some kind of coast is clear of something undesirable—and he squints in it, ignoring the rest of the sparse traffic on the sidewalk. There’s something mildly surprising about it. Last night it was so difficult to see past the night itself. Seemed like it might just go on forever, but here’s empirical evidence to the contrary.

Life does, apparently, go on.

He wonders how Merle is getting on with his.

He heads across the street to the truck, gets in, drives.

~

Next stop is the high school.

He sits in the parking lot like he has before. Feels sort of creepy, like usual. Doesn’t care about that either. He looks at that low, blocky building with its rows of windows and its football field, those towers of light that blaze on Friday nights, the deep green boxwoods in their concrete planters in front of the main entrance. They’re trimmed very neatly. They cast long shadows. There’s something about the look of them that he doesn’t like.

But somewhere in there is Beth.

By now it’s a little after ten. She’s talked about her schedule and right now she has Calculus. He can’t begin to conceive of calculus but he imagines her at a desk—grabs the image from movies and TV—head bent, pencil in her small, graceful hand, ponytail over one shoulder, her braid bound in a glittery green elastic band. Biting her lip, maybe, the way she does when she’s thinking.

Or doing other things.
Gold heart against her chest. Tight jeans. That loose cardigan he loves, because it slips so wonderfully down her upper arms without having to be tugged. Brass and deep brown wooden beads strung onto leather thongs around her wrist. Head ducked like that—intent, concentrating.

Or maybe she’s not concentrating at all. Maybe she’s daydreaming. Maybe the teacher is droning on and on about linear equations or whatever—he has no idea if that has anything whatsoever to do with calculus and he doesn’t even slightly care—and she’s staring out the window, watching the sun on the fiery trees.

Or… He has no idea where her classroom might be. Could be she has a clear view of the parking lot. Could be she can see him.

There’s hard heat settling between his legs. Everywhere is heat. But not all that kind of heat. He aches. He remembers feeling like this; it’s how he felt in the beginning, when everything was so new and so horrible and so unbelievably incredibly wonderful. Needing and wanting and desperately holding himself back.

It’s not even that he wants to fuck her. Not right now. It’s just that she’s so amazing.

And she came and she held him—so warm and strong—and when he asked her to lie for him she said she would, and she didn’t leave him even though she probably should have. She never leaves him. She has to love him, because if she didn’t she would be a thousand miles away from him right now.

She would have been the one telling him to go.

He closes his eyes and drops his head back against the top of the seat. He doesn’t realize he’s digging his thumbnail into the pad of the band-aid until the pain throbs up his arm.

She’s amazing and beautiful and he wants her, loves her so much—so he can still feel something.

He can feel something a fuck of a lot.

But he can’t stay here. He has somewhere else to be.

~

It’s actually almost warm by the time he gets to the house.

Almost. That crisp autumn edge remains in the air, and now and then sharp breezes cut down the street, shouldering their way through the falling leaves. Those are beginning to gather along the curbs, piling up, unraked, still colorful but browning at the edges. Peak is passing fast, and the near-warmth is treacherous. He doesn’t trust it for a moment.

But the window is rolled down and the sun is on his face. And he does feel it. He feels like it’s lifting him, a little. Like it’s easing him back into something. He feels like absolute shit, hurting and lurching and near dizzy—like he’s been sick, like he’s only now coming out of it—but he thinks he can bear it.

He thinks he might eventually be okay.

He parks in front of the house and sits there for a while, looking at it.

Those big windows. That turret. The window just on the side—he was thinking sort of half-seriously
about claiming that room. The stained glass. The painted gables. The huge old oak tree. The wild remains of the flowerbeds. The porch, the swing. But he keeps coming back to the windows, all the windows, in need of cleaning but there, so many more than he’s ever had, so much more here than he was ever supposed to have. Merle was right: this isn’t them. It isn’t him. It’s like when Beth first led him up to the farmhouse and he was more than hesitant; he was scared, because he’s not supposed to be in places like that, and even if he does end up in them he’s only a tourist. At best. And he’s never completely stopped feeling like an intruder. Not even with the Greenes.

This isn’t him.

But maybe it could be. Somehow. Maybe. If he tries.

*House of light.*

He doesn’t believe in God, and he doesn’t know exactly what a prayer is. But he does believe in Beth Greene, and right now it feels like that’s all he has, and it’s something.

He closes his eyes and turns his face away.

*Help me.*

He doesn’t know if she can answer prayers. He doubts it. But one of those gusts comes whistling into the cab through the window and stirs his hair, combs through it like gentle fingers, and images slip through his mind, half-formed and ghostly, prints on clean glass.

The gleam of a wolf’s teeth, glossy fur. The flutter of wings. Blue doe-eyes.

She’s not a goddess.

*Girl.*

He gets out of the truck, picks up the pack, picks up the bow, slings both over his shoulders. He doesn’t hesitate. Not anymore.

He plods up the cracked front walk, climbs the steps, and knocks on the door. And when it opens, he walks through.

~

The front hall is full of bags—or it sure seems like it is—and Cathy is flustered. She says hello and clacks off to the kitchen to do something, calls to him that she’ll be back in a minute. Daryl is momentarily confused until he remembers: the cruise. Right. She won’t even be here. It’ll be Carol instead.

And suddenly Carol’s there, coming out of the living room, giving him a faint smile. She pauses for a second, not totally looking at his face, eyes widening just a touch, and it takes him another second or two to realize what she’s staring at.

The crossbow. Yeah, well. Right. That must look kind of weird.

He gives her half a shrug, taking hold of the strap. “I hunt.”

She lets out a soft breath. “Ah. Okay, right.” Another smile, less faint. “You won’t be dragging any dead things in here, right?”

“Probably not.”
She gazes at him for a moment longer, and he guesses she might be trying to work out whether or not he’s kidding. But then Cathy comes back in, rubbing her hands together, reaching up to adjust her hearing aid. She’s wearing leggings and a very brightly colored, very flowery shirt. Daryl has never in his life even considered going on a cruise, nor has he ever personally known anyone who has, but he supposes this might be the kind of thing someone would wear on one.

Or it might simply be Cathy. From what he knows of her, either or both are extremely plausible.

“So.” She produces a cigarette out of nowhere, lights it. The burn on Daryl’s hand flares into an itch and almost immediately subsides. “You got it?”

He nods, reaches into his pocket. Carol gives him another quick look, her own single nod, and vanishes into the kitchen.

Cathy arches a brow when he pulls out the roll of bills but otherwise confines her reaction to a stream of smoke from the corner of her mouth. “Alright, then. I did figure you were good for it. Nice to see I was right. I have to get going in… Christ, about five minutes, but Carol has the lease for you to sign.”

And she’s not going to ask him any questions. Regardless of the fact that a bunch of cash in this kind of amount looks more than a little odd. Possibly more than a little suspicious. If she’s going to take it and leave well enough alone, he’s not remotely into the idea of having a problem with that.

He counts out the hundreds and hands them over. She receives them without further comment, folds them into her fist, and nods at the bow. “You hunt?”

“Yeah. I mean… When I can.” He cobbles together a kind of smile. “Ain’t gonna drag nothin’ dead in here.”

“You better not,” she says amiably, and looks past him at the front door. “You got anythin’ comin’? Got a van or somethin’ with your brother?”

His stomach twitches, twists, ties itself into a complicated series of knots. He manages not to wince. Shakes his head, and hopes his face isn’t clearly broadcasting what’s happening to his insides.

The arch of her penciled eyebrow lifts a bit further. “Out in the truck?”

He shakes his head again. Speech feels some distance out of his reach.

Cathy takes a long drag on her cigarette and regards him with a mixture of curiosity and skepticism, both eyebrows creeping upward. “This right here? This all you got? Seriously?”

Nod.

“Where’re you gonna sleep?”

He shrugs. He honestly hasn’t thought that far ahead. He hadn’t thought ahead to this line of questioning, if it comes to that, though he should have. But thinking isn’t his strong point at the moment.

He’s pretty certain that he could sleep on a fucking rock right now, and sleep well.

She stares at him for another moment and folds one arm across her chest, blows more smoke. “Where’s your brother?”
“Ain’t comin’.”

“Ah.”

Only that. Quiet sound of sudden comprehension. For now, apparently, it’s back to no more questions. And it comes to him, what it means that she wouldn’t feel the immediate need to ask any. Why this might not come as a tremendous surprise to her. What, when she looked at the two of them, she might have seen.

“Alright. Well, that means an adjustment to the lease, but I guess it ain’t a big deal. You sign it anyway, I’ll take care of it when I get back. That work for you?”

Nod. It works perfectly well.

“Okay.” She glances around at the bags, mouth tightening. “Okay. I got a taxi comin’, like, now.”

Outside, someone gives a car horn a hefty punch. “Yeah. So here’s the keys.” All at once she’s holding them out to him, two coppery keys on an unadorned ring. He has no idea where she was keeping them, because she has no pockets as far as he can see, but his not-caring approach seems to still apply to some things. He takes them, closes them cool and strangely heavy in his palm.

Cathy jerks a thumb at the staircase behind her. “Go ahead up that way this time. Just remember, like I told you—stairs outside in back are yours. Use those unless you can’t for some reason.”

“Right,” he murmurs, and she’s turning away, scooping up bags—more than she should really be able to carry, given her size and her apparent age—and out the door so swiftly that it hardly seems to open.

Leaving him alone in the front hall.

He listens for a few seconds, and he’s not sure what for until he realizes that he’s listening for Carol’s movements. But there’s nothing. The house is bright and silent.

He shifts the bow higher onto his shoulder and starts up the creaking stairs.

It feels like they go on for a while. Longer than they appear to allow for. That he’s climbing and climbing, and the sunlight through the stained glass on the landing throws the entire stairwell into shifting, nearly hallucinatory colors. With every step his body gets heavier, and when he finally reaches the top he’s stooped, head hanging, gripping the bow’s strap.

He fumbles the key into the lock and it turns with ease. There’s a click, unnaturally loud. And the door swings quietly open into light.

It echoes when he steps through, sound ringing off bare wooden floors and bare walls. An empty room. But it doesn’t feel cold. Doesn’t feel spartan or impersonal. The echo and the light through the big windows and the clean white of the walls, the dark gleaming wood of the floor—it feels like that breeze, those soft fingers sliding into his hair, tugging gently at him.

*Come in. Come in and be welcome.*

He does, and closes the door behind him, soundless but for a nearly inaudible squeak of hinges and the click of the latch.

He moves to the center of the room, directly into one of the largest patches of sun, and stands there, head tipped back and eyes shut, breathing. It smells like old dust and old wood and a paint job from years back, and none of it is in the least unpleasant. The light through his closed lids is making his
world a brilliant red, the color of a turning leaf. He’s still so tired, but he’s lighter, and he can breathe. He’s alone.

He lays down his pack, unshoulders the bow and sets it carefully beside. He rubs at his eyes, turns, swings his gaze around and scans the space he’s in.

And it’s not empty. Not completely.

He doesn’t know what they are at first, sitting there in the corner by where the bookshelves were. He can’t comprehend it. They’re so incongruous, so unexpected in such a fundamental way. He was told the place would be empty, told the former occupants wouldn’t be leaving anything behind, and he assumed…

Cathy has to have been up here. She would have seen. She would surely have taken them out. Given them back to their owners. Done something else with them. Not simply left them here.

When he crosses the room, he takes it a step at a time. Like everything else here, the floorboards are old. They should creak like the stairs. He’s positive he remembers them doing so the last time he was in here. But they’re silent, and he’s silent too as he stops and drops into a crouch, reaches out and picks up the book and turns it over, examining the title.

It really couldn’t be anything else.

He sits down crosslegged and just… holds it. He holds it in his hands. He feels the weight of it, the lines and angles, its reality. It’s here. He’s here. He’s holding it and he’s here and this is all real and beating into his skin and muscle, his blood and his bones, and his head is flooded with light.

He opens it and focuses on the page.

When I woke
I was alone,

I was thinking:
so this is how you swim inward,
so this is how you flow outward,
so this is how you pray.

He lifts his head, and he already knows what he’s going to see.

Set against the baseboard with clear and utterly inexplicable purpose, glittering in a shaft of sunlight and almost too bright to look at, is a little crystal wolf with eyes stained blue.

Chapter End Notes

Poem is "Five A.M. in the Pinewoods" by - of course - Mary Oliver.
life is more than who we are

Chapter Notes

For anyone interested, I’ve done some meta here about the role of the preternatural/weirdness in this thing, and there is also now a playlist.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He sits there for a long time.

A long time is an extremely subjective measure at the moment. It continues to be difficult to care about things like that. He sits with the book in his lap, gazing down at the page—not turning forward or back. He’s so tired, tired to the point of literally going limp, boneless, collapsing, but he feels bizarrely steady and his eyes are dry and his hands aren’t shaking, and he can’t look away.

This is a poem about the world
that is ours, or could be.
Finally
one of them—I swear it!—

would have come to my arms.
But the other
stamped sharp hoof in the
pine needles like

the tap of sanity,
and they went off together through
the trees.

At last—and the sun has left him and moved a little way across the room, nearer the door—he puts the book down and picks up the crystal wolf. He closes his fingers gently around it, carefully; he remembers it from all those years ago. He remembers that the crystal is thick and strong; it won’t be broken simply by him holding it. He cradles it in his palm and lifts it so the light can catch it again, and he turns it, staring into it and at its smooth, graceful lines, the curve of its back, its tail, pricked ears, one paw raised from its frosted base. Alert, as if it heard something. Paying attention.

He stares at those translucent blue eyes.

He pushes himself to his knees and then to his feet, wolf in his hand. He picks up the book in his other and turns back to where he left his pack and bow, and crosses to them. The pack isn’t very full—in those final and coldly pragmatic moments he didn’t feel like he needed much—but it’s full enough. He curls two fingers under a shoulder strap and walks over to one of the patches of sun, closer to the place where the room transitions into the kitchen. He lays the pack down and then he lays himself down, the book and the wolf where he can see them, pack serving as a pillow—lumpy, and he can tell he’ll have a motherfucker of a crick in his neck when he gets up, but as with almost everything else he’s too exhausted to care.
He settles, curled, knees drawn up, sun warm on his shoulders and the side of his face, and he’s asleep in seconds.

Really asleep. No dreams. Not that he can recall.

Nothing he needs to remember.

~

It’s dusk when he opens his eyes. Other than that he has no idea what time it is. He lies there, drifting back into himself, only gradually aware of his body—aware that yes, he does have a motherfucker of a crick in his neck, and in fact it’s not confined to his neck but seems to have spread to every part of him, ambient low-grade series of knots in his muscles like tiny painful beads strung through him. Even his fingers hurt.

His left hand especially is throbbing and it takes him a minute or two to remember why.

He rolls onto his back and stares up at the ceiling.

Clean white. No water stain continents. Bizarrely, he thinks he might actually miss those. A bit.

He’s hungry again—extremely—and he doesn’t think his muscle pain situation is going to improve if he just keeps lying here. Gingerly, he rolls onto his side and lifts himself up to sit, raking a hand through his hair and blinking.

Everything should feel dreamlike. He should be disoriented, falling asleep like that and waking up like this on a bare floor in an empty room in a place that’s still strange to him. But he doesn’t. Everything here feels intensely, vividly real, and the floor under him is solid. He’s grounded.

He feels like shit, but he doesn’t think he’s going to go spinning off into that void inside him. Not anymore.

A sudden soft hum; he jerks his head up, confused, but half a second later he realizes that it’s only the fridge kicking on. Fridge. His stomach wrenches pitifully—oh my GOD would you PLEASE ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM IN A WAY THAT DOESN’T INVOLVE BAD PASTRIES—but he already knows that there isn’t going to be any food in there. No painkillers in the bathroom. The place is completely empty—he can feel it, intuition so strong he knows he won’t have to look.

There’s the wolf and the book. Beside him. He glances over at them, reaches out a hand and lays a fingertip against the wolf’s smooth, cool back.

He has to get up. So he gets up.

For a moment, though, he doesn’t really do anything else. He stands there, hands opening and closing absently, and he tries to come up with some kind of plan, and he doesn’t have one. He sure as hell didn’t come here with one. He didn’t come here with anything. Well, no: he did come here with a few things. He has some things, and he found some things.

Like someone thrown into a survival situation, he takes inventory. He has a couple of changes of clothes, and he has the clothes he’s wearing. He has a wallet, such as it is. A truck and the keys to it. Cigarettes and a lighter. Bandanna. He has a phone and a crossbow and a fuck of a lot of money.

He has a book of poetry and a wolf.

This isn’t a dream, but it is pretty goddamn surreal.
He sighs and wanders off into the bathroom, which he finds with no trouble even though the place is dim and getting darker all the time. In there he fumbles for the lightswitch, finds it and flicks it, and then has to stand for another moment, reprocessing the sheer size of it. A lot of people probably wouldn’t consider it anything much, but to him, after all this, it feels opulent. He’s not sure what to even do with it. Besides the obvious.

He goes to the sink, turns the water on as hot as he can stand, and splashes a bunch of it onto his face and scrubs with his bare hands, drying off on his shirt because there isn’t anything else—and that’s something else he needs to take care of, unless he wants to keep using clothes.

He glances at the mirror. He’s still a wreck, but he thinks he looks a bit more human.

His hand twinges. Right. The band-aid is coming off and he finishes the job, drops it in the sink. The burn is scabbing over, but it still looks ugly. It’s going to leave a scar.

What the fuck is one more.

He closes his eyes. These things he has to do in order to live in this world.

It was never too much before, is the thing. He was fine. More than fine; he thinks back to the last two years and he’s beginning to understand that there were points at which he was absolutely fucking heroic. He did what had to be done when no one else was going to do it, and increasingly he was the one who saw to it that they didn’t freeze or starve or get arrested. He kept Merle from killing himself in about a hundred thousand different exciting ways. He held it together. He did. With no help to speak of. And he never thought about it.

Now he thinks about an empty apartment and he’s paralyzed. He can’t see it as anything other than an empty room. And that’s just the one he slept in; there are others. Big ones. What the fuck is he supposed to put in those? Where the fuck does he put himself?

How do you do this? How does anyone do this?

He wasn’t supposed to be doing it alone.

He goes back out into the front room. It’s well and truly dark now, no light but the dull glow of the streetlights outside. He waits for his eyes to adjust, moves along the wall by the door looking for a switch, which he remembers seeing. It’s there, right in front of him, and now he has light from a simple frosted glass fixture overhead. So that’s an addition to his inventory.

There’s something else he can do now. Probably should have done it before. He fumbles in his pocket for his phone, dials.

It’s a little after eight.

She’ll be home.

It rings for longer than he’s used to, and he’s starting to wonder if she’s not near her phone when he remembers: he didn’t bother to keep the number he had. This will be an unfamiliar one. She might not pick up right away.

But then she does.

The distant not-click of a line opening. “Hello?”

Her voice is like the most welcome fist in the gut he can imagine, and for a few seconds he literally
can’t breathe. His chest is locked. He leans back against the wall, eyes closed against the overhead light, and soaks in the agonizingly wonderful sound of her. It’s been a day, but he feels like he hasn’t heard from her in years.

Which makes what he has to do now even worse.

“’s me.”

“Oh.” Soft breath, the word carried in something that isn’t quite a gasp. When she speaks next her voice is lower and the cadence of her breathing has changed; possibly she’s changing locations. Possibly she was with people. “Daryl, I… Okay, good.”

“Toldja I would.”

“Yeah, you did.” She’s smiling now. Good Christ, she’s smiling, he doesn’t need to see it to feel like the sun has slammed back up and is flooding into the room. “This is the new number?”

“Yeah. I’ll call your dad tomorrow, tell him.”

“Where are you? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I’m in the new place.” He opens his eyes and stares at the room. Part of him had almost expected it to not be there when he did. But it’s here, bright and white and shadowless. He doesn’t much care for the overhead light; it hurts his eyes. He’ll have to pick up something else—and hey, that’s yet another thing on the terrifyingly vast to-do list he’s throwing together in his head.

He can’t do it all tonight. He can’t do anything all at once. That’s probably a useful fact to bear in mind, going forward.

“Is it nice?”

He could say yes. It wouldn’t even be untrue; for what it is, right now, it’s very nice—or at least he thinks so. But what he thinks isn’t what he feels, and what he feels is that he still doesn’t really belong here.

“Maybe it will be.”

“Okay.” Cautious now. Not very, but he’s not doing a whole lot to keep his state of mind out of his voice, and he doesn’t think she’s gotten any less perceptive in twenty-hour hours’ time. “When’re you comin’ back?”

So here it is. He closes his eyes again. How people do this, all of this—he strongly suspects—is that they just suck it up and hold their noses and jump.

“I dunno.”

“Oh.” Disappointment? Confusion? Yes, those things are there. She’s no fool, far from it, and he’s never seen much evidence that she’s even slightly naive. He’s probably been far more so than she has, in a number of tiny ways. But he understands now that she was hoping—though perhaps not entirely believing—that when he called her it would be a sign that everything was, if not okay, at least well on its way back to Okayness.

And it isn’t so.

“I mean… Sometime. Soon.” I hope. “Just not right now. I gotta… I gotta do some stuff. I gotta deal
with some shit.”

A long pause. In the space her voice leaves he can hear other voices in the background, laughter, almost too faint to be heard, and he’s certain that she was with her family, doing something, and he pulled her away from them and that feels terrible in a way he can’t begin to define.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

He takes a breath. Swipes a hand down his face and stops at his jaw. He needs to trim this fucking thing before he starts looking like an old biker and/or a goat. “No.”

“Do you want me to come over?”

“I’ll text you the address.” Another breath, deep. You can’t derive strength from air, not the kind of strength he needs right now, but it sure as fuck can’t hurt. This… He does it himself or it doesn’t happen at all.

And the only way this is going to work is if he starts doing the former, and doing it regularly.

“But I don’t want you comin’ over.” Girl, I’m so sorry. “I can’t have you here. I can’t… I can’t see you for a while.”

“Daryl.”

This time it’s hardly a breath at all, and he knows what he’s done. Or some of what he’s done. Because she never uses his name over the phone if she can help it. Too risky. Sometimes when she’s lost in the sounds that connect them, when she’s lost in what she’s doing or what he’s doing to himself or just lost in general, she lets it slip. But this is not like those times. This is beyond disappointment or confusion.

He’s surprised her. And she sounds like she might be scared. A little.

All this time, only feeling how much he needed her, how badly he wanted her, how hungry he was for her and every part of her, starving for her, dying when he wasn’t with her and occupying roughly the same space…

He knows she loves him. But it somehow never occurred to him that she might feel remotely the same way.

He’s such a fucking idiot.

“I gotta to do this by myself.” He grits his teeth and closes his left hand into a fist so tight that he feels the scab over the burn crack open. “I’m sorry—Beth, I just need to.”

“Why?”

How to ever in a hundred million years explain that. For him. Someone else probably could. She probably could. But it feels like his mind is wheels spinning in mud, throwing up all these words and none of them work and all of them are flying and spattering into nowhere.

But he can try.

“’cause I never have.”

She makes a noise that could—in some universe that isn’t this one, that operates according to completely different rules—be a laugh. “I don’t understand.”
“Not sure I totally do either.”

“So how long?”

“I dunno.”

“Are you breakin’ up with me, Mr. Dixon?”

The smile he can hear is weak. Watery. He imagines her sitting there—wherever she is—and scrubbing at her eyes and face with one hand. She’s trying to tease him, trying to tease herself, trying to cast a ridiculous light over this—and it is ridiculous. But he knows it isn’t helping.

He pushes away from the wall and walks slowly across the room to one of the windows, stands and lays his hand against the pane. Ghost hand. His reflection in the glass – surrounded by light, he’s a dark shape, his face lost in that darkness. Ghost man. Outside the shadows are heavy and thick.

What she’s pretending to joke about is something he can’t even imagine doing.

“No.” He leans his forehead against the glass. It’s cool. Soothing. “I love you, Beth.”

A simple truth. He has those too, though not many, and if he cared to do so he could take an inventory of them as well.

“ar” He hears movement, shuffling, and now he’s sure that she is scrubbing her face. “I wanna see you.”


“I wanna see you too.” His face crumples and twists, everything twists, two hands gripping him and wringing him out like a dirty rag, and he feels the resulting wet running down his cheeks to the corners of his mouth. Salt. That twist feels like a terrible smile, and once more he thinks that time and space and the entire universe are one big Möbius strip and once again he’s circled back around. “I’m just not ready.”

“You tell me when you are?”

She could fight him. It wouldn’t be completely outside what he’s seen of her nature. She’s wise far beyond her years but she’s also a girl, a Daddy’s Girl, and she’s accustomed to having her way in the end, and she has her own ideas about how things should go and how things should be done. Him doing this alone, being alone… She hates it. Hates it. She doesn’t have to tell him in order to make that abundantly clear.

He’s not all that fond of it either. But there are a fuck of a lot of things about this situation that aren’t ideal.

She could fight him. But she isn’t. And she won’t. And another thing he understands is that it has nothing to do with her not wanting to fight for him. She began this by taking him in hand, drawing her own conclusions about what he needed and making him, in her kind and gentle way, accept those things. And she was right about them.

But that was the summer.

He needs to figure out what he needs. He needs to figure out how to live in this world.

“Yeah. Yeah, I swear I will. Swear to God, Beth.”
“You don’t believe in God.” Still that watery smile. Not angry. Not at all. Part of him wishes she would be. He’s not totally comfortable with feeling like he’s not getting what he deserves.

He turns and looks back at the book. At the wolf. There, waiting for him, with no reason that he can see. “I believe in somethin’.”

“Swear to that, then.”

I swear to this weird fucking book of poetry that has no right to be here. I swear to this fucking crystal wolf I lost years back that shouldn’t be here either. I swear to how I’m sure it’s the same fucking one, and I swear to how I found the exact right words in that fucking book at the exact right time, and I swear to how I don’t understand.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do?

I have no idea.

“Swear to my life, Beth,” he whispers. “Swear to my fuckin’ life.”

Once more she’s quiet. She’s quiet for a long time.

But he isn’t worried that it isn’t enough for her.

At last she sighs, long and heavy. He thinks of wind through cracks. Winter. Which is fast oncoming, and nothing he could do can stop it, and nothing she could do can slow it down, whatever the extent of her time-fucking-with powers might be. “Alright.”

“Ain’t leavin’ you.” Still a whisper. “I’m not. Swear that too.”

“I know.” He can hear a smile again, and it’s weak but it’s no longer watery. And it’s not even as weak as it was. He doesn’t think. Sad, maybe. But it’s there. “I’m gonna go.”

“Alright.”

“I love you so much, Daryl.” Her voice cracks on his name. He would wrap her up in his arms if he could. Wrap her up and cradle her and rock her like he did when he pulled her out of the water, when she wasn’t breathing and then suddenly she was.

Words will never be enough for what he was feeling then. Words will never be enough for any of what he feels all the time. He should resign himself to that fact, but he keeps looking for a way around it. Some way to reach and grasp what he truly means.

But all he has are those three words.

“I love you, Beth.”

Not-click of the line closing again. It feels like a shutting door.

He stands for a few more seconds, staring out the window, staring at the world through the ghost of himself, at the street and the other houses, the lights, the people living the life that baffles and terrifies him, that he’s halfway certain isn’t for him and never could be. And he stares at the old oak tree, nothing but a black shape now, so many of its limbs spindly and bare.

He’s not ready.

He’s not sure how he’ll know when he is.
For people who might be scratching their heads, throwing up their hands, or generally just interested, this meta is sort of a companion to this chapter.
He has to start thinking in terms of what’s next.

What’s next is he needs to buy some things. This is a small rural town and it keeps small rural town hours, and pretty much anywhere he would buy most of those things is almost certainly closed, though there’s a twenty-four hour pharmacy he knows about where he could probably pick up at least a few of the bare essentials. Some fucking *ibuprofen*, which sounds like a fathomless blessing at the moment.

He also needs food. Very likely that’s something he can take care of with relative ease.

He can’t do any of those things in here. He turns away from the window and stares at the door, then turns and looks to his left at the *other* door—the door that actually serves as his front door—which opens onto the stairway at the side of the house.

Well. He should probably get in the habit of using it. He feels in his pocket for its key and goes to it, fits the key into the lock, and the door swings open as easily and quietly as the other one. The night floods in—not really cold but cooling, fragrant with the gentle and not unpleasant smell of decaying leaves. Fresh. It feels good in his lungs. Feels a little like it’s cleaning him out.

He closes the door behind him and heads down the stairs—iron, like the ones at the old place, but they don’t groan and creak. They make solid, vaguely tuneful metal-sounds when his boots land on them. This, too, feels good.

The stairs deposit him on a brick walkway that swings around to the front of the house and back to a spacious yard and a smaller porch. He looks to the right—toward the street—and then something grabs him and tugs him to the left, into the shadows of trees and deeper grass. When he saw it in the daylight it didn’t appear to be mowed very often.

He’s not in the right frame of mind to resist impulses like this. He picks left, feeling for his cigarettes as he does.
But it doesn’t go well.

He was feeling almost good—or, if not good, sort of approaching the beginnings of okay. But as he walks he thinks about Beth’s voice—that tight, watery quality, how he could feel that he was hurting her—and his gut starts to sink below the dropping temperature of the air, starts to get dense, aching all the way up into his chest and throat. He promised her and he intends to keep that promise, but there was a lot he didn’t promise and he doesn’t know what might slip into those gaps.

And there’s so much he still doesn’t know. There are so many variables he can’t factor in. There’s so much he can’t see. This is a dark road and he has his headlights, but he can’t see more than the few feet in front of him that they allow.

*Man, if she don’t break your heart, you are sure as shit gonna break hers.*

Fuck it.

It’s not what he was feeling last night. But it’s not good. This might be some kind of *house of light* but the sun went down a while ago, and back here—the streetlights obscured by the house itself—it’s all shadow. thick trees. Rustling of unseen dry leaves. Off somewhere in that darkness he’s pretty sure he hears a raccoon snuffling around.

He smiles, and it feels wan. If he brought the bow with him, the food problem would be taken care of right fucking now.

He pulls out his cigarettes, pulls out his lighter, makes a tiny red coal and plucks it out of his mouth and stares at it.

He never did that to himself before. The only marks he ever put on himself—or had put—is the ink. Now he has this. Little moon crater. He can already imagine what the scar will look like.

Beth will see it—when he finally does see her again, which he will—and he has no idea how he’s going to explain it to her.

Except he… Christ. He could just tell her the goddamn truth.

She might be the only one he could tell who would actually understand.

The small back porch is ahead. He sticks the cigarette back in his mouth and walks to it, sits down on one of the steps, lays his forearms over his knees and lets the dark sink slowly back in. And it’s not fun—*God it is not fun*—but he’s still feeling *something*, and he supposes that’s better than the alternative.

He’s getting the distinct impression that this is one of those storied things that there’s just no way around. This is one of those storied things you have to just bore your way through.

Stream of smoke at the shadowy trees, the sky—stars out, no moon. The bare minimum of illumination, without clouds. He remembers brighter starlight with her, out there, bright enough to see by. But this is town and there’s too much of the wrong kind of light everywhere, and in his head there’s not nearly enough light to see anything. If only he had a clear and fully articulated idea of what *this storied thing* even is. Something beyond his gut, which isn’t terrifically helpful.

Then again.

*You follow your gut. You got instincts, you gotta listen to ‘em. You gotta learn.*
He bites down on the cigarette and rakes his hands into his hair, clenches his fingers until brittle sparks of pain roll down his scalp.

“Daryl?”

So soft he isn’t immediately sure he heard it. But yeah, he is sure, and when he hears the whisper of a footstep behind him he knows who it is. There’s really only one person it reasonably could be, but it’s not only that line of deduction. He knows how she moves by now, has had time enough time to observe her and note that she moves as if she’s trying to take up as little space as possible. As if she’s trying not to make too much noise. As if she’s trying to attract a minimum amount of attention. She sneaks through the world.

Or… No, sneaking isn’t the right word. She eases. Careful. A woman moving through a dim room where something is sleeping—something she very much doesn’t want to wake up.

He can feel her at his back, though. Warmth. Presence. She is there, no matter how hard she might try not to be.

He’s looking for clear terms. Clear articulation. Suddenly he’s perceiving and thinking about Carol in a clearer way than he has since they met.

What fucked you up, Carol?

Because something sure did.

He grunts and doesn’t turn around. He has nothing against her—doesn’t know her, has no reason to feel much either way yet, except that she seems nice and she’s been pleasant to him if a little standoffish—but he doesn’t feel inclined toward conversation, and he sure as hell doesn’t feel inclined toward getting to know the neighbors.

“Saw someone through the curtains, I thought…” Her voice is shaking slightly. Almost imperceptibly. It’s what finally kicks him into glancing back at her, looking up at her in the low half-light from the nearest windows and studying her carefully. He can’t see much of her face, but what he can see—and it might just be the shadows but he doesn’t think so—is drawn. Strained.

He can’t be completely positive, given what he has to work with, but he would swear that she was frightened. Isn’t now, but coming down off it. Adrenaline bleeding away through her pores—it’s something he can nearly smell. Can actually smell, maybe.

“Thought what?”

“Thought it was someone casing the house or something, I dunno.” She’s holding her forearm with her other hand, pulled tight against herself. “Saw Cathy leave. People do that. Watch places.”

He grunts again and looks away, taking a long drag. “Light’s on.”

“Not much, I wasn’t—”

“Mine.” Scuffs his boot on the weed-choked brick. “Ain’t got no curtains yet. ‘s bright.” He looks back at her again, and while he can’t summon up the raw material for any kind of smile, at least he knows he would give her one if he could. “Even if someone did try shit. Got the bow. Remember?”

“Yeah,” she says softly. Doesn’t move. He stares at her; there’s so much here that he feels like he almost has a handle on, and then so much that he can’t quite make sense of. She creeps through the world like a little fucking mouse; she’s also nimble, evasive, and he doesn’t feel like pursuing any of
it.

Wouldn’t anyway. People who want to be left alone should be left the fuck alone.

“You mind if I sit?”

He exhales—it might be something in the remote vicinity of a laugh—and looks down at the brick, tapping ash onto it. “’s your fuckin’ porch.”

“Guess it is, yeah.” She sits down to his left and a step up, and in the periphery of his vision he sees her dim form fold itself as she draws her knees close to her chest. “You can use it if you want, though.”

He shoots her a quick look and an equally quick up-nod. “Thanks.”

And he means it. He might not be equipped to be as appreciative as he would ideally be, but somewhere down in the swirling grayness that’s lingering in him, he does feel it. Because he can imagine sitting here in the sun, even on a colder day, and looking at the sky and the trees he can’t see now and having a smoke and just thinking. And it might be nice.

Might be nice to have a place like that.

There’s a period of silence then, and he’s grateful for it in an unfocused way. The truth is that he’s discovering he doesn’t mind the company. Would have been fine without it, but one way or another he’s been alone for what feels like forever, and while he remains pretty damn sure he has to be—for right now—a bit of time with someone else is probably not such a terrible thing.

And he doesn’t dislike Carol. Of that he’s also pretty damn sure.

But then she starts talking.

“Your brother isn’t with you?”

The glance he gives her is immediate, instinctive, sharp. A stab at her that he doesn’t plan for and doesn’t smooth over, doesn’t want to smooth over, even though it’s likely that she doesn’t even know what a badly raw, bloody spot this is for him right now. How the hell could she know that?

It doesn’t matter. He never needed a good reason to get stupid levels of angry at someone, poked in the right place.

He grits his teeth, stares down at the cigarette between his fingers. Smoked down over halfway. He’s still been trying to smoke less—he thought for her but now he’s not so certain about that—but right now he feels like he could get through an entire pack in about an hour.

“He’s gone.”

She takes a slow breath. God just shut up shut up shutupshutupshutup. “Did… Did something happen to him?”

He wants to cackle at that. Simply toss his head back and laugh until he hurts even worse than he does now. Laugh his fucking guts out through his throat. Instead he merely grunts yet again, drops the cigarette, grinds it out with the toe of his boot, lights another one.

“He’s just gone.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs after a few seconds’ pause. He should be giving her credit for not asking
any more questions, should be—yet again—appreciative of the fact that she seems to realize she’s come up against something and should back off. He should take it for what it is, accept it in silence, give her a nod or something, leave it the fuck alone.

There are a lot of things he should do. And he didn’t exactly get where he is now by doing them.

So he sits in silence, smoking, little paper tube between his fingers acting as a kind of focal point that doesn’t really do much to focus him at all, Carol’s presence at his elbow, the night getting colder, all the shit he has to do and buy and take care of and figure out, and up there is a series of rooms he’s absolutely certain he should be in but in which he still doesn’t even sort of feel like he belongs.

He should leave it the fuck alone. Probably mutter a ‘night and leave. Instead he stares down at the cigarette, stares down at the dim outline of the edge of the crater in his hand, and he murmurs, “Ain’t how it was supposed to be.”

She shifts. Leans a bit closer—he feels the slightest increase in the warm air on his arm and shoulder. “How was it supposed to be?”

He walked into this. That question isn’t her fault; he set her the hell up for that, and he has no right to resent for her it, so of course he does. He does violently. And he knows himself well enough by now—can be honest enough with himself by now—to know that he’s not genuinely resenting her at all.

Knowing those things doesn’t help in any respect.

He grits his teeth, cigarette between them. The filter gives under their edge. Smoke stings his eyes. “Better.”

“Better than what?”

Oh fucking HELL.

When Daryl was small—very small, young almost beyond the boundary of his ability to retain memory—outward expressions of anger terrified him. For various reasons he doesn’t recall a whole lot from then, but he does remember that. He remembers anger as a vicious, roaring, unstoppable thing, and when once a summer derecho of record-setting intensity blew through and screamed wind gusts around the house for hours, pounded everything with raindrops that seemed the size of fists, sent hail tumbling down after it and destroyed cars and roofs, shattered the sky with constant lightning, uprooted trees and ripped down powerlines, sent a branch spearing through a neighbor’s window and nearly killed their little girl, he looked out his own window in the strobing dark of power-loss and thought oh, yes, the world is angry.

Instantly recognizable. He had been seeing smaller, more contained versions of it for a while. Things weren’t truly bad, not yet, but they were well on their way, and children observe much and understand a great deal. He knew they were going to get worse. Even then he knew.

When they did, when they finally got as bad as they could get and he felt that black void-maw of hatred opening inside him, he learned to be terrified of a different kind of anger—not outward but inward.

He learned to be terrified of himself.

This isn’t like the rage that inspired that terror. This doesn’t frighten him. It’s cold and weary and it lurches through him like a drunk, swiping things off tables and knocking stuff over. But while he doesn’t feel terror, he looks at it and recognizes that he can’t stop it now, and he feels vague disgust with himself—because he should be better than this.
He really should be.

His teeth were gritted before; now they’re grinding. He parts them long enough to yank the cigarette out of his mouth, puffing smoke through his nose, throat tight. Eyes stinging for reasons that have nothing to do with that smoke. He was almost kind of okay and now he doesn’t want to be here, doesn’t care that he feels so deeply that he needs to be, doesn’t give a shit, but has no earthly or unearthly idea where the hell else he would go.

“Know what it was supposed to be better than?” Not loud. Low and strained and painful. “Two fuckin’ years of fuck-all and me carryin’ everythin’ and a stupid fuckin’ asshole prick of a brother killin’ himself on crystal and Oxy-fuckin’-Contin and fuckin’ cuttin’ and runnin’ ‘cause he’s a yellow sumbitch who can’t fuckin’ handle his own shit, that’s what it was supposed to be better than.”

He skids to a halt. He’s breathing hard. The rage is abruptly less weary, but it’s not burning hot. He merely feels sick all over again. His disgust is now diffuse, general. He has no fucking idea what he’s doing, no fucking idea how he’s supposed to know. No fucking idea what any of this is even for.

He drops his head between his shoulders and makes a quiet, wrenched noise that originates somewhere near his diaphragm. “People tell you to try and you try and it ain’t worth shit.”

Another pause for station identification, which is nothing. He has nothing else to say. Nothing else worth saying. This afternoon he slept—he doesn’t know exactly how long but he knows it was a long time—but now he just feels like curling up and going back to that dreamless darkness.

But Carol shifts again, lets out a breath, and whispers, “I know.”

Flare, sharp and hot. He snaps his head around, feeling his eyes narrowing and lips pulling back into something close to a snarl—matched by his voice. “The fuck you know ‘bout it, lady?”


He snorts a laugh, scorn-edged and perversely pleasurable. It’s a distraction. “Yeah, that’s sure as shit the same fuckin—”

“I ran away from my husband.”

He’s cut off. Fucking chopped. He might be angry, he might be close to losing himself in it—and speaking of perverse, what a horrible blessing that feels like—but he’s not too far gone to realize the implications of those six words before she has to spell it out any more clearly. Because of the words themselves, and because he’s observant even on his worst days, far more than most people, and he picked it all up, even if he didn’t put it all together.

He should have. The signs were all there. So familiar they’re knitted into his marrow.

Who fucked you up, Carol?

“I’m hiding from my husband.” She’s not looking at him anymore. She’s staring out at the breezy dark, at nothing. Her legs are drawn close together, still bent, and she’s hugging her knees like a long-lost and beloved child, her hands clasped against them. “He’s… He’s dangerous.”

He takes a slow breath. He shouldn’t even ask this. He doesn’t need to. He already knows. In one way or another, he knows—or at least intuits—everything. Everything important, anyway.
This is a very old story.

“He hit you?”

“Among other things.”

What he feels now isn’t anger. He has no idea how to define what it is, no idea how to fully understand it—like so much of what he feels these days. It’s not anger, though it’s not completely unlike anger. It’s sure as hell not surprise. It’s not sorrow, and it is absolutely not pity, because he knows he would loathe anyone’s pity and loathe them for feeling it, and he suspects she might feel the same way.

What he feels… a sick kind of kinship, maybe. Something he was missing.

His brother had the same father. The same scars.

Now that he’s started he doesn’t seem to be able to stop. “You got kids?”

She nods. “One. Daughter.” She finally looks at him again, smiles an awful, weak smile, and swipes a hand over her face. Before she does he can see in the faint light from the windows that her eyes and cheeks are shining. “Sophia.”

“Why ain’t she with you?”

But he’s pretty sure he gets this too. If not the specifics.

Carol sighs and lays her head sideways on her knees, angled so she can look at him. “I sent her to stay with her godmother in Indiana. A couple of weeks ago. I got her out first, then I got myself out. I needed some time to work things through, and it seemed… I don’t know, it seemed safer if she wasn’t with me. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it was a stupid idea. I was scared, I was trying… I was just trying to do anything.”

A shudder runs through her, and he feels a sudden and overwhelming urge to lay a hand on her back. But he doesn’t. He’s still not sure how to do this. Not sure how anyone does. The woman in the truck’s cab, talking to her, that single chaste kiss—you’re not alone, neither of us is—that was different.

He’s not going to say a final goodbye to this woman tonight. He’s not going to never see her again.

She tilts her head back, blinks hard, disentangles one hand and rubs under her eyes, and she smiles that smile again, and he thinks in a way he hasn’t before that this is something that someone who hasn’t gone through it can never understand. Not fully, not really. There are two kinds of people in the world, and the line between them is a high wall.

“You know what the worst part is?” She actually laughs, shaky, and there’s a thin strand of rueful amusement in it. “I don’t know how to live without him. I mean… I’ve been trying, and I… I don’t know.”

She just stabbed him in the heart. Punched a needle straight through his sternum—one of those long, thick ones through which you deliver a hard shot of adrenaline. He feels it, a deep jolt, a burst of light at the outer edges of his vision, pure and fundamental mirror-like recognition.

He doesn’t know how to live in the world. Not yet. He has to figure it out. He has to do it on his own.
So he needs to be here. This is exactly where he needs to be.

He’s very bad at this. Sucks at it. But he has instincts and—given that right now they’re all he has to go on—he’s going to listen to them. He gives her a quick, small nod, and flicks his gaze down and away.

“You wanna beer?”

He doesn’t have beer.

Carol rakes a hand through her short hair, half-shakes her head. “I don’t know if I—”

“You wanna whiskey?”

He doesn’t have that either.

She laughs. She laughs, and it’s weak, run through with tremors, but she sounds better. More robust. The laugh is deeper and there’s warmth far beneath its surface, and he feels some of that warmth seep into him.

“Yes.” She wipes at her face again. “Yes, that would be… That would be nice.”

“Alright.” He flicks the remains of the cigarette onto the brick—almost burned down to the filter, he only narrowly avoided further injury—and grinds it out beside its fallen comrade. He stands, half turns, and gives her a fraction of a crooked smile. “You gotta tell me where it is.”

She arches a brow. “You’re not buying a lady a drink?”

“Could make a run.”

“I’m kidding. Cathy has… God, she basically has an entire wet bar in there.” She jerks her head at the back door. “Through there, down the hall, living room. You can’t miss it. Trust me.”

He nods, gives her another minuscule smile, and goes on his mission.

~

He comes back with the entire bottle—Jack Daniel’s, suits him right down to the fucking ground—and two glasses as a concession to gentility, since no, he’s not buying a lady a drink. But he can more than afford to do so, and he makes a mental note to buy another bottle, regardless of how much they burn through tonight. Files it away. Tomorrow, maybe.

He’s starting to put together some plans for tomorrow. Rough ones. He doesn’t think they have to be much more than rough. Not right now.

Making them at all is enough.

He sits down, opens the bottle, pours them each half a tumbler and hands hers over. She takes it, gives him yet another small smile, and lifts her glass in a salute, which he returns before draining half of what he has.

He needs to be here, and thinks this might also be a need, as far as that goes.

“Home sweet home,” he murmurs, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Carol giving him a quizzical look, head slightly cocked. She drank considerably less than he did, and doesn’t seem inclined to follow it up all that rapidly.
“Is it?”

He glances at her—then angles himself against the old, pitted wood of the railing, allowing a more direct view of her. “Is it what?”

“Home?”

He shrugs.

“Do you want it to be?”

He shrugs, and this time makes a soft noise to match. I’unno.

“I don’t think I have a home anymore.” She turns her attention back to the dark and takes another swallow, this time a bit bigger, and coughs lightly as it burns her. “Then again… I’m not sure I ever did. Ed sure as hell never made it feel like a home.” She flicks her gaze to him, quick, and away. “I tried. I really did. But like you said.” She tips the glass back again, and he wonders if his evaluation of a moment ago regarding her drinking pace might have been the exact polar opposite of right. “Ain’t worth shit.”

“Yeah, but… You’re here,” he says quietly. He looks at her, and his evaluation about the way she’s drinking isn’t the only thing he’s revising. He thought of her as this mouse creeping through the world, and now he thinks that was wrong as well. Because he remembers his mother—though she never truly got the worst of it—and what she ran away into and how it killed her, and he remembers himself, and he remembers how he thought about running and it took him years. It took him so fucking long. So long, and by then he was wondering if he was just too far gone. If he wasn’t going to get to come back. Wasn’t going to be a whole person anymore.

He was. He did.

Or he is.

She looks at him again, what he can see of her eyes a little unfocused, as if he disturbed some kind of meditation. “Mm?”

“You’re right here,” he repeats. Emphatic. This is worth emphasizing. “Tryin’.”

For a long moment she just keeps looking at him, half-lit. The light might have made her look older, the sharp shadows and lines, but instead it takes the years off her—many of which her husband probably put there—and she’s young again. A version of her to which she probably said an unwilling goodbye a long time ago.

But we get to come back. Sometimes. If we try.

“Yeah,” she says softly. “I guess I am.”

He gives her a single nod, ducks his head. Looks down at his whiskey and then finishes it off, pours himself another—offers her the bottle and she shakes her head, puts up a hand—and he looks down at it some more.

“I know this girl,” he says, very softly. “She’s…” He laughs, only a breath, and leans his head back and stares up. Not at the sky. Not really at anything. The whiskey is settling into him—into a mostly empty stomach—and he’s feeling warmer and looser now, relaxed. He still hurts—he hurts a lot, everywhere—but it’s muted. Talking is easier. “She reads me poetry. You believe that? Fuckin’… Look at me. Poetry. Me.”
He shakes his head in frank bafflement. Carol says nothing—doesn’t agree or disagree. But he can feel her listening.

“But she’s… There’s this one. I remember.” He remembers it because he asked to hear it more than once. His blood humming in the dark, coming back down from the hot imagining of her body, or just listening to her voice, knowing he might sleep better. Knowing it might ease the vicious knots in him, the wanting of her and the fear of losing her. Knowing it might return him to the ruins with her, even if they couldn’t actually go there—not the way they did before. To the fields and the water and the forest, taking him back to something that was getting harder and harder to hold onto.

He remembers it. Part of it, anyway. He remembers it because it was one of the many things he thought over and over to himself in that darkness, repeated like an incantation. Like a spell. Like he could invoke her and she would come to him.

“There was a new voice,” he whispers, and falters a little. This hurts in so many different ways. All at once he misses her so much, and he hates the things he knows that tell him he’s not ready to see her again, the things he can’t ignore, because he’s been so stupid but he’s sure of this. This is right. This is the only way he can do it.

And he’s sure Beth understands. Or he’s sure she will.

“There was a new voice,” he says again, stronger, and it all comes back, and he doesn’t hear it in his own voice but in hers.

\[
\text{there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do --  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.}
\]

The words hang in the air after he falls silent. He can feel them stirring—almost hear them, like leaves. Might just be his imagination—he’s so tired and it’s been such a strange few days, even given how strange the last few weeks have been—but he wonders.

He wonders about a lot of things.

“We’re gonna be okay,” he says at last, turns his head and meets her gaze—hers steady, her face unreadable. “We’re gonna figure it out.”

“Figure what out?”

He releases a long breath and closes his eyes. Nothing about this is going to be easy. But he knew that. He knew it after he left her, that first night he went to her room. Touched her like that. Was with her like that. Was able to make her feel so good, loved her so much. What he knew then, heading back through the dark with the storm rolling toward him.

Knowing that he was going to fight for it.

“How to live in the world,” he says, and says nothing else. Neither does she.
He needs to be here.

And now he needs to do what comes next.

Chapter End Notes

Poem scrap is from "The Journey" by Mary Oliver.
last night's feathers exchanged for new ones

Chapter Notes

More meta, much of it inspired by musing on comments. Guys? I fucking love when you comment. And it's not just about YAY YOU THINK I'M GREAT; I really, really like knowing how people are processing this thing, and how the ways in which they're doing so fall in line with and differ from how I do.

Because like I've been saying, when it comes to how this is being written I'm a reader too. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What’s next is food.

Carol has some. Leftover lasagna, and it’s very dense, and as far as he can tell it’s between seventy-five and eighty percent cheese, and it’s amazing. It could just be that it’s real actual food and he almost forgot what that tasted like, but he also doesn’t care, and by the time his body figures out that it’s not hungry anymore he’s eaten a potentially dangerous amount of it, and he doesn’t care about that either.

And it feels good not to.

They eat in the kitchen, sitting across from each other with the dregs of the whiskey between them, not talking much. Which is fine; he feels better but he also doesn’t feel like conversing. He doesn’t have a whole lot to say. Carol doesn’t appear to either, nor does she seem burdened by a need to fill silences.

He likes that.

She doesn’t ask him about the girl who reads poetry to him. He likes that too. He thinks he might be able to talk about Beth at some point, maybe, very possibly—especially if Beth is ever going to come here, because if Carol spots her that’s going to raise some interesting questions—but not now. Maybe not for a while.

That’s okay.

Eventually, though, it does come out that he moved in with a couple of changes of clothes and not much else, and before he says goodnight to her Carol forces him to take a spare toothbrush, a towel, a couple of pillows and a blanket, and a few other things.

Including ibuprofen. He wouldn’t embrace her gratefully even if he was feeling okay, but he looks at her as he takes it and imagines doing so and hopes she can tell that in another world where things were different he probably would.

He goes back upstairs—the main staircase. He figures it’s all right and Carol doesn’t try to stop him. Inside, the light is still on and it still hurts his eyes. He stands there with his arms full of stuff, door open, and looks at it. The whole place. This space, which is his, which he’s decided to be in.

Yes, it’s empty. It’s big and bright and white and clean, and it’s terrifying. But he’s going to make it
not empty, at least not completely, and he’s going to fucking live in it until he’s not terrified anymore.

He kicks the door shut and considers the bedrooms for a moment. Then he sighs, goes back to where he left his pack and drops everything right there. It doesn’t matter where the fuck he sleeps. He could sleep in the goddamn tub if he wanted to. He doesn’t, but it’s nice to know that he has options. Then again, that’s part of what was and continues to be so terrifying.

Anyway. Tonight he’ll do what he’s done many, many times before and make camp.

Tomorrow he has to go shopping.

~

He wakes up in pain, but less pain. It’s actually not significantly worse than the couch and he’s used to sleeping on less than ideal surfaces, and anyway the pillows spared his neck much more in the way of agony. But he’s aching, his head is throbbing—right, the whiskey—and he fumbles beside him for the bottle of ibuprofen and dry swallows two, then another one. Lies on his back, tangled in the blanket, and blinks in the sun streaming in through the windows and pouring itself across the floor.

There’s so much sun, Jesus fucking Christ. He’s not in any way used to it. It’s sort of disturbing.

It’s also very quiet. He can’t decide if that’s disturbing or not.

The next thing he fumbles for is his phone, which he squints at until he can focus on the numbers. It’s a little before nine. That’s good; he has plenty of time to do things. He has a number of things to do, and his list is longer and more specific than it was last night. He realizes—sitting up and pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes and waiting for his head to stop throbbing quite so much—that he was working through it while he slept. He does that sometimes. It’s useful. Weird, but.

He is, as Beth has observed on more than one occasion, kind of weird. So.

He also feels… Not good. But good isn’t hopelessly distant on the horizon anymore. He can see how he might get to good, eventually. Things fucking suck, they suck a lot, and he’s still essentially at a loss regarding most of it, but he’s certain now that there are ways past it. There have to be. He was well on the way to drunk last night, sure—but he also doesn’t think he was wrong when he said what he said.

He looks over at the book. The crystal wolf he put on top of it, sun entering it and making it glow with its own unreal light.

He’s going to figure it out.

His mouth tastes like a dead ashtray and he feels grimy everywhere. He drags himself to his feet, groaning, and goes to shower.

~

Hot in the old place was barely worthy of the term. Warm is about the best it ever really did, at least on its worst days, because for some reason it seemed to vary. Hot in this place is just short of scalding, and he’s not ready for it; he forgets to test the water and as soon as he steps under the spray he yelps, jumps out again, slips and almost falls, catches himself on the wall, hits it with his back and slides down to sit on the shockingly cold tile.

And he drops his head back and laughs. Deep, rolling laughter—laughter Carol can probably hear—
and he wonders vaguely what the fuck she’ll think is going on up here. It’s ridiculous, every part of this is *so fucking ridiculous*… But he’s here. He’s wet and cold and his hand is hurting again, and he misses his brother and Beth so much that part of him wants to stay down here and cry for a few hours.

And he’s *here*.

Trying.

He makes sure the water won’t blister his skin off and gets back in.

~

It’s a cold day. First truly *cold* day they’ve had yet. Unseasonable for late October. He didn’t leave the old place in the clearest state of mind—if he had it to do over again he might actually pack with some forethought but as far as money goes he’s square with Elmer and he’s *damned* if he’s going to go back there now for anything at all—but he did at least think clearly enough to pack some stuff that will keep him from freezing. Even with layers and long sleeves it’s a shock stepping out the door, and as he watches his breath steam in the air he makes a mental note to also buy gloves.

Less urgent. But he should.

Winter is coming.

It’s cold but it’s also *bright*, hard beams of sun plunging toward the ground and spilling all over everywhere. The sky is cleanly and aggressively blue, and the remaining color on the trees looks like spatters of fresh paint flung from the brush of an enthusiastic kindergartner.

It’s beautiful. It’s a goddamn *beautiful* day.

As Daryl climbs into the truck and groan-shudders it to life, he thinks it kind of figures.

He drives to the center of town. No, he’s not going back to that shithole and doesn’t even want to see the building, sure as *fuck* doesn’t want to give Elmer a chance to rail about the pile of crap they left in the place—regardless of the fact that a lot of it was in there already—but pretty much everything he needs is there. There’s a Walmart about half an hour away, and for a lot of reasons that would be more convenient and would make a lot more sense, but he doesn’t want to do this like that.

Among other things, it feels a bit too easy. And clearly he’s not into doing things the easy way right now. Not when he can make them fabulously difficult.

This won’t be fabulously difficult. But it’ll take longer. Which might carry with it some benefits.

He needs time to think. Some people can’t think while they’re doing something, but with his deeply-learned ability to compartmentalize his brain, he’s never been one of those people. He can think while he does just about anything.

Sometimes it’s very hard to *stop*.

He doesn’t really want to go into the coffee shop. Which is a significant part of why he does. His Perceptive Barista isn’t there today, but it doesn’t much matter; he’s in and out as quickly as possible, black coffee strong enough to knock over a deer and a donut that isn’t completely marinated in sugar and frosting. The morning crowd has come and gone and the place is quiet except for the almost inaudible country-folk music they’ve got playing, and although it’s not raining he does think of that first day. Passing by the table they sat at, the table by the window. Her chair. Sitting across from him,
her hot chocolate in her hands.

Whipped cream. Little chocolate shavings on the cream.

The sharp twist in his chest hurts, but it’s not completely unpleasant.

Sitting in the truck, finishing up the donut, he screws up whatever courage he can spare and calls the farm. Annette answers, and he has no idea how to ever express to anyone how grateful he is for that. And the conversation itself isn’t actually that difficult: yes, he’s still having a rough time. It’s a very persistent bug; he’s pretty sure he picked it up from his landlord. He’s very sorry for not letting them know earlier. He had an accident with his phone, only just managed to replace it. Yeah, it was lucky the way he ran into Beth in the pharmacy when he was picking up some stuff to make him want to die a tiny bit less. By the way, this is a new number. Here it is. Tell Hershel sorry, again.

He’ll be in touch.

He sits for a minute after he hangs up, and it comes to him that he just called out of work. Just literally pretended to be sick and called out of work. Like a normal person.

Like a normal person living in the world.

He needs an additional minute to process that.

Then he screws up what remains of his courage and texts Beth his new address. A short message with it. Very short.

He can’t manage more than that right now.

*doing ok. talk soon.*

*love you*

Most of the rest of the day is a blur of retail.

He has no planned order for any of this. He merely tackles things as they occur to him. There’s *so much*, and it quickly becomes apparent to him that there’s no way whatsoever that he’s going to get to all of it today. He’ll have to focus on the most immediately important stuff—of which there’s still a lot, or it seems like it. He doesn’t like the overhead light; he goes to the maybe-real-maybe-not antique store on Main Street and leaves with a cheap—but not hideous, to the extent that he can even judge—table lamp. Doesn’t actually *need* to be cheap, but old habits die hard and old ways of thinking die harder, and anyway he forgets about it ten seconds after he shoves it into the truck and moves on to the next thing.

He needs towels. He needs soap, food, dishes to eat it off of. Some kind of pot or pan, and what the fuck is the difference between those two things? He’s never been sure. As he progresses it’s becoming more and more evident just how little he really *knows* about any of this. He’s technically bought some of this shit before, of course, but generally he’s taken things as they come and never given it much thought, like running down a flight of stairs without watching your feet. He’s never organized a home. Never had to. Now he’s watching his feet and he’s stumbling.

Jesus.

He’s vaguely aware that he’ll need a table or something, some chairs, a couch that isn’t terrible, it
would be nice to have a TV, and fuck, probably a whole bunch of other things, and so much of it
doesn’t even seem like stuff he really needs but instead ought to procure because this is what people
have. This is what people do.

But there is one thing he does most definitely need. He was thinking about it more than anything
else, before everything exploded and burned down and fell apart.

He knows a place. He goes to it. He’s not sure exactly what his options are or which specifically is
the best, but there’s someone there who shoves something at him and it seems okay. Not everything
he should have to go with it is here, but he can take care of all of that elsewhere.

Suddenly he’s calmer.

He makes arrangements to have it delivered, gives them the address, leaves.

~

Another stop and it’s past noon, and that’s when Beth texts him back. Short as his message was, and
he didn’t expect anything else. Like when he sent it, he sits in the truck and looks at it for a minute or
two, and though he’ll save it and he’ll probably look at it again later, probably more than once, he
feels like he’s trying to memorize it. Trying to hold onto something ephemeral, something that might
slip away at any second.

miss you. love you.

I’ll be here

He knew. He never would have doubted it. But he reads it and it’s like the cold—barely held at bay
by the truck’s ancient heater—melts away into summer. And it hurts, because everything to do with
her hurts right now, but it’s not the cold, dense, wrenching pain of the last few days. It’s an ache, but
it’s like a worked muscle. Strained, tired, maybe shaky, but it could come back.

It could come back stronger.

He’s given himself no deadline. He can’t. He has no fucking idea how long this is going to take, and
he has no way of knowing what it’s going to take, and he still can’t begin to guess how he’ll know
when he’s where he needs to be. But he has faith. He does. It won’t kill him. This won’t kill him.

He leans his head back and closes his eyes, phone cradled in his hand. A cool, smooth little weight,
and it’s not like her but he still thinks of her hand in his under the table, holding onto him. Curled
into his palm. Anchoring him to the world in which she’s made him want to learn how to live.

He’s going to keep moving.

He’s going to make it work.

~

In the end, in a concession to practicality, he does go to Walmart.

He hates Walmart. He hates everything about Walmart. If there’s a place in the world which serves
as the absolute antithesis of the woods—the dappled light and echoing birdcalls and smells of green,
growing, gently decaying things—it’s not a desert; it’s motherfucking Walmart. The lights and the
dirty looking off-white floors—designed to be easy to mop—and the flat, hard quality of everything
make him think of a morgue. Or what he imagines a morgue might be like; thank Christ he’s never
had a reason to be in one, though once Merle told him a story about breaking into one with some
buddies and posing with a couple of the bodies. Nothing genuinely awful except for the thing in and
of itself; just stupid and drunk and pretty fucking pathetic. Merle didn’t come right out and say that
last, but Daryl thought it immediately, and how Merle related all the details…

Yeah, Merle thought it was too.

Daryl has to stop in the middle of the frozen food section and breathe deeply until his gut un-knots
itself.

But it’s okay. It does.

It’s the middle of a weekday and at least the place isn’t crowded. It doesn’t take long. He doesn’t
waffle back and forth between choices. He doesn’t get irritated and impatient about how ridiculously
many there are. The fact is that he’s thought so intensely about some very particular parts of this,
gotten so ambiently immersed in half-formed and half-conscious fantasies of it, that he already has
some pre-existing ideas of how he wants it to be. And he can move according to those.

He gets what he wants from the various sections with all the direct smoothness of a military
operation. He takes it all to the seemingly endless line of registers at the front and pays for it, and
walks back out into the cold, clean, real brightness with his hands full of bags.

At the truck he checks the time. It’s closing in on three. He still needs to get some actual food. He
should be home for five.

Home.

It’s powerfully weird. But it’s not as weird as it was.

~

He doesn’t care about the specifics of food. All he cares about is that he has some.

So he takes care of that, tries to make it as fast as he can—despite the fact that he doesn’t feel nearly
the same loathing for Kroger that he does for Walmart—and he’s back at the house a little before
four-thirty. The house, his place, his goddamn front door, and walking through it, he has to stop
again and simply look.

Not even just look.

Tell me what you see.

White walls. Clean. Dark wood, glossy, polished by decades of foot traffic. Gathered pools of late
sunlight in its little pits and divots; windows and outside dying autumnal fires. Blank space. Fields of

Close your eyes. What d’you hear?

Quiet. Plastic rustle, boots shifting: echo. The shape of that sound is flat and blocky. Rectangular.
Eyes closed, you can pick up the actual shape of the room. Now and then the house creaks. It’s an
old house. It never completely stops moving.

What about what you smell?

Old paint, old wood, old dust. Age. Nothing dead, though. Store-made barbecue ribs in one of the
bags. Sunlight has a smell. Or it raises it in other things. No one notices it until they do, but it’s always there. The light gets into everything. Changes it. Isn’t light a wave? Isn’t that right? It comes in and out like tides. It washes clean.

What do you feel?

I don’t know.

Yet.

He opens his eyes, moves into that space, and starts—in a hesitant kind of way—to find homes for things.

~

The delivery comes just after five, as dusk is starting to creep in around the edges. Daryl comes down to help but the two guys with the van wave him off and he shrugs, steps back and lets them do their thing. He has nothing to prove, and he’s still tired. He’s reasonably certain that he’ll need more than a day to recover from the last few.

This will help. He thinks. He hopes. It should.

Where should they put it? He shrugs again; he’s pretty much given up on the two bedrooms for now. Maybe at some point he’ll decide to do something specific with one or both of them, but putting anything in there at the moment feels like an unmanageable combination of surreal and pointless.

Right here. Right here is fine.

Close to the windows.

They nod, leave, and he’s alone with it. Looking at it. A couple of the larger bags beside it.

There’s no frame. He knows there probably should be, at some point maybe, but something told him no. No, this is enough. This is right. Box spring and a mattress. That’s all he needs.

He goes to the bags, crouches, and begins to pull out the sheets he bought. The pillows.

He said he would make a bed. Told himself over and over. Everything else was basically extraneous. He said he would make one, now that the world won’t do it for them. He’ll make one for himself and for her, for the both of them, and he’ll make it well. He’ll make it worthy of her.

The sheets are a deep, rich blue. Almost black. In his mind—a long time before now—he thought about that exact color and he thought about lying cradled in the night sky with her in his arms.

His girl who draws down the moon.

He releases a long, slow breath and begins to unfold them.

~

It doesn’t take long. There isn’t much to it. But he’s never done it before, not like this, and although it’s not like he’s stymied by any of it, he pays very close attention to the process. How it all fits together. The things his hands have to do, how they pull and tuck, lay everything in place. Smooth it all out. There’s a quilt down in the truck and he’ll get it in a bit, but right now he wants to crouch here, elbows on his knees and his clasped hands against his mouth as if he’s praying, and let his gaze sink into all that night-blue—somehow warm in the light of the lamp he’s set beside it.
He’s not sure if it’s worthy of her. But it might be the best he can do for right now.

He pulls off his boots and crawls onto it, lowers himself onto his side. The sheets are rough, crisp—they’ll soften. They need time. Like he does. Nothing truly new is ready for anything right away.

He reaches for the book and opens it, props his head up on one hand, and reads for a while as the bed he’s made and the sky outside slip into each other in a singular and perfect unity of color.

~

so I thought:
maybe death isn’t darkness, after all,
but so much light wrapping itself around us —

as soft as feathers —
that we are instantly weary of looking, and looking,
and shut our eyes, not without amazement,
and let ourselves be carried,
as through the translucence of mica,
to the river that is without the least dapple or shadow,
that is nothing but light — scalding, aortal light —
in which we are washed and washed
out of our bones.

~

It takes him another hour to know what he has to do.

It’s an impulse. At any other time he might resist it, or at least examine it more closely. Interrogate it, demand to know where it came from and what it’s doing here, what it wants. But this isn’t only an impulse; it’s a vision, and it hits him right in the center of the forehead like a bolt and unfolds itself in front of his eyes.

Unfolds like wings.

If he waits, he’ll talk himself out of it. He’ll be stupid and he’ll fall into the trap of second-guessing everything rather than just trusting his instincts. His gut. He’s an animal, sure, okay: might be a good time to embrace that. If he’s lost—and he still is—he has ways of finding the path again.

He sits up, pulls on his boots, scoops up his keys and the overshirt he was wearing.

He needs a coat. Something. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, if he feels like moving around very much.

It’s still early. He stops off at the shittier liquor store on his way out of town and picks up a bottle of Jack Daniels, and then another one. Back out into the night, out of town—he knows a place. It’s not that far. He’s well aware that it looks like a place no one in their right mind would want to walk into, but he sort of knows the girl who owns it and runs it—they’re barely acquaintances but he’s had a couple of drinks with her—and he’s seen her work.

She’ll do right by him.

And she does.
Finally, after what feels like over a day of buzzing pain melting into a lovely, warm endorphin high, he drives home in the deep night, and makes his way gingerly back up the staircase with the plastic-packed quilt under his arm and the sack with the bottles of whiskey swinging loosely from his hand. He left the light on, and when he walks in there’s something so welcoming about it: bare floor, bags still everywhere, his pack and bow left near the corner, but the bed—God, it looks vast and infinitely soft, and he believes his eyes. He pauses only long enough to unpack the quilt and toss it on top before he’s stripping off his clothes and sliding naked—and hissing with dull residual pain—beneath the covers.

He cuts out the light and lies on his stomach. The moon is thin and nearly new but it’s there, and it catches the wolf’s elegant crystal back and turns it silver.

*Her*, all silver and bone. His fingertips tracing the flowing length of her spine.

He sleeps and dreams of spreading wings.

Chapter End Notes

Poem snippet is "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field" by Mary Oliver.
there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sun wakes him again—not direct, most of it seems to come streaming into the place in the afternoons—but bright, bouncing all over the walls, nudging at his eyelids. He mutters, turns his face into the pillow, burrows a little.

Pillow. Bed. He feels it then, really feels it—the soft give of the mattress under him, no hard floor or broken springs digging into his spine. Stomach; he’s not lying on his back, and in fact his back is gently burning on one side, steady and weirdly soothing. Lying there, eyes closed in the deep blue night he made to sleep in, he thinks how familiar it is, that pain, and then he remembers why and a fine shiver makes its way down his spinal column.

He feels almost hungover. But he knows he wasn’t drinking last night. When he went to bed, except for the endorphins drifting through him, he was stone cold sober. Tired, hurting—but in the world. Not hiding from anything.

Now he’s waking up in this big empty place—less empty, actually—and he’s not so frightened of it. Could be it’s that he’s not yet fully awake, but he’s not frightened at all.

No, it’s not home. Not yet. But it’s closer.

He has to take a piss, and he shouldn’t take a shower yet but he should at least pull off the bandage, clean what’s under it, splash some water on his face. He wants to eat something. He wants to sit for a while and simply think, and then maybe not think at all.

He does these things. Cold leftover ribs make a better breakfast than most people would assume. Done, he sits on the floor beside the bed—unsupported and shirtless, back exposed to the air—and reads some more.

In every heart there is a god of flowers
just waiting
to come out of its cloud and lift its wings.

His head is full of words, swirling and dancing and spinning into tiny tornadoes, crashing into each other and passing through and rearranging like colliding galaxies. He closes his eyes, the open book in his lap, and soaks in the indirect sunshine.

He misses her voice. He misses it on the other end of the phone, he misses holding her close and feeling it vibrate out of her, sound as waves rolling through her body—waves like light. He misses her whispering in his ear, mouthing words against his throat. He misses her singing and he misses how she reads to him, how she makes music of words entirely devoid of any real tune. Because they aren’t devoid of one at all; there’s music in words when they’re carefully arranged. Music doesn’t even have to be intentional to be there. In the woods, tracking, it was all around him, because everything has a rhythm and a cadence all its own. There are the calls of birds, but there’s also wind
in the trees and the grass, and water, and the crunch of twigs and dry leaves. Everything is a song, absolutely everything, and he sensed it but never knew. He never heard it.

The signs were all there, spread out around him like sheet music. He just didn’t know how to read them.

He didn’t know how to pay attention.

He did, once—because now he thinks everyone starts out already knowing how. But he forgot. Was made to forget. It was taken away from him.

He misses her voice, but he’s not afraid that he won’t hear it again.

He puts the book down and crawls back into bed, curls up and meditates on one of the things she sang to him—he doesn’t remember when, but he does remember the song.

\[
\begin{align*}
  \textit{it's so hard to dance that way} \\
  \textit{when it's cold and there's no music} \\
  \textit{your old hometown's so far away} \\
  \textit{but inside your head there's a record playing} \\
  \textit{a song called hold on}
\end{align*}
\]

Sleep is like her hands stroking through his hair and it holds him until the afternoon.

~

Still no shower. With the others he had done he wouldn’t have given—and in fact didn’t give—much of a fuck, wouldn’t have wanted to preserve it as well as he could, keep it as intact as possible in these first important forty-eight hours, because the things themselves weren’t especially important. They were basically impulse buys as well, but not like this. No vision, no real inspiration. No deeply seated conviction that this is what he has to do.

The only possible exception to this is the pair of battling demon-angels, and he’s not sure he’s entirely comfortable with what was going through his head when he thought of that one. He doesn’t totally remember it—wasn’t sober—but he does remember that.

But this.

He washes his hair in the kitchen sink—done that shit plenty of times—and makes himself a sandwich. Peanut butter and jelly is never a bad choice for children and adults alike, and as he takes it over by the bed and the central big window and eats it standing up and looking outside at the late sunlight moving across the lawn and street, he realizes that he’s not sure which he is.

He never explicitly thought about himself as one or the other, but that’s something else that’s changed. That she changed. Who he is.

Who he might be.

\textit{I'm not a virgin, Daryl. I dunno what I am.} \\

Me neither.

\textit{You just are.}

As the sun is setting, he wanders out onto the landing outside the front door—short sleeves but it’s
not quite as cold today, and he’s in the lee of the house and sheltered from what breeze there is—and sits down and has a smoke and watches the light start to die. The trees are barer than they were yesterday. It seems like it’s moving faster, and he doesn’t think it’s his imagination. They’ve reached a tipping point, crossed some kind of event horizon. That’s another thing that would have frightened him before—the brutal fact of No Going Back Now—but it doesn’t anymore. There never was any going back; he understands that. It didn’t begin with her or with this town, and he understands that too. From the moment he was born there was never any going back. There was and is only forward, and the only thing he has any control over isn’t what forward is but instead what forward means.

And that counts for a lot.

_Tell me, what is it you plan to do?_

He doesn’t know, and he thinks that might be all right. That might be the woman’s point. That he might not need a _plan_, per se. That the very idea of a _plan_ is rank, arrogant foolishness. His mother died when he was young but he remembers a surprising amount about her, and one of the things he remembers is that she hauled around a lot of sayings. A lot of aphorisms. She would get them wrong, get them jumbled up—especially when she was drunk, which was most of the time—and the majority of them struck him as fairly stupid, but there were a few that stuck.

He doesn’t believe in God, but: _If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans._

Regardless of whether or not God is a thing, it probably holds up.

The point of this isn’t to have a plan and it never was. The point of this is to be here, watching smoke curl lazily into the calm air, listen to the distant hum of traffic and the occasional soft exhalation of a car going by, watch the lights come on, listen to the mockingbirds organize their setlists of covers and feel the air getting cooler and cooler on his bare skin and just _be in the world._

Live in it, sure. But living is a process. It’s constant and ongoing. It’s temporal. It has a past, a present, and a future. It has a beginning. And it has an end.

Being is being. It’s timeless, atemporal. You just _are._

_I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed._

_Tell me, what else should I have done?_  
_Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?_

And then there’s the first part—because what he discovered last night is that Beth never read him the whole thing. She only ever gave him the second half. It wasn’t neglect on her part, he’s sure of that; she sensed what was important—what was most important to _her_—and she gave it to him, yet another piece of herself.

The first part, the first line.

_Who made the world?_

Not God, no. There is no God. He’s almost certain. Maybe something else, maybe some kind of ineffable and incomprehensible intent.

But it doesn’t matter. We don’t have to know that.
All we have to do is be.

He drinks some. Not a lot. He bought some glasses and he pours himself whiskey, enough to make him feel warm and sleepy, and he lies back down with the book and lets his attention drift—idle—across the pages and the uneven lines of words.

Thanks to her he’s listened to poetry, a fuck of a lot of it, but this is the first time he’s ever really looked at it, its extremely odd structure, and he doesn’t entirely know how to make sense of it. But doing so also doesn’t feel necessary; he intuits that this isn’t something he should make sense of so much as feel. Feel the rhythm and the flow of the words like anything else alive.

You don’t make sense of the grass. You don’t make sense of a tree. You don’t make sense of a bird or a deer or wind, or the sun or moon, or water. Rain.

You don’t make sense of a girl’s body. Her hands. Her hair, her voice, her laugh. You don’t make sense of the swell of her breasts or hips, the graceful, delicate lines of her neck and collarbones and spine. You don’t make sense of her mouth. You don’t make sense of her legs, the way they spread for you, the slick heat of her cunt and the way it tastes. You don’t make sense of how she welcomes you into herself, how she makes a home for you there—even for only a little while. You don’t make sense of how she sighs, moans; you don’t make sense of the way she moves in crashing waves when she comes. You don’t make sense of her bones, or the songs that hide deep inside them.

You just feel these things.

They just are.

Crow is crow, you say.
What else is there to say?
Drive down any road,
take a train or an airplane
across the world, leave
your old life behind,
die and be born again—
wherever you arrive
they’ll be there first,
glossy and rowdy
and indistinguishable.
The deep muscle of the world.

He strips off his clothes, falls into sleep again and stays down there until morning.

For a while after he wakes up he simply lies on his side with his eyes closed against the dim, indirect
sunlight, sheets tangled around his waist and legs.

The bed is getting softer. He’s getting softer. Not in the sense of weaker, not in the sense of losing himself or slipping away from something. He lies with his hands nested together, palm curved over palm, and he thinks about moths emerging from cocoons, how at first their wings are too soft and damp to use. How they have to rest where they are and dry out, solidify.

A moth has to struggle to emerge, and the struggle itself is necessary. If they don’t struggle, if someone cuts them out—does the job for them—their wings never spread at all.

They never fly.

~

He feels ready for this, anyway.

He turns on the shower—barely warm. He lets some of it fall into his cupped hand; it’s difficult to be certain but it feels to him like the perfect temperature of summer rain.

Before he gets in he stops, turns, looks at himself in the mirror. It’s a bigger mirror than they had in the old place, and when he cranes his head he can see almost his entire back. Battling demon-angels on one side. His right side.

A single wing on his left.

Not quite finished. It was too much to do all in one sitting. But it’s over halfway there, the outlines and some of the shading. It’s scabbed, soon it’ll start peeling, and the lines look rough. But they won’t be when it’s done.

When it’s done becoming.

He smiles and turns, steps under the spray.

And he thinks about her. Really thinks. Since he asked her to leave him he’s thought of her only in fragments, only in partial terms, but now he thinks about all of her. He thinks about her with him, stepping close and tipping her head up, gliding her mouth along his jaw. Down to his throat, kissing. Sucking at him, tongue swiping over his skin. Her breasts pressing against his chest, hands resting on his hips as she rolls herself forward—his cock trapped between them as she curls his fingers around his hard shaft and braces his other hand against the tile. Stroking himself the way she would, slow, easy, idle. Perfect. Drawing his pleasure out of him, her hand and her belly and the rise of her mound, what he knows is waiting for him between her thighs, parting them so he can touch her—how wet she is, soaked even in the water. But even though he’s circling her clit and slipping a finger into her and catching her breath in the curved ceilings of her lungs, this is all about what she’s doing to him.

Stroking him faster, thumb against the base of his head—whispering to him as she jerks him off, her soft lips grazing his ear. That it’s all right, he can want this, he always could, he can have it, he’ll be good enough and she loves him and doesn’t this feel amazing, his cock and her hand, and there’s so much more, a great big world out there he can live in, but she has him now and she’s going to make him feel so good, going to make him come, make him go out of his mind—

Fucking her fist, fucking his own, tight moans twisting out of him, her name, her fucking name, because it’s a prayer as pure as anything. Beth. Beth, oh my God, please. Please.

Daryl, come. Come now. Come for me.
He does and it’s like cracking and breaking open, sobbing into the streams of water, into the rain, spilling warm into it and running away.

His back wrenched, and that wing bursting free of his skin.

~

He’s starting to think of this as Day Two. That’s suggestive of how this might go. He’s not sure what it’s suggesting, but he feels it all the same.

Day Two. Of? No idea how many. But of that, what he felt before, coming back into himself. The wing on his back is healing, the ink setting into his skin. He’s still not exactly sure what made him settle on one wing only, but he’s not going to question something that felt so right. He didn’t at the time, won’t start doing it now.

He wonders what Beth is going to think when she sees it. What she’s going to say.

He’s not worried. He thinks she might like it. He knows she’ll look at it and she’ll get it, and she’ll get it even more if he can tell her the story of what he thinks these days will turn out to be. However many of them there are in the end.

He got enough food that he won’t have to go out again for a while, so he doesn’t. He just sits. He sits on the floor, on the bed, in the sun. Dozes. Holds the wolf in his hands, traces its lines and curves. Passes his fingertip over its pricked ears. Stares into its blue eyes. It feels like it’s staring back at him. He wonders what it sees.

It occurs to him that he might be going very slightly crazy.

It occurs to him that he already was.

He was never well, he thinks. He opens the window in the late afternoon—there’s sun but clouds are creeping in and he wants to take the last of it while it’s here—and he swings his legs out and sits on the wide sill, bare feet dangling above the roof of the porch, and smokes. He was never well. He wasn’t born sick, but he got sick pretty quickly and he’s been sick since then. Broken inside. But that doesn’t mean he’s ruined, and it doesn’t mean he ruins things.

And anyway, he’s been inside ruins and he’s seen how alive they can be. How beautiful.

He’ll always have scars. He’ll always be broken, a little. But he doesn’t have to be sick. He can get better. He can get well.

That’s what this is. Some people go to a hospital to get well; he’s come into a house of light.

And this isn’t about being good enough for her. He’s starting to understand that too. He wants to be good for her, he wants to be worthy of her, but that’s not why he needs to do this. That’s not why he needs to get well. He would be that, need that, deserve that, without her.

He doesn’t need her to be a reason for him. Not anymore. He’s his own reason. And that’s plenty.

~

Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazzled—
to cast aside the weight of facts
and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world.
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing—
that the light is everything—that it is more than the sum
of each flawed blossom rising and falling. And I do.

Day Three. He washes, covers the tattoo with lotion, puts his last clean shirt on over it and resigns himself to the fact that he has to do laundry. He’s sharing a washer and dryer in the basement, to which there’s an external entrance—the other key he was given. He shoves what he has into his pack and heads down there.

Outside it’s cloudy and the wind is picking up. No rain—doesn’t feel like it, the air doesn’t have that unmistakable rain-smell—but the clouds are low and a bit threatening all the same.

As he slides the key into the lock and steps down into the dim, slightly humid mustiness of an old cellar, he finds himself entertaining the idea of snow.

Early yet. Too early. But eventually it could happen.

The light is on. Carol is here too—he sees her as he makes his way through a maze of shelves covered in cardboard boxes and bags and plastic containers, all unmarked and unlabeled, all mysterious and therefore intriguing. What would Cathy keep down here? Somehow he doesn’t think she would necessarily keep the same kinds of things that anyone else would.

As if there might be some kind of magic down here. Enchanted things.

Hey, why not. Wouldn’t be a whole lot weirder than anything else that’s happening to him right now.

Carol looks up as he approaches. She’s emptying powdered detergent into the washer, and when she lifts her head there’s no trace of alarm in her eyes. She probably heard him come down, so she wasn’t startled, but also maybe… Maybe she would be less alarmed anyway. She’s been here for a while now, same as him.

It wouldn’t surprise him very much if he’s not the only one this place is reaching into. Rearranging.

“Hi.” She looks him over—quick, and he can tell it’s involuntary. “Are you doing okay up there? Barely even heard you since the other day.”

He shrugs. Yes, he’s doing okay, but okay also doesn’t even begin to capture it. A shrug feels best. “Still gettin’… settled, I guess. I dunno.”

She goes back to the detergent. “You get some furniture?”

“Yeah. I mean… Some.” He’s not sure he wants to tell her details, because he’s not sure he feels like explaining why he’s stopped where he has—because how could he? It doesn’t make complete sense even to him. And he does think she would probably ask, in her way.

“All right, well… You let me know if you need anything.” She glances back, flicks her gaze down
to the pack hanging from his hand by one strap. “You want to toss your stuff in? I don’t have a lot, I don’t think there’s any point in you waiting.”

He looks down, mulls for a few seconds… And yeah, she’s right. There’s no point. He hands the pack over with a single quick nod.

She adds his clothes, shuts the lid, leaves the pack on top, and turns to him, regarding him thoughtfully. He gazes back, unperturbed. He’s not sure what could perturb him right now. He feels remarkably unbothered by everything.

Finally she shifts her stance and jerks her head in the direction of the other flight of steps, the other door. “You want to come in for some coffee?”

Sure.

~

The coffee is good. There are flaky pastry things and they’re good too. Like when they shared the lasagna, there isn’t much conversation, and also like then, there’s nothing particularly uncomfortable about that. Daryl is gathering the impression that—like him—she’s perfectly happy to be in someone’s company without any real need to interact with them in a direct way. That’s very promising. He could be into a neighbor like that.

Maybe not merely a neighbor. On his second pastry he allows himself to consider that possibility.

“What do you do?”

The question mildly startles him, but there’s no reason to withhold an answer. He shrugs again.

“Work on a farm.”

“Outside town?”

He nods.

“Just for the season?”

“Was. Seems like maybe longer now. Probably.” He pauses, and without meaning to, he shifts his gaze to the windows. The gray light. Still light, even gray. Still bright. “Ain’t got nowhere else to go.”

“Is that bad?”

Once it would have been. It would have been bad because everything was bad, everything about where he could go or be, because all of them amounted to a big fat nowhere. But that’s not what it feels like anymore. He has nowhere else to go, and that feels good. He doesn’t have to worry about where else to go. He can just be here.

“No.” He swings his gaze back to her. “What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What d’you do? Did you do?” He’s not sure the adjustment is necessary, but it seems like a safe enough assumption, and when her mouth twists—more than a little pained—he knows he was right. “I was… a housewife.” It’s not exactly scorn, but it’s in the general vicinity. “Ed wanted me to stay
home, take care of things. Take care of Sophia. Seemed like a good idea at first. I wasn’t going to argue. Obviously I wouldn’t have argued anyway, but…” She sighs, gives him her own half shrug and a very rueful smile. “If it was just Sophia… I did love taking care of her. I loved being with her all the time. She was… She was this one good thing.”

“But she still is, though. Right?” Gentle. There’s no way to be certain what she needs to hear right now—if anything—but when she talks about Sophia it’s like light breaks through into her face, faint and gray as the light outside but there nonetheless. “You’re gonna see her again.”

“I don’t know when. Not until I’m sure it’s safe.”

“You think he might come after you? Her?”

“Her…” Carol shakes her head. “He might come after her to get to me. He’ll be… He’d come after me, yes, I think he would. I don’t know if he will, but I can see him trying.”

And he’s not stupid enough to ask any questions about police or about having Ed arrested. He’s seen too much. He knows better. The law doesn’t tend to stop men like it seems Ed must be. Not effectively.

Something else has to.

“But you’re safe here?”

“Safe enough. He doesn’t know where this place is. I haven’t…” Her mouth twists again. “I didn’t talk to Cathy for a long time. Any of my family. He made that as hard as he could.”

Of course he did.

“Where you gonna go?” He’s asking an unusual number of questions. But he’s interested in the answers. They feel important. It feels important that he knows these things. Her safety is a no-brainer, but there’s other stuff. “You gonna stay here? You gonna go to Indiana?”

“I don’t know.” She looks down at her hands wrapped around her mug—soft hands, he notes. Almost delicate. But there’s also somehow a hardness about them. They’re necessary hands. They’re hands that have become accustomed to doing what they have to do without hesitation, and they’ve had a great deal to do. They’ve worked. They’re tired.

He has no idea how he knows all of this, how he can see it, but he can.

“I think…” She laughs quietly, shakes her head again, doesn’t look up. “I’m not even remotely ready to answer that question.”

“Don’t answer it, then. Wait till you’re ready.”

She finally looks up at him, brow slightly arched. “That simple?”

“That simple.”

“There’s something about this place,” she murmurs after a few moments of silence, looking up and around at the room. Dark wood, and light. Age but not death. Nothing at all like death.

Yes, she feels it too. It’s working on her, the same as it is on him.

“Yeah,” he whispers. “There is.”
And then I feel the sun itself
as it blazed over the hills,
like a million flowers on fire—
clearly I’m not needed,
yet I feel myself turning
into something of inexplicable value.

Day Four. He realizes, lying half on his side and half on his back and listening to morning rain drum gently on the glass, that it’s Sunday. Sunday, and raining, and of course it is, because that’s perfect. And he knows without having to go out into it that it’s cold rain, fall rain, but in here he’s warm, surrounded by softness, and there’s nowhere he has to be. He doesn’t have to get up. He doesn’t have to go anywhere. He doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to do. Later he should probably call the farm, update them on his entirely fictional condition if nothing else—and God, he’ll actually lie to them, just straight up lie, and he’s done it already and it wasn’t that difficult—but for right now…

Nothing.

He closes his eyes and the sound of the rain sweeps over him, settles against him like a blanket. He finds himself thinking about her again, her here with him, lying along his side with her head on his shoulder and the sweet, fresh smell of her hair filling him. And moving, pushing herself up, so easy and smooth, maybe not even entirely awake herself. But knowing what she wants, sliding a leg across him and straddling him, taking his cock in her hand and sinking down onto him. Not even moving after; simply resting there on top of him, feeling him inside her, her head fallen back and her eyes closed.

Lowering herself. Lying on his chest, head tucked under his chin, hands on his biceps, rolling her hips only slightly. This is not about fucking. This is not about coming. Her cunt is so warm and wet around him and her small body fits so perfectly into his arms; wrapping her up in them, sheathed in her, it feels like home.

This feels like home.

He’s so hard. But he doesn’t release it.

He burns.

He calls the farm. It’s a short conversation, but like before, it’s not a difficult one. It’s becoming clear to him that he’s earned himself a fair amount of credit with them—being reliable, making no trouble about anything, doing his work well. They assume this is legitimate. They believe what he’s telling them about being sick. They trust him.

That might not last for too terribly much longer, but they do.

And he doesn’t feel guilty. Not about this. Because it’s not even really a lie. He was sick. He is getting better. Someone might see that as an excuse, but it doesn’t feel like one. It feels like a truth embedded in him, inextricable.

He’s getting better. And he thinks it’s going faster now.
Later—much later, around nine, sitting with his back against the wall and the lamp between his knees, he calls Beth.

He’s not afraid of doing it. He doesn’t even have to think about it. He simply knows he’s ready for it and he does it. Her number: it rings, and while he waits her for to pick up—or not, whatever she ends up doing—he moves his fingers slowly over the open top of the lamp and watches the shadows on the ceiling shift and dance.

He’s had a bit to drink. Not a lot. For the taste as much as it makes him feel, and that’s something else new: he likes the way whiskey *tastes*.

He never really tasted it before. Never paid attention. It never mattered.

It picks up after three rings. Her voice, low—she’s keeping it down, but not to the extent that he thinks she’s with other people.

“*Daryl?*”

He closes his eyes briefly, hand going still. God, her *voice*. It’s like he couldn’t breathe before and now suddenly he can—a full inhalation. “Hey.”

“*Hi. I… It’s good to hear you.*”

He takes the words and turns each one over in his mind, careful, thorough. Examining. She’s surprised. She’s slightly breathless. There are other things—uncertainty. Apprehension, even—a current of tightness under everything. She’s not sure what she’s going to get here.

She doesn’t sound impatient. She doesn’t sound angry. Small wonders, but wonders nonetheless.

“Yeah. You too.” He pauses, but it’s not because he’s working up any courage. He doesn’t need courage for this. He can tell her what he’s feeling. “I miss you so fuckin’ much, Beth.”

“Oh.” Not surprise this time—except maybe a little. Maybe she wasn’t expecting to hear that, so suddenly and so soon. And no hesitation. He just said it. “*I miss you too. I’ve been…*” She swallows. “*I know you said you were alright, but I’ve been worryin’. Kinda. I didn’t wanna call you, not yet, I figured*…”

She trails off, but she doesn’t need to finish the sentence. His heart pounds against his ribs, knocking like it wants him to open up and let it loose. Kind girl. More merciful than he’ll ever deserve, no matter what else happens to or inside him.

“I… Thanks. Thank you.”

Silence. Once more, he senses that she might not have been expecting that. That specific response, that sentiment.

“*Are you? Alright?*”

“Yeah.” Another thing he doesn’t have to think about—it *comes* from him, slips right out. Flows. Easy. He is. He is all right. “I am. I’m doin’…” He breathes a laugh, tilts his head back, and moves his hand. Dappled light on the ceiling. His fingers are branches nodding in the breeze. “Think I’m doin’ really good.”
She releases her own breath, and he can see her. He can see her so clearly. Her surroundings are unclear, but the rest of her is as vivid as if she was right in front of him. Hair lying over one shoulder, face soft, big blue doe-eyes shining. Cheeks just a bit flushed. Fingers against her lips, maybe. Those small, full lips.

So beautiful.

“Can I see you yet?”

“Not yet.” It hurts to say, but not so much. Because yet is no longer so indefinite. He doesn’t know how close it is, but it doesn’t feel so distant anymore. “Soon. I think. Probably soon.”

Fingers moving in slow waves.

“You get it, right? You know why.”

“Know why what?”

“And he can almost hear a smile.

“Why I’m doin’ this.”

She doesn’t answer for a long moment. He lets his eyes fall closed again, his fingers dangling. The breeze has died down. He doesn’t know what she’s going to say, but he’s more than happy to wait. She’s waited through his own silences, his own periods where he struggled to gather himself, struggled to find the right words for her. Sometimes failed. She’s always given him space for things like that, and that’s what makes it easier for the words to come. Or did, in the end.

And she does answer, finally. A murmur so quiet it’s nearly a whisper.

“After I cut my wrist, I… I was in the hospital a day. Just while they sorted some things out. They didn’t leave me alone that whole time. Someone was always with me. Like they thought I’d try somethin’ again, y’know?”

He makes an affirmative sound. So she’ll know he’s listening, and also because he does know, or he can sort of imagine. But he’s understanding that just as she’ll never truly know the horror that gave him his scars, he’ll never be able to be with her in that moment when she tried to make herself die. It’s not a question of will, or desire, or love. It’s simply that he isn’t her. She isn’t him. He wants to be with her, wants to be with her more than he’ll ever want anything, but all he can be is himself. All he needs to be is himself.

“And I mean… I got it, but I was already sure I wasn’t gonna. I didn’t want to. Not anymore. But they drove me crazy, hangin’ around me like that. Mama and Shawn and Maggie… And Daddy, Daddy was the worst.” She’s definitely smiling now, smiling and it’s bleeding into him, pulling at the corners of his mouth. Fond, amused, a little bittersweet and a little sad, and here her smile cracks and he wants so desperately to hold her. “He was so scared. I didn’t know how to tell him I was sorry. I tried, but he… And you know, the really bad part was I knew he would’ve helped me if he could. He would’ve done anythin’. But he didn’t know how. And I didn’t know how to help him help me. Any of ‘em. It wasn’t that they didn’t love me. Wasn’t that I didn’t love them. We just didn’t know how.”

He’s silent. Letting her go, letting her say it how she needs to say it. And it’s so much more than enough to sit and listen to her voice, so close, right there with him. Musical, like singing even when she’s telling him about this, even when she’s opening her own box of darkness and letting him see inside.

So much like singing. Because she needs to. She can’t not.
“After they got me home, it was pretty much the same. They never left me alone. Not once. Maggie always in my room, or Mama—Daddy and Shawn not so much but they were still there—and the thing was... They hadn’t really started me on the medication yet, and I wasn’t talkin’ to a doctor, but I could already feel it... goin’ away. It was. Not a lot, but it was like... There was this crack in me, and the light was gettin’ in. And all I wanted to do was be there and feel it, and I couldn’t do that with them all over me.

“So soon as I could, soon as I had a chance at all, I got outta there. I got outta the house. I got outside. It was spring, early, and everythin’ was startin’ to really get green, and that’s... I knew the mill was there, the ruins, but that was when I started spendin’ time in them. Just... Goin’ there. Bein’ by myself. Thinkin’.”

She pauses, a long pause, breathing slow and deep, and that’s when he feels the tears on his face, and he doesn’t try to stop them.

*My girl, you’re so blessed.*

“When I started talkin’ to my doctor, she said I should keep doin’ it. Said it was good for me. And she... She gave me the book.”

She stops again and her breath is shaking, and he knows it’s her too, her tears, them together, and it makes no difference that he can’t touch her or see her, because she’s with him in every way that matters.

“She said... People love you. You need them. You can’t live without them. They help you. But in the end the only person who can make you well is you.”

He waits until he’s sure she’s done speaking. Waits longer. Gives her words a chance to sink into him, takes them in and folds himself around them. He had no way of knowing that she would say this. Except he did. He completely did. Wiping at his face, pulling in his own shuddering breaths, he knows he knew. Knows he was ready to hear it.

That’s why he called. That’s why he reached for her.

“Beth,” he whispers. “Listen.”

It’s not in the book. He wouldn’t need the book even if it was. He remembers every word.

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*You do not have to be good.*
*You do not have to walk on your knees*
*for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.*
*You only have to let the soft animal of your body*
*love what it loves.*
*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.*
*Meanwhile the world goes on.*
*Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain*
*are moving across the landscapes,*
*over the prairies and the deep trees,*
*the mountains and the rivers.*
*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,*
*are heading home again.*
*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,*
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

Days Five. Six. The same. The sun comes back out, patchy through the clouds. He looks at it, watches it move and feels things moving inside himself—that slow process of rearranging. Reorganization. He’s drying in the light, waiting to extend. Waiting to spread.

He’s not fool enough to think that this will be over when he calls her again. When he emerges. Something like this goes on for a long time after it starts. It might go on for a lifetime. Like what happened to her—she said it came back sometimes, maybe not as bad but there. People change, get better, but people also relapse. Happens all the time.

But if it does, it doesn’t mean anything is ruined.

He rests in the sun. On the landing outside, slowly working through the last of his cigarettes. He looks around the room and he begins—tentatively, vaguely—to imagine what else he might do with it. What else might be here someday. Being here long enough for there to be a someday. Wanting to be. It’s not about having nowhere else to go; he doesn’t want to go anywhere else. Right here is the only place he can imagine wanting to be.

He doesn’t see Carol again but he knows she’s down there, and the knowing is pleasant. Grounding. It helps anchor him to everything.

He watches the last of the leaves starting to turn. By the second week of November they’ll all be gone.

On the night of Day Six he sees Merle.

Makes himself to see Merle. He sits on the bed, propped up with pillows, and sees Merle standing in front of him, middle of the floor, wearing that awful orange prison jumpsuit. Standing there and looking at Daryl with his tired old eyes.

Merle doesn’t offer any excuses. Doesn’t berate him. Doesn’t say anything. Neither does Daryl. They gaze at each other across an expanse of floor, Merle a ghost there and Daryl more and more solid here all the time.

Maybe this could have gone another way. Maybe there was no other way it could have gone. The speculation is pointless; it did go that way, and there’s no going back now.

After a while, Merle fades away and disappears. He leaves no trace behind. Daryl watches this happen, and as it does something in him—already broken open—widens. Expands. Spreads itself and flexes and discovers that it can be strong.

It hurts. But it’s good.

I was thinking:
So this is how you swim inward,
So this is how you flow outward,
So this is how you pray.

Day Seven. Sun, thin and idle. He calls her that night, standing in the center of the room – exactly where Merle was—looking at the bed he made. For her. For them.

_Beth._ A single breath. He didn’t know how he would know, but he had faith. And it didn’t kill him.

_I’m ready._

Chapter End Notes

Poem snippets are, in order:

The Kookaburras
The Summer Day
Crows
The Ponds
The Buddha's Last Instruction
Wild Geese
Five A.M. in the Pinewoods
I want to breathe that fire again

It would be wonderful to say he was zen after that.

He would love to be able to make that claim. It would be so great to say that he wasn’t nervous, that he didn’t turn in circles around the room, brain turning in circles of its own as it tried to figure out what the fuck he needed to do to make this presentable to her. Would be great to say that he wasn’t panicking, knowing that it was stupid to panic and panicking all the same. She wasn’t coming until the night after; he had a whole day, and it would be great to be able to say that he used that time to be calm, ease himself into the idea of opening this place up to someone else, to simply think about how amazing it’s going to be to see her again in any context at all.

It would be great to say that.

Daryl Dixon is still not very good at lying. So that’s not happening.

Sort of sunny. Cool. He didn’t sleep well the night before—not fitfully, but his dreams were surreal, overly colorful, crammed with more sensory input than he’s used to. He thrashed around. Got tangled in the sheets even more than he has before. Woke up and thought he could hear voices—not threatening or creepy, at least not much of the last, but he couldn’t escape the conviction that what they were saying was important and he had to pick it out. He knows that he was half dreaming, in that liminal space between consciousness and something deeper, but at the time it seemed intensely real.

And it feels like so long since he saw her. So much longer than it’s been. Speaking of liminal, it also feels like he’s passed through a larger version of that space and now he’s looking back across it at something profoundly different from where he is now. He knows that’s not true—you don’t change that much in a week—but to some degree it is.

He’s not entirely who he was.

He’s not sure what she’s going to make of the place, the room, not sure what she’s going to make of what he’s doing with it—which, in fairness, isn’t terribly much—but most of all he’s not sure what she’s going to make of him.

And he didn’t expect to feel that way.

He leans against the railing outside and smokes his last cigarette, and looks at things. Nothing in particular. The leaves drifting into piles under the oak tree. The occasional car passing out on the street. The high, unruly hedge that mostly obscures the next yard over. Starlings in it, popping in and out and arguing shrilly.

Beth is coming over between eight and nine. He doesn’t know what excuse she’s invented to be able to do so, but she hadn’t seemed worried, so he’s not going to.

He’s going to try.

He washes the sheets. They come out softer. He remakes the bed, sits on it and stares down at the floor, his hands. He picks up the wolf and holds it, once again explores every well-known centimeter of it with his fingertips. It’s centering, like her hand in his, and he calls the farm and tells them he’ll be back tomorrow. He does this almost absentmindedly; it doesn’t require the screwing-up of any courage. If he’s ready to see Beth, he’s ready to go back to work. It’s that simple.
He finds, after he cuts the call, that he’s looking forward to it. It’s been good, being in here. Being quiet, being calm. Being. But that’s not really what he is, even if it was what he needed. Something the farm has taught him is that he likes working. He likes feeling useful. He doesn’t completely feel like himself if he’s not doing that.

Understanding what feeling like himself even means.

He’s going to go back and he’s going to keep getting better.

So after that he’s calmer.

~

And he’s calm that night when there’s a knock on the door, and he’s calm when he goes to answer it, and somehow he manages to be calm when he opens it and Beth is standing there in a jacket and a striped yellow and black tutu with a pack on her back and little yellow-ball antennae bobbing on her head.

But he does stare at her for a bit.

Her hair is spilling over her shoulders, she’s slightly flushed, her eyes wide and subtly lined and her lips parted and subtly glossy pink, and she’s showing a lot of black-tight leg, and the whole effect is confusing in a whole bunch of different ways.

“Hi.”

Breathless. Excited. She’s excited to be here. That makes him happy, but he still doesn’t get the whole tutu business.

He stands aside and watches her as she walks in—ignores the packaging for the moment and observes how she slows down, how she’s really looking at the room, taking it in. There isn’t much to take in; he hasn’t bought anything additional, hasn’t done anything special. Considered it briefly, then decided against it.

He wants her to see this space the way it’s been, while he’s been in it. What he’s been seeing these past seven days. For some reason that seems important.

He shuts the door. “Why are you dressed like a fuckin’ bee?”

She turns, one hand on the strap of her backpack, brow arched—looking at him like he’s the one being weird. “It’s Halloween? I was at a party.”

“Oh.” He had no idea. He knew it was coming, but he hasn’t really been out of the house in days, has been—he supposes—enclosed in his own personal tangent universe, and the neighborhood is quiet. As far as he’s been able to tell, there aren’t many kids around here. Aren’t many people who were even recently kids.

He gives her half a shrug, the barest edge of a smile. “I don’t really celebrate.”

“Yeah, got that. Unless your costume is Daryl Dixon with no shoes on.”

She’s no longer looking at him. She’s returned the majority of her focus to the room, and she slings
her pack down on the floor and moves into the center of the space, scanning up and around and all over with her little antennae nodding on their springy stalks. The lamp by the bed is the only illumination, and it does what it always does from this angle—which he likes—and throws strange shadows against the walls and ceiling. Catches her, her arms and legs, and stretches them out, lengthens and broadens, and with the way they move as she moves, he’s once again put in mind of trees.

Except not exactly. Her and how she is and how she changes this place merely by being in it... What he sees on the walls isn’t like trees at all. There’s no word for what it’s like.

That keeps happening.

Yes, even with her dressed as a bee.

She stays in roughly the center of the room for a moment or two, then crosses to the other door—the one that leads to the interior stairs—and touches the old wood. She runs her hand over it, her fingers trailing, and he knows what she’s feeling—the gentle roughness, the scratches and dents and dings that no longer feel anything like damage, the coolness of it and the way it gets smoother near the crystal knob. And she moves on from there, walking along the wall and toward the space reserved for the kitchen, her gaze somehow everywhere and nowhere at once. There’s nothing over there yet—no furniture, not even any of his stuff, because he’s keeping it all confined to his area by the central windows—but she takes her time, reaching the cul-de-sac of the kitchen and sliding her palm along the countertop. She’s abandoned her old boots for the present and put on newer ones, black and buckled, the kind of vague approximation to biker boots that seems currently fashionable, and the heels clack pleasantly on the bare floor. And slowly. Steady and well-spaced noises, marking her progress.

He knows what he’s seeing. She’s done it with him. She’s doing to this room, this space—his space—what she’s done with his body.

Exploring it. Giving it her full attention.

He’s not entirely sure why watching her do this now should make him want her with sudden burning ferocity, but it does.

She makes the full circuit—passing by the entranceway that leads to the hall that in turn leads to the bathroom and the two bedrooms—and comes around to the wide windows and at last to what he thinks of as his camp, to his bed and his light, his pack, his clothes, the crossbow leaning against the wall, the book and the crystal wolf.

She stops and gazes down at these things, and then she looks up at him.

“Don’t got a lotta stuff yet.”

He shrugs, abruptly self-conscious. Not very, not even all that uncomfortable about it, but. “Don’t need a lotta stuff.”

“Will you? Get more?”

He shrugs again. He would say yes, is beginning to think yes, but the truth is that he still doesn’t really know. He thought about those items that first day—Day Zero—and they seemed so fundamentally unnecessary, and they still do.

He’s happy here. He’s happy with what he has. He has a bed and food, and light, and he’s warm and he has something to read, time and space in which to think about things, work to do tomorrow...
he doesn’t want anything else.

And her. She’s standing right in front of him. Almost close enough to touch.

“I like it,” she says softly, looking around at it again. Her face is as soft as her voice, her eyes bright, and his heart is a sweet knot under his breastbone. “I like it a lot. It feels good.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “Yeah, it... It does.”

She returns her gaze to the bed, his other possessions—and stops, and he knows what she sees. She moves to the side of the bed, crouches—the yellow balls at the end of her antennae nodding like flowers in a breeze—and picks up the book. Slowly, and with care. As if it’s delicate.

She doesn’t look particularly surprised.

“You bought it?”

He shakes his head. “It was here.”

“When you moved in?”

“Mmhm.”

She studies him for a moment. He meets her eyes with no hesitation and no difficulty, though he’s not certain how to understand what’s there.

He isn’t even really noticing the bee thing anymore.

She puts the book down again—just as careful—and picks up the wolf, lifts it so the light catches it, and turns it over and over, following the shifting flow of its shape. She appears half entranced by it. Hypnotized. He lets her go, lets her be. He needed his time to be in this place, to fit into it; he doesn’t think she’ll need nearly as much time as he did, but he can’t rush her. Can’t even nudge.

Then he realizes what he was thinking. That she’ll fit into it. That she’ll be here. With him. Not a question, not a desire. He knows it.

When he was nine years old a revivalist preacher came through and set up shop, got people together, made noise. No one in Daryl’s experience of childhood was especially devout, but it was something new and it was a hot, droning summer, and he and Merle were both deeply bored, so they went to see what they could see. And it was a bunch of half incoherent bullshit as far as Daryl could make out—a lot of yelling and wild gesticulation and hellfire and sin and the anointed meeting Christ Jesus in the air while the damned suffered through the years of Tribulation—but there was one thing, one single thing like a beam of light breaking through thick cloud, a phrase that never left him. Never seemed like much good, either, but for some reason he never forgot it. The red-faced preacher with his white halo of wild hair, his bulging eyes, accusingly pointing finger, and then these words—like they didn’t have anything to do with anything the man was saying. Like they didn’t have anything to do with him at all.

*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

He gets it now.

“That was here too.”

She’s still looking at the wolf, still fascinated. Turning and turning. “People before you left ‘em?”
He’s about to say yes—And stops. Seems like a no-brainer; he saw those objects there, saw them on their bookshelf. They were possessions of those unseen now-former tenants. Of course they must have left them here.

But he’s not so sure. He’s not sure assumptions like that are so safe, in this place.

So he merely shrugs.

She raises her head and gives him a slightly quizzical look, but she seems content to let it go. She puts the wolf down again—exactly where it was—and straightens up, absently brushing off her bushy yellow tulle skirt, though there wouldn’t be any dust on it.

“There’s more?”

“Yeah. Two other rooms. But I ain’t... Not gonna do nothin’ with ‘em yet.” Little smile. “I figure I should deal with this one first.”

“One was gonna be Merle’s,” she says, soft again, and though it’s like the memory of a punch in the gut he feels no resentment for it.

He nods.

“Can I see ‘em?”

He shows them to her. He hasn’t truly been in them since he moved in—has had no reason to be so—and they feel even bigger than he remembers. So white and blank and empty, smaller than the main room but somehow seeming to echo far more. He doesn’t dislike them, but as he stands there and watches her look around in the shadowless overhead light, he’s not at all comfortable in them. Not yet.

He’ll figure out the main room. Finish settling into it. Then, when he’s ready, he’ll expand his territory. But there’s no reason to push himself too soon.

He’s ready, he called her, she’s here. Day Seven was the last day. But this isn’t over, and there’s no set timeline. Things will happen when they’re ready to happen.

They end up out in the hallway—longer than the stubby rectangle of space in the old place but not much room—and she moves closer to him, tips her head back and gazes up at him, places her hands against his chest. And that’s... He might be better with words than he used to be, at least when it comes to her, but there’s no way in hell he would ever be able to describe what that touch does to him. Like her hands sink into him, like they melt his shirt and press through his skin and flesh and ribs as if he’s made of warm clay. She’s all heat, searing him; he knows that’s not true—knows that, if anything, the cool from outside lingers in her—but it feels truer than anything he knows could gainsay.

The first time she’s touched him—really touched him—since he came here. Since everything started. The first time.

He’s getting way more of those than he ever thought would be possible.

He must have done something, must have shown some of it on his face, because he focuses on her and she’s frowning. She hasn’t moved her hands.

“Are you alright?”
He nods. Releases a long breath. Ducks his head and—somehow—lifts his own hands and closes them over her wrists, not trying to pull her away from him but merely holding on.

“I wanna touch you,” she murmurs. God, her eyes. He has no idea what to do with her eyes. It’s dim here—no light but what’s coming from the main room, and that’s not much of anything—but her eyes are fucking glowing, a clear and brilliant blue.

Crystalline.

He shudders. He had no expectations. He was smart enough to keep those well away. But if he did have any, she would be confounding the fuck out of them all.

Which she does. He should expect that much.

“Daryl...” She gently frees one of her wrists—her left one, simple black leather cuff that he’s not sure he’s ever seen before—and lays her cool palm against his cheek. “I didn’t come here to... We don’t have to do anythin’, that’s not what I’m sayin’. Not if you don’t want, if you don’t feel ready, or... I just wanted to see you. I just wanna touch you. Doesn’t matter how.”

It’s difficult to look at her. Not because it’s too much, not because he feels far too stripped and laid bare—once that would have been why, but he thinks that might be over now. It’s difficult to look at her because it literally hurts him, how long it feels like he’s been without her, how close she is, how he can smell her, all those wonderful scents that combine and commingle into Beth Greene: her shampoo, soap, sweat, the faint closet-smell of the fabric of her jacket, and beneath it all a deep, rich current of arousal.

She didn’t come here to fuck him. But she wants to. She wants to, and she’s holding back. She’s letting him move, letting him decide. Letting him lead.

Waiting until he’s ready.

“You can touch me,” he breathes, and reaches up, settles his hands on either side of her jaw, thumbs against her cheeks. And he pauses there, feeling her, and maybe her hands are cool but her body is a furnace, her neck, like her heart is pumping fire up through her veins. Her hand has fallen away from his face and found his chest again, splayed over his heart.

She’s still waiting. Staring up at him, tongue passing over her lips, flash of her teeth. Her eyes still glowing with that stained-crystal light.

She can touch him, Jesus, let her touch him. Let her touch him anywhere she wants to. Let her touch him everywhere. He doesn’t even care whether or not he fucks her. He wants her hands on him, all that burning skin, all that tightly contained sunfire.

In a bee costume.

He breaks at that, seeing it again very suddenly and finding it impossible to ignore this time. All at once he’s laughing—quiet, small—and she’s arching a brow at him, her fingers curling into his shirt.

“What?”

“You look fuckin’ ridiculous is what.” He reaches up and plucks the antennae hairband off her head, tosses it onto the floor with a soft clatter. “Why a bee?”

“I like bees.” She doesn’t sound defensive. She also hasn’t released him. “Bees are cute. You don’t like bees?”
“Don’t really give a shit one way or the other.”

“So I don’t need to keep it on, then.” Teasing smile, and she presses closer, right up against him, last of the space between them gone. He didn’t have to tell her it was all right. She knew. She knew, and when she’s this close to him, her hips and belly flush with him, she has to know something else.

“No.” He takes her face in his hands, angles her, moves her gently where he wants her and lowers himself to meet her. “Not if you don’t wanna.”

“I don’t—” she breathes, and then his lips curve over hers and she doesn’t say anything at all.

It’s not like any kiss they’ve ever had. He’s ever had.

When she kissed him that first time in the truck it was quick, fleeting, sudden with the fact that she dared and the daring excited her but maybe also scared her a bit. Then in the rain, sudden again and hard, desperate, everything he wanted to say and couldn’t, given to her in his body and his mouth and wracked with terror and shame and the certainty that she wasn’t going to understand and wasn’t going to want him even if she did. And the ruins, hard once more and deep—not desperate but strong, because she knew what she wanted and she wasn’t going to deny herself. Deny him.

This is light. Careful. Delicate, like he’s never done it before. With her.

With anyone.

It actually feels like that. It feels so new. How she’s soft under his mouth, his hands, her pulse racing beneath his fingers, how her lips part and her tongue flicks against him, as teasing as her smile, inviting him in. How he does, he slips into her, and she tilts her head and sighs and uses the grip on his shirt to tug him closer—how she rocks her hips forward just enough to put pressure on his hardening cock, and that rushes heat so fast and forceful through the core of him to his brain that it’s dizzying.

And that doesn’t even feel entirely connected to him. It’s there—that thick, heavy pleasure, what it might become—but everything is her mouth, her taste, the faint vibration of the moan that slips out of her, her lips moving in the outlines of his name.

He’s been waiting for that. For so long. For how she says it, what’s behind it.

“I wanna touch you,” she repeats in a hoarse whisper, sliding her lips away. His cheek, his jaw; it’s his turn to moan, fingers toying with loose strands of her hair. “Daryl, I... I want you. So bad. We don’t have to, but I do, I want you, please...”

He’s already moving.

He saw her in her bikini top that day. He saw her and he felt the sickening wrench of the most fundamental want he had ever felt for anyone or anything, and then later in the shower he thought about sliding the ties down her shoulders, sliding it all off her, baring her breasts for his hands and his mouth, and he can do that now and he does. The jacket doesn’t so much fall off her as vanish, and then she’s sighing again and curving her neck and closing her hands over his hips, fingers hooking into his beltloops and pulling him harder against her as he tugs the black straps of the tutu slowly down her shoulders. Leaning back as he does. Watching her, watching what he’s doing. It’s dim in the hall but he can see enough: the graceful dips of her collarbones, swells of her breasts, still obscured and then not anymore.

She’s not wearing a bra. Her nipples are standing out small and dark pink in the low light.
He feels the surge of a strange kind of wonder as he closes his hands over them. Cups them. Hard little nubs under his palms. She gasps, pushes herself into it.

He didn’t dream about this. He couldn’t have.

“Daryl.” She swallows and stares up at him, eyes half-lidded. Moving, fingers under the hem of his shirt, gliding across his stomach. His muscles twitch and he pulls in another sharp gasp and laughs. “Every single night I’ve been thinkin’ about makin’ you come.”

*Oh my God.*

His moan is more like a ragged sob, and he shoves her backward, pins her against the wall.

It’s very confusing. His hands are trying to be everywhere at once. Hers too. Dragging her tutu the rest of the way down, attempting to help her step out of it without her falling, tights and panties, her wrist cuff, and her abruptly naked in only her boots and fumbling at his fly. And kissing, the whole time kissing, kissing her so deep and so hard he might be trying to eat her alive. All that softness gone as he gets her legs spread and his hand between them, stroking her slick, wet lips and drawing a shiver out of her, but it’s not like it has been. Not like it was. It’s not desperate.

He has no reason to be desperate now.

This is so good. So fucking *good.* Her clever hand on his cock, tugging him out and squeezing him around the base and him groaning against her cheek, *yes,* that’s so fucking good and he already can’t even think, can merely lose himself in what she’s doing to him. And he wants it. Wants it so bad he almost can’t stand up.

But he doesn’t need it. He could not have it, and he wouldn’t die.

His shirt joins the rest of her things. She’s kicking off her boots and they thump against the baseboard behind him and she laughs into his mouth. His pants and shorts and her helping him with that, and then he’s as naked as she is and digging his fingers into her hips, rolling his cock against her belly, more firmly when she reaches between them and grasps him again.

He could do it right here. Lift her, forget about condoms and consequences and fuck her right here against the goddamn wall, fuck her until he has to swallow her screams. He could do that.

But he doesn’t want to. Not here, not really. Because this feels so *new,* this feels like the first time, her body and everything he knows he can do with it, and there’s a way and a place in which he fell into that. Once. Twice. Even if she wasn’t *there* with him.

She is now.

All at once he pulls free and steps back, and she wobbles, catches herself on the wall behind her, and blinks up at him in slightly disappointed surprise. “Daryl, what—?”

But he grins. Lightly slaps the side of her thigh.

“Bathroom. C’mon.”

And then she gets it, and she’s grinning too.

Apparently they can’t do anything with any significant degree of coordination, so they’re stumbling when they make it there, trying to arch their mouths together, tongues and teeth, but it’s not that far, and he extricates himself long enough to cut the shower on.
He actually thought he understood what people mean by *can’t keep their hands off each other.*

He’s bending in with a hand under the spray, making sure it won’t burn or freeze them, when he hears her soft breath and he remembers.

He had nearly forgotten. Completely forgotten, in fact. He hasn’t felt it in a while.

All he’s been able to feel is her.

He doesn’t move, doesn’t turn. He wants her to look. Somewhere, at some point, every ugly shard of fear he used to feel about this melted away and now it’s easy—mostly—to give it to her. To show her.

And now he *wants* to show her. Because he did something important. That he didn’t do it for her makes no difference.

Her fingers tracing its edge. It’s rough, peeling. He takes his own soft breath.

“Does it hurt?”

“No. No, it’s fine.” He swallows, smiles faintly. “It’s healin’.”

Her fingers keep moving. Like they did with his scars that night he revealed them to her—careful. Exploring. Not wanting to push him, but relentless in her merciful way. Sure he’s strong enough to take it. Sure he’s strong enough to know that he doesn’t have to be afraid.

She loves him. It’s so simple—and when he can make himself accept it, it’s everything,

“When did you get it?”

“Day after I got here.” He hesitates, thinking over the words. “I just... It felt... I needed to.”

She’ll understand.

“It’s so beautiful,” she whispers, and something aching turns over inside him and his breath catches in his throat.

“Ain’t done yet.”

“When?”

“Couple weeks. Maybe. Has to heal some more first.”

She doesn’t say anything else. She keeps touching it, touching him, keeps drawing her fingers over its outer edge, and he remains motionless, his eyes half closed, the sound of the water washing away everything but that touch.

Then there’s her warmth, the puff of her breath, and he knows it’s coming as she does it—her lips, feather-light, hardly on him at all.

But it pulses in him, bright. It flashes behind his eyes, and he makes a sound that’s more a quiet murmur than a moan, a hint of her name. He reaches back for her as she reaches forward, around him, his hand settling on her thigh and hers wrapping around his cock, mouth against his wing.

She told him it was beautiful, the wing. She told him he was too. Not what people normally mean when they say things like that. All of him. His scars. His cock. He wanted her to stop. Didn’t believe her. Couldn’t.

He still doesn’t. Not himself. But he’s beginning to believe that someday he might.

“Beth.” He lays his hand over hers. “Come with me.”

He’s not only talking about the shower.

He’s not completely sure what he’s talking about.

He steps in, takes her wrist and tugs her in after him, and the world dissolves into nothing but the drops of water clinging to his lashes making a bokeh of light, her skin, the steam, her in the circle of his arms and trailing her lips down his neck, collarbones, chest. For a few seconds she’s pressing him back against the tile—he jumps with how cold it is and she giggles and nips him—and then he has her by the shoulders and turns her, her back to him, ass curved so perfectly against his cock and even better when she arches and gives him a shimmy.

He curls his arms around her and simply holds her as her panting breaths slow. For the moment—sudden, technically, but it’s like the most natural transition in the world—he’s not touching her anywhere but there. Not her breasts, not her cunt. He’s pausing. Hanging them above this, suspended.

“Calm down, girl.” He smiles against the shell of her ear and she shudders, breaths a tiny laugh. “Just... We got time. Be calm.”

Be.

She does. The pace of her breathing continues to ease and she gradually relaxes against him, pleasure-tight muscles going loose. Her heart was pounding through her ribs; it’s deep, heavy, but it’s also slow. And him with her, sliding into the same place, his cheek against the crown of her head as he slips into the trance of the warm, steady spray. The truth is that he’s not sure how much time they have, and maybe he should be worrying about that, but this week has felt like a month, longer, and now that he has her he wants to be with her.

Whatever time they have, he wants to take it.

“This is nice,” she murmurs after a few moments, and he hears the smile. He lifts a hand and traces a single fingertip along the seam of her lips, and yes: there it is.

“Yeah.”

“Never done this either.”

“Figured.” His tone is gently teasing. Went without saying, but he thinks he might understand why she wanted to say it. They’re listing things when they do this. Taking inventories of Nevers, of Firsts. He takes a breath. “Neither have I.”

“Everythin’s softer.” She doesn’t explain what she means by that and she doesn’t have to; he couldn’t agree more.

Soft and so right, like everything else—like how it feels to take the hand at her mouth and glide it down her throat and lower, to her breast, pausing there to stroke her nipple before it moves on to points beyond. She could have tensed up but instead she’s relaxing even more, leaning back with a
deep sigh, head tipped against his shoulder.

“Been thinkin’ about you too.” He stops at her bush, pets his fingers over it; her hair is somehow both slightly coarse and soft along with everything else. “Been thinkin’ about this.”

“All week?”

“Yeah.” Maybe not in the center of his attention, but it’s been there on the periphery: her cunt, her cunt as her and not some disconnected part of her anatomy, how she gives it to him. Gives herself like a gift. Touching her, knowing how good he can make her feel. How close to her he can be.

“You can have it.” Like she can read his mind. Maybe she can. She spreads her legs, her hands resting on his forearm where he’s holding her against him. “Daryl, you can have anythin’ you want.”

Oh, girl, so can you. My girl, you can have everything.

He goes where he can tell she wants him, his fingers erasing the last fraction of distance, and she gasps and lets out another one of those moaning laughs as he finds her clit. “Daryl...” She had picked her head up; now she drops it back again, her neck arched and her mouth falling open. “Oh... Oh, that feels so good...”

“Yes?” Yes, it does. Everything about her says it does, canting her hips against his hand, chasing him but not with any real intensity. Everything has gone loose and lazy, idle, and she’s going to take it as it comes.

“I... I. Ah—Please. More.”

He gives her more. It’s nice when she pretty much begs him, but it’s not necessary right now. She rolls again, seeking the teasing, circling pressure of his fingers, and he kisses her ear. Grazes her with his teeth. Bites.

“Did this to yourself?”

“I...oh God. Yeah, I did.”

“Made like it was me?”

She nods, words briefly gone. “Mm.”

“You know I love doin’ this.” A little faster, pressing harder. Lower for a few seconds, nudging between her lips, inhaling sharply when he feels how soaked she is. Not the water, so smooth and slick, using it to make his own rapid movements better for her. Those low moans, ragged-edged—that’s what he wants more of. “Beth, I love doin’ this so fuckin’ much.”

“It’s.” She rolls her head, her hips, and he glimpses a wide smile curving her mouth, something like happiness but somehow deeper. “It’s perfect, Daryl, it’s so... I love it... Make me come, please, I wanna come, I wanna come so bad, I’m so close...”

In her again, a single finger, and the angle is awkward but he makes it work and fucks slowly into her, thumb on her clit. And he already knew the awkwardness wouldn’t matter; she sucks in a breath, stiffens, twists in his arms and releases a low cry as it takes her and ripples through her, more and more of it, clutching at his arm and craning her neck to press her hot, open mouth to his jaw.

Daryl Daryl oh my God yes yes that’s so good oh God yes.
Yes.

And she slips back down.

He’s still moving in her, letting her clit be, and she goes loose again, eyes closed and her breathing deep and even easier than before. Like always, he forgot himself for those few moments, but now he feels it again, how fucking hard he is, and he’s burned for her all this week but he wants real fire.

The flames roaring in her.

He kisses the patch of skin under her ear, the side of her throat, and reaches around her to cut off the water.

She murmurs sleepily when he helps her out and wraps a towel around her. She barely moves, and he’s perfectly content to dry her, rubbing the terrycloth gently over her skin, her hair, bending his head and kissing her now and then. And after a few minutes she murmurs again, almost words, and finally takes the towel and blinks up at him.

He’s making puddles all over the floor. Provided it doesn’t start leaking through the downstairs ceiling, he doesn’t care at all.

She smiles dreamily. “I love you.”

He frames her face with his wet hands, kisses her brow. Licks at a stray drop of water trickling down from her hairline. The taste shouldn’t be remarkable in any way but it’s indescribable. “Love you so much, girl.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

He nods. He is. He always meant to.

She hums and leans against him, towel wrapped around her shoulders, her head on his chest. “C’mon, then.”

He doesn’t think. He did this once before, with the flood, and it was awful. He’s going to take that, seize it, overwrite it. Make it something else. Make it better. Make it well.

He scoops her up in his arms and carries her to the bed.

~

The trip back to the main room can’t be more than fifteen feet and not a whole lot more than that to his camp, but it seems like forever. It seems trackless, and it’s not that she’s heavy but that he feels once more like he’s waiting, making this journey so it’ll be even sweeter when he’s inside her. The lamplight is stranger now, and the shadows it casts are stranger as well, half forms all appearing to move, and as he reaches the bed and crouches and lays her down he realizes what it all reminds him of.

It’s not moonlight. There’s no grass or water, no mockingbirds, no glittering mica embedded in old stone. But the essential strangeness is the same.

It makes sense. This is another First.
He unwraps her, unfolds the towel on either side of her like cloth wings and stares down at her. She looks small there, even smaller than she normally does, her hands loose at her sides and her knees bent upward, her legs slightly spread. She’s looking up at him with bright eyes, and she gives him a lazy smile as she arches her back and fits her hands against the outer curves of her breasts, pushing them inward and making them rise. Her thumbs pass over her nipples, surrounding them with abstract designs, and her legs spread wider. She might be mostly dry but her cunt is glistening, and there’s only one thing he wants to do.

She’s basically *presenting* herself. It’s entirely her fault.

The boxspring and mattress put her at the right height for this, and he tugs at the towel until she scrambles back and lets him take it, pushed up on her elbows with a questioning expression visible through the odd shadows playing over her face. “Daryl, what—”

He doesn’t answer. He bunches the towel and lowers his knees onto it, reaches out and takes her by the hips and yanks her to the bed’s edge. She squeaks and giggles, hands fumbling at his arms.

She knows what this is.

“*Daryl,* you said you’d—”

Just like before.

“I will. Lemme have this first.” He doesn’t wait for her permission; he lifts her legs with his hands fitted under her knees, leans in and closes his mouth over her soft, wet, *sweet* cunt.

Again, she could tense up. Again, she doesn’t. She whimpers and collapses under his attention, rests her feet on his shoulders, and her legs fall open as he tongues her lips apart and dances up to her clit.

It’s been plenty long enough; he knows she’ll come again and it’ll probably be quick, but not too quick, *please,* because he’s so hungry for this. Still not desperate, not starving, but *hungry,* lapping up her juices as he makes them flow, sucking, biting so gently and licking her in long, broad cat-swipes. And she thrusts herself up, keening, her hands tangling in his wet hair and tugging him in harder, the rocking against his face sharpening into a grind.

He can’t say no to her. He simply can’t.

And he’s beginning to understand that—in a way he would rather die than abuse—he can make it so she doesn’t want to say no to him.

“You bastard,” he hears her hissing, the word almost lost in the sheer depth of her smile. “Jesus, you bastard, you—Oh, *oh,* you just... Oh God, *yeah*...”

He’s not going to tease her. Not least because he’s not sure he can stand it. When she jerks his hair he launches a full assault on her, swirling rough over her clit, rapid flicks with the tip of his tongue, and for a few seconds he can’t breathe as she bucks upward, spine in a deep bow, head thrown back and his name tearing out of her as she smotheres him with herself.

And this time when she releases him and goes limp, panting, he doesn’t wait. He raises himself with his hands on her thighs and crawls up her body, and when he braces himself over her and she stares wide-eyed at him in that dreamlike light, it comes sweeping into him.

*You’re an animal. We forget that, but y’are.*

That day, that wonderful day—really long before then—she reminded him.
"Let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

He leans in and kisses her, gentle. Unhurried. But he closes his teeth over her bottom lip and bites carefully, bites harder, and she whines and clutches at his shoulders.

“Stay here,” he whispers, pushes off her and reaches down by the side of the bed into his pack.

When he went shopping that first day, he figured it might be good to plan ahead.

She sighs as he tears open the packet, returns to her, but as he’s about to roll the condom on she pushes up on one elbow and lays a hand over his, stops him.

He blinks down at her.

She meets his stare, licks her lips and gives his hand a squeeze. “Let me.”

Oh. Yes.

He has no idea why it should mean anything. But he watches her, absolutely entranced, as she takes it from him and does it—does it like she has a hundred times, smooth and easy. She’s watched him, and maybe she’s wanted to do this for a while.

Wanted to prepare him for herself.

He shivers, sudden and violent, and she pauses, searching his face with a hint of concern. But he shakes his head.

“It’s...”

He doesn’t even know.

“Alright.”

She releases him, lowers herself back, reaches for him. Open, she’s all open, her whole body asking for him, and looking at her now is nearly too much. He dreamed about her, this, dreamed over and over, told himself he would make them a bed and it would be right, it would be everything it needed to be, everything they lost when the summer died, and now she’s here, she’s in it, cradled in the night sky he laid out for her.

Pale and slender and full. So bright she outshines the stars.

She gives him another one of those sweet, slow smiles. “What?”

“You’re perfect.”

She shakes her head, apparently unsurprised but abruptly solemn. “I’m not.”

No, she’s not. Neither of them are.

He lowers himself to her, takes her wrist. Thumb against the scar there, lips against the sharp line across her cheek—close to healed now. But it’ll always be there, and it’ll always be beautiful—both of those marks will, because of what they mean.

You’re so alive.

“You’re not,” he whispers. “You’re better.”
“Daryl.”

And again he doesn’t think. He’s lost in it. There’s no reason he can see why it should feel so good, so right, why it should send warmth bleeding all through him like bathing in sun. He doesn’t need to know why, doesn’t need to understand; he takes her by the waist, so gentle, and turns her onto her stomach, slides his grip down to her hips and—just as gentle—pulls her up, her knees shifting under her.

She jerks, surprised, pushes up on her elbows and twists her head back to look at him. But she’s not alarmed. Confused, maybe, but she’s not fighting.

“Daryl, I—?”

He bends over her, smooths his hands up her back, rocks himself against her. “This alright? You alright?”

She doesn’t answer right away, and he knows why. He’s not worried. She’s feeling it, feeling through it. Learning it, what it is. What her body is doing. What it might do.

How it might be, to take him this way.

“Yeah,” she sighs at last, and another delicate shiver races through her as she presses back to meet him, shoulders dipping. Raising herself. Raising for him. “Yeah, I am.”

“Beth.” Simply her name. That’s all he can find. He bends lower and kisses the knob at the top of her spine, kisses further down, tongue tracing into the dip of her spinal column. She presses up again, sighs, and he knows it’s all right.

It really is.

He rises and steadies her with one hand, takes himself in the other, and slides into her so easily that it’s like he never left her.

She gasps with him, moans thickly, and her head drops between her shoulders at the same time his does—in perfect time. Perfect sync. He stops, both hands on her hips, eyes squeezed shut as it surges through him. Her tight wet heat, all around him, holding him and pulling him in, and maybe it was never better than this and maybe it was never worse, but it’s never been this way. Not when she rode him that first time, not when he held her down after and pounded into her, not when he fucked her in the truck, up against the wall. Grasping her, the way she’s arching beneath him, it’s power and it’s not confined to him or her but flowing between them like a twisting, brilliant arc of lightning.

“God, Beth.” His teeth close on his lip, biting for no reason other than to bite. “Jesus Christ, you’re so fuckin’ good.”

She doesn’t answer. The sound she makes—choked, nearly a sob—is everything he needs to know.

He makes himself look down at her. The lovely slope of her back and her shoulders, heaving as she breathes, her hair spilling all over in damp knotted strands. How he fits her, how she fits him, how they’re soaking in light that doesn’t look like it’s coming from any source ever made by human hands. Drenched in shadow. Both together, him and her, like it’s always been.

“Oh, my girl,” he breathes, and starts to move.

Like everything else, it’s slow. Slow but hard, long thrusts as deep into her as he can go, and she pushes herself up on shaking arms, moving with him, those sobs working themselves into an
unsteady rhythm. He started upright on his knees and for a while he manages to stay that way, but with every plunge his own heart is beating him down, and bit by bit he curves himself above her, one hand releasing her hip and braced on the bed beside hers, then on hers, large and rough over her small, cool fingers, threading with her, curled tight. And he’s pushing her down too as he finds some speed, the arch of her back more and more extreme, until her cheek is against the mattress and her arms are flat, her free hand fisting in the sheets as he fucks the breath out of her.

Because he is. Still not much faster, but even harder, solid pounding that shakes him like the tremors of a distant earthquake, makes the blood sing in his ears, drags her groans toward a crescendo. Under them he’s vaguely aware of the squeak of springs, but nothing is real except her, the brightness and the heat all around him, the home she’s making inside herself for him.

She’s so full of light.

“Beth.” Panting. Wrenched, grating, and it’s an effort, but he has to say her name. That prayer, the only one he needs to offer here. “Oh, fuck, Beth, oh Jesus, girl, I love you. I love you, I—”

“I was thinkin’.”

He almost stutters to a halt.

It seems like a total non sequitur. It doesn’t fit, not the words or the way she’s saying them. Muffled, breathless—but musing, and amused. He’s low enough to see her face clearly when she turns her head, and when she does it hits him like a fist clamping around his heart.

Her absolutely radiant smile.

“I was thinkin’. About makin’ you come.” She laughs then, low and clear and tuneful, and it flows through his head like a song. “I wanna make you come, Daryl. I want that.” She lifts enough to catch his eye with hers, and she’s sparkling, all blue broken diamonds. “Come for me.”

He can’t say no to her.

He doesn’t sing. It’s not something he ever does. But she squeezes his hand so tight it’s nearly painful—maybe is—and compresses the air from his lungs, and what fills him in and out as his burning pleasure slams into him and consumes him is that song: her ringing laughter, him crying her name, and to him it feels like they’re singing together in an imperfectly beautiful harmony. A duet of everything.

Songs in the house of light.
I'm not sure if I'm singing for the love of it or for the love of you

There’s a moth flying around the lamp.

His attention keeps straying to it, following it as it bobs and flutters, tosses itself at the shade, rises over the top and falls again. It’s fascinated by the light in a way he thinks he understands—but the bulb is hot, and if it doesn’t watch itself it’s going to burn its wings.

He shifts a little on his back so he can see it better, one arm slung behind his head, his other combing absently through the slightly snarled waves of Beth’s hair.

Beth isn’t watching the moth. Beth doesn’t appear to have noticed that it’s there, or if she has she doesn’t care. She’s lying half draped across him, one leg stretched across his and her body flush with his side, her chin resting on her hand—which is in turn resting on his chest. She has the wolf in the other; she placed it over his breastbone and she’s studying it, stroking its back with her fingertip.

Just like he has. Over and over, this past week. Over and over until time melts into that smooth, lovely curve.

He has no idea how late it is. He very much wants it to not matter.

“It’s so pretty,” she murmurs, and he flicks his gaze away from the moth at the same instant she looks up at him, her eyes large and liquid. Pools rather than polished, faceted crystal. “Honestly, I... I didn’t know you’d like somethin’ like this.”

He tugs gently at a strand of her hair. He could tell her about this, what he truly suspects, but he’s not sure how. Though he doesn’t think she would necessarily find it ridiculous. She wouldn’t laugh at him, anyway. Never that. “Reminds me of somethin’ I used to have.”

“When?”

“Long time ago. Merle was still locked up.”

“You were livin’ on your own then.” Not a question. He didn’t tell her details here, the night he told her everything, but he told her enough. She knows the rough timeline of events.

“Mmhm.”

“What happened to you?” She’s laid her head down again—a bit to the side—and her expression has gone thoughtful. “While you were here? I mean...” She lowers her head more, nuzzles at him. “I know you were... I get it. I told you. I get why. But what were you doin’?”

At first he doesn’t answer her. He simply regards her in silence, and a look of mild concern crosses her features. Not directed at him. “You don’t have to answer that, I’m just—”

“It’s alright.” He lifts his head enough for him to press his lips against her brow, lingering, and she sighs and slides her leg further over his. It’s so easy to lie with her like this, naked and half sprawled and glowing with the last ripples of coming, and he realized as soon as they collapsed together in a panting, slippery heap that this is the first time they’ve done this kind of lazy recovery since the first time.
Since the ruins.

He lays his head down and is quiet for another moment, stroking her temple, tucking her hair behind her ear. Then he lets out a slow breath and stares up at the shadows on the ceiling, which flutter and shiver with the determined movements of the moth.

“I was... I dunno. Sleepin’. Readin’. Just sittin’. There’s this woman downstairs, talked to her some. Just... Nothin’. Not really anythin’ at all.”

Which he knows isn’t even remotely true.

“You just were,” she whispers.

She angles her head so she can kiss his chest, high and near his collarbone, and his eyes slip shut. She’s pressed all along him and he can feel her, her smooth skin, the curves of her breasts, her belly, her cunt against where his thigh and hip join. The tickle of her hair spilling over his arm. The smell of her—clean, soap, but thicker. A little sharper. Not merely sweat. Fucking, the two of them mingled. Familiar—but it, like everything else now, is subtly different.

Or he is.

He can feel all these things, smell them, see her eyes and the slope of her shoulder and the glimmer-shine of the crystal resting on him. And they’re filling him up. Furniture, electronics, expensive toys, things—he doesn’t want anything else. Everything in the world he could want is right here.

He doesn’t want Merle anymore. Misses him, yes. Misses him so much, misses him like a bone-bruise that he knows will never entirely heal. Misses him like a scar.

But he doesn’t want him.

“Yeah. I just was.”

“What about now?”

“I dunno.” His attention drifts back to the shadows on the ceiling, vision unfocused. “I’m not... I don’t think I’m gonna worry about it.”

Not anything. Not at the moment. Given who he is—who he remains, no matter what else happens—he doesn’t think he’ll have any trouble carving out some time in his busy schedule for worrying. He’ll work it in. Later.

He can procrastinate too.

“You comin’ back? To the farm?”

“Tomorrow. Called your dad.” Which snaps something into the forefront of his mind—not worry, exactly, but he does feel like he can’t ignore it anymore—and he lowers his gaze and turns his head, looks at her. “When you gotta be back?”

“Well...” She smiles, and he knows that smile. He’s seen it before when her hand brushes his under the table, when she’s telling him to meet her somewhere, when she says hello to him and they both know what she’s thinking. When she told him to drive and to pull over and he fucked her in the truck. When she told him to bring towels to the swimming hole.

When she showed him the ruins.
When she asked him for that first ride after the First Ride.

She’s Up To Something.

“Well what?”

“I mean, I gotta be in school tomorrow.”

“Right.” Of course she does; it’s Thursday. Pretty much goes without saying. “So when do I gotta get you home, girl?”

“You don’t gotta get me home.” She picks up the wolf again, still smiling at him, and turns it over between her fingers. “You just gotta make sure I get to school, Mr. Dixon.”

He stares at her. Uncomprehending. Or... Yes, technically, he understands what she’s implying. He’s not a total idiot. But what he comes up with when he does those calculations is even less comprehensible.

“Beth, what—?”

“You gotta promise you’re not gonna freak out.” Before he has time to point out that promise you’re not gonna freak out is basically a sure-fire way to get someone to freak out, she takes a breath and pushes ahead. “You remember Becca? The girl who... I told you about her, she did the whole witchcraft thing? Her daddy’s the pastor?”

Daryl nods. He’s getting a dim sense of where this is going. He isn’t sure whether or not freaking out is appropriate.

“I’m supposed to be sleepin’ over at her house. She’s... She’s coverin’ for me. I told her. About us.”

For a few more seconds he simply stares at her. It’s... He has no idea if this is even a big deal or not. No idea what it means. All at once he’s lost. Too lost to even freak out.

He’s still unbelievably new at this.

“I didn’t tell her details. I didn’t tell her who you were.” She pushes herself up a bit, leaning on one elbow and looking down at him. “I told her I was seein’ a boy, my parents would lose it if they knew, I needed a little...” She rolls a shoulder and her smile goes crooked. Through the mild shock he notes that it’s adorable. “I needed a little help.”

He swallows. The shock is starting to settle like dust. He supposes...

He supposes it makes sense, actually. It does have a certain practical logic to it.

“You trust her?”

Beth nods. “She’s not, like, my best friend or anythin’. But I trust her. She’s...” She laughs and shakes her head. “She’s a bad girl. And her daddy thinks she’s a good girl. She’s good at lyin’. Quick on her feet.”

And the two of them aren’t. Not very. He doesn’t think so.

That’s going to have to be something they work on.

“So you’re out. All night.”
“All night.” She lays her head down, tucked into the hollow of his throat, and sighs. It’s a happy sound. Content.

Content with him. In his bed. Not the grass, not the ruins, not the water or a clearing or a field. No sun, stars, moon... No trees, no birds, no whisper of wind in the leaves. No ancient stone. None of the things he loves, and loves about the time they’ve had, about what they’ve been blessed with. About what they’ve been able to take, to give to each other.

None of those things. But something he made. Something all him. He doesn’t have much to give her but he made this, he has this, and she’s here in it with him and she looks and sounds and feels as happy as he is.

And for a few seconds he can’t breathe. At all. He tries and there’s nothing there.

“You’re gonna stay with me,” he whispers, because he knows but he wants to say it, and he wants to hear her say it. Wants it clear.

She raises her head and kisses the underside of his jaw, slow and warm and sweet. “I’m gonna stay with you. All night.” She sets the wolf down on his chest and reaches up, combs a hand through his hair and leaves it there. He can see her eyes, wide and serious, and there’s something else behind them. Strong. Maybe almost fierce. “And I don’t want this to be the last time.”

No. No, not the last time. The first time. The first time, and he would walk on his knees for a hundred miles through the desert if it meant he could have this every goddamn night for the rest of forever.

But he’ll take anything.

“I love you,” he breathes. And she kisses him again, wriggles further up his body and gently parts his lips with hers, and the wolf tumbles off his chest and into the sheets as he turns and pulls her closer with a hand curved into the small of her back and his other tangled in her hair.

So that goes on for a while.

But it’s only kissing. For now. By the time it’s over he’s gasping—they both are—and he’s hard, nudging her hip and her belly, but if they really do have all night there’s no need to rush this either. At some point he turned them and slid mostly on top of her, and she snakes a hand down between them and takes his cock in a loose grip—but like she did in the bathroom, she’s simply holding him. Feeling.

He rocks into her fist, and his eyes slip closed as a soft hum escapes him. But there’s nothing else.

When he opens them she’s looking up at him, and her gaze is close and searching. He doesn’t think it’s with any particular goal in mind; it’s like how she’s handling his cock. She’s taking him in. Taking her time. Time they’ve hardly ever had before now.

He lets it go for a moment or two, then tips his head down and leans his forehead against hers.

“What?”

“I like lookin’ at you. You’re interestin’.” She flashes him a quick smile—which twists into a wince when she shifts against the mattress. He’s pushing himself back when she stops him, releases his cock and gropes at her side, and comes up with the wolf in her hand.

She giggles. “Diggin’ its ears into my ribs.”
“You were lyin’ on it. I would too.”

She rolls herself out from under him and stretches down to place the wolf by the bed—careful, like she’s handled it every time before now. He turns onto his side and props his head on his hand and watches her do this, the curve and bend of her spine, the fall of her hair—watches like she was studying him, simply because he can. And he hardly ever gets to. Not when he doesn’t have to pretend he isn’t.

Also not so much when she’s naked.

When she returns to her back she’s holding the book, and in much the same way she was holding the wolf—curious, thoughtful, as if she can get as much out of it by touching it as she could by reading it. The moth throws itself against the lampshade with a soft *pat-pat* and scatters more of those odd shadows across her. It’s like her whole body is moving, some essential part of it maneuvering through time and space even as she doesn’t appear to move at all.

“You were readin’ this?”

“You see any other books around here?”

“You should get some.”

He huffs a laugh and pinches her nipple—pinching harder when she swats at him. “The fuck am I gonna read?”

“I dunno. Whatever you want.” She’s thumbing idly through the book, not appearing to look for anything in particular, but for the first time he notices that the pages are deformed the smallest bit at the places he kept going back to. It’s not a long book, and it didn’t take him long to get through it three, four times, even spending a careful amount of time on each piece that grabbed him.

This is a new form of exposure. He didn’t know it existed.

It’s not horrible. It doesn’t hurt.

She glances over at him. “Which ones did you like?”

He favors her with a partial shrug. He’s not sure how to answer that question. He kind of liked them all.

“You have to have liked *somethin’* more than the others.” She’s quiet for another moment, turning the pages, then she rolls back to face him and holds out the book. “Read me a part you liked.”

Another first.

He’s never read to anyone. Not like this. And the truth is that prior to her, no one really read to him. The idea of his mother doing it? Maybe once, long before he can even remember, but by the time he was probably old enough for it to matter it would have been a joke. His father? Also a joke, and a cruel one. Merle? Fuck no.

Though he always suspected that Merle might be hiding a secret there.

When it came to reading, there was school—such as it was—but at the end of the day he pretty much taught himself. And did so silently, as discreetly as possible, in a usually useless attempt to avoid torment.
He’s never read aloud, and when she holds the book out to him he balks. Doesn’t want to, but he does.

“C’mon.” She’s smiling faintly when she sets the book down and pokes it at him, the corner against his chest, but that gently ruthless quality has come into it and into her eyes, and he knows at once that she’s not going to back down. Which he knew already. “It’s not a big deal. Can be anythin’. Anythin’ at all.”

He mutters a jumble of half-articulated protests as he picks up the book and flips through it one-handed. What the fuck is he supposed to pick? He knows that—yes—there were parts he liked more than others, but suddenly and for no apparent reason they’re all blanks. It’s all just words. He doesn’t remember. He’s not even sure what any of it means.

He honestly thought she had run out of ways to make him nervous.

But she’s watching him quietly, patiently, fingerling a fold of the sheet, and something about that steady gaze holds him and centers him instead of freaking him out even more. And then it’s there, open under his hand—a part he now recalls coming back to more than once, mouthing the words to himself, their flow across his lips and tongue. The images they called up in him, the sensations. Exactly the thing it describes, every strange and frightening and exhilarating fragment of emotion. Deep whispers in the dark, everyone moving and unseen.

He raises his eyes to her. “I’ll read you somethin’ if you sing.”

She laughs softly, a musical sound. He thinks of a stream running over stones. “Sing what?”

“Whatever. Anythin’ you want.” He leaves the book open and stretches out a hand and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, fingertips lingering against the warm, ridiculously smooth skin at side of her throat. “Just wanna hear you sing.”

She presses into the touch and murmurs something he can’t make out, her eyes falling closed. He can see a shiver trickling down from his touch and all through her, and abruptly he wants to fuck her again—so much—and he’s going to. Soon.

“Alright.”

“Alright,” he echoes, and transfers his attention back to the page.

He did come back to this one. One among many, but he did. Came back to it because it was him, him for years, lying in poor excuses for beds in forests and cities, brain churning and whirling in useless circles. He was aching for something else, then. He knew it was there. Sensing a sharp simplicity forever out of his reach.

\[\text{Forgive me.}\]
\[\text{For hours I had tried to sleep}\]
\[\text{and failed;}\]
\[\text{restless and wild,}\]

\[\text{I could settle on nothing}\]
\[\text{and fell, in envy}\]
\[\text{of the things of darkness}\]
\[\text{following their sleepy course--}\]

\[\text{the root and branch, the bloodied beak--}\]
even the screams from the cold leaves
were as red songs that rose and fell
in their accustomed place.

He falls silent and she’s silent too, and the words drift back and forth between them. There’s no need to do anything with them. They’re not for anything.

They just are.

The moth makes another few determined attempts to force its delicate body through the stiff fabric of the shade, then finally gives up and flutters away into the shadows. Its destination is entirely its own business. This house is more than big enough for mysteries of all kinds. The mysteries of a moth should be no trouble to keep.

With no preamble whatsoever, Beth starts to sing.

He doesn’t know the song. That’s not rare or odd; he doesn’t know most of the songs she sings before she sings them. But there’s something about the quality of this unfamiliarity that pulls at him, reaches its smooth, knowing little fingers through the gaps of his ribs and strokes over his heart. He remembers when she was on the porch playing her guitar, the song sounding so deeply and wonderfully incomplete, and he realized it wasn’t a mockingbird cover but something all her own.

Not made by the world. Made by her.

shoots and ladders, game of chess
connect the dots upon my neck
climb the stairs and take a chance
pretend we’re at some high school dance
the night will last and last and last

and kiss me like you’re not sure
leave my answers, baby
I’ve never done this before

forget the day you’ve had, forget the loves you’ve lived
you and I are famous for pretending to be kids
wash off all your grass stains, I’ll pull off my shoes
let’s love like we are kids, all shiny and new

He’s already putting the book aside when she stops, already pushing himself forward when the song dies away, and he seals his mouth over hers in perfect time with the press of his hand between her thighs. She moans, still musical, perfectly echoing the notes that slipped free from her throat and cups the back of his head as her legs open for him—and she’s louder, lifting her hips as he nudges a finger between her slick folds and into her.

She sang to him and he wants to make her sing again.

It’s easy and very slow, fucking her in smooth, unhurried slides of his hand and giving her clit the slightly clumsy pressure of his thumb, and he remembers the clearing, the sun soaking them in liquid warmth instead of lamplight—warm too, but not the same. He remembers what he did, what it did to her, and he lowers his head and circles her nipple with his tongue, flicks at it, sucks it until she’s twisting under him and clutching at his hair, his hand—and throwing her head back against the pillows and sobbing his name as she comes in a shaking rush.
Her lips part immediately for his finger, and she cleans her juices off him with the same exquisite slowness he used to fuck her. Her tongue, her soft wet mouth—he pulls her more firmly against him and rolls himself, his entire body, his cock trapped between them so hard and hot and throbbing with the force of how much he wants her.

“You always do this to me.” He smiles against her jaw, nips lightly at her ear. “Fuck, girl, you get me so hard just lookin’ at you.”

She shivers, slings a leg over his hip, and he feels her cunt gliding up the top of his thigh. “At the farm?”

“All the fuckin’ time.”

“I like that.” She hums and tilts her head back, a wicked smile curving beneath her dancing and equally wicked eyes. Doe-eyes—no innocence there. She’s honest and true, no artifice or pretense, but she’s never once been innocent since he first met her. “I like how I can do that to you.”

“What about me, though?”

“What, you...” A sigh trembles deep in her chest and all through her and she grinds herself down harder, rocking, finding a rhythm. Teasing herself, maybe. She just came but he’s well aware that sure as hell doesn’t mean she’s subsided. Doesn’t mean she’s not interested. “You make me wet, you know that. You can feel it.”

“What about when I can’t?”

“Then too. So wet, Daryl—Ah—You... Sometimes you get me soaked, all through my clothes. Swear you... You do.”

He grins, wracked by a sudden pulsing shudder, and he practically luxuriates in it, everything feeling abruptly decadent—this sweet girl wet and ready for him, a soft bed beneath them, all night together and as much of this as they can stand.

He supposes eventually they might have to sleep. But in the meantime.

“I want you again,” he murmurs, nuzzles at her jaw, and clutches at his own breath when she wraps her hand around his shaft and strokes him. She doesn’t respond and it’s completely unnecessary; this is her response, her open-mouthed kisses against his cheekbones and under his chin, the excruciatingly slow movements of her hand, her whole body undulating against him in gentle waves.

He wants her, so much. He can’t imagine he’ll ever stop. He sees no indication that it might be a problem.

Once more she puts the condom on him—taking her time, tracing his length with her fingertips and drawing shallow gasps out of him—and then she lies back, spread out under him, her arms loose over her head and her hair a cascade of spun gold over blue-black night. The light is both softening the terrain of her body and throwing it into sharper relief—her curves and planes, all the places he knows so well by now, but he looks at them and at her and again everything feels so new.

“C’mon.” Soft whisper, breathless, and she leans up and hooks a leg around him, takes his cock in her hand and leads him in.

It’s not like before. He sinks into her with a quiet whimper and lowers himself, lying against her, braced up on his elbows and weaving his fingers into her hair. He’s inside her, her cunt tensing and loosening around him, but her whole body feels open, welcoming him, her arms curling around his
shoulders and her knees tight against his hips as she tugs him closer and licks into his mouth.

He isn’t fucking her. He’s resting here in her. He dreamed this, except it was her. She was on top of him, taking him in, holding him there. Taking all she wanted from him, the morning sun playing over her and toying with her hair. She made a bed of him.

And it felt real. It felt true.

“We fit,” she whispers, and her head drops back as she circles her hips. Her lips are lifted in a small, dreamy smile, but she’s not looking at him; her eyes are half closed, unfocused—drifting. He pulls in a breath, trembling as he moves with her. They do. They fit. He still finds the idea that anyone is made for each other deeply silly, but he can see why people think it.

It’s not so silly to think that for him, there might only be one person. For him, this might be it. And somehow he found her.

“You feel so good, Daryl.” Her focus returns to him and she lays her hands against the side of his face, and her eyes are shining bright as moonlit water when the light catches them. It takes him a moment to realize why, and something in him simultaneously clenches and blooms outward, because he understands the presence of her tears. He gets it. That simple fact, that they feel so good like this, that they can... And how many times now has he almost lost her? How close has he come to never having this again?

How close has she?

There are things he wants to say, countless things. Innumerable, even if he tried. They’re beating against the inside of his head, his throat and chest, a dizzying tumult of words, but they’ve never been good enough before and they aren’t good enough now. He’s not a poet and he never will be, and there aren’t any songs in his bones. All he’s ever been able to do is show her, and he does that now, finally pushing fully into her, rocking back, in again with a ragged groan. And what escapes her isn’t a moan and isn’t laughter but both mingling perfectly, so sweet, and he echoes it as he moves faster—easy, gradual, because he doesn’t want this to ever be over, but he wants her so bad and he’s been waiting for so long, and nothing is ever going to be enough.

Except it is. This, with her, slowly fucking her deeper and deeper into his bed—their bed, theirs—whispering her name as he rains kisses over her face and her neck, as slow as his hips. It’s enough. It can be. He’s in the world, he can live here with her, and it’s enough.

“Daryl.” Laughing, really laughing, her heels digging into the small of his back, a wild edge in her voice. Something bright, something with wings, tumbling through the air overhead. “You’re so good. You are. Look—Look at me.” His face is in her hands again, her thumbs passing over his cheekbones, and when he does as she says and looks at her everything in him-seizes up. She is crying, tears trickling from the corners of her eyes—not hard, not many, but she’s crying and he’s not afraid of it or what it means.

“I love you. I love you so much, Daryl. Look at me, I love you, I—”

It’s not an impact. It doesn’t slam into him. He doesn’t cry out or groan, doesn’t tighten or hurl himself into convulsions against her. Warm water closes over his head and receives him. He kisses the words out of her and trembles gently over and into her, and releases everything with a sigh that empties out his lungs and blurs the world into a soft mist.

When it slips back to him, he’s still on top of her, still inside her—though he understands with dim disappointment that he can’t stay—and he’s carefully licking her tears away, her salt on his lips, and
the night beneath them cradling them both like he dreamed it would.

His dreams do keep coming true. It’s uncanny.

He does believe it might be her.

Chapter End Notes

Poem is Mary Oliver's "Nature", song is obviously Emily Kinney. :D
He doesn’t end up sleeping much.

He can’t. He also doesn’t want to. Some of it might simply be the weirdness of how it feels to sleep with someone else—to run into them turning over, gravitate toward them and end up pressed together, arms around them, settle face to face with legs tangled, settle closer face to face with everything tangled. The warmth, the sheer presence. Skin against his, never going anywhere. Never gone. Not a dream or a fantasy. Bluntly, shockingly real.

She does sleep, or if she doesn’t she’s faking remarkably well. But he stays awake, and—even though he feels like it might be at least a little creepy to do this—he lies on his side and watches her, gaze moving over her, and marveling.

Something has changed in him, is changing, and he no longer feels like he needs her with the same all-consuming ferocity he felt before, but he’s still in awe of her. She still seems so much like a miracle. So close to him and so relaxed, her features smooth, the tiniest smile pulling at her mouth—as if she’s dreaming and the dreams are pleasant. Hair spilling over her neck and shoulder. Her left arm bent in front of her and her hand loosely curled, her wrist turned upward. He turned out the light a while ago but he can see her, and what he can’t see his memory and imagination fill in just fine. Her scar there, thin, almost invisible, and he reaches out and traces it with his fingertip. She stirs and murmurs but nothing else.

She’s not perfect. She’s something better.

After a bit, he does sleep, and even if it’s not for long, it’s good. Because then he’s awake again, tugging her against him, her back to his chest and their ribs expanding and contracting together as he matches her breathing with his own. He dozes and returns and she’s partially on her back and facing toward him, her hand on the pillow beside her head. He doesn’t intend to do anything now, nothing that might disturb her, but he slides his hand down her side and hip to her belly, and to her mound, resting there. Her warmth. Her softness.

And she does wake up, enough to cover his hand with hers. She whispers his name.

*I love you, my girl.*

He doesn’t think he says it. Not aloud. But in his head is enough.

When he sleeps again she follows him into his dreams.

~

He’s awake at dawn and he watches the light drift over and come into her, bringing her into full view. He strokes her hair but otherwise leaves her alone—only gazing at her, not fully awake himself, drawing in a slow breath when her eyelids start to flutter.
A short while after that she stretches, pulls her body into an arch, turns away from him and shifts backward with a quiet, happy hum deep in her throat. His hand settles on her hip, moves to her breast and palms her, and he holds her.

Not for much longer.

Time is running out.

But it’s so amazing, waking up with her.

It’s not that long after dawn—he wants more time and so does she, and they’re both tired but it doesn’t matter. He knows—and he hasn’t said it yet but he senses she knows it too—that they can’t do this very much. That they’ll have to be even more careful than they have been. That they were getting stupid and reckless even when they told themselves and each other that they weren’t—her making herself come in the barn, him fucking her out in the field, and all those stolen touches under the goddamn table. They can’t do that anymore. They have to keep a distance, and the nature of that distance might have to change.

The thing is, now that they have this he actually feels like he can. It might not even be all that hard. He can bear it, if this place is here and if now and then he can be with her in it. In their bed. She always carved out a part of the universe for them to be in—a separate universe entirely, a tangent into which they slipped. She can do that; turns out he can too, in his way.

He made them a bed. And it’s not perfect. It’s better.

So bit by bit they wake up and she’s on her side with her back to him, and she gasps when he starts to tease her and pet her and dance his fingers over her clit. She gasps harder when he presses a finger into her and fucks her slowly, gets her wet for him, whispers to her that he loves her and this is all he wants, this is everything, her in the light and with him and God, Beth, groping for the condoms and sliding into her—quivering—and fucking her as slow as his finger. As slow as last night. It’s so much the same—and then it really is the same, because she pulls away and he’s briefly worried, about to ask her if something is wrong, but she turns with a sleepy smile and pushes him back with her hands on his chest and climbs on top of him, lowers herself and buries him deep in her cunt.

And it’s his dream. It’s exactly his dream. She rests there for a few minutes, breathing, her head tipped back and her mouth open in a silent moan, and he smooths his hands up her thighs and trembles under her. She doesn’t have to move. She doesn’t have to do anything. It’s enough simply to be inside her like this, and when she bends down and lays herself on his chest, her head tucked under his chin, he wraps his arms around her and rolls with her in a perfectly synced wave. Nothing fast, nothing hard; even when he’s right on the edge and she’s grinding herself against him and hissing in tight little breaths, it’s not fast. It doesn’t need to be. Like before, he comes in a loose, easy rush, sighing her name, and keeps going, fucks her over and through it and holds her tight until she stops shivering.

Even after that.

And again in the shower—hands, fingers, fumbling between each other and slipping, laughing and moaning and both together, trying to hold on and nearly falling when they shudder against each
other, and it feels so good and it hurts to let her go.

But he has to.

Until next time.

~

He can drive her part of the way there. She doesn’t know anyone who lives in this part of town, and no one who doesn’t know either of them is going to think too hard about a girl getting out of a truck driven by a man who could frankly be her father.

It’s because of that that he doesn’t kiss her—or doesn’t plan to. But as he’s pulling over to let her out —by a dark, silent used bookstore and a gas station that won’t be open for at least another two hours —she touches his arm and fixes him with serious eyes.

She bends closer, reaches over for his left hand, and he knows exactly what she’s doing and his gut twists. Not hard, but. He actually forgot about it for a short time. Actually got away from it. He hardly thought about it in all the past seven days, and with her he was fairly distracted.

But she saw it. She probably saw it immediately. Saw it and wondered, and maybe took some guesses. Probably good ones. Probably she saw it and she was more than capable of drawing her own conclusions. He didn’t cut himself, but a burn is a burn and a scar is a scar, and she already knows all his old ones.

She doesn’t say anything. She closes her hand over his, and as she does he lifts it off the steering wheel and moves it nearer so she doesn’t have to reach so far. So she can see better. Because he could hide this from her, or he could brush it off as nothing, or he could ignore her. But he can’t do any of that. He’s been in the house of light and he’s had a lot of time to do a lot of thinking, and one of the things he’s decided is that this shit—pretending he’s something he’s not—this is well and truly fucking done.

She looks at his hand, her thumb stroking over the scab—old now, it’s healing quick—and he watches her look, cool morning light flowing over them both. She’s not perturbed. She’s not upset. She doesn’t even appear surprised. And she wouldn’t, if she saw it before, but he doesn’t think she was surprised even then.

She knows him.

Finally she shifts her gaze up to his face, and he sees nothing in her eyes but deep and complete understanding. She doesn’t know what it’s like to have a brother like Merle and the hell he came from riding around on his back, and he doesn’t know what it was like to be swallowed by her darkness and try to escape it that way, but they both have scars, and from the beginning that was all that ever really mattered.

So this is how you pray.

“You’re alright,” she says quietly. “You are.”

He nods. Yes, he is. He’s very, very all right.
She smiles, and the sun catches it and her eyes and hair, and like always she absorbs it, pulls it into herself and performs her own peculiar, effortless alchemy, radiates it out again in light like he’s never seen before.

_Girl._

She leans up and kisses his cheek, a fleeting brush of her lips. Completely chaste, completely innocent. “I’ll see you,” she whispers, hops out of the truck with her pack slung over her shoulder and heads off down the street toward the high school.

He watches her go. He can do that much. He’s a guy in a truck parked in front of a gas station on a beautiful morning—in November, the first day of it—and he might be there for any number of reasons, none of them suspicious. He can watch her walk away, her hips swaying in her tight jeans and her shining ponytail bobbing. And anyway, a man can’t be blamed for watching a pretty girl walk by.

He can do this. He’ll see her again.

He’ll make sure that happens.

~

It seems like the day only gets lovelier as he drives. It started bright and it gets brighter, and it hits him all at once that this is the first time he’s been _out_ in a week. It was beautiful in the house, it was everything he needed for that time, and it’s not like he was starved for sunlight, but this is sunlight like a smack in the face and the air—when he rolls down the window, because he doesn’t care how chilly it is—is so crisp and clean it hurts his throat. He has the radio on and he has the radio loud, and the reception is usually pretty scratchy but the reception is better today. Might be his imagination, but a lot of things could have been his imagination and really don’t seem to be.

This place has been subject to a kind of deeply weird dream-logic since he wandered into it. If he wants to stay here for any length of time, he’s going to have to get used to that.

_there’s something about you_
_that makes me fly_
_you’re a heart attack, just the kind I like_

He laughs. Creepily appropriate radio playlist always delivers.

If he was more inclined to worry he might be a little worried about this—about the farm, about the conversation he might have there, about how he might have to explain that in spite of supposedly having been sick for almost a week he looks healthier than he has in a _fuck_ of a long time—but he isn’t, and as it turns out he doesn’t need to be. No one asks any awkward questions. Everyone merely appears satisfied that he’s come back, and Annette throws a donut at him, and then it’s back to work, more hay to be baled into the loft and a ton of other chores. They’ve frankly been backing up while he’s been gone, though nothing too bad, and no one is’ bothered by it.

Least of all him. By rights he should be exhausted but he’s not. He can—to the extent that it’s possible to do it without doing damage to the healing tattoo—throw his back into it.

The day goes fast—fast like it always does when he’s found a good pace—and he doesn’t do the
counting thing the hour before Beth comes home. She simply comes home. She was always going to, and counting the time was never going to make it go any faster. She walks up the drive with that same hip-sway, the same ponytail-bounce, and she gives him a small flick of her hand, which he returns, leaning on the pitchfork and mopping his brow.

Because they also can’t ignore each other. That would be perilously stupid too.

What they had before? That worked. That worked pretty well. They were getting a bit too close for comfort before it all tumbled over into something else, but initially there was nothing especially suspicious about it, and he’s starting to piece together enough objectivity to see that. They’ve always been casually friendly, and if they suddenly stop being casually friendly someone is going to notice that and start wondering.

And that... He got it on the drive out, window down and radio up, the air slicing itself into his lungs, and it made him want to fucking sing. They were stupid. They were really fucking stupid. They made this so much harder on themselves than it had to be, and in particular he made it so much harder, which he has a unique talent for.

They don’t have to stop being friendly. They can’t be close friends, can’t be the kinds of friends who spend a lot of time alone together, can’t be the kinds of friends who have long intense conversations where anyone can see, but they can sure as shit be friendly.

They don’t have to be miserable when they’re not together. They don’t have to walk through the desert on their knees. They don’t have to starve themselves.

He watches her walk into the house and goes back to work like nothing happened. He loves her. He loves her so much. But he can live in the world, and he doesn’t have to do that for her. He can do it for his own damn self.

~

He doesn’t go straight home.

He drives past the town and out onto the highway and onward, back out into where the lights of houses get fewer and further between and the darkness rises up on either side of the road, trees and fields, hills and lowlands. He didn’t set out to do this with any real pointed intent, but part of him did intend it, and now that he’s aware of it he doesn’t want to fight it. He drives with the windows down —yet again—and the radio on, though it’s not so loud. He’s not feeling the same kind of giddy joy he was this morning, but he feels content. He feels steady. This isn’t something he’s doing for fun, nor is it something he’s doing for the hell of it, but it’s yet something else that doesn’t have to be agony.

It just has to be done.

The song—coming scratchily in through the shitty speakers, which he realizes now he can replace—slides over him. It flows. It’s soft, except when it’s not, and it curls itself around him and tightens. Aches. He doesn’t fight it. He doesn’t want to. This is right.

and now we’re grown up orphans
and never knew their names
we don’t belong to no one
that’s a shame
but you could hide beside me
maybe for a while
and I won’t tell no one your name

He and Merle never had A Place, but they had A Type of Place—for lying in the truck bed, talking a lot of stupid shit, ragging on each other, getting slowly and profoundly drunk. It didn’t begin with this town, and if events hadn’t proceeded the way they did it might never have ended. There were things about it that he never liked and he still doesn’t. But there was so much that he did. Really, in the end, there was a great deal that he liked. A great deal that in a completely different context might have been pretty good. Some of it was.

It still is. It’s over, but it still is.

He has a six-pack. He hadn’t been entirely sure why he bought it, but now he knows. He rumbles through the night until he sees the radio tower blinking red on the horizon, and he pulls off the road at the first stretch of scraggily unfenced meadow he comes to, bumps a little way in, parks and gets out.

And stands for a moment, boots in the patchy grass, breathing in the jagged scent of dry vegetation and gentle decay. It’s the first night of November, and when he exhales he can see his breath. It’s a new moon and there’s only starlight now, but the stars are brilliant—scatters of broken diamonds—and he tilts his head back and stares up at them.

Autumn constellations, spinning on toward winter. He shoves his hands into his pockets and mouths their names.

Andromeda. Cassiopeia. Pieces. Aquarius. Pegasus. Soon Gemini and Taurus and Canis Major. Orion. The hunter with his bow. All their places and so many nights like this, staring up at those arrangements of impossibly distant light, and he never knew if Merle knew their names. Never asked. Maybe he likes to believe Merle knew them already. Or maybe he likes to believe Merle didn’t, and that’s something Daryl could have given him. Something they could have shared between them, like a secret.

Like a better secret than all the others they shared. And didn’t share.

He lowers his head and goes to get the six-pack. He puts down the tailgate and sits there and drinks a beer—a single one—and lights up a cigarette and looks out across the stretch of rolling land toward the radio tower, the redly winking glow protruding from between his lips and the one out there. His wing is itching, and he thinks about when he wanted to climb the spindly metal legs. When, half mad with something he couldn’t articulate, he wanted to jump. Not because he wanted to die but because he was so certain he wouldn’t.

Hell, given how this place works, perhaps he wouldn’t have done.

He finishes the beer, finishes the cigarette, drops the butt into the can and listens to it fizzle. He’s crying, has been for a while, but it’s okay. It hurts, but it’s good.

“It’s alright, bro,” he whispers, and somewhere in the shadowy distance an owl calls, soft and low. “It’s alright now.”

It is.
He stands and bends, places the can carefully on the ground and leaves it. He puts the rest of the six-pack in the truck, gets in, pulls back onto the road and drives home.

Home. To his room and his bed and his sheets that smell like her. He wraps himself up in them and he’s asleep in seconds.

It’s the first night of November. He made it this far.

He doesn’t know what kind of story this is anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Songs are "Mother We Just Can't Get Enough" by New Radicals and "Name" by the Goo Goo Dolls.
They have to be careful.

But there are things they can do. There are times when she can disappear for a while and no one will wonder too much. Beth calls him early Saturday morning and asks him to meet her at the oak tree.

Everything feels different now. But there’s something about this that feels both profoundly different and so familiar that it’s like she’s done the time-fucking-with thing and slung him back with a single conversation. Not the words, not the content of what she says. It’s something else. It pulses in the periphery of his vision like the beat of his blood, but it’s not unpleasant.

He has breakfast—dry cereal, he’s running low on food and will need to fix that—and doesn’t rush. Right now he’s trying to keep from rushing wherever and whenever he can. It’s as bright as the day before and he sits on the floor, back against the wall by the door, facing the bed and spooning Cinnamon Toast Crunch into his mouth. He barely tastes it. It’s not that it tastes bad, or that he doesn’t want to. He’s just thinking.

The oak tree has been the launch site for a particular number of missions to a particular assortment of places. They could go to any one of those places today, but he knows exactly where she wants to go, and he thinks he can intuit at least the basic outlines of why.

The time they’ve come into, it feels like they’re touching certain bases, keeping certain things open, closing other things down. Closing them up for the winter. Maybe for good. Winter is a broad concept and it can be applied broadly. It’s not here yet but it’s sure as shit coming, and coming soon. She’ll be finishing up her classes before too long—over a month to go but he knows it’ll go fast. She’ll be home for the holidays. She’ll be all bundled up in a warm coat, a scarf, her nose and cheeks red with cold. She’ll be smiling, and her eyes will be full of oncoming Christmas.

He was afraid of December. Then he wasn’t. Then he was again. Now he’s not, and this lack of fear... To him it feels final. He doesn’t know what’s coming now, and he doesn’t know what it’s going to mean for them, but he does know that if something bad comes, it won’t be winter’s doing.

Time is time.

He gets up, slings the bowl in the sink and goes to get dressed. He has to get out of here now. She’ll be waiting for him.

She is, and it doesn’t seem like she’s been waiting long. It’s almost noon, sun high and direct and shining away some of the chill in the air, and he notes with odd intensity that she isn’t trailing a shadow when she comes toward him dressed in jeans and a thick pink sweater, the pack once again on her back and a bright smile on her face. The presence of the pack is indicative and he’s wondering about it, and wondering if he should ask, when she climbs in and leans close, cups his cheek with her soft hand and kisses him.

Not for more than a moment. This particular highway isn’t especially well-traveled, but they are
visible here.

She sits back, unshouldering the pack and setting it down on the floor between her feet. She tosses her ponytail over her other shoulder—sparkling band holding her braid in place, winking in the sun—and buckles herself in. “Ready?”

“Kinda gotta know what I’m ready for.”

She favors him with a sidelong smile, and the mischief in the lift of her lips is teasing but very gently. A healthy part of it isn’t teasing at all. There’s a healthy part of it that he has no idea how to read.

She settles her hand on his thigh and squeezes, and as her fingers dig into the muscle on its inside he twitches and shoots her a look. She’s still smiling, positively beatific with her halo of gold and her wide, guileless eyes, and she strokes down toward his knee.

And it’s not really about sex. Not entirely. He can feel that, feel the faint heat slipping into him at her touch, and he wants her like he always wants her, immediately and hard, and speaking of hard he’s already on the way there...

But there’s something else. Something he doesn’t recall being there before. Not in this way.

They were always friends. Even from the beginning when he had no idea what the fuck to make of her, they were friends. Maybe—he thought—not what he truly wanted, wanted so much the absence of it was like acid chewing away at his spine, but friends. Someone to talk to. Someone he liked being with. Someone he started caring about. Someone who genuinely seemed to care about him. *Friends,* and she told him once that was all she wanted them to be, and he knows now that even if nothing had happened and that was all they are now...

He told himself that was okay. He told himself at the rainbow dinosaur ice cream stand that they still had it. But he wasn’t sure. He didn’t really believe.

He does. It’s all right now. It’s better.

“You know where we’re goin’,” she murmurs, and he nods and puts the truck in gear.

Of course he does.

~

In his bed with her, her warm mouth and his hands on her skin and sliding into her, it somehow felt like the first time all over again. That day when she directed him here—the sky brilliant and the air hot and the leaves thick and mind-blowingly green and everything blasting itself into its final surge of life before the fall took it away—it feels like another life now. Could be it was; the idea makes a certain amount of sense. Which means this is yet another first time, something new and all their own, and as he drives them down the road toward the turnoff and the last of the fire in the leaves flickers defiantly against the breeze, he feels that same fluttering in his core.

Her next to him, so bright and sweet, and something ahead of them—something he later came to allow himself to think of as an adventure.

She could have waited on this. It’s true that it *is* a tiny bit of a risk, because every time they meet is a
risk now, and it won’t start getting genuinely cold for at least another couple of weeks. But she decided on this weekend, today, and he knows why. It surrounds them, spreading out in front and closing behind, blazing and glorious.

It’s the fire in the trees. And all it needs is one day of wind to blow it out until next year.

She rolls down the window—or starts to. She stops partway and glances at him, brow arched, hint of a question on her face. Because yeah, with the wind of their speed it is cold.

He shrugs.

So she rolls it down the rest of the way and sits back, grinning, hair flying loose and dancing around her face in whipping strands, and she extends her hand out the window and does those dolphin arcs, up and down, dip and rise. So pretty he has to make himself focus on the road, because he doesn’t know what kind of story this is but them both dying pancaked against a tree doesn’t appeal to him as an ending.

But he knows what she’s doing. He knows what this is. It is an ending. Of a sort.

He knows her. She strikes him as a girl who might like to mark occasions.

He pulls them off and down the gravel track, bumping and rattling like the first time and like every time, because no road like this ever gets smoother. The field off to the right was always gold but now the gold is paler and scruffier, dryer, and soon it might turn brown along with everything else. The light dappled through the trees the first time and it does now, not green but yellow and red, orange, violent combinations of all three. Birds scatter through the trees, crying, occasionally strafing the windshield—warblers and sparrows, slate-coated juncos. This is the last bloom of true color, the flare before the dark overtakes everything, and he understands that she wants to see it and see it with him, and she wants to do it in the place where she began to teach him to love the world.

He can deal with that. That’s not a problem.

She turns toward him as he bears to the left and swings them away from the drying gold and into the deeper shade, and she’s grinning—but there’s something bittersweet about it. He knew they lost something and she did too, even if they never said it aloud to each other. They didn’t lose as much as he thought they did—or they appear to have found something new—but there are things the summer gave them that the fall took away, and they won’t get them back.

He should fix his attention on the way ahead—it’s now at that point where it can’t fairly be called a road, even a service one—but he’s not going fast and he spares a few seconds and risks their lives to reach over and tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. It’s useless—she has a lot of loose strands and it would take him a while to tuck them all—but that’s not the point.

All these firsts returning to them, briefly, flocking around them like wild geese.

She touches his hand and he returns it to the wheel.

He parks where he always does—always does, he can say that now, to himself if no one else—and they get out and she shoulders the pack, holds out her hand. He takes it, threads their fingers, and together they slide down the slope and onto the wide stretch of ancient lawn—the thick, cool grass, the sound of the water dancing around the rocks, the sun on the arch. The towers of brick and stone.

In front of the arch she stops for a moment and simply stands, her head tilted back and face lifted to the sun. She’s smiling, eyes closed, and he realizes that right now, in this moment, he might as well not even be present. She wants to be here with him; that’s why she called him, and he knows she
wants it as intensely as she did when she first brought him here. But this is her place. He was with her all those times, kissed her here, fucked her in the grass, loved her the best he knew how and learned so many new ways of doing it, but he’s here only because she wants him here. He’s here because she permits it.

So she’ll stand in the sun of an early afternoon in early November—that sun warm even now, though it has to fight harder to get the job done—and she’ll say hello to this place. Her place. And he isn’t part of that.

And he doesn’t have to be.

He waits, watching her, and she lowers her head and turns, blinking.

“Y’alright?”

She nods, comes to him and circles her arms around his waist, leans her head against his chest. His arms are around her at almost the same instant—angling somewhat awkwardly over the pack—and he lays his cheek against the crown of her head and feels her hair all sun-warmed, feels her breathe.

That’s all. And it’s like that for a long moment.

“Think this is the last day like this we’re gonna get,” she murmurs, and he knows she’s not just talking about the leaves, or the sun, or any one thing around them. It’s running deep in everything, like a current far beneath the surface. Finality. Termination. Not ominous, not something to be afraid of, but inevitable. He couldn’t stop the fall, he can’t stop the winter. He can’t stop whatever comes after. If his life is precious, so is every single day of it.

These are our last days as children.

Those days were over a long time ago.


~

She brought a picnic.

He’s bemused. He leans back against the nearest crumbling wall and watches as she kneels on the grass in the big interior space and lays out the old blanket she brought, sandwiches, apples he knows were picked from a tree not far from the house, cans of soda, little tupperware things of peach cobbler. Napkins. Forks. Everything.

He understands picnics in an intellectual sense. He gets picnics on a theoretical level. Practical experience is something else. And he doesn’t think merely eating whatever outside counts as a picnic. No, you need the whole blanket deal. He’s pretty sure that’s a rule.

She doesn’t appear to mind that he’s not helping—seems in fact to have a specific idea about how this should all be handled—and when she has everything arranged to her satisfaction she turns, smiles, beckons him.

He pushes off the wall and goes to her, settles down on the blanket opposite her, accepts a sandwich. Firsts and all.
He gives her a look as he unwraps it from its plastic. “Peanut butter and jelly?”

“You don’t like peanut butter and jelly?” She’s already taken a sizable bite and the words are heavily muffled. Takes him a couple seconds of mental playback to get them.

“Like it just fine, I just didn’t know you were ten years old.”

She swallows and kicks at him. “You think there’s some kinda age cutoff for PB&J, Mr. Dixon? Not sure you’re one to talk. Also,” she adds, licking some peanut butter off her thumb and kicking him again, “that’s kinda creepy. Considering.”

It is. But he’s not bothered. And the sandwich is perfect, impressively; the ratio of jelly to peanut butter needs to be carefully balanced and he doesn’t think it’s a skill most people possess.

“You made these?”

She laughs softly, going to work on the apple. “Well, Mama might’ve thought it was kinda strange, makin’ two.”

This is true. And again, he’s not bothered. Once the idea would have twisted him all up for a bunch of reasons. Now he gets it, takes it in stride, lets it go. This is how it is.

They don’t talk much. It’s like it’s always been: there’s no need to. It’s enough to be with her, be close to her—not pressed up against her, not lying in a tangle with her, but across from her, one leg against hers, eating sandwiches. Like riding with her. Like coffee. Like shelling peas. Like sitting with her here, sitting with her on the marble bench, smoking. Looking at the water.

Occupying roughly the same space.

“You ever been on a picnic?”

He’s finishing the cobbler, lost in a vague meditation on the length of her thigh and the perfect, subtle curves that flow down to her calf, and he blinks at her, not exactly startled. “No. I guess... Not really.”

“Never?”

“You think my family did a whole lotta picnics, Greene?”

She shrugs, downing the last of her soda. “I dunno. You’ve been surprisin’ me some lately.”

He cocks his head. Shadows are starting to move over them and it’s getting chillier, but something warm is trickling through him like summer rain. He knows it. He’s felt it in her. He didn’t expect any of this; neither did she, for all her powers of perception and all her belief in the fundamental goodness of the world. This might be something neither of them could have predicted.

“How’ve I been surprisin’ you?”

“You know.” She laughs again, just as soft, and leans back on her hands, legs stretching and toes of her boots tipped together. She looks so young. She looks how he feels, right now. “C’mon, you totally know.”

“Yeah.” He puts down the tupperware and lays his hand over her knee. Squeezes. Simply to touch her. He doesn’t need any other reason. “I mean, I think so. But I wanna hear.”

She’s silent for a long moment, looking at him, and he waits. Not impatient. He recognizes that look,
and he recognizes the way she’s studying him. Thinking. Taking her time. She’s better than him when it comes to words, endlessly better, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t choose hers carefully. Not when it matters.

And it does matter.

“You came back,” she says finally, quietly. Solemn, as if she’s hit upon a deep truth in the world. Something magical. And why not? They’re here. None of the rules seem to fully apply in this weird fucking town, in her circle of influence, but here more than anywhere. The center and perhaps the source of her power. “You... You were almost out there too long. Weren’t you?” She leans forward again, lays her hand over his. Takes it, turns it, threads his fingers with hers. “You got to the edge and you came back. I don’t mean...” She shakes her head, near laughing. “I don’t mean I didn’t think you could. I don’t mean I didn’t... You’re strong. I knew that. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t strong. But you... came back.”

She gazes at him for another long moment, then adds—so quiet he has to listen closely for it, pay attention—“You’re not like you were.”

No. He’s not.

Yet he feels more intensely himself than he thinks he ever has.

“How was I?”

“It’s like you were... a kid.” She looks down at their hands, at his, and strokes her thumb across its back. Across his burn. “Now you’re a man.”

And he has no idea what to say to that. So he says nothing.

He’s not sure how long they sit there, hand in hand. The shadows keep lengthening—it can’t be later than three but the evenings are coming on fast now. He can tell, in a distant way, that the chill in the air is sharpening even more. But somehow it’s not touching him. Doesn’t seem to be touching her. The branches over them stir and the shadows twitch and dance, and then a sharp gust blows through them, whistles past the towers, and a shower of whispering crimson-gold tumbles down onto and around them. Onto her face, her lap, in her hair; she releases him and giggles and swipes at the leaves, knocks them off her head and shoulders, brushes them off him.

Fewer leaves. More light.

She pushes herself up and reaches down to him. “C’mon.”

He doesn’t have to question. She’s never led him wrong before. He takes her hand and gets to his feet, and lets her lead him through the far doorway and onto the wider stretch of grass beyond.

~

The leaf-falls have been heavier here—the trees are thicker—and the grass is carpeted with them. Some of them are fresh and bright, but a lot of them are browning, spotty, on their way back to dirt. Once someone would have raked them, cleared them away, but he likes this. This whole place is built on a particular kind of decay, a particular kind of entropy. Order would ruin it. It should look like no one touches it.
Like how he tried to leave it untouched for her. He tried. Even though she never asked him to.

She’s holding his hand as they walk together over the grass, and he’s not sure what makes him do it but it seems like as good a time and place as any. Not even that it’s some big confession. He doesn’t think it was some form of sin and he doesn’t expect her to think it was one either. But it seems wrong to not have told her. Even if he wasn’t trying to keep it from her.

Which he wasn’t.

“I came here,” he says, voice low, barely above the rustle of their feet through the leaves. “When you were... Y’know. After you came to the place the first time.”

He’s better. Maybe he’s a man. But he can’t say it. It’s not fear. It’s just too much horror for the words he has to fit. What she saw. What he did to her. What could have happened. He can’t.

But he trusts her to know what he means, and when he glances at her she meets his eyes and nods. “That night? In the storm?”

He nods back. “I didn’t... I didn’t know what to do, I was drunk, I was fuckin’ stupid. It was stupid.” No viciousness in it. Once he would have been cruel to himself over it. He would have burned himself inside, over and over, or devised some other mental torture. He used to be very good at it.

He had good teachers. And he’s always been a fast learner. Quick to retain.

“What?”

She’s still looking at him and somewhat to his surprise he finds he can look back at her, and it’s not even difficult. She’s not demanding anything—of course she’s not. She never would, not like this. She’s not upset. She wouldn’t be that either. She’s curious, and maybe a little concerned—after the fact. She simply wants to understand.

That was all she wanted that night in her room. After. When he told her. When he told her everything.

“I dunno,” he says, and he means it. Some kind of reasoning was at work, prompting him, but reasoning isn’t necessarily rational at all. He barely even remembers the drive out here. “I think... Thought I wasn’t ever gonna see you again. Thought I... Maybe I freaked you out too much. Or somethin’.” He gives her a tiny, rueful smile. Honest. She knows. “I was a fuckin’ asshole, Beth.”

“Yeah.” She squeezes his hand. “You were.”

No excuses. She wouldn’t try to make any for him—yet another thing she wouldn’t do. If he’s not a kid, she’s not going to insult him by treating him like one.

“So I drove out here.” They’re coming back to the treeline and the path, shade closing around them, and he can feel it now: secrets. All around them. Not like inside the mill itself. This place is older and stranger, and full of memories. “Got shitfaced, completely fuckin’ wasted, and I came out here and fuckin’... I don’t even know. Yelled at shit. Threw a fuckin’ tantrum.” This last in a mutter—what he feels isn’t the sick self-loathing he would have felt before, but he doesn’t think much of it. What he did. How he behaved. It was stupid. It was childish.

Like a child, he didn’t know any better.

“Got soaked, got cold, guess at some point I sobered up, drove home.” Found you. Found you and almost lost you, my girl. “But it was... Whole place felt... strange.”
“It does that.” She lifts her head as the branches pass above them—the branches passing, not them—and another gust sends a shower of whispering sunlight onto them. “At night.”

Yes, he knows.

“And again.”

That first time. First time with her, first time without her. Which... Maybe that was somehow the beginning. That wild, half despairing prayer to a fucking fountain. Hadn’t even known why he wanted it so much. Knew only that he found something nice, something that made him feel good, and God, he didn’t want to have to let it go.

Soft. “When?”

“Night after you brought me out here. Showed me. I wanted...” He doesn’t know what he wanted. He didn’t know then, and he doesn’t know now. Oh, sure, he knows what he wanted later. That much has become abundantly and repeatedly and very, very pleasantly clear. But then, that night, desperate and knotted up inside and frightened and wanting. Wanting so badly. Wanting beyond the words for what’s wanted.

Wanting badly enough to believe a prayer to a winged wolf god might actually work.

He looks to the right, watches the water come into clearer view. Sparkling and full of fallen leaves, a dancing flow of reflected, refracted color. “I thought I was never gonna see you again,” he murmurs. Not like the storm.

The deer path is running parallel to the bank now, and ahead through narrow trunks he can see it: pale flashes of old marble. He takes a breath, and he realizes this is the first time since that first day that he’s seen it in the sunlight.

“And I wanted to see you again. I wanted to never stop seein’ you.”

Because really, that’s what it comes down to.

She doesn’t say anything as she leads him to the bench—the softly glittering marble, that wolf’s head over the basin, those wings—and the new ink in his skin twinges when he sees it. She doesn’t assure him of anything, doesn’t say you never will. Maybe she would have once, he thinks, watching the shift of the light over her hair—or maybe not. Either way they’re past that now. Again: she won’t treat him like a child.

Standing in the center of the semicircle, she turns to him and lays her hands on his chest and stares up at him with her soft doe eyes. But sharp, beneath. Not easily startled or frightened. Not quick to run.

“I’m glad it was here for you. I’m... I’m glad.”

It’s not what he expected, but it’s not a complete surprise. Generous girl, in addition to her kindness. He settles his hands on her waist, palms fitting into that subtle curve, and she draws him down by his shirt and kisses him for a while, slow, her tongue working gradually into his mouth and inviting him into hers. She’s sweet, sweet as she’s ever been, and perhaps it’s where they are—this locus of something, this focal point—or perhaps it’s just her. Just what she is, moaning softly against him and pressing forward, angling her head to deepen everything when his fingers find her hair.
And then she’s pushing him backward toward the bench and he’s going easily, not resisting even in play, because this is her place. She takes what she wants here. He brought a condom, thought they might need it, but with no expectations whatsoever. He merely wants to kiss her like this, feel her burning against him as the last of the fall showers down all around them.

The backs of his knees hit the bench and he half sinks, half drops onto it, spreading his legs so she can fit herself between them, standing over him now and tilting his face up to her with teasing tugs of his hair, ripping at his lips when he does as she’s directing him. She’s smiling and as usual it’s intensely infectious, and he matches the curve of her mouth before he thinks about doing so. Warmth there too. Warmth everywhere, though the wind is taking on an edge when it hisses through the trees.

Her mouth on his cheek, his jaw, gentle scrape of her teeth. Swipe of her tongue. He gasps, whispers her name. “Beth, I want... Like that, please...” Like before, he doesn’t even know exactly what it is that he wants. Except yes, like this. Her mouth, Jesus, her mouth.

She braces her hands against his thighs and sinks to her knees on the soft, mossy ground.

He stares down at her. At the swimming hole, when she knelt like this, it was too much. Freaked him out. He couldn’t take it, couldn’t deal. He couldn’t look down at her. But in the clearing he straddled her and allowed her to make him come, spattered her breasts with gleaming drops of it, looked down at her then and at her parted lips and yes, he wanted it.

He’s looking down at her now, settling herself between his legs and running her hands up the insides of his thighs, staring back up at him. Licking her lips, making them shine. Fuller. Plump. Deeper pink than usual, part of the excited flush making its way across her cheeks to her ears, lighting her up like a forest fire. Eager. One hand closes over him, curves up his length—already so hard—rubbing him with the heel of her palm, and as his hands frame the sides of her head his eyes almost drag themselves closed.

But he won’t. It’s not too much now. He can see her.

*Look at me.*

“I want it.” Stroking him through his jeans, her fingers already toying with his fly. “Daryl... I want to do it. I want you in my mouth. Can I?”

Asking. Perfectly willing, he can tell, to accept a no.

It’s redundant to keep going over this, but *I love you* will never in a hundred million years be enough.

“Fuck, yeah,” he breathes, pushes those loose strands of hair back from her face. Her cheeks are as warm as they look. “You can. You absolutely can.”

She grins, sudden and delighted, and opens him up like she’s done it a hundred times.

Swift. No fumbling to speak of. She has his button open and zipper down in what feels like fractions of a second, reaching in and finding him, curling her nimble fingers around his shaft and drawing him out. She gives him a single unhurried stroke, gazing back up at him, and it’s all he can do to keep his hands light against the sides of her head. Her grip is incredible, tight and smooth as it moves over him, her lips, *fuck*, her tongue flicking out between them, but somehow her head is every bit as good, the silkiness of her hair and how it feels to hold her like this, nearly taking control but not quite. Moving, petting her, rolling his hips up. Because he can do this. He can *have* this. She *wants*
to give it to him. There’s nothing wrong with it. And if she wants to be on her knees...

She’s so beautiful like this. She’s so beautiful he doesn’t even know.

Her wide eyes are pinning him down as she extends her tongue and delicately licks at the glistening head—and his eyes finally do close. Only for a few seconds as a rough groan escapes him, and twists and cuts itself off when she lowers and takes him in.

Slow, like everything else. Inch by inch, tongue lapping at him, and he watches her as her stretched, shining lips slide down his shaft, his breath held in a fist, somehow keeping himself from pushing deeper into her slick heat. Her cheeks hollow slightly as she sucks at him and pulls back and slides down again, and he can’t help it: his hands tighten and press, just a little, barely more than encouraging her.

She moans and the vibration shivers into him, all through him, and he drops his head back and stares up at the trees, wanting so much to see her but no longer completely in control of himself, hips twitching under her and breath stuttering through his chest as she wraps her fingers around the base of his cock and moves faster.

The branches seem so low, bending over them. Covering them. She pops him free of her mouth and kisses the head, flicks her tongue across it—dances, quick and light—and he whines her name and the world slips into blurred gilt. This is a sacred place—he knew it when he saw it—and there’s nothing profane about this. Nothing whatsoever. He wanted to worship her, and he has, and now he can let her do the same to him, let her scatter light wet kisses over every inch of him, ducking her head to lick at his balls, back up to run her tongue up the underside of his shaft. He forces himself to look at her again and she tears the breath out of him: lips gleaming and swollen, spit shining on her cheeks and chin, bobbing her head and making soft mm-mm-mm sounds that might be purely for his benefit—but he really doesn’t think so.

She loves this. She does.

“Beth.” Strained whisper. It’s all he can manage. “Shit, Beth, that’s... You’re so fuckin’ good, girl, your mouth, Jesus, just look at you. Look at that.” As if she could, but he’s stunned by her, working to process. His hands are cupping her head and he shifts them further back, still mostly encouraging, entirely gentle—but yes, pushing now. Pushing her down. Not taking her, not using her, but she’s so good, she’s so amazing, and he wants her to know. How much he wants her. How he’s out of control and she did it to him.

Her. Only her. No one else before this. And, he’s sure, no one else ever again.

“You’re gonna make me come. You want that? Oh my God, Beth, you’re gonna... I’m—Fuck.”

Not warning her. She doesn’t need to be warned. Because this is exactly what she wants and he’s promising her, what he’ll give her, giving it, arching his back and sobbing and clamping his hands around her head as he bucks against her and spills hot into her mouth.

And he sees it when she withdraws. Barely a glimpse, and he’s released everything, but he sees his own come on her tongue, and it ripples a last hard wave through him, shoving him against the marble and yanking his eyes closed.

Her head resting on the inside of his thigh. He strokes her hair, mindless, breathing. There’s the sun and the breeze, dappled warmth across his closed eyelids. Completely untouched by the chill.

This place is hers. So if there is a goddess here it’s her, something old and wild and dancing on the
cusp of the light.

And if she wants to bless him he’ll be blessed.
I'll remember your song but I'll forget your name

He's still a little out of it, still floating, when he feels for and finds her hand and gently tugs her up, pulls her close. She swings a leg across him and straddles him, settles into his lap, and she kisses him for a while, slow and relaxed and deep - sometimes pressing in and stroking him with her lips and tongue, sighing, and sometimes just resting her mouth against his, hardly moving at all. He can taste her, the subtiest hint of sweet jelly. He can taste the salt of his own come. He sinks into it - it expands, filling the world. Everything around him is violently, piercingly bright, sharp, so real it’s like a blow, like it’s beating him over the head with its sheer existence, but it’s fading behind her mouth, behind what she’s given him. What she’ll give.

But she pulls back a little when he reaches down, pressing his hand between her legs and curving against her through the fabric of her jeans, and he's mildly surprised to see her shake her head.

He breathes a laugh. "What about you?"

"No." She leans in again, smiles against his mouth, his jaw. It’s a half kiss, wet and smooth. "I got what I wanted."

“You sure?” Not surprise anymore, not quite. But he wants to be sure. He wants to know.

Her answer is barely even a whisper. He feels it, the words in the drift of her lips across his. *I’m sure.*

He doesn't suppose he's going to argue with her. She would definitely be in a position to know better than him.

But he drags her back in and closes his teeth on her bottom lip, on the ridge of her jaw, scrapes them down her throat and makes her tremble. And he arches and rocks against her - even, steady movements, rise and fall of his hips. Not a real grind, not the kind he could give her if he was still hard, but even if she doesn’t want anything from him he knows she’s soaking her panties, can practically smell it, and he can tease her until she tells him to stop.

She doesn’t. She moves with him, shifting until her crotch is resting directly on his thigh, and she rolls like she’s riding him - *is* riding him - and her breath speeds up and tightens into tiny whimpers, shallow. She’s working herself toward the edge and that tight breath catches when he runs a hand up her shirt, sending tremors through her belly, curving over her breast and tweaking at her nipple.

They used to do this. He hasn’t forgotten. They used to do exactly this: Horny teenagers kissing and groping at each other in shadows and the truck bed, in that field where they drank moonshine - they carried each other up until they were gasping and shuddering, until it was almost too much, and he didn’t even completely understand why it felt so good to want and *not* get.

But it did. It does. Just another thing she taught him, and just another thing they don’t have to lose.

He thinks she might actually make herself come after all and he’s pressing back, encouraging her, but abruptly she stops and shakes her head again, tugging at his hair and panting hot against his ear. “I don’t want to. It feels too good, I don’t…” She giggles and drops her head back, arms curled around his shoulders, and he cups her ass and pulls her down and in, licking at the hollow between her collarbones.

You really *sure*?

“*Daryl.*” She laughs again - high and giddy - and pushes herself off him with her hands against his
chest, stepping back, gasping for air. He makes a playful grab for her but his fingers skim against the sides of her waist and fall away, and he’s left there, looking up at her, cock still hanging out of his pants and sure he’s a completely ridiculous human being.

He can’t remember a point at which this whole thing wasn’t ridiculous.

She’s already turned away from him by the time he’s zipped up and found his slightly wobbly feet, and there’s something about her back, about the way she’s holding herself and setting her boots against the ground - center of gravity lower than usual - that tips him off. This was already wild - everything here is wild. To come into this space is to be wild, carve away everything that covers up older beds and channels, let it all flow. So he’s not surprised when she whirls, tosses both her hair and a smile over her shoulder at him, and launches herself into the trees, scrambling up the slight incline away from the bank.

She didn’t have to tell him. He already knew. *Come get me.*

It’s not a steep slope, not like the one they have to descend to get to the stretch of old lawn, but he still has to work for purchase, using saplings and slim-trunked pines to pull himself upward. He can still see her, bright flashes of pink among brown and red and gold, but once she told him she was fast and her self-evaluation was accurate. Even under cover she’s fast. He wonders just how much speed she’d work up with open, level ground on which to gather it.

But he can tell she’s also not trying to avoid capture. Not really. She’s just making him work for it. So his breath tightens into something that almost slips into his own laughter, cutting across her right as she crests the small ridge and takes off along it, hair bouncing and flying behind her, arms pumping and her strides long and graceful - and still possessing that small remaining hint of teenage awkwardness.

Little deer.

He doesn’t take the ridge; he keeps to her side, edging closer - nudging her to the left. They’re running roughly parallel to the service road they took, the gravel strip itself a little further up. But he doesn’t think she’s making for that, and she isn’t; she veers right again, meaning to slip in front of and past him, back downward, sliding and skittering through the leaves.

And the pass is close. She means it to be. The incline is forcing her to slow just a bit, and she crosses barely feet in front of him, flashing a grin - knowing he’ll follow her easily and much closer behind.

He does, letting his weight carry him down, digging the sides of his boots into the leaf litter and dirt and catching them on protruding roots. His focus is on her back, her legs, the swing of her ponytail, but when he first met her he noticed so many strange little details about her, almost fixated on them, and he’s doing it again now. When she passed him, gave him that grin, a shaft of deepening sun caught her and held her and touched her heart pendant and flashed it into his eyes. He saw it in slow motion and it’s replaying over and over as he closes in on her, a wider and dryer stretch of bank coming into view below them. Those delicate joined hearts, carried into the air by the bounding movements of her body.

Why the hell *that* detail? He has no idea. A lot of things are still mysterious to him.

But some things aren’t, and those things are also simple. Like momentum, like the workings of gravity, and like the ability of his hands to grab and grip her shoulder, tug sharply. As they reach the leveler ground together she jerks, they spin, and he hauls her backward into his arms and she goes with a breathless little squeak, half struggling, kicking at the moss, kicking harder and dissolving into shrieks and violent squirming when he holds her with one arm around her chest and shoves his free
hand under her sweater and shirt and digs his fingertips into her ribs. Her cries ring off the rocky outcrop across the creek and startle sparrows out of the trees, and he grins against her neck, bites her gently and then not so gently, growls.

They might not be children anymore and the summer might be receding faster and faster with each shortening day, and maybe they lost things they won’t get back.

But they’re still animals. And they can still play.

Eventually they make their way back to the ruins, still panting and a little sweaty with leaves stuck in various places, and as they pass above the bench he catches her by the arm and pulls a twig free from her hair, pokes her in the back of the head and dodges when she swipes at him.

He wasn’t interested in keeping track of time; neither, he gathers, was she. But they’ve passed through most of the afternoon, and the sun is touching the edge of the opposite slope, lighting up the very tops of the stone and brick towers, and it’s as though it’s raising shadows out of the water and ground as it goes.

They stand in the middle of the interior, and he looks around at it - the blanket, the remains of the picnic, the faint glitter of the stone and the way the sun casts the bricks in a much deeper red, the bare treetops and branches well on the way there - and he looks at her beside him, and he feels for her hand and wraps their fingers together, warm and tight. All at once he feels like they’ve veered around and slid back into being kids, just for a few moments in the last hours of what he knows is a last day. Kids standing hand in hand in the kind of hidden place kids find and keep secret between themselves and a select few - a select one. Her, his girl - and maybe not his, not really - and something precious and very fleeting.

He learned early that his body could be damaged. But death remained the kind of curious abstraction that it does for most children until he was close to smashing head-on into adolescence. Even seeing animals killed, somehow it never really made sense to him that his life might have an end. That he might die. Life just was. It wasn’t even about taking it for granted; it was simply a fact and seemed personally eternal. There was no reason to question it.

Even his mother… She was just gone. He never saw it happen. He never saw her after. There was no body to bury. It wasn’t real. She just went away. She left and she wasn’t ever coming back.

So precious wasn’t really a thing. Even after he did start to get it, the concept of anything around or in or of him being precious would have seemed comical if anyone had ever floated the idea.

But it is. It is precious. It does matter.

And he’s a man.

She squeezes his hand. “I should get back. They’re not gonna worry, but…” She sighs. “I should.”

“Oh.”

But he holds onto her for a moment longer and looks at her sidelong - at the shadows covering her up, her gold hair losing its color and fading into silver, pink sweater darkening to magenta, her eyes deep and her skin pale. He looks at her and he fixes it in his mind, her like this, everything like this, and all at once he really feels it: Gripping this like he gripped her, pulled her against him, and here he can’t hold on. It’s slipping away. He accepted it a while ago, most of it done during that week alone; he let go of a lot of what he used to have and to be, and he’s all right with it being gone. But this is
the last day like this they’re going to get, and it twists into a hard coil at the top of his throat, and for a second he can’t breathe.

“Daryl?” She’s turning to him, frowning. Growing concerned. He refocuses, shakes himself, finds the ground under him, and he’s over and past it.

“’m fine.” He curls his hand tighter around hers and then reluctantly releases her. “Let’s get this stuff picked up, get outta here.”

It doesn’t take very long. There isn’t a lot of stuff.

But they don’t hurry. They make it a point to not hurry - or he does, and gets the impression she’s doing the same. No words exchanged about it, or about what they’re doing - her putting the containers and garbage into her pack, him shaking out and folding up the blanket, handing it to her. Fingertips brushing under it like a table.

They’re holding hands again when they walk beneath the arch and back up the slope.

Before it was just the leaves all red and gold, all fire hues. Now the sun has set fire to everything, every shape edged and outlined in red, gold so deep it bleeds right across the line between it and crimson. It seems to swirl over everything as they drive out through the heavier tree cover and into lighter growth, glimpses of the sky expanding to more than glimpses, bands of cloud arched above the sinking sun like ripples around a stone.

It’s red. Very. The trees cut away and he’s staring up at it as he turns them onto the main road, flanked by pines, and he thinks not only fire but blood.

It should be disquieting, maybe. But blood can mean lots of things. Many of them aren’t bad at all.

The world is so alive.

Beth has the window down again, hand out and arcing, head tipped back and face turned away from him. He can see the soft curve of her cheek, her jawline, a very faint red mark just beneath that he knows he left there. Hair falling loose around her neck, over her shoulder, and her pendant gleaming like it did - gleaming darker.

He can just see her lips.

They’re moving. He can’t hear. The radio isn’t on, but the wind is drowning out her voice - if it’s there at all.

And that seems like a shame. He’s about to say something, about to ask her, hand reaching for her knee, and she turns and meets him halfway. He glances away from the road again and when he sees how she’s looking at him, little wild thing made of fire, her blue eyes not blue at all but some color for which he’s not sure there’s even a word…

He has no idea what to do with her smile.

“You remember that song I sang you?”

He swallows, brief flutter beneath his ribs. It’s been a while since she knotted him up quite like this. She always knots him up, but this is different. This is older.
And also not. It’s new.

“You sung me a lotta songs.”

“You know this one.” She curls her hand around his, weaves their fingers together, and sings him the first line.

_just where it now lies I can no longer say_

And yes. Yes, he does know. He nods.

“Sing it with me.”

“I-” He jerks his head around, gives her what is, by this point, a very well-worn Look. _Are you fucking kidding me right now?_ “Fuck off, girl. I ain’t gonna sing.”

“Come on.” Gentle. But persistent. So. Yeah. This is one of those things he’s not going to get out of. “You know the words. I’ve sung it to you lots of times.”

But. “Yeah, and you can sing it on your own this time too.”

“No. You’re gonna sing it with me.” She lifts his hand, turns it and raises it, presses her soft, warm lips against his palm, and he’s hers. He’s absolutely hers. Always was. Never wanted to be anything else.

Wants. Not needs.

“C’mon,” she says again, smiling that incredible smile against his wrist, and she lifts her head and starts to sing.

_just where it now lies I can no longer say_
_I found it on a cold and November day_
_in the roots of a sycamore tree where it had hid so long_
_in a box made out of myrtle lay the bone of song_

_the bone of song was a jawbone old and bruised_
_and worn out in the service of the muse_
_and along its sides and teeth were written words_
_I ran my palm along them and I heard_

_lucky are you who finds me in the wilderness_
_I am the only unquiet ghost that does not seek rest_

He doesn’t sing.

Except he does. Rough, very soft under her voice, but as they leave the pines behind and the blazing fields open out on either side of them, the sky burning down the world, she lifts him and carries him, and while his volume still doesn’t match hers it’s closer. Flying just beneath. Flying with her.

_then the bone was quiet, it said no more to me_
_so I wrapped it in the ribbons of a sycamore tree_
_and as night had come I turned around and headed home_
_with a lightness in my step and a song in my bones_

_lucky are you who finds me in the wilderness_
I am the only unquiet ghost that does not seek rest
I'll do anything you ever dreamed to be complete

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. This thing is now also over at ff.net and I've slowly been getting stuff up to speed over there so I can crosspost for the rest of it. Not quite there yet; I got impatient. But should be all caught up in the next two days at most, hooray.

<3

Saturday night is uneventful—which is good. Very. Daryl is better, Daryl is coming back—not done yet, he can feel it itching down deep somewhere like the ink in his skin, like the changing has nestled into his marrow and is snaking out roots—but uneventful is best. He doesn’t feel robust. There have been a lot of events.

He doesn’t for a moment imagine that there won’t be more.

He reads for a while—all stuff he knows, but with every pass he sees new things and new words jump out at him, and it’s always worth it. Then around midnight he cuts out the light and rolls onto his back. The sky is clear and the moon is bright even if it’s only a crescent, and it tosses light into the room. Outside a wind is picking up, and he slings an arm across his forehead and thinks about that one good wind that’ll put everything out, and thinks it’s probably here. She was as prescient as she ever is. Knew they had to go today or not at all.

It’s hard to think about what’s next. But he’ll have to figure it out. It’s not exactly like he has a choice.

He was locked into a circle, a spiral, no way out that he could see, endlessly inward and downward with no speedbumps, no road signs, no map—and no need for one, because what the fuck other way was there to go? Girl busted him out of it. Girl opened up a new road. But it’s as trackless as the old one, and it’s far more unknown. It’s new, all new, and he’s trying not to look at his feet. Keep from tripping. Trust.

Not her and not himself. He’s trying to trust something else, and he doesn’t know what that something is.

Sometimes he’s still sure that this is all a dream. He’ll mutter and stir and there’ll be the squeak of broken springs, and he’ll wake up on that fucking couch with his nose full of stale cigarettes and bad whiskey, knots in his back like clenched fists, and Merle will be snoring in the next room. And that’ll be it. Nothing ahead but more shitty towns and shitty bars and bad deals with bad people, more walking, running, never stopping, the world gone flat and dead.

Can dreams change you? Can they really do anything?

Will this last? This tangent? Or will it collapse and toss him back into the world where everyone always gave him to understand he belonged?

The sheets smell like her. No stale cigarettes, no bad whiskey. Soap and sweat and fucking her slow and hard. He shifts his legs with a soft rustle and it’s like her sigh as she rolls against him. He made
the bed for her and she’s left a part of herself here, like a tether to pull her back. Or he believes it. It feels easy to believe.

Six impossible things before breakfast? Something like that. He remembers hearing something like that at some point in the hazy-distant past.

He falls asleep and he doesn’t dream.

~

The wind picks up and he wakes to it howling.

No rain. Not yet. But the light is threatening it, hard-edged and slate gray, and he stands in front of the window, scratching sleepily at his shoulder and trying very hard to not scratch the tattoo, watching the leaves sweeping down the empty, quiet street in whirlwinds. Tiny tornadoes, debris flying.

Sunday. Something about Sundays. Her in the rain and her pretty church dress, white like a virginal bride, laughing under a family umbrella. It doesn’t feel like it was that long ago. It could have been last week. Could be now. He leans his forehead against the pitted wood of the frame and smiles as old warmth flushes through him, bringing with it a thin edge of heat. It’s early, he could pull some clothes on and stick a cigarette between his lips and go to see her coming out—wouldn’t look all that suspicious, he could be there for any number of perfectly good reasons—but he can see her right now. See her and hear her, anytime he wants. He always could. It started out that way and it never went anywhere, whatever else happened.

She’s deep in him. Deeper than he realized.

He didn’t think he had songs in his bones. But yesterday she drew one out of him.

He wasn’t born with them. But maybe she’s putting them there.

~

All day the wind strengthens and works itself up into a frenzy, tears around and throws things like a big toddler with correspondingly big lungs and way too much energy. By mid-afternoon it’s a gale, and by late afternoon the rain has arrived and it’s a storm. A true storm, heavy like the ones that hit them in August and September and arguably started this whole ridiculous business rolling. Driven by the wind, the rain flings itself against the windowpanes, rattles as if the drops have gone solid and they’re contending with hail instead of water. Daryl sits on the kitchen counter and works meditatively through a roughly thrown-together roast beef sandwich, watching the gray light darken and deepen even though it’s no later than three. The rumbles of thunder are confining themselves to the distance, but they’re coming. Already dim flashes of lightning are casting the swinging shadows of branches against the wall.

Winter can’t sustain storms like this. This one is also probably the last one they’re going to get. Makes sense it would want to go out big.
His phone buzzes, and at the same instant the steady hissing moan outside becomes the flat of an immense hand striking the side of the house. Daryl doesn’t jump, but he can tell his body was thinking about it pretty seriously for a quarter of a second there.

He hopes the roof is reasonably secure.

you ok?

He sets down the sandwich.

yeah why?

half a tree just came down

front yard

daddy’s talking about boarding up windows, might be only half kidding

Half a tree. He wonders which one; he likes those trees. All together somehow they achieve a kind of pleasing tree-cluster harmony, shape and shade and how they’ve grown together, and he’ll miss eating lunch under them now that it’s getting too cold.

everythings fine here

So far. The wind smacks the house again and he tosses the ceiling another skeptical glance. He’s not really worried. But he’s seen what a fuck of a lot of rain can do, and he’s also seen what a fuck of a lot of wind can do, and both of them now live in places surrounded by trees.

Him more than her, if it comes to that.

He hesitates, then adds stay away from creeks

Pause, buzz. In the interim, the lamp flickers gently. ha ha

Nothing else from her and he doesn’t send anything either, but there’s something about the lull that feels unfinished—a pause rather than a conclusion to a conversation. He finishes the sandwich, wanders over to the windows again and stares out.

Two plastic garbage cans are hurtling down the street, end over end. One of them narrowly misses the truck and collides with an elderly Impala, bounces off and continues on its way. Outside, the branches of the old oak dip and rise and flail back and forth. They’re bare and have been for a while, and in the weird, low light they look like the waving tentacles of some enormous sea monster.

A sea monster that somehow got lost and ended up in rural Georgia and is none too pleased about it.

Buzz.

whole tree just came down

Daryl looks at his phone, biting at his lip for a second or two.

get away from windows maybe

Pause. Buzz.

yeah we all are
He does. He takes a few steps back, eyeing them with fresh unease.

It is, in fact, unease that he thinks might be out of proportion to the situation, gripping him far back in the gut and tweaking. Some of it is the memory of that derecho, the little girl who almost died, that great swath of destruction left behind—not that there were any huge losses, his neighborhood being what it was—and looking out his bedroom window and awed by that massive, profound, elemental rage. But a lot of it is simply that since late summer he’s internalized the idea that here, in this town, storms roll through with what seems like a special determination to fuck his shit up. And he just got his shit settled.

And he’s vaguely haunted by the idea of her, once again, as a casualty.

There’s no point in getting morbid. It’s the light messing with his head, that strange light filling up his room, and all the other ingrained reasons he has to be jumpy. Which, even now… They haven’t exactly disappeared.

He’s still him.

Not much for a while. More wind. More rain. The roof doesn’t fly off. But it occurs to Daryl at some point that he’s essentially trapped in here, which is a new and unsettling thing. Minor, sure. Not even something most people would notice. It’s like… This is why people fucking build houses, to have somewhere to go into when it gets like this. But he can’t go anywhere—taking the truck out on the road would be a questionable decision at best—and this is the first time he’s felt like that here.

Whole day is fucking unsettling. And he can’t even pinpoint why.

Lying on his stomach on the bed, ignoring the increasingly-difficult-to-ignore itch on his back, he texts Beth again.

*still alive?*

Barely a couple seconds later: *no*

His mouth twists. Sort of a smile. *dont fucking joke like that*

*I can joke how I want, I’m the one who almost died*

*miss you*

*miss you too*

He aches. It rolls through him in a deeply familiar wave. He closes his eyes against the last of the storm’s light and thinks about how it would be to be trapped in here *with her*, about how it would be wonderful in the most complete way possible—and not even because he can think of a plethora of delightful ways in which they could entertain themselves with each other. It would simply be nice to be with her. They could sit and talk, they could eat, they could lie in bed, they could do all three things at once. They could do anything.

He hasn’t *ever* applied the word *cozy* to anything he has ever done or anywhere he’s ever been... But he thinks about her, about cold and dark and the essence of winter, and he sees how it can be applied and perfectly so. *Needing* her the way he did, needing her in a way he now senses was threatening to suck something out of him rather than flood something in, this just… It was never quite there. Bits, yes. But not the whole. Friends with her, sure, but always it was something he was stealing. Always
something he had to clutch for and snatch because it was forever nearly beyond his reach, and not really something he even deserved.

And it isn’t, and he does. He does deserve it.

He always has.

Suddenly it isn’t only about missing her. It’s not about what he doesn’t have, and it’s not about what he wants right now. It’s about what he might have, sometime. What he might have, how at least in some version of this tangent universe it might be possible, and while it doesn’t involve any of the things he used to think of as Big Steps… It is one. It is one, in a way he doesn’t entirely understand.

A tiny part of him stirs, looks around. Holy shit.

All of this happens in approximately the amount of time it takes for him to complete a round of inhale-exhale, and he’s wondering if and how to express any of this to her and how the fuck he would ever even attempt to do that via text message when lightning seems to shatter the very air, a flash so brilliant that he winces and flinches away, there’s the unmistakable sound of an explosion in the distance that is most definitely not thunder, and the light doesn’t flicker.

It goes out.

He blinks in the dark for a second or two, purple and green spots dancing around the room, then pushes himself up and peers out the window.

No lights anywhere that he can see. Not in any of the other visible houses, not the streetlights. It’s not pitch dark—it wouldn’t be, storms like this catch the light and bounce it around and provide their own illumination—but it’s fucking dark all the same.

He has no candles. He didn’t have any reason to buy any.

He’s still holding the phone, and when it buzzes he almost drops it.

you lose power?

yeah just now

you?

yeah and just heard from a couple people went out all over town seems like even out this far

you ok?

fine

kinda fun if the house doesn’t blow away
gonna play board games

He smiles faintly, settles back onto the bed. Of course they would.

And again, sudden and strange and vivid, the idea of that. Sometime. Him. Not excluded from that world. Not just a tourist, not just someone who wanders in and looks around and is awkward about it
and leaves. Really part of it. He could be. Might always be weird, might never be totally him, but... He could. It’s not impossible.

If he tried.

Jesus.

He’s once again trying to come up with something to say to her, even if it’s completely innocuous, when something thumps hard just beneath him, and there’s the dull and oddly musical sound of something else breaking. He sits up, listening, and when there’s nothing else he shoves himself to his feet, phone in his pocket as he pulls on his boots. Not frantic, but.

As far as he knows, Carol is down there by herself. And there are worst case scenarios in play here, and they’re pretty goddamn bad.

The wind whips around him the second he steps out onto the stairs, rattles them against the side of the house, and they creak ominously as he heads down them as fast as he reasonably can. He did buy a coat and he’s wearing it now, but it’s not a thick one and it’s not helping much, and it’s not even remotely dealing with the water. Halfway to the ground he’s drenched, and three steps from it he realizes that he could probably have gone down the fucking interior stairs and dealt with any fallout and spared himself a soaking, but it’s too late now.

The air seems like a solid wall of flying leaves and he’s fighting a losing battle to keep his dripping hair out of his eyes as he sprints around the side of the house and up the porch steps, huddling under the cover of the roof and banging on the door. And it occurs to him that if something did happen, she might not be able to get there, and he’s not sure at what point he switched from being generally calm to not being calm at all, and he’s scanning the door and wondering in a dim kind of way how much force it might take to kick it down when it opens to reveal Carol, looking annoyed and in pain with her left hand wrapped in a bloody towel.

Otherwise she seems fine.

Her eyes widen and she reaches for him with her good hand, grabs him by the arm. “Good Lord, what the hell are you—Get in here now.”

He does as he’s told.

～

Inside it’s warm, it’s dry, and it’s also not dark, and those are three reasons to be happy about being there. A fourth is that Carol truly does seem okay, except for her hand, and he’s opening his mouth to ask her about it before she stands him on the mat by the door and vanishes to—she calls over her shoulder—to get more towels.

So he stands there, dripping and hugging himself and fighting off shivers, and looking around.

There isn’t a whole lot in the way of light, but what he can see is coming through the entrance to the living room, and the warm, shifting quality of it tells him that it’s a fire. Not candles, either—unless there’s a fuck of a lot of candles—and there’s also the soft crackling of something burning.

Right. Fireplace. Good idea.
Carol comes back, carrying a large bath towel in her non-bloody hand and shoving it at him. “Here. Get that coat off, you’ll catch pneumonia.”

He shrugs it off, mutters something about yeah, Mom and doesn’t feel too much of a pang, then glances down at it. It’s heavy with water and it’s doing most of the dripping. “What should I… Uh…”

“Oh, I don’t—” Carol waves a hand at him. “Just drop it there. I’ll deal with it later. Run it through the dryer for you or something.”

She still both looks and sounds annoyed—tone a bit sharp and syllables clipped—but as Daryl starts to make use of the towel and watches her head off in the direction of the kitchen, he decides that’s probably way less to do with his intrusion into her evening and way more to do with whatever happened to her hand.

Which… It’s remotely possible that she’ll tell him.

He’s not going to get dry. But he might work himself up to damp. He feels like—and suspects that he looks like—a wet dog, and when one of the perennially unimpressed cats drifts by, stops and looks him coldly up and down before drifting out of sight, that seems like all the confirmation he needs. He’s wondering what to do about his waterlogged boots when Carol returns, looking less irritated with her hand now wrapped in a gauze bandage, the firelight grabbing her lines and angles and twisting them into something that doesn’t appear quite real.

She looks him over, and he stands there and lets himself be looked at.

“Why are you here?”

That’s a good question. “I… heard somethin’ break, I thought you might be—”

“Oh, that.” Her mouth tightens and she glances down at her hand. “I dropped a mug in the kitchen, I couldn’t see all that well, I reached down to pick up the pieces…” She shrugs. “I was stupid.”

“You ain’t stupid. It’s dark.” He peers more closely at her hand while trying to seem like he isn’t. He knows Carol by now, is reasonably comfortable with Carol, likes that she’s down here, but that night on the porch, drunk and sad and talking to her, her talking to him—they weren’t best friends or anything after that and he doesn’t imagine she thinks they were.

But then again, she probably wouldn’t be too freaked out by him simply being concerned for her.

“Y’allright?”

She nods, raises it. “It wasn’t deep. Right under the thumb, y’know? Just bled a lot.” She sighs and glances back in the direction of the kitchen. “That was Cathy’s favorite mug, too.”

“She gonna be mad?”

“No. I mean… I don’t think so. That’s not like her. But she’d be upset, she’s had it forever.” She looks back at Daryl and gives him a tiny smile. There’s a lot going on in that smile, and it’s not all bad. “It had ducks on it. She loves ducks.”

Daryl thinks of the ashtray they used when he came by to bring the first payment. Nods.

“Anyway.” She shakes herself slightly and seems to refocus—on him, on everything. She gestures down at his boots. “Pull those off, go in the living room. The fire’s warm.” She turns away, once
again toward the kitchen, and shoots him a quick glance. She’s retained her smile. “I was making hot chocolate. You want some?”

It hits him—sense memory, which is rarely gentle. Whipped cream. Little chocolate shavings on the cream. What grips him then is soft and bittersweet, and he doesn’t entirely understand why. It’s all quiet warm rain and the unique and indescribable smell of wet pavement, and the remains of raisins in a free bagel. The flash of flower earrings and the bangles on her wrist. The Goo Goo Dolls on the radio.

*put your arms around me, what you feel is what you are and what you are is beautiful*

He takes a breath and starts to toe off his boots.

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks.”

There’s no whipped cream with the hot chocolate, nor are there any chocolate shavings. There are those dehydrated marshmallow things floating in it, and somehow that’s kind of perfect. He sits on the floor close to the plain, unadorned fireplace, crosslegged and hunched as the water slowly evaporates out of his clothes and hair, and watches the flames leap and dance. Carol is sitting behind and to his right in a strange, angular, very modern-looking chair upholstered in a deep pink.

It doesn’t look like it should be comfortable. But when he looks back at her, she looks comfortable. She also looks distant, unfocused again, hands wrapped around her own mug.

He’s not going to ask why. But he notices it. Notes it. Files it away. Adds it to the growing list of things he knows and can guess about her.

He’s not feeling any need to break the silence—as seems to be usually true with her—but after a short time she does anyway.

“Always wanted a fireplace in my house.”

He glances back at her again. “You get one?”

“Ed said they were pointless, couple houses we looked at that had them. Outside our price range. *What he decided* our price range was.” Her bitterness is sudden and sharp, and it doesn’t surprise him in the least. “Ed’s a cheap bastard. Always was. With us, anyway. He never had any trouble spending on whatever he wanted.” She looks away from the fire, at him, and doesn’t quite offer him a smile. “Sorry, you don’t—”

He shakes his head. “'s fine.” And it is. He didn’t mind it the first time she started telling him about it, and he doesn’t mind it now. Can’t imagine minding it.

Only two other people in his life have ever talked to him even remotely like this. And one of them he never saw again.

And all three of them since he came to this damn town.

She simply gazes at him for a long moment, and he turns his body more toward her so he can see her
without having to look over his shoulder. The light is still moving her face around, making it difficult
to read her expression, but he thinks he might see…

Is she grateful?

“Y’know, you could have taken the inside stairs.”

Yes, he does. Now. He rolls a shoulder, eyes flicking downward and away. “Cathy said—”

“I know what Cathy said. Cathy isn’t here.” She’s keeping her gaze on him, level and direct.
Wherever her thoughts were drifting, they’re fully here again. “I trust you. If you need to come down
here for something…” The wind, which had died down, abruptly rises and howls across the
windowpanes and beats against the side of the house. The fire flattens as if it’s trying to dodge, trying
to avoid being lifted right up the chimney. “And it’s awful out there.”

He gives her a rueful smile. “Yeah, I know.”

Carol is quiet for another moment, her attention locked on the mug resting on her knee. Then she
takes a breath, looks up at him again. “Tell you the truth, I’d… I’d feel better. Knowing you could
just come down. If you needed to.”

There’s something in how she says it that pokes him, pinches something deep and instinctive, tugs.
She doesn’t sound scared exactly, but there’s tension winding itself around her tone like a snake. Not
strangling, but intensely capable of doing so.

He tilts his head. “Everythin’ alright?”

“Yeah. I just…” She sighs and swipes a hand down her face. “I’m looking for lawyers. I’m going to
start… You know. Divorcing him. He’s… He’s not going to be happy.”

Daryl would lay down all the money he has that _not going to be happy_ is ridiculous levels of
understatement, and the additional implications there are clear, and they work him into a single tight
muscle. His jaw clenches. Not much, but it does. Once again he thinks of a dog, lips pulled back in a
snarl.

_Junkyard dog._

Yes, he would also feel better if he can come right down. If he needed to.

“Good.”

The corner of her mouth inches upward in faint but clear amusement. “Good that I’m divorcing him,
or good that he’s not going to be happy?”

“Both. Prick don’t deserve to be happy.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

She’s staring back at the fire now, all trace of her smile gone. Her entire face has gone oddly flat,
oddly expressionless, and Daryl remembers—like a gust of that wind outside slamming right into his
face—that his mother once wore the exact same expression. More than once, actually, but he’s
remembering one specific instance, clear as footage in front of him. A neighbor came over to borrow
a shovel for something long-forgotten—an older woman two houses down what everyone
generously thought of as _the street_, all cracked blacktop and half gravel—and stood very close and
said something. Something that made his mother look exactly like that.
He had been playing with a couple of broken plastic trucks in a patch of packed dirt in front of the house and hadn’t been close enough to hear. But he looked up and saw his mother’s face—her cheek swollen and dark with a bruise gone rich shades of purple and green—and hadn’t been able to look away.

He didn’t need to hear the words. He knew—roughly—what the woman was saying as she leaned on the rusty handle of the shovel. Only truly figured it out years later, but had been sure. Absolutely sure.

*You need to get away from him. You and your boys. You need to get away or one of these days he’ll kill you.*

She beat Will Dixon to that, at least.

Sometimes, in especially bad moments, he wonders how accidental that accidental fire really was.

“*You should do it,*” he says—low. Gentle. “*You’re doin’ exactly what you should do.*” He thinks about touching her knee, her hand, but he doesn’t. Can’t. Not yet, if ever. And if he never can, that’s all right. He doesn’t need to fix her.

He couldn’t do that anyway.

She shifts her attention from the fire to him, and while she’s difficult to read, the flatness in her affect is fading. “*That’s what you think?*”

“That’s what I know.”

Another long moment of silence. He lets it flow in, the space left filled with the wind and the creak of branches and the fire snapping sparks upward in dancing fragments of light.

“Yes,” she says finally, and nods. And she doesn’t ask him *how* he knows, and while he’s not certain about it, he thinks he’s thankful for that. It’s not that he’s ashamed of it. Not anymore. But there are some things he’s not sure he’s ready to talk about. Not to anyone but Beth. Not even to someone he has every reason to think would understand completely.

“You seem happy, though.”

His brows pull together. Does he? He hadn’t noticed—he *feels* pretty good right now, but he had no sense of how obvious it might or might not be. He’s self-aware enough to know that he’s someone who doesn’t hide strong emotion well, yet also someone who tends to have trouble showing anything at times.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” That half-formed, half-amused smile tugs once more at the corner of her mouth, and she sips her hot chocolate. “You had a friend over.” Just above the rim of the mug, he sees her smile widen and he knows why.

Great.

“You… had a good time. Sounded like.”

He drops his gaze and his head, and it might only be his proximity to the fire but he feels heat rushing into his face. Some part of him had known at the time that the house is old and probably not all *that* soundproof, and it’s not as if he was particularly focused on *keeping the noise down.*
Now he feels like a jerk. And he’s wondering if Carol saw Beth, saw how young she is, is thinking about that too... But somehow he gets the clear sense that if she had, she would probably say *something* about it. Not so positive she would get all judgy, but... something.

“Yeah, uh... Sorry. ‘bout that.”

“It’s all right.” Her turn to be gentle. “Was that the girl who reads you poetry?”

He nods, not meeting her eyes. The heat in his cheeks is subsiding somewhat, but it’s there, and despite what she’s saying he can’t stop feeling like a jerk.

But he *had* been happy. He had been so fucking happy. He was drowning in it, rising, floating on its surface until he was sucked back under.

“Beth.” Because there’s not much reason now to *not* tell her, as far as he’s concerned. “She’s... I hadn’t seen her in a while, and she was—”

“I said it’s all right.” Carol breathes a quiet laugh. “Just don’t be doing that *every night* is all.”

“Yeah, well.” He sets his mug down on the carpet and fiddles with his own fingers, capturing one set between his thumb and forefinger and twisting a little. “Don’t think she’s gonna be comin’ ‘round here that much.”

“Is everything okay?”

He nods. Once again it’s a bit hard to hold her gaze. “She’s...” *She’s in high school and I’m still pretty confident that her father would murder me about five or six times if he found out even if he does like me.*

Maybe *because* Hershel likes him. Trusts him. He’s thought about that more recently in a non-freaked out kind of way—because not thinking about it won’t make it not true—and he wonders if that might not actually make it worse.

“She has a hard time gettin’ away for a night.”

“She works?”

“Could say that.”

“Well. It’s good that you have someone.” Carol lifts her feet off the floor and shifts sideways in the chair, draws her knees up, curled. In another situation, another set of circumstances—with every single message her body and her movements usually send—it might have looked defensive. But again, it simply looks comfortable. *She’s* comfortable. Far more than when Daryl first met her, and that wasn’t so very long ago.

*There’s something about this place.*

He wonders, off-hand and idle, if Beth and Carol might like each other.

It’s nice to think that they would.

“She sings too,” he says softly. He’s not sure what prompts it, not sure why it’s something he feels the need to share, but he does. And it’s pleasant to share it. “She likes singin’, she’s... She’s real good.”

“She sings to you?” Just as soft, and inquisitive in a way she hasn’t yet been. As if the question is
significant somehow, as if there’s something at stake beneath it, and his answer might reveal something important.

Well, it’s a fairly simple answer.

“Yeah.”

Carol nods and appears content to let it lie where it is. He can tell she’s not disinterested—far from it—but as she has since they first started having any form of actual conversation, she seems to know exactly how far to press and when to stop and let him continue if he chooses to.

Like Beth.

He doesn’t want to take this line of conversation any further. Not right now. But he doesn’t mind that it’s gone as far as it has.

One of the other cats pads silently out of the shadows and butts its dark head against his forearm, lifting its back in a sensual feline arch when he scratches it between the shoulderblades. Its purr is a deep, delightful rumble beneath his fingertips.

Carol clears her throat, an introduction to what she says next. “Do you have anything else up there yet? Furniture or anything? I haven’t really heard you moving anything around.”

Maybe once this would have struck him as irritatingly nosy, but not anymore. It’s not like she can somehow deafen herself to what’s right over her. And she’s clearly not indifferent to him. Not at all.

He shrugs, shakes his head. Expressive enough for his purposes, and he doesn’t anticipate having to justify himself. And she doesn’t ask him to do so. He’s not sure how he would, anyway.

Except.

“Not sure what to get.”

She tilts her head to the side, oddly bird-like, and fixes him with a speculative gaze. “What do you have now?”

“Bed. Lamp.” He hesitates. There isn’t much else besides that aside from some stuff that doesn’t, as far as he’s concerned, count. He bought some more clothes. Dishes, towels. The most basic possible things, and he gave them little thought. “I have… this book. And this…” He laughs softly, watching sparks fly. Actually saying this to anyone but Beth feels stranger than he might have imagined, had he been inclined to imagine it at all. “This wolf thing. Crystal, y’know? Figurine.”

Carol responds only with a quiet mm, and for a minute or two he’s all but certain that she has nothing more to say. Then, just as his mind is starting to drift away from it and into the blueish heart of the fire, she speaks again, her voice low. Thoughtful.

“Why don’t you get a shelf?”

He shoots her a look, bemused. “Why the hell a shelf?”

“Why not? To put things on.” She smiles at him, and it’s quite small but it’s the truest and warmest smile he’s seen all evening, and it’s good to see. Warm as the room, as the fire—made even warmer by the continuing, steady force of the storm outside. “I’ve noticed—When you have something like that, a space or something… it fills itself. Somehow. You buy a shelf, you can put the book and the wolf on it, then you’ll find other things, and maybe… Maybe you can go from there.”
He doesn’t answer her immediately. Now that he has the idea in place he can get a good view of it, investigate its logic. He has none of her experience with things. He’s never made a practice of filling spaces, consciously or otherwise. He’s merely been in them. Living alone before, he didn’t have much of anything. Didn’t want much of anything. What would the point have been?

When had he ever been allowed to have anything nice?

But there is indeed logic in this, he thinks. Something he can get his fingers around the shape of. It definitely wouldn’t be a bad move. There might not be many of those available to him right now.

What matters, seems like, is that he’s moving.

And it sounds kind of like something Beth might say.

Slowly, he nods. “Alright. I guess… Guess it could be somethin’.”

She’s still smiling at him. But she doesn’t say anything else. And they don’t say anything else. And at some point there’s more hot chocolate and also some semi-good chocolate chip cookies in a cellophane tube, and he throws another couple of logs on the fire, and he thinks about how this is also part of it. It’s part of the light. The storm outside isn’t letting up in the slightest, and he’s not sure he knows how to live in the world, but here he is anyway. And here she is.

They’re sure as hell not best friends or anything, him and her. But friends…

Yeah, that might be something too.

~

He goes back upstairs around eleven—inside this time. The wind outside hasn’t abated but it also hasn’t strengthened, the rain a steady drum that’s become more lulling than anything else, and he’s feeling sleepy and very un-alarmed. If it was going to fuck his shit up, he thinks he would have noticed by now. It’s just a storm. Or he’s not actually sure there’s any such thing as just a storm, not in this weird fucking town, but this one doesn’t appear to be his blood enemy.

He sinks down on the bed and sends Beth another text. alright?

A moment. Then: yeah, you?

I’m good. He taps his fingers on the edge of the phone, briefly closing his eyes. The darkness is no longer threatening. It’s wrapping him up in itself, as welcoming as the light. He was always safe here. power still out. going to bed

Beat. Buzz. think about me

He smiles faintly. Heat seems to pulse in a gentle wave from his heart and trickle through his veins, blood starting to simmer. She’s playing coy but he knows exactly what she means.

you too

don’t finish

His breath catches. This isn’t unexpected, and they spent enough time together to this exact end that
she must know that he likes it. That he probably does it when he’s alone. But she’s never asked him to do it before. Never told him to.

She wasn’t asking.

Not that it makes a difference. She knows he wouldn’t say no.

ok

The wind sings outside as he strips, relaxes into the night he made, takes his cock in his fist. He makes it slow, slow as he knows she would, long steady strokes from base to head, pad of his thumb tugging and pushing at his foreskin until a single warm line of precome is dripping down his knuckle to the back of his hand.

And yes, he’s thinking about her and her wide eyes, wet mouth open for him and her small breasts heaving, her eagerly spread legs and her lips between them dark pink and glistening and ripe for his tongue—but he’s also thinking about himself, about the calloused roughness of his own grip, about how nice it feels to roll his hips into it. Without realizing it his other hand has started moving according to some agenda he wasn’t consciously aware of—dropping down to toy with his balls, passing in a lazy caress up the inside of his thigh, over his hip and the hard plane of his stomach. He captures his breath behind his ribs, holds it, feels. The firm rise and dip of his own muscles and how he can make them jump and twitch with light scratches of his nails, the ribs behind which he can feel that trapped breath fluttering, his chest. His thumb swipes across his nipple and as sharp heat surges through him and his back twists itself upward he makes a noise he’s not sure he’s ever gotten out of himself in his entire fucking life.

He’s done more than touch himself since she came crashing into his life. He’s done more than jerk off. He’s taken his time, and both with and without her guidance in his ear he’s done what she would have if she was there. He’s learned at least a little of how to enjoy himself. He’s come to believe that he might be worth enjoying.

But not like this.

Maybe it’s the storm—the growl of the thunder like he’s locked in the purring throat of the world, the wind lashing rain against the house, and the hungry power thrumming through it all and waiting to spike toward the ground. But it might not be. It might simply be that he’s finally ready to be with himself this way. It doesn’t matter; what matters is that he’s on his back with his legs spread and the sheets kicked down around his ankles and he’s playing with himself, exploring like he’s never touched any part of himself at all, and if he could he might be startled by it.

But really it’s not that startling.

Tracing his fingers down the curves of his bicep and his forearm and feeling how they flex as he works his shaft in a fist slick with his own arousal. The tense bands of tendon in his throat, his collarbones, and back to his chest, finding his nipple and pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, gasping and releasing, circling it with the edge of his thumb and feeling it tighten into a nub as hard as hers has ever been as the storm inside him sends spiderwebs of lightning from it straight down to the root of his cock.

There’s the wind and the rain but over and above it there are the quiet sounds he’s coaxing out of himself: breathy sighs, low groans, sobs that stutter and hitch and never quite escape him. He’s writhing under his own strong hands, thrusting up to chase his own touch, arching and panting and digging his nails into the smooth skin above his collarbone. The frantic drum of the blood behind his closed eyes is keeping perfect time with the patter of the rain on the window, with the rise and fall of
his body in the wave he’s made of it. He’s making himself feel so good, so fucking good, being so
sweet, as generous as she would be, tossing his head back and biting his lip and Christ, he’s so close,
he’s getting himself so close, she told him to and he is, racing toward the edge with his cock burning
in the circle of his fingers and making his whole body a prairie fire. Begging himself silently to let
himself come, please, please, he can’t fucking stand it, his fingers and his teeth, his tongue thick and
heavy in his mouth, his cock thicker and heavier in his hand, the storm raging everywhere and he
wants, he wants, Jesus fucking God, he wants it...

He freezes right on the fucking edge and trembles and rolls to the side, his face twisting, everything
twisting, simply trying to breathe. Waiting to slide back down. His right hand is sticky; he
disentangles it and lifts it, licks the salty-sweetness of his precome off his fingers. The desperate,
throbbing ache between his legs feels like it should be making the walls quake, but in here
everything is quiet.

The storm is confined outside again.

He pulls the sheets back up and clenches them in his fists, bearing up under waves of pained
shuddering. At some point he finds his breath and what remains of his voice, and whispers her name
to darkness that enfolds him like her arms.

It’s not a prayer, no. But it’s as close as he thinks he would ever want to get.

~

By dawn it’s blown through and left the sky scrubbed clean, and the quiet is so intense and so
complete that it feels almost like deafness. The birds have apparently been stunned into taking a
morning off. No one is on the street—not that a lot of people usually are, and especially not this
early. Daryl stands on the landing outside his door, hands on cool iron beaded with rain, and stares
out at the world.

Branches litter the yard. Branches litter everything and everywhere. Across the street a particularly
thick one has taken a tangle of line with it. Where leaves haven’t gathered into piles they’re carpeting
the ground, the grass and the pavement nearly obscured. They’re plastered to cars as if someone got
way too enthusiastic with handbills. They didn’t fall; they were ripped down, torn, and it’s exactly as
he thought it would be.

The trees are all completely bare. Skeletal. The wind left nothing, spared nothing. Took it all.

It might be early November but autumn is over. The fire is out. He’s standing on the front edge of
winter, and it’s going to be a cold one.

And he’s still here. He was supposed to be gone three months ago and he’s still here, and it’s not just
because she wants him here. Not anymore. He has no plan, no idea what’s next; he’s been kicked
out of a very old and very ugly nest, and fly or fall, he can’t go back. Time isn’t the shape it used to
be, and maybe that truly is her doing and maybe it isn’t, but it’s still moving. Still sweeping
inexorably along like a river in flood.

He’s always been a good swimmer. So is she. One flood already couldn’t drag either of them down.

A month ago he wasn’t afraid. He isn’t afraid now.
He gets in the truck and goes to work.
I'm feeling so small against the big sky tonight

The farm is a mess.

As soon as he pulls up the drive, it’s abundantly clear that everyone is going to have a fuck of a lot of work to do, and it’s going to take a fuck of a while. Which Daryl fully expected—would have been shocked if it wasn’t the case—but he has to take a moment to stand there with his hand on the open driver’s side door, staring around at the damage.

Leaves and branches everywhere. One of the old trees has fallen and is lying at the foot of its stump, at the foot of itself, end pale and splintered like a compound fracture. The other trees have lost a good portion of themselves, though nothing nearly as bad. In the distance he can see slats missing from the paddock fence, and in the other direction it looks like those small gaps in the roof of the barn are considerably less small.

The house itself is mostly untouched. Like just about every other surface anywhere it’s plastered with damp leaves, and they’ve stuck to the porch steps and the porch itself and scattered over every inch of roof he can see. High up, too, which is impressive, though not all that surprising. But the windows are intact, pretty much everything is intact, and that’s—

He sees it as he’s walking around the side, getting a better look at the barn.

Her trellis.

Flaking white boards are strewn all over this part of the yard. Bits of it remain, jagged shards like bone. Lines and angles, clear indicators of its ruined shape. He can see it as if it’s still there; he can feel the roughness of it under his palms, how each time up it gave him at least one tiny but painful splinter like a toll he had to pay. He can feel it shaking slightly under his weight, supporting him but never particularly pleased about having to do so and always threatening to stop.

It’s still there.

But it’s basically gone.

He halts, stands, looks at it. Something between his sternum and diaphragm feels like it’s received a light but very pointed kick from someone wearing correspondingly pointed boots. An ache that flares and immediately subsides into blunt dullness. Lingers. He doesn’t expect it to go anywhere for a while.

He never used the thing much. Only a couple times. But she did.

She used it a lot.

“It’s a shame, isn’t it?”

Daryl manages not to jump, takes half a second to be pleased with himself about that, turns. Hershel is standing close behind him, arms crossed, staring over Daryl’s shoulder at what’s left of the trellis.

“I know it didn’t look like anything much, but it’s been here forever. My mother used to have blue dawnflowers climbing it, all the way to the window. They died right around the time she did.” He
shifts his gaze to Daryl, mouth tight. The sadness there isn’t intense, but it’s deep and it’s old, and Daryl wonders how much there is to this family that he doesn’t and won’t ever know. “You don’t realize how much those little things mean until they aren’t there anymore.”

Daryl shoves his hands into his pockets, looks at it again. This is uncomfortable, but maybe not as uncomfortable as he would have expected—standing together and regarding this broken thing that Daryl has used in a way this man can’t know. This broken thing he used to reach this man’s daughter, to kiss her and put his hands on her and make her come for their first time in her own room, her own bed. This broken thing she used to sneak down to him, to wash him clean and take him into her and show him the world as he never would have believed it could be.

This broken thing he used to bring her a bouquet of roadside wildflowers, because he had to do something for her, because what he was feeling wouldn’t stay contained behind his skin.

Maybe he could explain. Maybe he could explain all of it in such a way that this man wouldn’t hate him for it. And all at once he remembers sitting in that soul-killing ER with Annette, so close to telling her and wanting to, needing to, so weary and so lost and just wanting to let it all go.

He didn’t want to lie anymore.

“You could rebuild it,” he says quietly, gaze locked on it. That ache hasn’t left him. It’s nesting in him, clearing out some space for itself. “Wouldn’t be that hard. I could—”

“No.” Daryl can’t see Hershel’s slow, regretful shake of the head, but he can feel it. As if he can sense the displaced air on the back of his neck. “You’re kind to offer. I thank you for it. But there’s other things that need repairing a good deal more. I need you working on them. And…”

He’s silent for a few seconds. Daryl already knows what he’s going to say, understands it, doesn’t blame him for it, but it at once deepens the ache and draws it closer to the surface, like one of those splinters slowly working itself free. And it’s not about utility, about losing the use of something.

It’s about losing the thing. The thing, and everything it is. Was.

Might have been.

“It’s gone,” Hershel says, voice even lower. Meditative. Almost as if Daryl wasn’t there at all. “It wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t be right. It should stay as it is.”

You lose things. It’s not cruelty. It’s not unfairness. It just is.

Daryl nods, and when Hershel directs him toward the toolshed and the barn, he goes without another word.

~

Hershel has always worked him hard—not by any means unfairly, God knows the man has always been more than fair and even kind to him at times—but the rest of the day is some of the hardest work he’s done yet, because it has to be done fast. The longer they spend on repairs and clearing away debris and fallen timber further out at the edges of the fields, the more all the work they would have to do as a matter of course falls behind. Hershel is clearly trying to strike some kind of unhappy medium, but it’s taking effort, and after lunch Annette comes out in jeans and workboots to do
whatever she can do.

And when Beth comes home she jumps into the fray as well.

She’s everywhere, raking and carrying and fetching, darting from place to place and doing whatever’s immediately needed—a bright little bird flying through the last of the sunshine. Daryl follows her with his eyes when and where he can, but as on Friday there’s nothing about it that’s painful. There’s no wrench of longing somewhere deep in the darker recesses where all the feelings he would rather not have hang out. He doesn’t look at her and see—in the shadow of the beautiful shining collection of glass shards he once considered being in love—everything they could lose with one misplaced step along this edge they’ve sharpened for themselves. He looks at her and he simply enjoys what he’s seeing: a lovely girl dancing along the boundary line between the child she used to be and the woman she’s becoming—and in some ways already is and has been for a long time.

He looks at her as she comes to him in the shed to get a roll of heavy-duty trash bags, and as she leaves he follows the flash of her hair and the brass beads at her delicate wrist, the subtle dip of her waist flowing up into the even more subtle curves of her breasts, her hips and ass and powerful legs, and he…

He loves her. It’s that simple. It can be.

Under everything, waiting for him, it always was.

~

Dinner is breaded chicken cutlets—because it’s quick and easy and everyone is starving to the point of getting snappish—and given that Annette has been working as hard as anyone for two thirds of the day, Beth offers to take over the cooking. Annette and Shawn have gone upstairs to shower and change and when Daryl comes in Hershel is seated at the kitchen table with a book in one hand and an enormous glass of water by his other. Beth is standing at the counter by the sink and doing the breading, Annette’s ladybug apron tied around her waist, and when Daryl pauses in the doorway she looks over her shoulder, half turns, gestures with her knife at the pantry.

“Get me some corn, please, Daryl? Enough for everyone?”

He gives her a quick nod and moves past her to do as she says, and he’s three feet from the pantry door when her sweet, clear voice floats to him through the warm air.

> forget the day you’ve had, forget the loves you’ve lived you and I are famous for pretending to be kids wash off all your grass stains, I’ll pull off my shoes let’s love like we’re kids, all shiny and new

“That’s very pretty, Bethy.” Daryl can hear Hershel’s smile in the words, in her name—can hear that it’s small and as deep as his sadness was. “Don’t think I know it. Is that something of yours?”

“Oh—Yes, Daddy.” And her smile? Not small at all. “Just somethin’ I’m workin’ on.”

“Very pretty,” Hershel repeats over the rustle of turning pages.

By the time Daryl returns with the ears of corn, he’s managed to put his own smile safely away.
Tucked inside, it curls around that nested ache and dulls it even further. Soothes. They lost a thing. But she’s right here.

*Girl.*

~

On the phone with her later, going back over the day. Not him and not them this time but the farm, and in particular the tree that splintered and fell. All evidence of what it had once been used for rotted away and came down in various other storms years ago, but when she was much smaller Shawn made a knotted rope swing for her and hung it on a thick limb, because she loved the one at the swimming hole and she wanted a version for her own. She used it almost every day for two years, wore the rope smooth at the knot and around the inches where she always settled her hands, and three years ago when sheer exposure to weather finally wore it thin enough to fall, she stood in the yard with Shawn and the tangled rope in her hands and joked about giving it a burial.

Then, after everyone else was in bed, she did. Little girl—not so little anymore, and far too big for that swing—in the moonlight in the backyard with a shovel in her hand, digging a grave for summer day after summer day like a murderer disposing of a body in secret.

She tells him this story with a smile in her voice, and he can tell she thinks it was silly, maybe even stupid—except she *doesn’t*, and he doesn’t think it was stupid either. Once he might have said it didn’t matter.

It does matter.

“*It’s hard,*” she says after a short period of silence broken by faint phone-crackle. “*Lettin’ go. At least of stuff like that. I don’t… Did you ever have this moment where you realized that nothin’ was gonna last? That everythin’ was eventually gonna go away or fall apart, or die, or somethin’—That it just wasn’t gonna be there anymore?*”

He’s leaning back on the bed and toying with the wolf, turning it over and over in his hands and tracing the cool lines he now knows nearly as well as the lines of his own body. Perhaps this conversation should bother him—certainly it’s wandering into some decidedly melancholy territory—but it doesn’t. Not very much. It’s her voice and she’s here with him, and for now that feels like the one thing that matters.

“I dunno. Maybe.” Should he have? He doesn’t remember a specific moment. Possibly there wasn’t one. Possibly it was a long series of them, beaten into him in both figurative and literal senses. Standing with her in the ruins and looking around at the last of autumn, he’d thought about it and hadn’t been able to think of anything then either.

“*Seemed unfair,*” she says quietly. “*Then I realized… Ain’t like it’s that way because someone decided to be a jerk about it. Ain’t like that because God decided He doesn’t like what He made. It just is. Nothin’ lasts.*” She pauses again, and he can hear the soft whisper of her sheets as she moves between them. Shifts her legs, maybe, or turns over. “*So you gotta hold on.*”

A smile, faint and completely spontaneous, pulls at the corner of his mouth. “Thought you said you have to let go.”

“*Have to do both. Was reading this earlier, thinkin’ about it.*” She takes a slow breath—what he
now recognizes as her preparing to switch gears from speaking her own words to ones written by someone else, and this time the rustle is unmistakably the pages of a book turning beneath her fingers.

To live in this world

you must be able
 to do three things:
 to love what is mortal;
 to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
 go,
 to let it go.

He hasn’t heard it before. For some reason she’s never given him this one. It cuts into him, peels something back and exposes something else to the air, leaves it raw. He takes his own breath and holds it, wonders if she can hear. Wonders if she knows.

Of course she knows. By now she couldn’t not know. She’s tuned to him, tuned in like a radio, and her particular reception is excellent.

And it’s not as though it’s even something he would want to hide.

He could joke about this. Say something about her killing a mood. But he won’t. And she knows that too.

She wouldn’t have said anything otherwise.

“I don’t think I’m so good at that,” he murmurs. He lifts the wolf and stares into its translucent blue eyes. He’s better than he was, he’s pretty sure, but better only means better. It doesn’t mean he’s suddenly an expert. He has long years of training to shed.

“Me neither. But I’m tryin’,.” She lets the silence unfurl again, then says, “Don’t worry about the trestle. It’s not a big deal. I couldn’t have used it as much anyway. Not if we’re, y’know. Bein’ more careful.”

“Yeah.” She’s right, of course. He knew that. Accepted it. Would have said it himself if she hadn’t gotten there first, or something like it. But that ache remains, even if—in practical terms—it doesn’t make a whole lot of difference.

“I did think it would always be there,” she adds, so low that she’s barely audible. Half submerged under the ambient hiss-hum of the open line through which their voices are traveling. “It always has been, since before I was born. But... I haven’t even been here all that long. Not really.”

“No one has,” he says, as low and soft as her. As if he’s there with her and they’re whispering to each other under the covers, like children who were supposed to be asleep a while ago. And he’s not sure what he means, not sure what pulled the words together and arranged them in that order and delivered them from his lips, but they feel right, and he senses that, like always, she’ll understand everything she needs to.

“No. No one has.”
Unspoken: Some things have. Many things. Those things get to stay, at least for a very long time, and those things lose us, and maybe they miss us.

But probably they don’t. And that’s all right. If the world collapsed every time someone left it, nothing would ever hold together at all.

They appear to have discovered a whole new game.

By the end of Tuesday he’s sure it’s a game, sure they both know it and are silently negotiating the rules, and by late Wednesday afternoon he’s started vaguely thinking of it as You’re Nice I Guess But I’m Not Paying Any Attention To You. Before, when desperation was driving them into greater and greater degrees of recklessness, every moment in each other’s company had been all about stealing and waiting for opportunities to steal. Glances, looks, fleeting and of course purely accidental little touches. Further removed but still not removed enough: kissing. Groping at each other, hands everywhere. Fucking, fast and hard and over much too soon. Over half their time together had become one enormous spatio-temporal B&E job, and he was never good at breaking or entering. It’s a fucking miracle no one noticed anything. Or so it seems, looking back.

Now it’s the reverse. Opportunities where there might be looks? No looks. Looking away. Sometimes doing so a bit pointedly. Chances for touching? No touching. None. Hands kept firmly inside their respective vehicles. Everything perfectly cordial, perfectly friendly, because the situation has to appear very normal. No weirdness. But she’s the Good Girl Farmer’s Daughter and he’s the Rough Drifter Farmhand, and when all’s said and done they categorically cannot have anything to do with one another.

If they’re going to be a cliché, they may as well enjoy it.

Thursday—once again bright and breezy—she walks up the drive with her backpack and her tight jeans, jacket that somehow manages to accentuate the lines of her body rather than obscure them, hair loose today and flowing down over her shoulders and nestling against the sides of her throat in a way that manages to absolutely dismantle him. He passes her on the way to the barn and gives her a single polite nod, which she returns.

Miss Greene.

Mr. Dixon.

If he had a fucking hat he might have lifted it.

In the barn, alone, he takes a second to himself and drops back against the wall and shakes with silent laughter. It’s so funny, and it’s fun, and he’s perfectly capable of carrying on with the rest of his day but Jesus fucking Christ, he wants to drag her in here and bend her over a hay bale and pound into her until she’s screaming for joy.

Well. He can call her later tonight, tell her all about it.
By Thursday afternoon the cleanup is done and the majority of the repairs have been completed—or at least all the ones that had to be done to ensure that everything else can proceed. Daryl lets the cows out to pasture and spends the morning in the field behind the house, clearing away the last of the branches and the few smaller trees that tore free from waterlogged earth and fell. As he works he thinks about the weekend and how he might spend it. Beth can’t get away—or neither of them thinks it’s a good idea for her to try—so he’ll have to come up with some other way of using the time, and staying inside isn’t particularly attractive. The brightness and clarity are set to continue. He wants to be in the world.

He could simply drive. Do what he wanted to do with Beth the day they spent on the road and explore. There’s a lot around here that he doesn’t know about, a lot of corners into which he hasn’t looked, and suddenly he wants to. Suddenly it feels worth doing. Feels like there might be something to discover.

And there’s the matter of the shelf. The shelf, and what might make a home there. He doesn’t know how to begin thinking about that part, but maybe he doesn’t have to. Maybe Carol was correct and it’ll simply happen if he steps back and allows it to do so. Let go can apply in a variety of ways to a broad selection of things in a multiplicity of situations.

He never had much control and that’s nothing to fear.

He’ll find a shelf. And he’ll wait for the rest to take care of itself.

~

Thursday evening, heading home, he scans the streets of town as he drives down them, and something slaps him in the face—not with any ill-intent or desire to hurt him but simply to get his goddamn attention.

_Hey. You. Fucking look at this._

So he’s looking. Hand on the wheel, watching what’s behind and on either side and in front and all around him, radio on and soft and crackling in a way he long ago started to find comforting, and he takes it all in—this weird fucking town in which he never expected to stay long, this weird fucking town which is home to a weird fucking girl who grabbed him and held on and finally, most unexpectedly of all, made him choose.

Made it so he _could_ choose. More than one thing, so many things, a crazy-quilt of possibilities, every second another choice. He looks around at it all—wide Main Street with light traffic and most of its shops closed up and dark but light coming from the cafe, the coffee shop, the bar, a few pedestrians wandering home or away from home or nowhere in particular, in pairs and small clots and alone, and the general restfulness of it all. Past the feed-&-seed, dark as well, and he looks up at that fucking building, that fucking ancient chipped brick and that fucking alarmingly rickety stairway up the side, that fucking dirty window he always used to consider kind of _his_, and Barenaked Ladies crashes in on the radio and he feels a total absence of resentment.

_broke into the old apartment_

_forty-two steps from the street_
What the fuck good would resentment do him now? It’s all been done.

On, away from Main and off down side streets long before he reaches the place where the street got washed away—mostly reconstructed now though it won’t ever be the same—past a thrift store and a tiny bakery and into quiet residential lanes lined with heavy trees considerably less heavy since the storm. Past houses with their lights on against a chilling night, cozy, swinging out into the wealthier neighborhood closer to the high school, the high school itself with its football field and its parking lot in which he’s allowed himself to be a total fucking creep, its windows through any of which she might be found on any given weekday. Past that and toward his own neighborhood, the houses aging and falling into poorer repair but still lit, still cozy, still nice.

This isn’t him. Not even remotely. He will never belong here, not really. Except he might, part of him. Part of him that he thought was killed a long time ago, that he never even missed. He can be happy here. He believes that. He is happy here. He has everything he can imagine ever wanting, and so much more than he ever thought he would get. He believes he can be happy here and he’s unbelievably blessed, not by a God who was never there for him, never there at all, but by a girl who loves him.

I don’t like bein’ here.

You lose things.

You lose things and you don’t ever want them back.
be exhausted, and Hershel needs him for the front end of tomorrow, but neither of those things seems to matter—neither of those things seems real. This is real, and this is the road.

This is the road out.

The realization is there and he collides with it head-on and it smashes the breath out of him; suddenly he jerks the car over and stomps on the brake, fumbles the door open with fingers that feel too big for his hands, stumbles out onto the blacktop. It’s very cold and his breath steams out of him, but he’s burning from the inside out, breathing fast and hard like he’s been running, been fucking, been doing anything that reminds his body that it’s alive. His muscles are locked into a furious cycle of tense-release, and he can feel the chemistry of fight-or-flight boiling through his veins, except all the fight is gone and only the flight remains, and there’s no hint of fear. He stops in the center of the road and gazes ahead at the way he was going, a long straight road extending to and over the horizon, behind him the moon and ahead of him an ocean of shimmering dark.

He made a night sky for them, for her, and set her into it like a rising moon herself. But he also made it for him. And here it is. Beneath it and beyond it is a world he had no idea was there, spread out and open and ready for him.

His wing itches.

Go.

It’s insane, exploding up into him in a dizzying rush like a broken pocket of madness sealed in his mantle. He has no idea where it’s all coming from. And he doesn’t want to go. His home is back there, his home in every way he could ever use the word and never thought he would, and she’s back there, and he doesn’t want to go. He wants to never go. Ever.

But he could.

Take her. Take her and go. Everything back there, everything in the way, everything telling you no—fuck it, burn it down, get her and take her and go.

He’s shaking. He bites down hard on his lip, fists clenching and unclenching, and tilts his head back and stares up at that endlessly cold, endlessly beautiful sky. Something he could fall into if gravity chose this moment to release him.

Say she did run off with you. Say she married your redneck ass. Got a tumble-down shack in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere. Pumped out a couple kids. Say she did that.

But that’s not us. That won’t be us. Can’t be. We’re wild and precious, and together we’re blessed.

Precious enough for this? Wild enough to make something like that work?

It was a hectic fantasy, far less formed and possessing far less clarity than even his earliest fantasies of her, and really it was there for a single second, but like the briefest and most powerful of dreams it’s lingering now, and he can’t stop thinking about it. Nearly everything that’s happened to him in the last three months has been stuff he would have sworn up and down would never happen in a million years of half-life be possible, and yet it’s all been stubbornly persistent about happening anyway. He doesn’t think impossible is a category into which he should be so quick to toss things, nor does he think he should be so set on confining them to it.

So would she? If it came to that, somehow in some scenario whose outlines he doesn’t want to fill in? If he went to her and held out his hand and asked her to go with him, run away with him, would she do it? Would she let go? Leave her friends, leave her life here, leave high school in the middle of
her fucking senior year—*drop out*, let’s call this what it is—and run?

Leave her family? If he asked? He never would, *never*, but if he did? Would she say yes?

Would the answer ruin her?

He thinks he’s been driving in circles for hours and he has no idea what time it is, and if nothing else this is pretty goddamn inconsiderate, but he needs to, he needs this, on some level he still does *need her*, and he gropes for his phone and hauls it out of his pocket like a brick, finds her in his contacts and punches her number.

He catches the time as he does it; it’s about twenty minutes after midnight. She might be asleep, sure, but she would want him to do this. He’s positive. If she knew how he’s feeling right now, she would want him to call.

Four rings. Then her voice, rough and slightly slurried—yes, she was asleep, and a tiny finger-wagging part of himself does feel bad, but the vast majority collapses into profound relief.

“*Daryl?’*”

“Hi.” He turns in place. His body is jittery and it wants to do something. He’s not completely certain about what. Sprint off into the darkness, possibly, which as ideas go wouldn’t be a terribly productive one. “Sorry. You were sleepin’. I’m sorry.”

“*s alright.*” Yawn, expansive and full-voiced. He imagines her tousled hair. He now knows what she looks like waking up. “*What’s goin’ on?’*”

*I think I’m on some kind of ledge and I don’t know how I got here and I need you to talk me down.* “*Nothin’. I was just… I went out. Drivin’. Wanted to talk to you.”

“*What about?’*” She doesn’t sound concerned, not exactly, but the lingering sleepy relaxation is slipping out of her voice.

“Nothin’ special.” *I have no fucking idea, I’m sorry, I’m lost.* “*I just.*”

He walks a few aimless feet and looks up again, raking his free hand into his hair and gripping, sparkling sting trickling all down his scalp to his hairline and beyond. “You ever wanna run away from home?”

“I… Sure, I guess… Every kid does, one time or another.”

“Why? What were you lookin’ to run from?”

“I dunno.” Another yawn, slower and deeper. If he was there, folding his arms around her and combing his fingers through her hair, fitting himself against her back and drifting in her sweet-smelling warmth. Because he *would* fit. He would fit to perfection. Because they do. “*I guess… Fight with Daddy and Mama? Somethin’ else I got mad about? Normal stuff.*” She pauses and he can feel her working through this, feeling out its form. “*Why are you askin?’*”

“Just wonderin’.”

“You did.” Not a question. She would never need to ask. “*All the time.’*”

“Thought about it. Never thought it would happen.” He wanted to escape, wanted it with everything in him capable of wanting, but it was purely conceptual, pure theory, even after he saw Merle do
exactly that—watched him run into the loving embrace of *service to his country* and all the bullshit that came after. That was Merle. That was never him. He was never going to be strong enough. And if he got caught…

And no one was coming to help him.

“*Why not?*”

All those reasons, sure. But there was something else—maybe the biggest one. Sitting there, blocking all the roads, squatting like a malevolent toad and blinking slowly at him with its dead eyes. It was always the last thing that stopped him when he came close to working up the courage to try. He would approach it, stare at it for a long time, and finally turn away and go back where he belonged.

“Wasn’t nothin’ to run to.”

“*There is now,*” she says softly, and although of course she can’t see him, he nods.

“*There is now.*”

*Great big world out there. Always was.*

Except was it? Was it really? Was it there before he came here, before he found her? *Was it there, my girl, or did you dream it into being? Did we, both of us, together?*

The moment he saw her by the side of the road in the rain, was that the moment? The creation of the tangent universe he slipped into without realizing it, so much brighter and more beautiful and more *alive* than the one he lived in for nearly four decades until he was so beaten down that he no longer regarded his own life as something worth saving? Until he fell into this world, and started learning how to live in it?

Was that when it happened?

Or has it not happened *yet?*

“*Where are you?*” She knows. Somehow—uncomfortably perceptive girl, thoughtful, *wise*—she knows what this is, she knows why he called her, and she knows what he’s looking at right now. She may not know the details, may not be able to pinpoint his location, but she knows him and she knows.

So don’t fucking lie to her.

“I’m on the road.” Because he is. It’s the truest thing he could say. *The road.*

“I *can’t hear you that well. You’re kinda fadin’ in and out.*”

“I’m sorta… in the middle of nowhere.” In the liminal. *I’m between.* “The stars are real bright.”

“*Are you comin’ home?*”

Could mean so many things. Means only one.

“Yeah.” No thought necessary. He doesn’t need time to decide. “Gonna come back now.”

“Alright.”
He turns and looks back the way he came. It looks exactly the same in this direction. If he wasn’t careful he could mistake one for the other.

Except no. In the distance, so faint he almost can’t see it at all, is the winking red star of the radio tower.

Surely he came too far out for it to be visible. Yet there it glows. And it’s the same one. It might not be—but it is.

“I’m comin’ back,” he repeats softly.

“I love you.” Sleepy again, her voice a deep hum. He can see her snuggling into her sheets, her blankets, phone tucked against her ear. “Be careful.”

“Love you too.”

Line closed. He lowers his phone and watches the red star twinkle.

He kept no track of his turns as he made them and he has no clear idea of where he is, but he’s not lost and he doesn’t need satellites to guide him back. He has celestial navigation at his disposal, the fallback of travelers on trackless roads for thousands upon thousands of years.

Except he knows something else.

Polaris marks true north. But Polaris didn’t always. A thousand years ago another star filled that role, and in a thousand years more of equinoxial precession yet another will have taken its place.

Nothing lasts. Not even very old things. Not even stars, not even these winter constellations turning above him. Everything is mortal and everything changes. He did. She did. They will.

This is a very old story, and every story ends.

He gets in the truck, turns around, and goes back where he belongs.

Chapter End Notes

Poem is "In Blackwater Woods" by Mary Oliver, song is "The Old Apartment" by Barenaked Ladies.
making up minds and making it last us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday is the shelf.

That’s as far as he goes. That’s as much as he determines ahead of time. The night before, he gets home on the ass end of one and he fumbles off his clothes and collapses into bed and sleeps more heavily than he has all week. He’s not shaken. Neither is exhaustion the right term for what sends him down and keeps him there. If someone made him look for the words he would scramble and come up with some but they wouldn’t come close to the mark, for all his skilled aim in other respects.

Something happened out there. And he came home. Those seem to be the only important details. Whatever else it meant, it’s over and he’s here. If he was on a ledge, he climbed down from it.

He wakes up around six-thirty and heads back out to the farm. It’s mostly playing catch-up, nothing huge or too strenuous, and the fact that he’s more tired than usual makes little in the way of difference. Beth is there helping, but Daryl’s in the fields, away from the house, and doesn’t see much of her. Which is fine. He passes, sees her at a distance coming from the barn, waves. She waves back, and that makes him feel pretty goddamn good and carries him through until he’s done, shortly after noon. By then she’s gone out with friends, and his time is entirely his own.

So. Shelf.

Where the fuck does one go for that?

Driving back toward town, he contemplates Walmart for about half a second before shoving the idea away. Same with Target; not all big box stores are created in a single equally miserable image but all of them fall short of easily bearable.

And anyway, it doesn’t feel right. Everything he’s done to and in this place—his place—has been guided by instinct he doesn’t understand and doesn’t want to. Once again, there’s the risk of watching his feet too closely.

Paying attention, he’s learning, isn’t always something you try to do. Sometimes it involves the exact opposite.

Let go.

So he drives, half an idle eye on the tall, puffy clouds drifting by overhead and the wheeling, darker murmurations of starlings. And when he hits the turnoff for the center of town he keeps moving—not out and away, as if he was heading to points beyond, but swinging wide and southwest along the outskirts, where he’s less familiar with everything. He’s lived here for coming on four months now but there are significant parts of this place that he doesn’t know. Not well.

The edges of town nearer the farm are sparse and the higher end of poor, narrow manufactured houses with patchy walls and roofs and trailers in even worse shape, crooked rusting mailboxes, scruffy yards with chain link fences and broken toys scattered in cracked driveways.

Familiar.

This is the opposite end of town, and while it’s sparse it’s clearly doing better. The houses aren’t
lavish but they’re in good shape and the lawns are wide and mostly well-kept. Lots of minivans and small SUVs, and what scattered toys he sees don’t look as if they’ve been through about ten generations of careless hands before their current owners. A couple of kids biking down the street; the bikes look new. Families were living out on the other side; there are families here too, and he gathers they’re younger ones. Starter families in starter homes. He’s never made any conscious study of real estate, never taken time to pick up on this stuff, but there are patterns, patterns in everything, signs to read everywhere, and at some point you stop needing to try to notice things. It requires no more conscious effort than breathing. You just do.

He feels—and is sure he looks—intensely out of place here. Which he also barely notices anymore, unless it spikes, and this is well within comfortable limits.

Driving down a long, curving arc of a street—houses on one side and a stretch of open land on the other—he still isn’t sure what he’s looking for. So he isn’t explicitly looking for anything. When he finds it he’ll know.

And about ten minutes later, down a street further in where the buildings rest closer together and the houses are interspersed with a bike shop and a tiny, low concrete place that purports to do both manicures and palm readings, he finds it.

At first he doesn’t know what he’s found. He simply knows that he’s found something. He pulls over across the narrow street and looks at it.

It’s small—not as small as the manicure/fortune-telling place but small. It’s a brick building on a corner adjacent to another house—also small, porch roof doing a bit of leaning and light blue siding getting dingy. It may or may not be connected to the building; hard to tell. Low roof, single big front window, and the window is packed with stuff.

It’s difficult to tell what exactly this place sells, though it does look as if it sells something. Patchy lettering on the window seems to back that up.

ANTIQUES
VINTAGE
CLOTHES BOOKS FURNISHINGS

The window is full of all three. Whether they’re antiques or not, Daryl has no idea and has no idea how anyone would have any idea, but sure, they could be. A dress covered in purple and blue sequins hanging off a dressmaker’s dummy, a stack of paperbacks the spines of which he can’t read, a dark wooden dining chair, a box overflowing with what appears to be extremely gaudy costume jewelry. An ugly painting of a cat in a green boat with an owl.

According to whatever bizarre dream-logic governs his life right now—if he goes nuts for a minute and grants some kind of authorial intelligence behind everything—it’s so fucking weird, there’s no way he wasn’t supposed to find it.

He gets out of the truck and walks across the street and opens the plate glass door. A bell jingles and the door shuts silently behind him when he releases it, and he stands there in relative dimness and waits for his eyes to adjust.

His first impression is that the space he’s entered is somehow larger than it should be, going by its external appearance. His second impression is that if the window was packed with stuff, the space itself is jammed full of it to the point where movement through it is difficult at best. It smells like the back of an ancient closet, all dust and old mildew and gently decaying paper and mothballs that have been lying in place for so long they’ve just about fossilized. It’s full of rows of shelves, all pressing
against the ceiling and nearly obscuring the already inadequate overhead lighting. The shelves themselves are stocked according to no ordered plan Daryl can see. More books—in stacks again rather than arranged in lines with spines facing out—paperbacks but also hardbacks, some of which, to his eyes, look very antique indeed. Jumbles of random junk: cheap figurines of dancers and angels and teddy bears, souvenir vacation glasses, snow globes, brass candle holders. More clothes far to the right, hung on a long rack which is bowing dangerously in the middle—sequins and silk which may or may not be real, velour, lots and lots of beads, colors which have no business showing up together. Another chair is hanging inexplicably from the ceiling. Fixed to the wall, he can see the tip of what’s probably a small kayak.

He blinks.

His childhood house—both of them—was full of junk. Ugly junk, useless, most of it broken, a lot of it boasting bullet holes like it went through a war. Some of it bought by his father—a disturbing remote control shaped like a headless limbless woman’s torso with buttons for nipples, a bra bucket-thing used for an enormous ashtray, a huge plastic beer stein emblazoned with STAY DRUNK NO HANGOVER, a Confederate flag with crossed rifles and cigarette burns scattered across it. He alternately hated and ignored it all, because it was his father, outward manifestations of Will Dixon’s sensibilities, but there were other things. Little things brought in by his mother. Little figurines not unlike the ones on those shelves, a plastic vase made to look like stained glass in which she unsuccessfully tried to grow a succession of plants, a chipped decorative plate—with a wolf on it, he suddenly remembers. A howling wolf backlit by an enormous moon. All cheap, yes, but he later understood what it was: she was trying to fight back. In her way. Most of what she acquired was broken already or got broken later one way or another, but she kept fighting. She was fighting right up until the end. Exerting any control she could find, any way she could manage.

She got hit. She had her share of bruises. But whatever impression the neighbors might have gleaned, the truth is that for the most part the beatings her husband visited on her weren’t physical. Those were reserved for his sons.

She wanted beauty. Little beauties, existing only for themselves. They were never allowed to survive. So those were the things Daryl always loved.

Didn’t really know it, but he did.

Now he looks at all this junk and he takes a breath.

“Anyone here?”

Silence, except for the almost inaudible creaking of things struggling to support the weight of other things. Cautiously, he moves forward and down one of the cramped aisles past a wildly varied selection of doorknobs and a pile of faded silk flowers. The back of the place isn’t visible, at least not clearly; he’s beginning to wonder if there is one, if he’s wandered into yet another tangent universe entirely full of the lost contents of people’s basements and attics, when there’s a crash in the distance and a string of loud cursing, and the sound of things scattering themselves across the stained linoleum.

Well, it’s something to follow. Noise is bouncing confusingly around but he’s pretty sure it came from somewhere to his left, and he exits the aisle, turns in that direction—and there’s a man standing on a low step-stool, arms up and spread, desperately attempting to keep a tower of unlabeled VHS tapes from collapsing onto him. On the floor all around him are about five hundred buttons, all different and all large and a lot of them glittry. A tin tipped on its side against the wall indicates where they came from.
“Oh, thank God.” The man sounds vaguely, calmly panicked. “You… I’m sorry, can you help me? I don’t want to die in here.”

Daryl takes a few seconds to survey the situation, hurries forward and reaches up to match the man’s hold. It’s awkward, and a few tapes fall and narrowly miss their heads, but together they manage to push most of the stack back into place. It’s unsteady, wobbling, and the man eyes it dubiously as he steps down and backs away.

“Jesus, thank you.” He faces Daryl, dusting his hands off on his shirt. He’s youngish, wavy brown hair, covered enough in dust that trying to remove it from his hands is mostly pointless. “That was stupid. You know that thing where you know something’s stupid as you’re doing it and you do it anyway?” He nods at the shelf. “That was that thing. Tapes have sharp corners.” He exhales heavily. Daryl watches him, bemused. “Anyway. Hi. Sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. I was in the back.”

Daryl glances behind him and to the left. “This ain’t the back?”

The man laughs hollowly. “Oh, no. God, no. No, this goes back a ways.”

“All like this?”

“Yeah. We didn’t…” He trails off for a few seconds and wipes at his forehead, succeeding only in smearing more dust around. “Believe it or not I didn’t notice that before I bought this place. We. Me and my… my partner.” He turns and starts back toward the front.

Daryl, still bemused and not sure what else to do, follows. “You just got it?”

The man nods over his shoulder. “Last week. Came with everything you see. Been trying to get it in some kind of order since then, but it’s… There’s a lot. Somehow didn’t seem like a lot before. Maybe because it was so cheap.” He sighs and mutters under his breath. “Let’s buy an antique store, he said. It’ll be fun, he said.”

It’s been getting steadily brighter as they approach the window, and right before they reach it a counter with a cash register comes into view. It, like almost everything else, is half buried under other objects. The cash register looks it might be deeply confused by the concept of credit cards. It looks like it should be in a home for cash registers. It doesn’t look happy about being there.

The man stops, lays a hand on the counter and adopts a businesslike affect. It doesn’t entirely work for him. Daryl’s bemusement begins to slide over into amusement.

He’s not sure and it’s too early to tell, but he doesn’t think he dislikes this person.

“So. I guess we’re open. Can I help you with something?”

“Yeah.” Okay. Sure. Why the fuck not? This is already odd and was from the beginning, and he sees no harm in making it odder. ‘I’m… Guess I’m lookin’ for a shelf. Or somethin’,” he adds, because maybe he shouldn’t get too specific.

The man takes a couple of seconds to process that. “Okay. I mean… Yeah. Probably something like that’s in here.” He glances around. “Anything might be. Are you okay with hunting?”

Daryl shrugs. “Ain’t got nowhere to be.”

“Okay.” The man nods, as if something’s been decided, and sticks out a hand. “I’m Aaron, by the way.”
Daryl looks down at it, takes it, shakes. “Daryl.”

“Daryl.” The man gives him a faint smile. Faint, but genuine. Very. It looks nothing like Beth’s—there’s nothing about Aaron that is at all like Beth in any sense of appearance—but somehow it reminds him of Beth all the same. “All right. Let’s see if we can find you a shelf.”

~

There could be anything in there. There really seems to be everything in there. Except a shelf, and in the third aisle they make their way down—it took Daryl two aisles to realize that he doesn’t know and can’t seem to tell how many there actually are—Aaron sidesteps a thick bouquet of peacock feathers in an umbrella stand and half turns.

“What kind of shelf?”

Daryl shrugs again, hands in his pockets. Carol hadn’t specified that, and his brain hasn’t done any specifying of its own. “I dunno. Any kind.”

“What do you need it for?”

This isn’t a line of questioning he anticipated, and he’s not sure what to do with it. “I don’t… Don’t need it for anythin’.”

Aaron arches a brow, looks both thoughtful and uncertain. “Why do you want one, then?”

Somehow Daryl’s not yet aggravated, but he can see how he might get there—and as much at himself as at Aaron. He didn’t come prepared. He still doesn’t know how to do things. “To put shit on.”

Aaron makes a turn, looks up and to the right and scans a case full of ornate gold-painted clocks. “What kind of shit do you have?”

He can answer this much, at least. Though saying it… It feels like revealing something personal. Not easy to say to a stranger, even one he’s now certain he doesn’t dislike. “Got a book. Got this… crystal wolf.”

“Like a figurine?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s all?”

“So far.”

“All right.” Aaron sounds slightly pleased. “That’s helpful. Nothing big, then. A wall shelf, maybe.”

He chews meditatively at his lip and starts forward again. They’re suddenly flanked on both sides by wigs on faceless heads. It’s creepy. “Doesn’t help find one, but yeah.”

This could have been an easier process. Much. There are plenty of stores around that probably could have sold Daryl what he needs, and probably within about ten minutes at the most. He could extricate himself, leave, go do that, go home. He’s not exhausted, but he’s tired, and he knows that if he lay down he’d be asleep in a couple of minutes.
But he doesn’t want to. Creepy wig heads aside, there’s nothing about this place that’s putting him in any real hurry to get out of it.

He lifts aside a dangling collection of beads, so numerous that they form half a curtain. They seem to be coming into a part of the shop that features more in the way of furnishings and furnishing-like stuff, and Aaron is scanning the shelves with fresh and thoughtful care. “You gonna keep it pretty much like this?”

“You know, we’re not sure yet.” Aaron nudges a child-sized rocking chair further back under the shelf where it seems to live. “Eric actually likes it this way. I’m not sure how we’re ever supposed to —” He gestures in the general direction of everything. “— find anything if we do.” He glances back, smiling a bit crookedly. “You’re the first person who’s come in here, to be honest. And looking for something specific.”

Daryl rolls a shoulder. Not that specific.

But then he looks up and to his left and he’s found it.

He halts, touches Aaron’s shoulder. “Whoa, hold up.”

They’ve reached the part of the room with the kayak—it is indeed a kayak, all flaking and pitted and possibly not especially effective as a kayak anymore—hanging high on the wall. Directly below it is a bewildering assortment of decorative fixtures: more sconces, wood carvings, masks—and shelves. Three, not huge; none of them longer than two feet, all featuring three actual shelves fitted into a frame. Two of them are unfinished pale wood, and look like the sort of thing someone might buy to customize. But the third one isn’t.

The third one is as simple as the others. There’s nothing special about it. Except there is, and Daryl needs to see it for less than the time it takes to blink to know it.

Someone already finished it. It’s dark brown, almost black, and glossy even under the thin layer of dust that covers everything. Looking at it, he can feel the cool smoothness sliding under the pad of his finger.

So he reaches up—fascinated—and he does exactly that. Runs a fingertip along the bottom shelf and watches the darker stripe it leaves in its wake as he wipes the dust away.

It’s a dark space. Not bad. Not a box of darkness—or if it is, it’s beautiful because it might be filled. And it’s beautiful in and of itself.

“You like it?”

Daryl starts, drops his hand and shoots Aaron a glance that’s more of a twitch. He feels… Not exposed, exactly. Not like he’s been seen doing something he would have rather kept private. But something did happen, and Aaron saw it, and Daryl can tell in the way those three words are said. They aren’t a question. And when he registers the look on Aaron’s face, that’s all the confirmation he needs. Little smile. Warm. It reaches all the way to Aaron’s eyes. Puzzlement, too; Aaron doesn’t entirely get it. But he’s okay with not getting it.

This is a guy who knows what a good thing looks like. All at once Daryl doesn’t need to know him in order to know it.

He clears his throat. “Yeah. It’s… I do.”

“All right.” Aaron gazes at him in silence for a moment or two, the smile and the bemusement
persisting, but somehow it’s now difficult to completely read his expression. Except that he seems to be thinking. Then he nods up at the shelf. “Take it.”

Daryl looks at the shelf, looks back at Aaron. *Take it. Like… Lift it down off the wall? “How much?”*

Aaron waves a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You can’t—” But he has money. He can pay. He *wants* to. “I got cash on me.”

“I’m sure you do. I said don’t worry about it.” Aaron’s smile grows by a few increments. “You saved my life. We’ll call it even.”

Daryl arches a brow. “Ain’t exactly even.”

“You’d be doing me a favor, then. You get it out of here, it’s one less thing I have to worry about. Seriously.” And he is serious. Very. Under that smile there’s a deep reservoir of honesty, and again Daryl finds himself thinking of Beth. “Take it.”

Somewhere in the unpleasant recesses of those long years of ugly conditioning, Merle mutters something about *not takin’ no one’s handout* and for the briefest of second-fragments Daryl’s gut twists. But that’s a lie. And that version of *Merle* is a lie, or at the very least it isn’t the full story where Merle is concerned. Daryl knows that now.

He’s not stupid. He knows this isn’t the kind of thing you say no to.

You don’t say no to a gift.

He rolls a shoulder. One of the things Beth has taught him, made piercingly clear, is that there are good people and they aren’t even few and far between. There might be a lot of them. “Alright.” He pauses, returns that little smile with one of his own. “Thanks.”

Aaron dips his head. “I just can’t believe we actually found one.”

But Daryl is already moving on to something else, shifting his attention back to the shelf and its rich color and its space. Okay, he’s taking a free shelf. But there’s another part to this, something that follows the acquisition of that space, and this doesn’t seem like a poor chance to address that question.

“Gotta put somethin’ on it,” he murmurs. “Just got the two things.”

Aaron is sharp. He can tell that too. Someone who might pick up on a hint. Sure enough, the answer comes and it’s exactly what he thought it would be.

“Well. If you want *things*…” Aaron spreads his hands expansively and his smile turns a touch dry. “I think I might be able to help you out with that.”

~

He’s half expecting Aaron to keep trailing him, but Aaron tips his head toward what he’s mysteriously termed *the back* and says he should return there, keep sorting through some boxes, and leaves Daryl alone to browse. Which is nice, even preferable; he hadn’t at all resented Aaron’s help
or his company, but this feels like something it might be better to do on his own.

He nods, turns, and begins to make his way back down the aisle toward the front, gaze drifting idly over the shelves without really focusing on much of anything.

Shapes glide past. More figurines, glass sculptures of fairies that actually don’t look cheap at all, a pile of mismatched plates, a pile of equally mismatched teacups. A case of chunky rings. A chess set made of unfamiliar green stone, polished until it glows and veined in white—similar to marble. A rack of tiny and extremely intricate wind chimes ornamented in what looks like bone cradled in spirals of copper.

All pretty. All of them look like they could mean something to someone. Did, maybe, assuming someone had them before now, and as his attention passes over them he realizes that each one of these objects has a story attached to it. Probably nothing terribly interesting, but maybe. Sure, maybe. And it’s all someone. All people.

This isn’t one story. There’s a lot more going on.

This takes him out of it for a bit. He keeps wandering, keeps looking, but his mind is also wandering, floating, leaving clarity behind for close to pure abstraction. It’s nice, it feels good in ways he can’t define, and without noticing it he ends up back in the aisle with the shelf containing all the old books—many old. Not all. But books, and even though the shelf itself isn’t that large, he can’t shake the feeling that he’s seeing more of them packed into one space than he ever has in his life.

His attention snaps back in and he studies them—at the spines, not only at the titles. Some of them don’t have titles at all. But each one of them has a texture, frayed cloth and torn paper, mass-market paperbacks run through with white lines from opening and reopening. He can practically feel it without touching them, and then something makes him do it, running his fingertips along them the way he touched the shelf. Slow. Careful. Receiving and processing the input.

In the ruins, in the sun, he reached out and laid his hand on warm stone. Felt the roughness, the pebbled texture. Could almost feel the sharp pinpricks of reflected light from the flecks of mica.

He touched it and it felt real. Something—a feeling, an experience—that he could possess.

He could have any one of these books. He could have them all. He could have anything in here, and the experience of the things. No one is stopping him. No one is telling him it’s a bad idea, or it’s stupid, or it’s a waste of his time.

A waste of his time would be turning away from this. Walking out.

He reaches out and—at random—plucks one of the beat-up hardbacks off the shelf level with his chest. Turns it over and looks at it. There’s nothing on the cover but the title—deep red letters printed into gray fabric.

ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

He knows it exists. He knows it was a Disney movie. He knows there’s a girl, a white rabbit, and a cat. That’s about the extent of it.

He flips it open to a random page and scans down the lines.

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.
“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.
“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

He snaps it closed and tucks it under his arm.

He’s about to move on, already drifting again—something about this place seems to be doing that to him, the dimness or the smell or simply the bewildering chaos of it all—when another spine reaches out and grabs his sleeve and gives it a sharp tug. Before he realizes he’s doing it, he’s pulling it off the shelf. Doesn’t even bother to look through it.

He knows he doesn’t have to.

~

There’s a little more wandering, a little more looking, but—and as usual he has no fucking idea where the certainty is coming from or what it means—he senses that he’s finished here. At least for now. It might be his imagination, because the whole fucking thing might be his imagination, but he doesn’t feel like he’s done with this place. Not quite yet.

For now he has what he needs.

He makes his confused and confusing way through the maze of shelves toward the back and meets Aaron on his way from it. Aaron gives the books a cursory glance, sets a price of five dollars for the two, and insists on putting them into a plastic grocery bag while Daryl goes back to get the shelf off the wall.

Daryl’s feelings regarding Aaron are definitely warming beyond the point of doesn’t dislike.

He’s still not entirely used to liking people. It feels weird.

“Thanks for coming in.” Aaron accompanies him to get the door, even though Daryl doesn’t need it—again, he’s not inclined to argue, and it seems to be making Aaron quietly happy. “Not just because of the tapes. Kind of…” He steps out onto the sidewalk and back, lets the door fall closed with a quiet jingle and blinks in the afternoon sunlight. “It feels real now. Having this place. Know what I mean?”

Daryl nods. He does.

He knows it exactly.

~

He stops off at the tiny hardware store on Main for some nails and a hammer. It’s dusk by the time he gets home.

Everything feels strange. Everything already felt strange, did long before he ever walked into that store, but the quality of the strangeness has shifted yet again, and the low light through which he
moves seems to be semi-solid, like a thin mist. It moves, swirls, as if his passage is disturbing it in some subtle ways.

He’s turning to walk around the house to the stairs when a pale shape moves in the shadows of the porch. He stops, the shelf under one arm and bags hanging from his wrist; it’s Carol on the swing.

She lifts her hand in a wave. He doesn’t have any free hands to wave back with, but he nods at her, trusts she’ll be able to see it.

And then he stays put. He’s aware that he’s considering something, and he’s considering it on a level quite separate from the part of his brain that usually takes care of making decisions.

He waits for it to conclude whatever it’s doing. When it relays instructions to him, he walks back to the porch steps, looks up at her. He can make out her expression now, and she’s smiling, but she also appears slightly puzzled.

Well, he’s about to puzzle her more.

“You like rabbits?”

She doesn’t answer immediately. Only looks more puzzled. This is expected, so he adds, “Y’know. To cook.”

“Oh.” Her brow furrows. “I… I never tried.”

“They’re real good fried.” He pauses again, gives her a smile. Faint, but he means it. Means it completely. He has a number of reasons for this, some of which he now knows and some of which he suspects, but primary among them is simply that he can do pretty much whatever he wants, and he wants to spend some more time with her.

And he owes her.

“I’ll get you some rabbits. Tomorrow.”

“All right.” Bemused, every bit as much as he’s been at any point today, but she’s smiling again too. “That’d be nice.” She lifts her chin at the shelf under his arm. “You got one.”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Have anything else to put on it yet?”

“Got a couple things.” His smile widens. Not very much, but it does. He’s feeling good. He’s feeling really, really good. “Like you said. Goin’ from there.”

~

He doesn’t put the shelf by the bed. He’s made his camp, established it as a space with a certain function, but he can’t stay there forever. It’s time to start spreading out.

He puts it across the room, directly opposite the bed. He does it carefully and with a good deal of attention to height, to how level it is. He looks at it from several angles. It’s important to get this right.
It’s another step. It’s moving.

When he’s sure, he takes out the books, picks up *House of Light*, picks up the wolf. He’s careful with this too, but less so. This can be done more by feel. If some ways of paying attention involve a kind of lack of it, this is one of those. If he looks directly at it, thinks about it too much, he’ll fuck it up.

They all go on the same shelf. He places them where it seems like they should go, then pauses with the last of the three books in his hand, fallen open.

What we know: we are more than blood—we are more than our hunger and yet we belong to the moon and when the ponds open, when the burning begins the most thoughtful among us dreams of hurrying down into the black petals into the fire, into the night where time lies shattered into the body of another.

He puts the book on the shelf with the others. He goes back to his base camp and switches off the lamp. For a while he stands by the window and looks out at the last of the light as it fades from the sky.

He’s not sure why he does this. He just does.

He’s not sure what he’s feeling. He just is.

Chapter End Notes

Poem snippet is "Blossom" by Mary Oliver.
It rains that night. Not hard, not a storm in any sense of the word, no wind to speak of and no thunder or lightning. It’s cold, and the chill of it seeps in through the windows, finds every crack and exploits it to the fullest extent—as if the cold itself is tired of being the way it is and is trying desperately to get warm.

Daryl wakes up in the small hours and lies curled under the covers, listening to the rain’s fingertips patting gently on the window. It’s a comfortable sound, and it’s comfortable to be awake to hear it. He’s abruptly swept by a sensation he’s experienced before but never to this degree: the simple knowledge that it’s cold and wet out there and he’s in here, and he has no reason to go out there until he wants to. That doesn’t necessarily mean he’ll be waiting until the rain fully ceases, if it continues into tomorrow, but he doesn’t have to. He doesn’t have to do anything.

But he said he was going to get Carol some rabbits and that’s exactly what he means to do.

As usual, Beth’s scent is lingering in the sheets, clinging to every thread—all intensity gone, the memory of a smell rather than the thing itself, but it’s strong enough for what he wants and he buries his face in the pillow, breathing her in.

The only thing better right now, better than the fact that he’s warm and dry and in no imminent danger of not being either, would be her next to him, fitted against his chest and the bent hollow of his belly and hips, his arm slung loosely around her waist with all the lazy tranquility that comes with the certainty that she won’t be leaving him. That she intends to stay.

He’ll have that again, and it won’t be long. And maybe when he does, the world will give them a storm like this and allow them to enjoy it to its full.

He sighs, and when sleep returns for him he follows it down without any hesitation.

~

By morning the rain has tapered off to a weak dribble, and not long after it stops entirely and the sky blows clear. He’s up before then, moving quietly around, making coffee, drinking it sitting on the counter and watching the light bloom on the walls and ceiling. He likes being up early, always has when he’s felt sober and physically able, and only in part because once long ago it was one of the few times of day when he could count on getting much in the way of peace or time to himself. That kind of maneuvering through spacetime is no longer necessary, but the peace of these initial hours and minutes is still there—always will be, it’s simply a feature of how the world proceeds with itself—and it’s nice to sit in it before he goes out into it.

Goes out into it to shoot and gut and skin some of its residents.

Not a big deal. Circle of life and all.

The sun is barely edging above the horizon when he shoulders his bow and heads out the door,
clanking down the steps to the path around. Everything is damp, a lot of it dripping, and the first shafts of direct sunlight are catching droplets clinging to the ends of branches, and Daryl thinks of icicles. Probably not too much longer. When the cold snaps come they can come hard enough to break your neck.

He realizes, as he gets into the truck and turns the ignition, that he’s looking forward to it. At the beginning of this whole Thing, when he was younger and measurably more of an idiot about a lot of stuff, he would have done anything to halt time in its tracks. To lay down spike strips and put up roadblocks, even to have taken out a couple of tires and slowed it down. He thought he was facing a deadline. He thought his time was running out and that was how he counted each hour of each day—one less hour and day to be with her, one more hour and day closer to when he would have to leave her forever.

Now he doesn’t want to stop it. It’s right that it should happen. Winter should come—winter is here, and as he drives down the street toward the roads that will take him out of town, he watches the houses thin and browning grass spread out on either side of him, naked trees rise all pale brown and black, and he thinks that this is very much its own variety of beauty. Time was, he found winter blandly hideous—even snow, because sooner or later snow turns into gray-spattered road slush and becomes disgusting.

But now he watches the woods gather and thicken as he leaves the last of the town behind, and he loves it. How clear it is. How there’s no foliage to catch the light and it simply falls. How it’s so much easier to see the sky and the pastel pink and violet of a November sunrise throwing his shadow down the road.

Once he would have considered this change of mind and heart and chalked it solely up to her influence. Had to be her. She was fucking with his life, wasn’t she? She was making him change. She wasn’t permitting him to be who he was. If he saw something differently, it would be because she had found a way to adjust his vision. No credit due to himself at all.

But now, fingers drumming absently on the wheel in time with Garbage on the radio, he wonders about that.

- trying hard to fit among you
- floating out to Wonderland

He really does.

~

He doesn’t mean to pull over in the exact same place he took her tracking that day. As with so many other things, it’s kind of just what happens. He’s not thinking about anywhere specific. He’s letting the world lead him, carry him, nudge him along, and he stops where he feels he should. It’s only after he’s out of the truck and slinging the crossbow over his shoulder, making sure he has his knife and a length of twine to string up whatever he manages to get, that he realizes where he is.

He stops at the treeline and looks around, takes a breath.

He wouldn’t have recognized it by sight. This far past the end of summer, it was long since rendered unrecognizable, at least at a glance. He recognized it because he felt it. Because he keeps coming
back here, keeps being drawn by gentle fingers hooked under his ribs. Because when he took her here and they did what they did and he showed her more far more of himself than he had ever shown anyone—par for the course with her—they both left something behind.

You don’t love that way and leave no trace.

He stares at the trees, the lingering shadows that consume their outlines a few yards in, those naked branches, bare tangled twigs that used to be undergrowth, leaf litter gone to mud. He steps forward and lays his palms against two slender hickory trunks that flank him, thinks of the frame of a door, and blinks, hard.

It’s beautiful. But it’s changed so much. It’s not the way it was. Nothing is the way it was, and even after winter when spring circles back around, even when spring flows thick and smooth into summer, it won’t ever be that way again. Because he won’t be. Can’t be.

Because he went into the water and he came up changed. And he never stopped after that.

Nothing is ever the same two seconds in a row. Every time he sees something is the last time he ever will.

He braces against the bark and feels it scrape his hands as he steps between the trees and through that door, into woods he’s never been in before.

~

But he does recognize some things. By sight but also by smell, by what he hears, by how it is when he pauses and close his eyes and feels the air against his skin and the world that contains it. It’s all still here, fragments of it like the fragments he and Beth left, and he hasn’t lost his ability to be in the world and know.

He hasn’t lost the ability to pay attention. If anything it’s sharpened. Honed. He can pay better attention than he ever could before, because he has so much more of it to pay.

Especially in places like this, where he thinks he’s probably more present than he is anywhere else. Except when he’s with her.

He’s unfocused as he moves deeper in among the trees, padding over the soft leaves and softer mud, scanning the ground ahead for tracks and signs of runs but also scanning everywhere. He’s here for the rabbits, but he’s taking everything in, everything that might mean anything and everything he knows doesn’t and won’t. Light glittering through falling water and scattering in tiny flashes against his eyes, catching like drops on his lashes. The steamy puff of his breath. The thinner, blunter scent of the wet leaves rotting in the cold and the paler smell of peeling bark and the flesh beneath. Faintly sulfuric whiff of a stream or a creek nearby, running high; he doesn’t remember noticing a creek here before but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t one.

Creaking branches. Cracks. Pinpricks of sound from a cardinal, answered by another. Somewhere off to his right a meadowlark is stretching its throat.

The yielding ground under his boots. Fingertips of a breeze across his skin, through his hair. The weight of the bow and the itch of his wing—less than it did. It’s healing. Time to finish it soon.
Almost done.

The solidity of himself, the robust structure of his own skeleton and the muscles laced over his bones. He’s here. He has a right to be. He has a place, and really that place is anywhere.

The sense memory of her in front of him, pressing back against him, the clean smell of her hair and her skin and the sharper scent of her sweat. Her cunt, musky and sweet; he hadn’t been able to pick up that scent then but he knows she was ready for him—they were ready for each other a long time before they hit that clearing. Her slim, strong body. Her heat. The low music of her voice.

He’s making his way through the ghost of that day. That’s what they left. This place is haunted. He is.

His chest is tight and he hardly notices. He’s too busy noticing everything else.

A run, cutting through the tangles of bare vine and brambles—a space that stands out clear and unmistakable when he doesn’t look directly at it. He determines its line, the way it extends, swings the bow into his hands and begins following to the side, heading down a gentle slope. Watching for ears rising out of the ground as his footfalls spook them, pausing now and then, but not entirely focused on any of it.

He’s thinking about memories and the ones he carries around. The ones he’s accumulated here, the ones he can’t let go of. Memories make haunted houses of our minds, crowd them with shades; we move through them and their fingers glide along us like cobwebs. They’re thick inside him.

Or he thinks about Aaron’s shop. All those shelves, all packed with stories.

Being here is doing very odd things to him.

Not that it didn’t before.

The spoor is fresher now, maybe less than half an hour old, and the run itself is well-established and frequently used. There are burrows nearby—he can tell without having to see any of their inhabitants firsthand—and sure enough, when he pauses again he sees it a few yards away: ears poking up above the damp leaves, twitching, and then a head with an equally twitching nose, shining black eyes in which he’d swear he can detect alarm. He’s motionless and it is too, bow aimed, and when it comes to its tiny rabbit decision and launches itself out of its hole he lets the bolt fly.

He hits it side-on, right in the flank, and pins it to the ground with a soft scream. Before it falls silent he’s moving, crouching over it and gripping it by the body and head, breaking its neck in one quick jerk of his wrist.

He pulls out the twine and binds it by the feet, straightens up and ties it to his belt.

There’s no specific pleasure in this, in killing it. There never is. But he did it and he did it well and that’s satisfying, and he’s always liked the weight of a good kill swinging against his thigh. What it means.

Once it meant that he would actually get dinner. Sure as shit no one else was going to feed him.

The run hasn’t ended and he continues along it, gaze down and up and directly ahead all at the same time, and it’s not long before he gets another one and just as neatly. It joins the first one, and when he takes a third the sun is cresting the edge of mid-morning and he figures it’s time to call it a hunt. They’ll all be bedding down anyway, and they’ll be tougher to get. And he has more than enough if it’s only going to be the two of them.
Fried rabbit. It’s been a while. Been a while since he hunted at all. It feels good.

Like so many other things these days, it feels right.

~

He’s heading back in the direction of the road when he finds it.

He’s not looking for it. Naturally he wouldn’t be. Except it’s entirely possible that some part of him was, and although little here is actually familiar, at least by sight, he would be able to find his way back to this place in his sleep. In his dreams.

He has, many times.

He stands at the edge of the tree cover and stares at it, heart pushing against his collarbones, beating in rapid flutters. It hurts. It hurts, and he’s not even totally sure why.

That wide stretch of grass, bounded all around by the trees. Open and welcoming—even now he can feel it. When he found it he knew it was perfect and it still is. Even if the grass is brown and dead, even if so many of the trees are bare and dark with wet. Even if the light is a pale imitation of what bathed them that afternoon.

Even if it’s gone and he’ll never get it back.

He pulls in a breath and it strains in his lungs, and he steps out of the shadows and into the clearing.

He moves slowly, carefully, as if he’s afraid of disturbing something—he is afraid of disturbing something, unsure of what exactly but the apprehension is real and it scrapes at him like coarse-grained sandpaper. This was a bed the world made for them, one of the many, and it was theirs for the time they were in it, but that time is long gone.

Now he walks to its center and stands, turning in a slow circle, searching the trees and the grass and every inch of space in between for something he couldn’t begin to articulate. Something that curls between his ventricles and clamps down on them both.

But—He stops turning and looks ahead, hand on the bow’s strap, attention caught and held. Maybe he’s having trouble conceptually nailing things down right now, but he can articulate this.

He can touch it. He crosses the grass to it and does so—lays his hand against the trunk of the tree and presses his palm to the carved X in the center of its circle, two of his fingers fitted against the notches in the bark left by her shots.

He smiles. She was good. She had a talent for aim.

Has one.

So from here he could turn and look back across the grass and find that ghost memory, twine its cool gray tendrils around his fingers and allow it to draw him toward where she was, where he went to her, combed his hands into her hair and kissed her and fell down in the grass with her, rolled and laughed and kissed her again, bit her, mock-fought and played with her like they were animals, made love to her the best he could and lay exhausted and tangled with her after as the sun drenched them
in warm gold.

He was idle and blessed with her that day, and if he wanted to he could find the place where it all happened and stand there, and be haunted.

But he doesn’t.

He remains where he is, hand against the target he made, a different man in a different time in a place that’s become so different as well, and he knows what this is and why he’s here.

In so many ways, some of which he doesn’t and will never fully understand, he’s saying goodbye.

~

If he’s here and that’s why, there’s one more thing that has to happen, and two thirds of the way back to the truck it does.

He’s not tracking anymore—not consciously. To a certain extent it’s something he never shuts off, couldn’t if for some reason he wanted to. He notices, notes, files away, only later realizes he’s retained the information. So when he comes on the deer trail and starts following it—it’s pointed roughly in the direction he needs to go anyway—he isn’t thinking about it.

He could. Because wasn’t this part of it? After. She saw and heard and smelled and felt, she shot the crossbow, and then she tracked and she did that well too, and he got to see it all and seeing it was, in its way, as good as anything else that happened in that clearing. A kind of sharp purity in her that he hadn’t known was there.

She followed this trail and he followed her, all the way to the end and what they found there.

You found her. All you, Beth. All you.

So maybe part of him is thinking about it, that haunted part, because it can’t not. But the rest of him is focused on the truck and the drive back, the rabbits that need skinning and gutting, the problems inherent in trying to do that in the kitchen, whether the downstairs kitchen has a garbage disposal and, if it does, whether Carol would have too much of a problem with him using it for rabbit organs, when a flicker of warm brown in front of him brings him up short.

And he already knows what it is before his eyes make sense of it.

Two things, actually.

The flicker of brown is what he sees first and primarily, and as he drops into a swift, silent crouch it resolves into more than a flicker. About twenty yards away, caught by a narrow shaft of sun and darkening as it moves out of it and into another one, it’s a shade of brown that manages to be both light and rich, containing a lot of other colors joining and intermingling with a complexity that the human eye can probably capture a mere fraction of. It’s glossy, looks like it would be soft to the touch, and then there’s additional movement and a slender neck lifts, an equally slender head with bright black eyes, ears pricked and flicking at the air.

As soon as he saw the color and the movement the bow was in his hands, already cocked and loaded, and now it’s up and aimed. But his hands don’t know what his mind did seconds ago and
they haven’t yet gotten the message: he’s not going to shoot, and not merely because he doesn’t need or want the meat.

This is the doe.

Same damn one. Like there aren’t any other deer in this fucking forest. In a saner time and place in a considerably less bizarre life he would have done a lot of scornful internal name-calling at this point, maybe even forced himself to shoot the thing just to shut his brain up. Can’t be the same one he saw twice before; the odds are ridiculous and he’s ridiculous for entertaining the idea.

And yet. It is. He’s sure.

Older. When he first saw her she had been little more than a fawn, small and gawky and speckled white, but he had seen in her the foreshadowing of the doe she would become. When he saw her with Beth she had been well on the way there, speckles faded, coat darker, larger and clearly more comfortable in her own skin. Now she’s almost fully grown, and when she takes a step forward and drops her head he can see the extraordinary grace in even that simple movement.

He’s not going to shoot. But to his right, half obscured behind the low crotch of a tree and flashing in the wire-tangle of undergrowth, is a hard blaze of hunter’s orange. A subtle movement from that direction and he sees the sun winking off the barrel of a rifle.

He can feel the point of the aim. He can practically feel the hiss of the bullet. As if it’s him in those sights.

He doesn’t think. Thinking never gets you anywhere in these situations. He swings his aim up and to the right of the doe and lets the bolt fly.

Beth has always been able to manipulate time. That was her, that was her divine power. He was the beneficiary but he never had any more to do with it than that. Sometimes—the best times—he allowed himself to believe that he might be helping her, that he might actually be part of the process. But it was never him. He could never do that because this isn’t his world.

But time slows now. Slows deep.

He sees everything. The shocking brilliance of the bolt’s fletching. Water dripping from the trees—diamonds polished into spheres, elongating as they drift light as feathers toward the ground. Actual feathers joining them as starlings burst out of the trees, the iridescent sheen against the inky darkness. The doe smoothly lifting her head, lazy as a giraffe as the sun once again slides across her eyes. How she rises and turns as if she’s performing wild ballet, floats into the air and down again, extending her long, elegant legs and launching herself back up. Some part of him knows it’s terror, knows he’s frightened her for her life, but to him in this moment it looks like joy, and he’s never seen Beth Greene dancing but he wonders if it might not be something like this.

He sees the light, its particles in lapping waves, and honest to fucking God he sees the bullet, watches it warble through the air above the doe’s head, leaving silver-gold ripples in its wake.

All he can do is smile. Because it’s so beautiful. Everything is so fucking beautiful.

He used to think you had to get high to feel like this. He suspects now that the exact opposite is true. He’s never in his life been this sober, this here.

And it’s over.

And a very irate hunter is stomping out of the trees and toward him with the rifle over his shoulder
and a murderous scowl contorting his features, thin red curls haphazard under a camo cap.

Daryl pushes to his feet and calmly waits for him to get there. The man isn’t large, appears to possess hardly any real muscle mass, and he’s red in the face in a way that indicates both anger and a need for more exercise. He probably doesn’t get out that much. He probably also isn’t that skilled a hunter. Daryl fucked up what would have been a lucky kill.

Good.

“The fuck’re you doin’?” The man stops less than a foot away from him, and Daryl catches a brief flash of apprehension sneak across his features; standing here, this close, he’s probably aware in a way to which his anger had blinded him that Daryl is significantly larger than him and could do pretty significant damage if he wanted to. And has an extremely big knife. But he’s started and he seems to be stupid so he keeps going. “I had ‘er, you scared ‘er the fuck off, and you coulda hit me, you moron.”

He looks Daryl over, and again there’s the apprehension. “You even supposed to be out here? You a goddamn poacher? I should fuckin’ report you.”

Daryl shrugs, perfectly placid. Once he would have been angry right back. Now he doesn’t give even a tiny bit of a fuck. He did what he was here to do. “Didn’t know. Didn’t see you.”

“Didn’t see—You fuckin’ liar, you couldn’t have been more than thirty yards away.”

“Didn’t,” Daryl repeats. “Sorry.” And he takes a fraction of a step closer, looking down at the man and consciously looming, and his hand isn’t on the hilt of his knife but it’s in a place where it easily and quickly could be.

He doesn’t have to be angry to be intimidating. He realizes it suddenly and with piercing clarity. He doesn’t have to yell or wave his arms or throw punches or threaten to do so. He probably wasn’t very intimidating before, honestly. But now he’s calm, and he doesn’t give a fuck, and he’s making that as plain as he can.

He doesn’t want to break this man, but he will if the man forces his hand. Because this asshole doesn’t get to do what he nearly did.

“Tell you what. Could be I’m not supposed to be here—” Supposed to be here a fuck of a lot more than you. “—so I’ll just get outta here and let you get back to…” He injects his voice with all the cool scorn he can muster. “…whatever you was doin’.”

The man swallows, manages to maintain his anger, but now it’s a mask and beneath it… Relief. Because this is an out that allows him to keep possession of his balls, or to pretend he has. “Yeah,” he growls. “Yeah, you fuckin’ do that. I see you again, I will make sure you get in some big goddamn trouble for it. Swear I will.”

Daryl nods, steps back, slings the bow’s strap over his shoulder without any further hesitation and turns, walks back down the trail. He has nothing to prove, and it feels good. It’s nice not to have to prove anything. Nice to not have any fucks to give for it, for what he intuits are all the right reasons.

He can feel the weight of a glare on his back, and it returns the smile to his mouth. Ruined the asshole’s day. He’s sure he has.

The asshole won’t find the doe again. Daryl has no way of knowing that, but naturally he does.

When he exits the treeline he doesn’t look back. Doesn’t look back as he drops the rabbits in the
truck bed, climbs in, swings it around and heads back toward home. Almost noon now, the sun high and warm even if the day is retaining its chill.

It wasn’t easy to be out there. But it was necessary.

The sun washes over his face and he starts to sing under his breath, softly, mostly unconscious of it.

\[
\textit{lucky are you who finds me in the wilderness} \\
\textit{I am the only unquiet ghost that does not seek rest}
\]

It’s possible that it shouldn’t be pleasant to get blood all over your hands. But it is. It is for him, at least right now—and he does skin and clean the rabbits in the sink, as carefully as he can, because he doubts Carol would be impressed if he did it on the porch. He was barely into his teens when he learned to do it and well enough that it’s quick and not even all that messy. The guts and skin go into a big ziploc and into the freezer; he’ll get rid of them later.

The rabbits themselves go into the fridge. And that’s that.

He doesn’t do much for the rest of the afternoon. He naps. Reads about Alice floundering in the Pool of Tears. Calls Beth, mostly to check in; the conversation isn’t long. Doesn’t have to be. They never had particularly lengthy conversations, even in the beginning. Beth seemed to imbue every single syllable with more meaning than the English language should allow for, which made for a kind of efficiency; she can say a lot without saying a lot.

And now they don’t need to say much at all. They could, and he thinks they might when they’re together again. He has things to tell her. But not like this. He soaks in her voice, and he soaks in what she tells him: she’s going to be at the library late on Tuesday, studying for an upcoming English Lit essay.

So—he knows then, hearing between all the words—he’ll need to make sure he’s here by the time she gets out of school.

The thing he most feels the need to say and most wants to hear isn’t news. Not at all. Nothing novel, and yet even now it slams into his head like a t-boned car every time he hears it.

\textit{I love you.}

\textit{I love you.}

Jesus fucking Christ, he does. He still can’t remotely handle how much.

He doesn’t want to be able to handle it. There are some things he never wants to get entirely comfortable with.

\textit{Never.}

That’s a long time.
Dinner with Carol. He wonders if he should be nervous, since this is the first actual specific meal he’s intentionally shared with her and it’s been a long time since he intentionally shared an actual specific meal with anyone but Merle and the Greenes, and even longer since he was the one providing the main course like this. But he’s not anxious, and there’s no reason to be.

And while Carol has never fried rabbit before, it’s not as if frying anything is complicated, and it’s amazing. Baked potatoes with sour cream. She has wine, and while he doesn’t much care for wine as a rule, this is pale and slightly sweet, and it’s not at all like what his mother drank.

So it’s good.

Like every time with her before this, a lot of the evening is transacted in comfortable silence. She talks a little, about how there’s this thing in the back of the house where the roof is leaking and she can’t seem to figure out where the trouble is—he offers to take a look at it—and about how she’s sure two of the cats hate her because they keep taking casual swipes at her legs—this as one of the two is winding itself, purring fiercely, around Daryl’s ankle.

About how she’s been feeling a lot better lately. About… About how she’s glad she’s not in here alone, because the cats sure as hell don’t count as company. About how it’s nice to hear him moving around up there even if she doesn’t see him much. How she sleeps better.

This while not quite looking at him, though he doesn’t think she’s nervous. She’s looking down at her fingers pinching the stem of her wine glass, low red sun catching the curve of it through the kitchen window and painting the wine itself in shades of honey. Her eyes are distant, and she’s wearing the look of a woman who wants to say something she regards as important and therefore intends to say it carefully.

Then she does look at him, and somehow he knows what she’s going to say before she says it. Because she was always going to say it. It was just a matter of time.

He doesn’t mind. Not anymore.

“What I’ve been saying.” It comes out slowly, each word considered before it passes her lips.


He doesn’t hesitate. He nods.

“Who was it?”

“My dad.” They finished eating about fifteen minutes ago, and he goes into his pocket and pulls out his cigarettes, shoots her a questioning look, and when she gives him an okay inclination of her head he lights one up and exhales. “Mean sumbitch. Worse than mean.”

She sighs. There’s a lot in that sigh. Some of it he can intuit, and some of it remains mysterious. “Did you get away from him?”

Yes. Which is true, as far as it goes. True in a very technical sense. He got out. He got away. Away from that fucking second-round shack, away from a man who was already drinking himself to death. A man who was really, by then, weakening, and soon wouldn’t be able to hurt him anymore anyway.
Except that had also only been technically true. Which is to say it wasn’t and isn’t true in any way that matters.

“After a while,” he says quietly. “Took a long damn time.”

A lifetime.

“How?” She’s searching his face, and he doesn’t know what she’s looking for. He wonders if she knows. “How did you get away?”

For a long series of moments he doesn’t answer. There might not be any one answer, at least not one that totally captures it. What it took. Part of the hardest thing he’s ever done. Maybe the hardest thing he’ll ever do.

But he went to that stretch of open land under the stars and he cracked open a beer and he had a smoke, and he told his big brother it was all right. And he meant it with everything he is.

“I let go,” he says at last. The red coal-end of his cigarette catches his attention, and then, without meaning to, he shifts his gaze down to the fresh pink scar on his left hand. “Ain’t carryin’ him around no more.” He looks up at her and smiles—barely a smile at all, the gentlest convex curve. “Only asshole I’m carryin’ from now on is me.”

“You’re not an asshole,” she says softly, and she’s almost smiling too. He half-shrugs and tugs the duck ashtray over from the corner of the table.

He’s willing to allow how that might be so. Some of the time.

“You said…” Again she toys with the glass, and he watches the wine move, like a deep lake beneath which something large is stirring. “You said you were going to figure out how to live in the world.”

“Mmhmm.” He did.

“Have you?”

He laughs. Very low, and real. There’s something funny about this, something he can’t quite pin down, possibly just that every element of this since the beginning has been patently ridiculous. He’s ridiculous. Beth said so—she was talking about his cock but whatever, same deal—and she was right.

And then she said he was beautiful. Maybe she was right about that too.

He shrugs again, and the smile he gives her is wider. Not much, but it is.

“I’m tryin’.”

That’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

Songs are "When I Grow Up" by Garbage and "Bone of Song" by Josh Ritter.
make your love my hideaway

Chapter Notes

For those interested, I threw together some meta concerning the Greenes and why, to date, they remain clueless, as well as the reasoning behind why Daryl and Beth have yet to confess anything.

Because yeah, there are some damn good reasons.

Something else he realizes as Sunday rolls into Monday and on Monday morning he rolls out to the farm: he’s not counting his life in weeks anymore.

Used to. He used to pine for weekends, for Friday and Saturday nights—something that somehow struck him as such an essentially adolescent thing to do, not least because of his reasons. Like everything else in that strained, frequently agonizing before-time, there had been pleasure in that kind of constant forward-focus and the aching desire that came with it. Hours and days: he counted them faithfully, kept the time, regarded each one as a step toward her—and each one as a step toward the time when, one way or another, he would have to give her up.

Now it’s a week. He’ll see her. He doesn’t have to worry about that. The question is when. He wants to, wants to so badly, and when he sees her coming up the drive on Monday afternoon—cool and gray with a bite in the air—he manages to keep from pausing on his way out toward the south pasture but his eyes follow her all the way up to the house, tracking that hip-sway he knows so damn well by now, the supple curve of her ass in her tight jeans and thinking even after she’s gone from view about getting his hands on it, on her, using that supple curve to roll her closer to him with her legs spread delightfully wide.

He told her she got him hard all the time just by being there, just by seeing her, and it’s completely fucking true. And it’s something to enjoy for a while, until he has to interact with people and it’s time to make himself behave.

Not all that difficult.

Getting Tuesday afternoon to himself also isn’t difficult; basically all he has to do is ask for it, which he does right before dinner. He’s ready to offer a plausible explanation—Hershel knows he moved recently and he’ll clearly have to buy things, finish getting things hooked up, everyone is keenly aware of what a pain in the ass that can be—but none is asked of him. Hershel simply nods, hand on the front screen door, and tells him to stick around as long as he can.

And it hits Daryl all over again that this man doesn’t only like him; this man trusts him. Might well trust him implicitly. Trusts him to be straightforward, to be honest. Daryl has come reliably to work every day except for the ones where he—allegedly—had good reasons for not doing so, has worked hard and done what he’s been told and hasn’t been any trouble, has arguably saved the life of Hershel’s youngest daughter and has refused to make a Thing out of it.

Hershel doesn’t know him, not really. Daryl has told the Greenes as little as possible in the way of details about himself. But there’s another form of knowing that derives its weight from sheer lengthy
proximity, and he’s worked beside Shawn and Hershel for months now. They probably do feel like they know him. There are probably acts they wouldn’t believe him capable of. Unless they knew otherwise.

Like, for instance, that Daryl is perfectly capable of lying to them about needing an afternoon off so he can fuck that youngest daughter whose life he saved.

That’s not all of why he wants the time with her—maybe not even the biggest part of why—but he doubts they’d be very interested in making the distinction.

So, watching Hershel walk into the house and following a few seconds after, there’s a period of about ten minutes where Daryl feels like kind of a piece of shit.

It fades when he sees her, when he spends all of dinner looking at her without looking at her, out of every corner of his vision available. This is better, this is best; this is working and it’s working well. No one is getting hurt. No one is going to get hurt. It’s yet another thing that isn’t even all that difficult.

He’s going to see her tomorrow, see her with a lot more of him than his eyes, and that’s what matters.

They’re still playing their I’m Not Paying Attention To You game, but just as he’s getting in the truck to go home, she comes out of the house carrying what turns out to be a plastic-wrapped loaf of raisin bread. He stares down at it when she holds it out to him—the dark speckles of raisins clearly visible in the thin twilight, and looks back up at her.

“I know,” she says, and she’s grinning as she tosses her ponytail back over her shoulder. “Mama had a loaf extra. Or that’s what she says. Take it or you’ll hurt her feelings.”

He takes the bread from her with deep solemnity. He would rather die than hurt Annette Greene’s feelings.

He really would.

Monday night laundry. Thinking. He’s always found that thinking and laundry make good companions, when he actually does any—more than he used to, because suddenly it seems to matter—and he was always the one doing it anyway. He sits on top of the rattling washer and smokes, watches his exhalations curl into the air in tiny, complex, ever-shifting patterns.

Patterns all the fuck over the place.

Back up in the apartment, he wanders. There’s no clear goal behind it and he’s content for there not to be. In fact it’s been some time since he was truly in the two other rooms, and for the most part the closets remain bare. He has no idea what to do with them, but he’s beginning to perceive the need to do something. He’s largely confined himself to his camp for almost a month now, has done little in the way of expansion, and while that’s fine and he’s had no interest in rushing himself, nests eventually get too small for their occupants and moths have to bust free from their cocoons.

The shelf and the things on it. Carol advised him to go from there. Where else to go?
He usually sits on the bed or perches on the counter when he wants to sit somewhere. That might indicate a direction.

He’ll think about it some more. The important thing, as always, is to keep moving.

The clock in him is broken
And as for ceremony,
Already the leaves have swirled
Over, the wind has spoken.

When she comes in late the next afternoon, when she knocks and he opens the door, she’s definitely moving.

He coughs a surprised laugh as she shoves him backward toward the bed, kicking the door shut behind her and wriggling off her coat—laughing into her mouth, hands raking into her hair and tilting her face up and to the side so he can kiss her as deep as he wants to, tongue surging alongside hers and teeth bared against her lips. Her hands are busy with his belt and fly when his calves hit the edge of the mattress and he falls, bouncing and somehow keeping himself upright, and drags her with him. She comes down half straddling him, plunging a hand into his pants, breathing rough and hot into his ear.

God, I want you, Daryl, I want you so bad…

He manages to pull back enough to look up at her, framing her face and lifting her, and she’s all the shades of honey in his wine in the evening sun, and he knows she’s just as softly sweet. Her knees clamp against his hips and she catches his wrist with one hand, other skating her fingertips somewhat clumsily along his length; he jumps, shudders, whispers, “Oh my fuckin’ Christ, Beth.”

They’re still pretty much dressed and he’s not okay with that.

It’s not the easiest task to get her clothes off when she’s scrambling with his, yanking his shirt off over his head and interrupting him doing the same, his hands closing hard on her breasts as she drags his fly the rest of the way down and pulls him free, strokes him from base to precome-wet head with her torturous fingers. He drops back, hands going loose, and laughs again because this is so hopeless, wanting her this much after what feels like months without her, her shirt off and blue cotton bra strap drooping down her right shoulder, her maddeningly tight jeans maddeningly on as she grinds slowly against his thigh.

He’s groping for her hips but basically all he can do is lie there, gasping, and let her have him.

“Fuck, I… Beth…” He should have expected words to stop working very well. He tries to lift his head, focus on her, and when he does he gets to watch her release him for a fraction of a second so she can shrug off her bra, her small breasts free and swinging slightly as she jerks her cunt back and forth over his thigh and jerks him in time.

“Beth what?” She tosses her hair back and laughs—a happy, careless sound—and he can tell by the strain under her voice that she’s already near the edge, and he doesn’t want it like that, like this, before they’re even naked, except he so fucking does. He hasn’t come in a while—has been saving it for this—and he’s on a hair trigger. Might only have seconds.
“You’re gonna make me come.” He whimpers it, and at the same time he reaches up and cups her ass, grabs her nipple and pinches at it, and he grins when that gets a tight whine out of her. “You’re gonna… Jesus fuck, girl, I’m so fuckin’ close—” He’s not warning her; he’s simply telling her, and she can do what she wants with the information.

She laughs again, drops it into a moan as her movements begin to stutter, her free hand slapping against his over her breast and her grip propelling him upward so fast he can’t breathe. “So come. C’mon, Daryl, I’ve been waitin’… Oh my God…”

He wants to hold off, wants to wait for her—wants to see her. But she’s telling him and he’s never been able to say no to her, and he buckles up under her, leg firm against her cunt, keening through his teeth with his come spattering himself and her, dripping down her hand as she milks it out of him. And he’s convulsing with it when she follows him, back snapping into an arch and her own cry ripping out of her throat, hand clutching her breast and definitely audible downstairs, and all he can do is smile and moan and watch her glory.

And hold her when she collapses against him, panting with him and trembling in what feels like almost perfect sync.

Of course they would rhyme.

After a few seconds of nothing in particular he combs a hand into her hair—already damp—and presses his lips to her temple. “Holy shit, Beth.” He’s still laughing—soft, shaking through him with his aftershocks. “Holy shit.”

She’s still laughing too, he realizes after a few seconds, breathing it into the hollow of his throat and going loose as he strokes her. When she shifts on top of him he can feel his come sticky between their bellies, and it’s perfect. “Yeah.” She pauses, pulls in a breath. “I haven’t come in two days.”

“No?”

“No. Was waitin’ for you.”

“Oh, shit.” He gently tugs her head back, smiling up at her. “Me too.”

“Oh.” The answering smile that breaks over her face is wide and pleased. “Oh. Good.”

She raises a hand slick with come and presses her fingertip to his chest, drawing idle, shining circles. He folds an arm behind his head and follows her movements, everything wonderfully fuzzy. He thought it might be slow, though they might savor it, but they can have that too. This was amazing.

He wants her any and every way he can have her.

“Love you,” he breathes, and she sighs, leans up and kisses his jaw.

“Love you too.”

More nothing, except the sound of her licking her fingers clean. Part of him wants to get up, finish stripping, finishing stripping her, pull her properly into bed and Do Things to her, but— “This is so nice,” she murmurs, a sleepy hum. Though he’s not worried about her actually falling asleep, and even if she did, that would be nice too. “I really love this.”

“Love what?”

“Just… Just bein’ with you. Your own place. Don’t have to do anythin’.” She lifts her head and rests
her chin on her hand, gazing thoughtfully at him. “I wanted you, but I would’ve been fine with this. Just touchin’ you.” She does, stroking her fingertips down his cheek. “I want you even more now, but it’s like… It hurts less.” She cocks her head. “That make any sense?”

He nods. It completely does.

“But.” She hesitates, then giggles and it’s too adorable to deal with. “How long before you think you can go again?”

“Oh Jesus.” He feigns exhaustion—not entirely feigned—head falling back against the mattress. “Gimme like… twenty minutes.”

She rolls her eyes, scoffing silently, and then rolls off him and onto her back beside him, arching herself up into a feline stretch with a moan that would make his cock twitch if it was capable. He turns onto his side and watches her as she pulls off her boots and tosses them away with paired clomps on the hardwood and wriggles out of her jeans and panties, using the latter to wipe the last streaks of come off her stomach.

“Twenty minutes? I’m gonna get bored.” She shoots him a grin, curve of her mouth all wickedness, and pushes to her feet, padding naked across the floor toward the shelf. It’s impossible to drag his eyes away from the roll of her ass with every step, the swivel of her hips and the way the muscles in her thighs flex beneath skin that makes his fingertips ache merely to look at it.

“Still ain’t got no curtains, girl.”

“The tree covers most of those windows.” And she’s right; it does. Not enough to keep out any light, but it does provide something of a screen between the windows and the street. In any case, she clearly doesn’t care, and before he can argue that maybe she should, she stops in front of the shelf and reaches up, running a finger along the spines of the books.

“You did get more.”

“You said I should.”

“You said you didn’t know what you were gonna read.” She lifts down Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland—with a fair degree of care, he notices, fresh, sweet warmth flooding his chest—and turns to him, opening it. “I didn’t think you’d get somethin’ like this, somehow.”

He sends her a tiny smile. “Maybe there’s a lotta shit you don’t know about me.”

“I know what I need to know,” she says softly, and the smile she sends back when she looks up completely takes him apart, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with what’s going to happen in about twenty minutes. “Y’know…” Her expression returns to thoughtful. “Maybe I’m not actually so surprised.”

“No?”

She shakes her head, looking back down at the book. “No. This isn’t just a kid’s book. We did some classes on it last semester. You know a lot of what’s in here is stuff about math? Math and jokes and riddles. It’s really complicated. You’d never catch it unless you know what you’re lookin’ for.”

She pauses, turning the pages, then smiles again—a secret smile, one he senses he’s being allowed to see but which isn’t meant for him. “The signs are all there. You just gotta know how to read ‘em.”

“Yeah, well.” He lifts his hips, shoving down his own pants and shorts and kicking them away.
“Never got above a C in math. Sucked at it in school.” *Sucked at school.*

But not, he now believes, because he was stupid.

“Maybe.” She turns the next page. “But I think you’re good at riddles.”

That doesn’t seem to follow. He rolls onto his stomach, facing her. “How’s that?”

“Because you do know how to read ‘em.” She’s coming toward him now, still carrying the book, still not looking up. “The signs. You see everythin’. You see more than anyone else I know.” She stops in front of him and crouches down, bringing her face level with his, and lowers the book so she can weave her fingers into his hair and kiss him for a moment that stretches out and out, becomes formless.

“There’s a hell of a lot I don’t see,” he whispers when she releases him, leaning her forehead against his. And she smiles and lifts her head, kisses his brow.

“You see stuff when you need to. Sometimes it just takes a while.” She pulls back enough to look at him, enough for him to look at her in the last deep light of a sun on its way out, and he hardly feels self-conscious at all as she studies his face with strange intensity, as if she’s trying to memorize every centimeter of every feature.

She said he was beautiful. When she looks at him like this now, there’s no part of him left that wants to tell her to stop.

“You’re amazing,” she breathes.

And even if he closes his eyes, he still doesn’t tell her. Still doesn’t want to.

They stay like that for another long, semi-formless moment, her forehead once more against his and his hand curled around the nape of her neck. At last she lays the book down on the bed and takes him by the shoulders, pressing him up, and her smile has gone loose and lazy.

He arches a brow as he lifts himself onto his knees. “What?”

“Lie on your back.”

He doesn’t have to ask for any additional explanation. Her smile is all he needs. He drops onto the bed and he’s barely settled before she swings a leg over him and straddles him, pushes back on his thighs with the book in her hand.

He reaches over his head and pulls a pillow down far enough for him to make use of it. “Turn on the light. Sun’s goin’ down, you ain’t gonna be able to see the words.”

She leans over and switches it on, and when she rights herself with her free hand on his stomach she’s bathed in a whole new warm glow. He didn’t buy this light or this bulb with any thought for how she might look in it, but of course it’s perfect. Of course it makes her beautiful.

Not that she needs any help in that regard.

“Wouldn’t be able to see you, either,” she says softly, glides her fingers over his lower belly and takes hold of him. “And that’d be a shame.”

He’s not hard, not yet, but it feels so good to have her touching him like this, playing with him, stroking him with slow, absent-minded movements. Like she’s not even genuinely paying attention.
Something about that is so perfect, something about how it doesn’t feel like it matters with all the weight of the world it used to carry, like this is simply something they can do, like anything else—and yet it means everything, everything in that world—and he lies there and luxuriates in the warm softness of her fingers, the lovely, strong lines of her as she sits back on him, perfectly relaxed, naked and caring absolutely nothing about it, his cock in one hand and the open book in the other, and it should be bizarre when she starts reading to him and it completely isn’t.

He returns his arm behind his head, lays his other hand on her thigh, and listens.

So she sat on with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality—the grass would be only rustling in the wind, and the pool rippling to the waving of the reeds—the rattling teacups would change to the tinkling sheep-bells, and the Queen’s shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy—and the sneeze of the baby, the shriek of the Gryphon, and all the other queer noises, would change (she knew) to the confused clamour of the busy farm-yard—while the lowing of the cattle in the distance would take the place of the Mock Turtle’s heavy sobs.

Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days.

At some point he nearly stops noticing her hand at all and his vision blurs pleasantly as he drifts into her voice, the music that always waits inside it even when she isn’t singing and isn’t about to. How she’s touching him is part of the whole, part of everything quietly incredible wrapping itself around him right now, and if he paid too much attention to it he’d miss everything else.

But then she stops reading, sets the book aside, and he notices it.

He notices it very much.

It doesn’t hit him, doesn’t crash in on him; it washes, sweeps across his perception, and where before there was a distant pulse of heat under her palm, now it’s a throbbing ache, needy, and he doesn’t know how long he’s been hard for her but all at once it feels like hours.

She’s sliding her hand up and down his shaft in those gradual, unhurried strokes, but now there’s purpose in it, and she smiles as she leans back further, tilting her hips so he can see the deep pink glisten of her cunt—just as wet as he is hard. Wanting him just as much.

There are times when that still seems barely possible.

“Beth,” he sighs, and she laughs, opens her hand, swings herself to the side so she can reach the condoms by the bed.

“You keep ‘em out like this?”

He pushes up on one elbow, lifts a hand and cups her breast. “Ain’t no one been in here but you.”

“Yeah, well.” She shoots him a look as she tears open the packet. “At least it’s on the side of the bed away from the door.”
“Want me to clean up next time you—ohjesus, Beth.” His head falls back as she rolls it onto him, his words dissolving into a quiet groan. It shouldn’t feel so good, merely this shouldn’t feel so good, but it does, it always does, and his hand tightens on her breast as if it’s the one anchor he can find.

“I think you should keep ’em handy,” she says, and though she’s trying to sound meditative the tightness has slipped back into her voice, a potential whimper stretched across the top of her throat, and it escapes her when she raises and lowers herself, sinking onto him and bending forward as a shudder runs through her.

But it’s still lazy. It’s still slow. When she moves it’s a steady, even rocking of her hips, leaning back with her hands on his thighs—something he gathers she likes anyway but which he also suspects she does because that way he can look at her, see everything, every tensing muscle and flexing joint, every expression that touches her face. How she forgets herself completely, mouth fallen open with her breathless little moans and her head rolling back and tipping forward, how her lids flutter over the whites of her eyes when he hits something inside her just right.

He loses himself in watching her get lost. He feels so fucking good, and—like before—it doesn’t seem to matter.

“Look at you,” he whispers. Not to her. Not really to anyone. “Look at you, fuckin’ hell.” His hand is operating on its own recognizance and it drags down from her breast to her belly, lower, fingers petting over her bush as his thumb nestles beneath it and finds her slick clit, circles in time with her rhythm.

“Oh—” She gasps, shivers, laughs at the ceiling. “Daryl, like that… God, yeah, that’s perfect…” So both her hands are free to steady herself and she can move faster, harder—not much but enough to winch his spine inward, twisting it into a sparking coil, and enough to pull her face into a grimace that’s all pleasure.

“C’mon, Beth.” He barely has to move his thumb at all anymore; she’s grinding herself onto it, grinding down, rotating her hips in a way that’s casually driving him insane. “I wanna see it, I wanna see you come, c’mon…”

And she does, and it’s not the explosion from before. It seems to begin in her goddamn knees and swell upward and all through her, shuddering that burns up from her marrow to her skin. She arches in a slow wave, her long sob trembling into laughter and back again, mouth curved into a delighted smile and every inch of her glowing.

It’s everything he wants.

She folds inward, shivering and panting, moving with her hands pressed flat against his chest. “Lemme see you, then.” Her hair is falling all around her face, tickling his neck, his cheeks, and he tangles his hands in it and pulls her down, and she says it again with her lips against his. “Lemme see you. Lemme feel it, Daryl, you come, you come in me now—”

He snaps himself up as it takes him, unsprings him in a hot, wonderful jolt that bounces through his veins, and he muffles his cry with her mouth, her tongue and her teeth, as what feels like years of wanting her flows out of him in a single rush.

Going limp, arms around her and gathering her to him, he knows it’s going to feel like years more until he has her again. No matter how soon it is.

But that’s all right. Especially if it ends up being like this.
More moments—a string of them like pearls, but fluid as they were before, warping and expanding like water pooling on the floor. Without thinking much about it he slips out of her and takes care of the condom, returns to her and curls himself around her, one leg hooked over hers and a hand cupping her breast, his face buried in her hair and breathing her in.

This can’t last. It’s almost fully dark, and even though it’s not that late because the darkness comes so much earlier now, it won’t be all that long before they start wondering where she is. She can only spend so much time at the library. There’s only so much studying she can do.

But he’ll hold onto this. Not with any real desperation, but it’s precious. Every second of it. He can know that and feel it, and not let the knowledge burn cigarette holes in him.

She’s half asleep—he can feel it in her total lack of muscle tension, the way she doesn’t resist or assist him when he tugs her even closer. She stirs, murmurs, relaxes as again her hand covers his over her breast. He remembers doing this the night after she came home from the hospital, the night he told her basically everything—how he laid his hand here and she pressed into it, and he wanted her but it wasn’t really about that. He simply wanted to feel her. Feel it, that she trusted him enough to let him. It was comfortable.Comforting. He could have stayed all night like that.

Could now.

They have a little time. So he lets her be, holds her, closes his eyes and drowses. He drifts into the kinds of weird semi-dreams that bubble up when you don’t totally sleep and don’t intend to—not worrying, lurching things like he often has, or had, but bright and gentle, closing over and around him, indistinct and making no sense he can piece together but not needing to. He feels good in them, if a bit bemused. He feels safe.

And when she finally stirs once more and stretches, rolls away from him and stretches again and sits up, rubbing sleepily at her face and already looking around for her clothes, those feelings linger.

“I don’t wanna go,” she says as she tips onto her back and lifts her legs to shimmy her jeans on. There’s regret in it, but nothing hard or sharp, nothing with a bite. She just doesn’t want to. Fair enough; he doesn’t want her to either.

He turns onto his stomach again and pushes up on his elbows, watching her. “You’ll come back.”

“Yeah.” She turns her head, smiles faintly and touches his jaw. “I will.”

He goes with her to the door—naked, and now not caring about it any more than she did—and when she reaches up and slides a hand into his hair, pulls him down to kiss her, she lowers her other and presses between his legs, curves her palm over him, and there’s something possessive in it that makes him shiver. “See you tomorrow,” she whispers against his mouth, smiles again and nips lightly at his bottom lip.

He doesn’t keep the door open—this side of the house is slightly more visible, at least to the house next door—but he goes to the windows, cuts the light off and watches her dim shadowy outline as she heads down the front walk to the street and out of sight.

He closes his eyes and sighs. Happy. A little wistful, sure. But happy.
He sinks down onto the bed. Like before, her smell is clinging to it—their smell, sweat and come and her hair, the soap she last used on her hands. The indescribable scent that is her skin. Something that he now recognizes as his own, mingling with hers. Together it’s sweet, and he falls, turns onto his side, burrows his face into the rumpled sheets.

When he lifts his head he sees that the book is by the foot, facedown and open. He stretches, reaches down, picks it up and is about to close it when—in the barely-there glow of the streetlight outside—something catches his eye.

_I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night. Let me think. Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle!_

He looks at it for a long moment.

_I think you’re good at riddles._

“Hope so,” he murmurs, sets the book down and picks up the phone and orders some mediocre Chinese food.

Chapter End Notes

Poem snippet is "Encounter" by Mary Oliver.
Yeah, we're slowing down just a touch. There are a number of reasons for that. I've kept up an every day/every other day posting schedule for about four months now, and I think we all knew that couldn't last. That said, I should have the next one up in the next couple of days.

I'm beginning to suspect that we might actually hit 100 chapters on the nose. While I won't be contorting things in order to make myself happy with numbers, it would be cool, wouldn't it? Regardless, I think that's about what we're looking at in terms of how much more of this there is to go.

I'll be very sad when it's over, by the way. This has been such an amazing ride. Thank you all again for coming this far with me. <3

Wednesday is the first real cold snap. It’s been cold before, sure—breath-steam cold, cold enough to justify gloves and layers, cold enough to be uncomfortable until he moves around enough to heat his blood back up. But this is a goddamn *snap*, a whiplash of plummeting temperature and it breaks open something in the world, and when he gets to the farm the next morning there’s frost on the ground.

First frost. As a kid, there was always something about this that excited him. He never knew what it was and he still doesn’t, but crunching over the grass toward the house and breathing in air that nearly slices his throat on the way down, he feels it again. Blood racing faster and higher than it needs to in order to regulate his temperature. It was never about what he thinks must excite a lot of kids—snow days, holidays, Christmas, because the first didn’t mean much when school was optional at best and the latter two happened infrequently enough that they basically didn’t happen at all. Instead—he now suspects, giving it some thought—it might have just been about a change. Something different. Something new. But familiar. Every year it came, and it was something he could settle into. Inasmuch as he ever settled into anything.

And there were times—not yet but he knows they’ll come—when it was more than frost, when the night’s freezing rain truly *froze* and encased trees and shrubs and fallen leaves in thin layers of ice, and when the sun touched them everything shone like glass.

A little boy wandering through a glass world. Knowing—in days he now appreciates as so much better than the ones that followed—that at some point Merle would drag himself out of bed and make it his business to break every inch of that blown glass world he could reach with his hand or a stick or their father’s gun, and he would expect Daryl’s assistance. But for a while—a very short while—it was his.

No one will break it now, and when it comes he’ll be able to keep it for as long as the sun leaves it.

He wonders what Beth would think. What she *has* thought, all her life.

Very possibly not so different from him.
He’s no longer certain they were ever so different as he once believed.

~

He’s closing out the day by watering Nellie and Mira—Mira a lovely older bay mare and Nellie’s best friend—and lulled in their soft conversational nickers, when he decides.

The wing barely itches anymore. Some, but the peeling is mostly done, and the skin is toughening and losing the sensitivity of its newness. It’s early—Abby would probably recommend waiting another week or two before finishing it up—but while he recognizes the wisdom of that and knows that if he did it at this point it would probably hurt like hell, he wants to anyway, and he wants it with an intensity that slightly surprises him and which he can’t explain. It’s not impatience, not exactly. It’s something else.

Something like a clock in his head. A broken one, the smallest hand ticking the same second over and over. But it might fix itself. Might do so suddenly. It’s not impossible.

It’s time. He shouldn’t wait. If it hurts bad, it won’t hurt any worse than the worst that’s been done to that skin.

Beth is in the stable when he brings the horses in, and she takes them both to give them a rubdown before dinner. He doesn’t stick around, even though no one’s about—Shawn is out in the fields and Hershel is taking a look at a new litter of pigs at a neighbor’s farm—because there’s no point in taking unnecessary risks now that they’re no longer starving to death for each other, but he does look at her on his way out, and she looks back, gazes colliding in midair, and the air in the stable was cool but all at once it bursts into flames and scorches him from the inside out, instantly hardening, instantly shivering, needing her. Even if he doesn’t, the way he did.

This will probably always happen.

Always.

Wow.

She graces him with the faintest curve of a smile, and it warms him for the rest of the night—she’s a shot of good whiskey making a home in his chest. Looking at her without looking at her, without anyone seeing—maybe even without her seeing—he’s sure she knows. She knows what every glance means to him. She knows what it is, for him now, to be seen by her.

When she first saw his wing she said it was so beautiful. He can’t wait to show her when it’s finished.

~

He makes the call on the way home. He pulls over halfway back and gets out of the truck, walks a few yards off the road. He’s in the middle of a stretch of land between a farm and a small cluster of older houses, and there’s no human light except a few pinpricks on the horizon, and the skyglow of
town. A single passing car. He has no reason for doing this except that he wants to. But long since abandoned by the heat he worked up during the day, it’s now clear to him that he needs to get off his ass and get an actual winter coat.

Something for the closet. One of them, anyway.

Abby picks up on the third ring. As he expected, she’s uncertain about tackling the second session this soon, but he can practically hear her shrug when she says *Look, man, it’s your hide. Bring something to bite on, maybe.*

Over the scars, too. It hurt worse.

It should.

She has an open slot for the couple of hours it’ll take. Nine-thirty on Friday night. He hangs up, puffs a breath of steam at the stars.

*Almost done.*

But no. He’s not almost done. He’s not anywhere near done. He’s not sure *done* is an achievable state. Except in one specific case, which everyone arrives at sooner or later. But who knows how close he is to that, too, and it’s not hard to think about.

*Doesn’t everything? And too soon?*

And that’s the point.

~

He’s edging toward sleep, drifting in the dark, when Beth calls. He’s not fully conscious when he picks up. Doesn’t need to be, not for her. He could answer her in his sleep.

She makes an apologetic sound when he gives her a sleepy mutter that somewhat resembles *hi.* “*Did I wake you up?*”

“Yeah. Kinda.” He rolls onto his back, watching headlights slide across the ceiling. “‘s fine. Don’t mind.”

“*Sorry anyway.*” She takes a breath and he hears the now-familiar rustle of her sheets. “I just wanted… I mean, I guess it could’ve waited, but… I’m supposed to sleep over Becca’s on Friday night. Y’know? So.”

So. He closes his eyes, smiles—then remembers and sighs. And he could cancel, it wouldn’t be a big deal at all and more than worth it, but just as he’s about to say *Yeah, so, I’ll be here,* something tugs at the fuzzy edge of his thought process.

He’s thinking too zero-sum. He’s constraining his options, and he has no reason to do that. None. None at all, and in fact every reason to throw them wide fucking open.

He’s smiling again, wider. “I got a thing at nine-thirty.”

“Oh.” Disappointment—not a lot, but yes. “*Well, I can—*”
“You wanna come?”

Very slight pause. Long enough to squeeze a thought into. “Yeah, I mean… Sure. What is it?”

Another about to say, this time an answer, but again that tug. All those surprises, since before they were together this way. All those gifts wrapped in time and carefully orchestrated revealing. He hadn’t realized, then, how much he loved surprising her. How much he loved being surprised.

Surprise of that kind was so sweetly new.

“Show you when we get there.” His own pause, longer; he has more thoughts to pack into it. “You got a driver’s license, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“’cause I might actually want you to drive back. Dependin’.”

A soft laugh—puzzled, but mostly amused. “You designatin’ me, Mr. Dixon?”

“Yep.” Something about the thought of that is perfect in about a hundred different ways, and he can only identify half of them. “You can be my chaperone.”

“You get drunk, I’m not puttin’ your ass to bed.” She’s grinning now, and again the sheets rustle. “Even if it’s a pretty nice ass.”

He coughs his own abrupt laugh, but there’s not as much shock as would once have rushed him, and if he’s flushing he has a couple of mostly separate reasons for doing so. Hey, maybe it is. He wouldn’t really know, but she’s in a position to have an informed opinion. “Not gettin’ drunk.”

“No?” Puzzled again. He likes that.

“Nope. You’ll see.”

“Alright.” She yawns, muffled a bit as she pulls the phone away from her face. “How long a drive are we talkin’?”

“Fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty.” Driving through the night with her. It’s been a while. “Be here before nine.”

“I can do that,” she says softly. “Definitely.”

“Good.” Very good. Perfect. Why the hell didn’t he ask her before? Why the hell didn’t it occur to him that she might want to tag along on a trip to a seedy-esque hole-in-the-wall tattoo place? She’s a nice girl, sure. But she’s not a Good Girl. Fuck no. A place like this… She might enjoy it. Might enjoy it a lot. It might, in a bizarre way that actually isn’t so bizarre at all, be right up her nice little alley.

And yes, he can take a second to enjoy an accidental double entendre. He can appreciate those with the best of them.

Merle would have appreciated it too. And that would have been okay.

“See you then,” she whispers. There’s a lot going on under that whisper. It sounds like a promise, and it also sounds like a secret—it is, of course it is, but it sounds like a secret that can accumulate power. A secret that has weight and can be thrown around, that can shift balances. That can make things happen.
“Yeah. You will.” He scratches idly at his stomach—a scratch that becomes a stroke of his fingertips across his muscles, fleeting but more than enough to slip a pleasant shiver through his nerves. “I love you, Beth.”

“I love you too.” Even softer. A breath. He can imagine it’s not finding its way to his ear through a phone and miles of night. He can imagine she’s touching his jaw as she leans close, settles herself against his side. I love you.

_Sweet dreams._

~

Thursday is warmer but not much, and thick clouds roll in and look more like snow than rain. Neither happens—if it actually did start snowing in any significant amounts, Daryl’s fairly certain it would be some kind of record. But it’s there, and if it’s not exactly ominous, it does feel like it’s _looming_. It. The world. In general.

Looming isn’t always bad. It simply means something very large is very close.

Nellie isn’t doing well. Hershel examines her runny nose and her general listlessness and pronounces the culprit a cold, and doesn’t seem worried, but Daryl is sent to the house to fetch a couple of apples for the purpose of administering some pills, and in the front hall on the way to the door Annette touches his arm and halts him.

“Are you having Thanksgiving anywhere, Daryl?”

He blinks at her, hands full of apples. He gets the question—or he gets the words and generally what they mean—but the sense of it is, for the moment, escaping him. “Uh…”

“Because,” she continues brightly, handing him a basket and another apple, “I was thinking you might like to have it with us. If you’re not going anywhere else.”


Not really.

“I.” He swallows and feels more awkward than he has in a while. “Yeah. I mean… No, I ain’t goin’ nowhere else. That’d be… Thanks. Thanks, I would.”

He would.

“Good.” She nods, a woman putting the final seal on a plan set and settled on, and moves toward the parlor, tossing him a glance over her shoulder. “Maggie’s going to be bringing that boy she’s been seeing, so we’ll have a full house.” Her smile quirks. “And you won’t be the only one new. It’ll be nice.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs again, turns back to the door.

Feeding Nellie her pills, he’s mulling it over in his head. Thanksgiving. With the Greenes. Like he’s normal. Like he’s not a fucking tourist. Like he _belongs_. 
He doesn’t. At all. And part of him is completely positive that they know it. But they’re apparently kind enough to shove that fact aside and pretend for him, and it’s not pity and it’s not condescension, and it’s not a handout. It’s not anything like that at all. It never has been.

When Beth reached out and pulled him into her bright, nice world, it wasn’t because she felt sorry for him. It was because it’s what she does. She saw darkness. She shone.

She got that light from somewhere.

Yes, it’ll be nice. Very. And if they can pretend he belongs, hell. So can he.

~

Coming up the front walk, he sees Carol on the porch. Odd, because it’s full dark and nearly freezing, but she’s bundled up in a thick gray sweater, and when he gets near enough to make out her expression in the glow of the front windows—and the tumbler of whiskey in her hands—he knows that whatever’s up, it’s something good.

Or close to good. What he can make out on her face… He’s not sure he’d be totally comfortable classifying it as happy.

She waves. He waves back. Then he pauses, and—responding to an invitation she didn’t explicitly issue but which he knows is there—he approaches and climbs the first two steps, leaning a hand on the railing.

“Somethin’ happen?”

She nods. “Yeah. Yeah, it did.” She raises the glass to her lips, takes a hefty swallow. She’s not a large woman, not at all, and slender, and he arches a brow. Grimacing—not far from a smile—she lays a hand beneath her throat and closes her eyes against the burn. “I found a lawyer. We’re starting. You know. Actually moving on it.”

He smiles. It’s ultimately not his business, except it is, sort of, and what he’s feeling is unquestionably hard relief. “Good. That’s good.”

“Yeah, it is. Come have a drink with me.”

No convincing necessary. He does.

About halfway through the first round—first of three, as it turns out, because goddamn, this is something to celebrate and celebrate properly as far as he’s concerned—something occurs to him and he turns in his place on the steps and looks up at her, tugs the freshly-lit cigarette from between his lips.

“Ain’t Cathy comin’ back soon?”

“Oh. Right, I meant to tell you.” Carol leans forward slightly, cradling her glass in her hands. “She called today, says she’s staying in Florida another week or two. She hooked up with an old college roommate and they’re going… Snorkeling, scuba diving, I’m not sure which.” She pauses, looking out at the night. “So I’ll be here at least until then. But after… I’m going to Indiana. I’m going to be with Sophia. I shouldn’t put it off anymore.”
A silence—which he allows to remain. Something else is coming; he can feel it. Clouds gathering. Sure enough, her mouth tightens.

“I thought I was protecting her. Staying away. And I was, sure… But I was also scared. Of him. Of what’s next. Of everything. Like you said. Living in the world.” She turns her gaze back on him, and even through an obvious and well-established buzz it’s sharp. She’s there.

More of her than maybe he’s ever seen.

“I’m not scared anymore, Daryl. Or… No, that’s not right. I’m scared. I’m really scared. But that’s not all I am.”

He nods slowly, sliding the cigarette back in place and drawing in a deep breath. “So what are you?”

She’s quiet again, and again he lets the quiet be. Until she smiles, and it’s a wonderful smile and it’s also pretty awful, and he wonders if Ed Peletier had or has any fucking idea who he actually married. And he doubts it very much.

“I’m really, really fucking pissed off.”

“Good,” he repeats, a low and deeply satisfied murmur. When he exhales a stream of smoke into the night, he imagines it finding its way to Ed’s eyes.

Good.

Everything is.

~

He’s leaning against the truck when Beth walks out of a pool of blue shadow and into the gold-orange glow of the streetlight directly overhead. Skeletal branch-arms are interlaced between it and them, and weird shadows spiderweb across her face as she moves, the knit cap she’s wearing pressing her hair down in a way that makes her look strange. Not like a stranger, but strange.

He pushes away from the driver’s side door, drops the butt of his cigarette onto the pavement and crushes it out. “Alright, then.”

She cocks her head, hefting the backpack higher on her shoulder. “Alright then?”

“Yep.” He flashes her a smile that stops just short of a grin and pulls the door open, nodding around the side. “Get in. If I’m late she’ll bitch about it.”

Beth hesitates halfway around the front of the truck and turns, brow slightly furrowed. “She?”

“Toldja. You’ll see when we get there.” He climbs in, turns the key, and the engine complains to rattling life. He could have fixed it before now, and he’s perfectly aware; he can afford to overhaul the whole damn wreck. He could afford to buy something about five times better, though still not great.

And he hasn’t. And he’s not sure he intends to do so.
“You’re bein’ a jerk,” she observes as she hops in—literally, the most adorable little hop he’s seen except for all the other times she’s done the exact same thing—and braces a boot on the dash as she buckles herself. “Just so you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” And he reaches over and slides a hand up her inner thigh as he takes them down the street toward another that’ll carry them out of town and roughly north. “You love it.”

She lets out a quiet squeak and grabs for his wrist—but she doesn’t pull his hand away, not at all, and when he steps on the gas and cranks up the radio she crows laughter and rolls her window down and carves her hand through the chilly night and sings.

\[
\begin{align*}
I\text{ only smile in the dark } \\
\text{my only comfort is the night gone black } \\
\text{I didn’t accidentally tell you that } \\
\text{I’m only happy when it rains}
\end{align*}
\]

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Only Happy When it Rains" by Garbage.
the flood swells his clothes and delivers him on

Chapter Notes

Yeah, I promised a quick update. And there's some stuff in here that I honestly didn't see coming. Heh. Not like that's really unusual but yes.

This ended up being something of an emotional theme for this chapter, as well as being the song at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Abby's place is in a strip mall near a housing development. Both of them—the strip mall and the housing development—appear to have built at about the same time, probably to augment each other. Both of them are doing poorly. The strip mall consists of a combination bail bond and check-cashing establishment, a nail salon and beauty supply store with a very dirty front window full of wigs, a store that claims to offer merely videos and novelties with its front window completely blacked out except for a pink neon sign, a liquor store, and a garishly lit Chinese food place with no tables and a couple of extremely disreputable looking kids smoking outside as they dig into containers of lo mein.

He was never with Merle at the times in question, but he knows a couple of deals went down here.

Beth's face is turned away from him as they pass through the dark, silent neighborhood—all bungalows with rusting iron porch pillars and stained siding—and he can't quite read her but he can practically feel the intensity of her attention. He knows she's traveled, and there are some poor parts of town and a few pieces of scraggly land not far from the farm on which rest only run-down trailers, but even so, as he pulls into the parking lot and stops he wonders if she's ever spent any significant time in a place like this—the kind of place that used to be the one kind in which he ever felt like he belonged. Even though he still didn't.

He never belonged anywhere at all until her.

She gives him a look as she gets out of the truck and heads over to him, glancing around and then back at him. The kids by the Chinese food place are staring at her, plastic forks gone motionless. Daryl looks her up and down with fresh eyes and sees her tight jeans, that jacket that accentuates the lines of her body rather than obscures them, her wonderfully messy ponytail further messed up by the wind, and the fact that, while about ninety percent of the time he doesn't even notice, she truly does look a good bit younger than she is. By a couple of years. Before he actually knew how old she was, he assumed she was around sixteen. Maybe less. Probably not, but he wouldn't have been shocked.

He looks at the kids—more like in their early twenties at a guess—and makes the look a Look. Before he left he strapped his knife to his belt. Didn't expect to need it, but he's not stupid enough to fuck around. It's a big knife and he's made no effort to hide it. At about fifteen yards it'll be eminently visible.

Beth tilts her head. Mostly she's questioning, studying him, but a tiny smile is playing around the corners of her mouth. "You bring me here for some dinner, or to get my nails done, Mr. Dixon?"

"You're fuckin' hilarious."
“Damn right I am.” She touches his arm. “Seriously, Daryl, why are we here?”

She doesn’t sound upset in the least, doesn’t even sound concerned, but her gaze is bright and penetrating in the light from the Chinese food place, and it’s clear that she’s at a point where she’s genuinely requiring some answers.

Well. He said he’d give her some. He lifts his hand, catches hers and threads their fingers. Makes sure the kids see it. Actually hopes they’ll note that he’s old enough to be her father and be taken aback, because fuck them is why.

“Well.” He gives her a light tug. “C’mon.”

Abby’s shop—ASCENSION INK—is tucked between the liquor store and the bail bond place, the smallest of the three. The window is lit an orange-red and strung all around with Christmas lights, displays of flash occupying a lot of the space. Some of it is conventional stuff—kanji that says fuck knows, flowers, skulls, flowers and skulls, flowers and skulls and guns, pouncing tigers, naked and mythologically proportioned women, script. But some of it is anything but conventional. The light obscures a few of the finer details, but along with everything else—and set to the side rather than the center where it should be—is a collection of more abstract designs. Delicately swooping shapes, intricate and complex. Faces and figures, some clear and some not, the shading fabulously subtle.

Birds.

Lots of birds. Perching, in flight, heads raised and beaks wide with song, singular and in groups. Peacocks with glorious floods of tail, robins and cardinals, murders of crows, murmurations of starlings, exaltations of larks. A rising phoenix shedding flaming feathers—two of them, seeming to dance. A spread-winged eagle—no sign of the patriotic flavor one usually finds accompanying eagles but instead a fundamental wildness that manages to be vaguely disturbing.

Birds themselves aren’t exactly unconventional, in fact. But these are—the colors vivid, the linework flawless, the shading making them appear to move.

Daryl is leading Beth toward the door, but abruptly she stops, gazing at the flash, and he’s not surprised. He had been hoping she might see it. Might be caught by it. She drops his hand, and as he watches she slowly raises hers, presses it against the glass.

“Wow,” she whispers.

“Yeah.” The smile washes over him and he couldn’t have resisted it even if for some ridiculous reason he wanted to. “The other stuff… She does it ’cause she has to. That’s what people ask for. But the birds…” He lays a hand on her shoulder. “She does those ’cause she loves ‘em.” She can’t not.

Because they’re in her bones.

Beth doesn’t turn. But he can see the dim reflection of her face in the window, lit a deep and somehow lovely red, and he thinks about the first time he saw her singing in the coffee shop and knew he was a lost fucking cause, when he saw her and knew she was the only thing he wanted to see. The only thing he would need to see for the rest of his life.

That’s no longer true. But he sees her now and it fills him up, and nothing else is ever going to be like this. Nothing. There’s her and no one else. No matter what happens, there’s her.

*Girl, I love you so much it might still kill me. I swear, it might.*
“You’re here to get it finished, aren’t you.” Not a question, and so soft he has to really listen to hear it. He feels it vibrating through her chest, under his hand, all through her.

He squeezes her shoulder. “Mhmm.”

Then she does turn and she looks up at him, face now thrown mostly into shadow. He lifts his hand and cups her jaw, thumb against the corner of her mouth, stroking slowly across her lips. “I want you to see it,” he murmurs, and he doesn’t know where the words come from and he didn’t intend them, but they’re true at the very cellular level.

“Never been to a place like this.”

As he suspected. He nearly smirks. “I’m corruptin’ you.”

“You already did that.” She closes a hand around his wrist, pushes up on her toes and kisses him—a graze of her lips that presses his eyes closed, sends a flush outward from his chest and all through him. “Let’s go.”

He pulls open the door, touches her shoulder again and ushers her inside.

~

If Aaron’s place felt bigger inside than it appeared from the street, Abby’s feels smaller. Not cramped, not quite, but the walls hug close and the dimness in the front exacerbates the effect. More flash papers everything, bounces the light around oddly, but behind the counter in Abby’s workspace the light is bright and strangely cheerful. It’s not the word Daryl would have expected to employ, but it does fit fairly well.

It feels good to be here. Did the first time he walked in. It felt exactly right.

Abby—a curvy woman with a buzz cut and skin such a dark brown that it makes the whites of her black eyes seem to actually glow—is in the back, working on a redheaded woman’s bicep. It’s impossible to see what she’s doing, but Abby herself is intent, pierced brows drawn together, hand moving with exquisite steadiness as she maneuvers the needle. She pauses and glances up, gives him a quick smile. “Have a seat,” she calls. “Got about fifteen minutes here, then I’ll be with you.”

Beth is moving slowly around the edges of the room, arms crossed, attention fixed on the flash. Daryl slings both their coats onto a hook and sinks onto a folding chair with a padded seat patched here and there with black duct tape, and follows her progress. He hasn’t stopped smiling, not completely, and if he had any remaining doubts about whether bringing her was a good idea, they disintegrated about five minutes ago.

The flash on the walls is more of the commonplace—all skillful, but none done with as much care and obvious enthusiasm as the birds in the window. Of course Beth knows that, spotted it instantly; she would know love like that when she sees it. Better than most people. So she’s looking, but she’s not as impressed as she was. Maybe she’s never been in a place like this, but he’s guessing she can make sense of everything she’s seeing.

After a moment or two she comes over and sits down beside him, still scanning everything. “It’s just her?”
“Just her. Sometimes she has friends come in to help, but it’s all hers.”

“How’d you meet her?”

Shrug. “Bar.” He gestures in her direction, at her bare right arm, which is turned toward them and totally covered with a sleeve of interlocking branches wound with blue dawnflower vines. Sparrows nestle in among it all, a few so well hidden they’re not immediately obvious. “Saw that. Asked her about it. She didn’t do it—I mean, obviously—but she designed it.”

“It’s not like your others,” Beth murmurs, and he’s not certain if she means Abby’s sleeve or his wing. Or both. But the same answer applies.

“No.”

“Why did you get the other one on your back?” She looks up at him, eyes very wide and again very bright. Too sharp to be doe eyes now. “The… I dunno if they’re angels or demons. Those things. What do they mean?”

He looks back at her. Then away. He didn’t anticipate this question. Maybe he should have.

“I don’t remember.”

Did it ever mean anything? Did it need to?

“What does the wing mean?”

And she must know that. She must at least feel it. But there’s another side to this, one that will probably surprise her, and it’s not that he doesn’t know how to phrase it, not entirely. He was pushed into it and he went without resistance, no time to think or ask questions, no time even to come up with any to ask, and all he had been sure of after was how it made him feel.

In the shower that first time in the house of light, allowing himself to begin to return to her in his mind. His hand on his cock with the ghost of hers, coming so hard, breaking open with it, his skin tearing and the wing bursting free.

It did happen. It didn’t, but it did.

“I don’t know,” he whispers.

~

It’s more like ten minutes before Abby finishes up with the woman. Daryl waits the rest of the time in silence and Beth waits in it with him, silent as well beneath the steady buzz of the needle and the Offspring on the staticy radio (and it feels like heaven’s so far away). Halfway through it, her hand finds his where it’s resting on his thigh and covers it, small and soft and warm.

He didn’t expect it to feel like this. He isn’t sure what he was expecting. She has a hand on his chest and she’s pressing, even if neither of hers have actually moved.

Abby makes him jump when suddenly she’s standing in front of him, hands on her hips, looking down at him with undisguised amusement. “You comin’, or what?”
He coughs, shakes himself and tugs his hand from beneath Beth’s. “Yeah. Yeah, ‘m ready.”

“Good. Got you a big thing of water, you’re gonna want it.” She transfers her attention to Beth, her amusement turning a touch quizzical. “You brought your dau—” she begins, and whether it’s his face or Beth’s face or the way they were touching that stops her cold, Daryl will never know, and it doesn’t matter. Comprehension sweeps across Abby’s features, and he sees a flicker of bemused surprise before it slips away.

If he’s going to go out in public with her—any form of public—this is probably going to happen periodically. Daughter. Little sister. Niece. Whatever. Even if there’s no trace whatsoever of family resemblance. He takes a breath, solidifies something between his chest cavity and gut, and gets to his feet.

Abby nods toward the back. “Alright.”

“Can she come back?”

Again that flicker, and when he glances at Beth he sees something there too, half obscured by shadow. Not apprehension. It’s not that she doesn’t want to. Not that at all. But something. This isn’t nothing to her. Of course it wouldn’t be.

Showing her things… Somehow, to her, it’s everything.

Abby shrugs. “If she keeps quiet and stays outta the way, guess there’s no harm.” She looks at Beth again, and appears to be gauging something. “It’s gonna be a couple hours at least.”

“I’m fine,” Beth says softly.

Abby shrugs again and leads the way.

It is cramped back there with the three of them, but Beth finds a place in the far corner, a bare stretch of table; she hops up and perches, and once more she looks around, taking everything in with those wide eyes—hungry for detail. Every last one.

He wonders when she last saw something completely new to her.

And then she’s watching as he pulls off his shirt and lowers himself into the chair, straddling it, and it’s…

He didn’t expect it to feel like this. At all.

He shivers when Abby slides a gloved hand across his back, and again at the cool wetness when she starts to swab the area. “Healed up good, anyway. Mostly. It’s gonna hurt like twenty kinds of fuck, though. You sure you wanna do this?”

Beth. He can’t look away from her. She’s all he can see. She’s almost close enough to touch but it’s like she’s on stage, brilliant with the lighting and with what she’s doing, with what she’s drawing out of herself. She’s quiet now, but he’s just as helpless. Just as much of a mess inside. It’s always going to be like this.

Always.

“I’m sure,” he murmurs.

It does hurt. A lot.
Yet another lesson he learned early is that pain has a texture and a complexity that most and more fortunate people don’t ever get to appreciate. Dullness, sharpness, jagged edges and a kind of relentless smoothness; hardness and softness and yielding firmness in between. There are aches and stabs and the rhythmic pounds of a heartbeat. Surface and core. Length and duration, during which it might change any number of ways. So many kinds of pain and so many ways to feel it. So many ways to suffer.

What he learned later was that pain itself is actually value-neutral. That it isn’t automatically unpleasant. That most of the time it is, but there can be exceptions. The ache of a weary muscle—tired but not pushed too far. Tight and worked loose by stretching. A tattoo needle—yes, that had been a very specific time, the first one he got, the demon inside his upper arm—fully sober and fully able to feel it.

And her. What she does to him. That’s good pain. It hurts so much less than it did, the bad pain melted away, but not all of it is gone, and he’s glad.

This pain starts as a low burning sting, bearable, and he breathes through it and is lulled by the buzz, finds a rhythm and rides it for a while, his eyes slipping closed. But gradually it deepens and sharpens and drills into him, and the burning bleeds into searing, and he clenches his teeth and presses his cheek against the back of the chair and has to struggle to keep the rhythm.

But it’s not bad. It’s not bad at all, and bit by bit he feels the slowly flowing release of the endorphins. And when he finally does open his eyes, squinting into a blur of light and uncertain how long he’s even been there, she’s there, and she’s watching him.

When she comes into focus he loses the rhythm entirely. He can’t breathe at all.

He’s never seen her look like that. Like she really is seeing something entirely new—which she is, but he doesn’t think it’s merely this place or even what’s happening to him. There’s something else there. Deeper. Heavier. Her face is flushed and her eyes are incredibly bright, her lips slightly parted. She twitches when he meets her gaze and blinks a few times, but doesn’t shift her attention.

Something on him. In him. Hugging the back of the chair, legs spread and half stripped with her looking at him like that, he feels naked in a way that has more to do with skin than clothes, and the needle scorching its way across his back hammers heat into him, through his blood and through everything, and he feels himself hardening at the same instant he sees her squeezing her thighs together.

A trembling breath escapes him and his eyes fall partially shut. He’s being swallowed by burning agony, and the urge to rock his hips and seek the pressure of the chair’s back is nearly overwhelming, and it’s all he can do to keep from moaning her name.

He whispers it. Mouths it.

Knows she sees.

It’s all different after that. The endorphins are a sweet, tingling blanket tucking over his nerves, but they won’t last, and anyway he doesn’t want them to. He wants to feel it, wants her to see him feeling it, every second of it on his face. They break for water and to allow him a chance to get his breath, and when Abby starts in again he begins to float off into a dense brightness. This all happened last time he was here, except it didn’t, because then he was alone in it. Now he’s diamond hard—pain there too, or close to it—pressing against the firm leather of the seat and his own damn fly, heat pulsing through him as Beth takes him in.
And she’s feeling it too. He knows she is. She’s just as taken as him.

He might be able to come like this. Enough pressure and enough rhythm and he could simply come into the drift, with this wonderful swarm of wasps singing their way over him. It might be possible.

A second break. He has some water and only as it touches the back of his throat does he realize how thirsty he is, and he has to fight himself to keep from gulping. But when Abby asks him how he’s doing, answering her is difficult. Talking at all is difficult. He’s ridden endorphin highs before, but not like this, and when he settles against the chair again and the tide of pain sweeps back over him, it’s a relief. Because he doesn’t have to do anything. All he has to do is be there.

If the pain is a tide so is his focus, and it comes in and goes out. Sometimes he can see Beth, look at her and meet that wide, fathomless blue, and at other times it all blurs away and he has to close his eyes and draw inward, burrow into the fill-and-empty of his lungs and the pistoning squeeze of his heart.

And through it all he’s so fucking hard.

He can’t possibly get any harder, in fact, but it feels like he is. Like everything in him is swelling, his capillaries expanding and veins flooding, a pressure that he’s never felt before building and building. All at once he can focus clearly and she’s boring into him harder and sharper than the needle, consuming the distance between them without even moving. He wanted her to see this and she is, she’s seeing everything, she’s seeing what no one else ever has, her eyes comprising his universe, and suddenly the pressure building in him releases, surges up from the base of his spine and lights him up like his nervous system is strung with those Christmas lights, a cascade of blinding color. He squeezes his eyes shut and tightens his arms around the chair, lays his head down and sighs, and he hears her draw in a quiet breath and God, he is coming, coming so slow and deep—

Except he’s not. Or not exactly. It’s not that kind of release. It’s another wave that he’s riding and it sweeps him out and returns him, beaches him, but it never shakes him. Never bursts him open. He’s absolutely positive that if he slipped a hand into his pants right now, he would feel nothing sticky.

But he came. He did. It’s just never been like that.

And he’s still so hard.

She manipulates time. He’s starting to think he can too. Maybe this is her and maybe it’s him and maybe it’s both or it’s neither, but after that everything becomes indistinct, fluid, and he drifts into a place that’s like the sensation of burying his face in her hair, until suddenly the buzzing is gone and the wasps have flown away, and all that’s left is a pounding burn that flares as he feels Abby wiping away the last of the ink and blood.

And Beth’s hand, weaving fingers through his, small and soft and warm.

He lifts his head and stares up at her. Abby is saying something, but he can’t make it out. There’s just Beth, only Beth, a world of her, and he knows he was supposed to bring her with him. She was supposed to be here.

She’ll take him home.
She has to help him walk out.

Abby is, if anything, even more amused, asks Beth if she can handle him, expresses mostly joking dubiousness when she gets a dry *yeah, I’m pretty much used to it* in response. Somehow he scrapes together the alertness to pay, to toss in a generous tip, to get the keys from his pocket and into Beth’s hands, and to not trip over his own feet on the way across the parking lot.

The kids are gone. He has no idea what time it is, but it feels late. Some general ideal type of Lateness. After midnight, maybe. Probably. He’s musing on the malleability of spacetime when Beth gets him into the passenger’s seat, practically shoves him, lets out an exasperated laugh that twists into concern and a hand on his shoulder when his back collides with the seat and he whimpers.

“’m okay,” he breathes, gently bats her hands away. “I’m… Swear. ‘m fine.”

“Jeez, you *are* drunk.” His door closing, then the driver’s side opening and the creak of the seat as she climbs in, starts the engine. The light from the Chinese food place is thrumming in his vision, vibrating at the edges, but it fades when she combs a hand into his hair and he closes his eyes.

“Are you alright?” Her lips against the corner of his mouth. “Really?”

He nods. He is. He’s very, very, *very* all right. Very.

There’s also no way in hell he would be capable of driving himself back.

“I am.”

“Okay.” Her mouth again, and she’s wearing that sweet lip gloss. The kind she wore the first night in the rain. He doesn’t know why he didn’t notice it before.

The fresh, cool scent of her hair, the deeper smell of her skin, the faint salt he knows he would taste there—and more. Lower. He knows what she smells like when she’s turned on, when she’s wet, and she is now. And he’d lost most of his erection before he got up, but suddenly the heat is rushing back, humming into him, and he smiles.

He’s burning.

“That was…” She swallows and pulls back, and when he turns his head she’s searching his face, her tongue flicking across her lips. “That was amazing.”

He breathes a laugh—happy, Jesus, he’s so damn happy—and closes his eyes again. By the time the ground starts sliding away beneath them, he’s flying, carried into the night by a guitar like a horse in full gallop as an opening salvo of raindrops hits the windshield.

*there’s four new colors in the rainbow*
*an old man’s taking Polaroids*
*but all he captures is endless rain, endless rain, endless rain*
*he says listen, takes my head and puts my ear to his*
*and I swear I can hear the sea*

*sometimes when I look in your eyes*
*I can see your soul*
Songs are "Gone Away" by the Offspring and "Sometimes" by James.
because we're graced in these matters

Man, guys, I really think we're in the final ten or so chapters here - though I've been wrong there many times before - and I'll be repeating this tearfully many times between now and the end, but let me say here that I appreciate you so much, whether you've been commenting or kudosing or reccing or just reading and enjoying, and coming along with me on one of the strangest and least expected narrative journeys of my life thus far.

We can make our heyday last forever, and ain't that what it's all about.

At some point he realizes she isn't driving him home.

The miles after Abby's place all bled together, a blur of rain and light and music, and her voice - singing, talking, he's not sure which. Both. He was still flying, continued for a while, and he doesn't think - to the extent that he can - that it's just the endorphins. Those should have worn off a while ago.

His back is on fire. The pain is like a solid thing, like the truck beneath him, carrying him. Somehow more real. It and she took him into the dark and the rain, and he allowed his eyes to fall half closed and his focus to slip away, and just felt.

Groped for her hand. Found it. Held on, and she squeezed, and the engine growled under him, duet with the buzz of the pain, and it's possible that he told her something. That he loves her. That she's amazing. That he can't even believe she's real, that he still sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night in his own bed and doesn't know where he is, doesn't know what's happening, but remembers her like a dream and is sure he's woken up and lost it and lost her. Gropes for his phone, looks at her last text message. Gropes for the wolf - which he sometimes still keeps beside him - loses his fingers around its cool smooth flank.

He might not have told her that. Might still have to someday.

But even if time slipped and flowed and warped well beyond reliable counting, he opens his eyes wide and focuses on the world and feels certain that they should have been home by now. It wasn't more than twenty minutes or so getting out there.

He shifts in the seat, immediately regrets it and hisses softly, and in the periphery of his vision he sees her turn her head, sees the small curve of a smile.

"Welcome back."

There's something strange about the quality of the sound and about what's in front of him, and after another few seconds he gets it. No windshield wipers. No rain-patter. It stopped.

He rolls his head toward her. "Didn't go nowhere." Which isn't at all true, but he says it anyway, and smiles loosely as he does.
She snorts a laugh and turns them to the right - down a way he doesn't recognize when he peers out the side window. Though it's hard to make out much in the way of landmarks, which makes a lot of sense given the darkness. Though he's fairly certain it's being exacerbated by heavy tree cover on either side of the road. "Yeah, you were gone. You even remember any of what you said?"

"No." He glances back at her. It's difficult to stop smiling. He doesn't want to try. "Anything interestin'?"

"Well." She glances at him again, lips still drawn into her own dry little smile. All teasing at its edges. In the faint light from the dash, as she has more than once now, she looks both very young and deeply old. Knowing. Something magical. His head drops back against the headrest and he simply gazes at her, rapt, feeling himself slipping just a touch and not minding in the least. "I think..." She shakes her head and turns her attention fully to the road. "It was, yeah."

"You gonna tell me?"

"Nope."

"You don't get to call me a jerk no more."

"I can call you whatever I want." Her smile curves more sharply, edging into the wicked, and he wonders if he actually said much of anything coherent.

He can well believe he didn't.

But she's quiet again, her smile fading, and he watches her and sinks into the silence, lost in the contemplation of a loose strand of hair curling against the side of her neck, the subtle glitter of her flower earring when she turns her head, the edge of the scar on her left cheek. The bob of her throat when she swallows. Her eyes - still so bright, so keen. All the light falls into them and they hold it in reserve for their own uses.

Shit, he's still kind of gone.

No, not gone. He's stoned. Or he was.

"Where are we?"

"Just drivin'. I wanted..." She takes a slow breath. "I just wanted to. I dunno why. I'm sorry, maybe I should..." She shakes her head, brows knitted. "I should've asked you."

"Don't think I coulda answered. You do whatever the hell you want." He looks out the window again. They've emerged from the trees and the land is opening out on either side of them. The clouds overhead are breaking up, and a few stars are shining through. Beneath it's all fields, copses of trees, fences and rolling hills, distant houses. And it's familiar, but that might be simply because so much of the countryside around the town looks the same.

Pretty, but mostly the same.

No other cars on the road. Not in front, and none behind that he can see. Just them and the night.

"How's your back?"

He grunts, shifting again. He probably shouldn't drink, but it feels like it would be one of those bad ideas that also manages to be an extremely good idea at the time it's being put into play. "Hurts."
"Bad?"

"Yeah."

"Sure you don't want me to take you home?"

"I mean... eventually." He turns back to her, reaches over and lays a hand on her thigh. She's very warm under his palm, and it might be that he's still all fuzzy around the edges, but he'd swear he can feel her pulse thrumming in time with the ghost wasps beneath his skin. "Beth, I'm alright." He gives her a slow squeeze. "Promise."

"You seemed alright back there," she murmurs, and something turns over inside him. Her eyes on him, piercing him as steady and relentless as the needle. Holding him there, like hands. Watching as layer after layer of him was peeled away.

"I was."

"Did it feel good?" Another glance, and she looks young now. Not naive, not a wide-eyed ingénue. But young. Curious. Learning. Hungry for it all. How she had been, scanning around at the the flash. At Abby's workspace. At him, as he straddled the chair.

"No. And... Yeah. Yeah, it did." He's still looking at her. He doesn't seem able to stop. "It was... I dunno how to say. You saw how I was."

"I did." She turns them again, onto a narrower road that winds down and around another wooded patch of land, roughly following the edge of a slope to a creek bed. "You..." She swallows, seems uncertain how to proceed. "You were... You looked like you were... That one time. But the rest of it, too. Like you were..."

"Like I was comin'." He just says it, soft. It's not hard. It feels weird to just say it like that, for reasons that dance out of his reach every time he tries to pin them down, but he can. Because it's true. He felt it. Felt it so deep, felt it all through him. Made no effort to conceal it. Of course she saw it. She knows what it looks like.

"Yeah," she says, just as softly. "Like that." Another glance, quick, and he can't be sure in the colorless light but he'd bet the money he has left in his pockets that she's blushing. Which is adorable, and he's smiling again. "Did you?"

Yes. But no. He still has no idea what the fuck that was. And he's very much unbothered by that fact. He doesn't think he needs to know. "Not like you mean." He pauses, his hand finding her thigh again and resting there. "You liked it."

She takes a slow breath. "I... Yeah. I liked it. I liked watchin' you. I was thinkin'..."

She trails off, ducking her head slightly, and now he knows she's blushing. Rather uncharacteristically for her, by this point - this girl who seems to positively luxuriate in being naked when she's around him, who refuses to keep her hands off him, who seems to draw pleasure from both of their bodies like breathing. But this was something new for her, fresh territory, and maybe she doesn't feel as fully at home there as she does in the woods and the fields, and in his bed.

In his bed.

His hand slides toward the inside of her thigh. "What were you thinkin'?"

"I was thinking that chair would be pretty perfect if you turned over," she says, and now she sounds
almost casual. Edged with a wicked little smile. And he laughs in quiet delight, because yes: it would have been. It would have been absolutely fucking perfect for that.

"Think Abby would pitch a fit."

"Yeah, well, you might've noticed I stayed outta the way." She pauses again, and her legs spread under his hand - minutely, but he doesn't miss it. He slides his palm higher. "It was beautiful," she says, soft once more, and his breath catches beneath his throat.

"Think you'd ever get one?"

She makes a faint, slightly surprised noise. But not so surprised as she might have been; a nice girl from a nice family, he can guess what Hershel and Annette would make of their youngest daughter with a tattoo, but yet another bet he'd be very comfortable laying is that while she was looking at the flash and while she was watching it done to him she was thinking very much along those lines. Imagining. Trying the idea on for size, just to see.

That's what she does.

"I dunno." She bites at her bottom lip. "I dunno what I would get."

"Not gonna haul you back there'n make you pick, I was just-"

"I liked the birds," she says quietly. "I... I really liked the birds."

He pictures that, at once and vividly and without a single shred of surprise. It's not even a new picture; looking at her gazing in the front window, the seed had been planted then. Her and one of Abby's lovely little birds on her shoulder, on her ankle, on the inside of her arm. Her calf. A blackbird, a starling. A tanager. He looks at her now, the shadows moving across her beautiful face, and he thinks dreamily about a singing mockingbird on the inside of her thigh. Near where he makes her sing too, with his fingers. His lips and tongue.

He thinks about the graceful curve of her back, and wings of her own. She deserves wings. Two whole ones.

She's going to fly.

"You got a lotta time to figure it out."

"You don't know that." Very soft, very solemn, and his breath tightens under his ribs. Because this is always going to be here. Like her scar. Her scars. What happened to her, twice, and what it taught her, and what she knows you can't really say.

"No," he whispers. "I don't."

What is it you plan to do?

"I'll get one." She says it without a hint of trepidation, with absolute certainty. As if she decided it long before now. "I don't know what, but I will."

He studies her, bemused, and squeezes her thigh again. "When?"

"When I know what I'm gonna do." She tips him a tiny smile. "After I graduate. When I know why. When I know what I... what I plan."

"You think you can ever know that?"
"No." She shakes her head, underlining the point. They've hit a stretch of long, straight road and the land has opened up again, and he's not at all surprised to see, directly in front of them on a rise in the distance, the winking red beacon of the radio tower.

And he knows where they are. And for a few seconds he can't breathe.

"Ain't about a plan, I think," she continues. She doesn't seem to have noticed that anything has happened to him. Beneath her voice, the radio muses to itself. Will we grow together? Will it be a lie? If it lasts forever, hope I'm the first to die. "I think it's just about askin' the right questions. Askin' at all."

He says nothing to that. He has nothing to say - nothing to argue with, nothing to add. It was something he began to understand in the week he was alone, something he feels as a truth that extends roots down into his bones, but that's not why he's silent. He's silent because he's watching the red beacon, the red star, the single one out of place in all these winter constellations, and he's thinking about the night he found himself on the ledge, and he stepped down off it and let her voice guide him home. Now they're here on this road, she's brought them here very likely without having any idea of what it actually is, and he's...

He's frightened. He's terrified.

And that's not all he is.

He lifts his hand from her thigh, covers hers on the wheel. "Pull over."

She shoots him a questioning look. "Daryl, what-?"

"Pull over."

She's staring at him, as much as she can without removing a dangerous degree of attention from the road, but she jerks the truck over to the side, half onto the shoulder, and turns to him, leaning against the wheel with her face drawn into a frown. "What the hell, Daryl?"

But he's already fumbling for the door, practically kicking it open. Stumbling out into the whispering grass, exhaling steam and staring out across the empty cornrows with their piles of dry leaves and husks, at the stars through the broken clouds and the pale gold moon lifting itself above the trees on the horizon. Except not gold, no; it's the exact shade of enameled molars fitted into the dry jaws of a deer's skull.

Beautiful. And terrible.

He's still more than half lost in whatever overwhelmed him back there. He knows he must not be thinking at all clearly, shouldn't be relying too much on his own perception of anything. But he feels it, as he takes a few uneven steps across the grass toward the field, hands clenched into fists at his sides. He remembers that night, the nearly overwhelming urge to sprint into the dark, to leap into the air with the unshakable faith that the air would accept him, and it's coming back now - and he's with her, and she's perceptive to an alarming degree.

She already knows something is up. He doesn't need to turn to be sure that she's standing behind him, arms folded, that frown deepening. Worried, maybe.

He doesn't want to worry her. But maybe worry is the most rational reaction here.

"Daryl, what's goin' on?"
"I was here when I called you." He doesn't turn, but the night is very quiet now, and even if he's speaking into it and not in her direction, she'll hear. "Or... No. Wasn't exactly here. But it was... This road? I think. Further on."

"Oh."

A world of understanding in that oh. He feels a species of wild gratitude; so many times he's despaired of explaining something to her, only to find that she knew it all along - or could fill in everything she needed to know when given the most basic framework. She's wise, and by now she can see down to his bones.

She knew that night. Somehow, some part of her. Knew what was happening.

He takes a huge breath and closes his eyes. Locks his jaw shut. Because he wants to run now, take her hand and run through the night with her like they're unbound beasts, like they're wolves, like she's the last girl and he's the last man and the rest of the world is gone and doesn't matter anymore. But he also wants to whirl toward her like a wind, seize her hands in his, and say things he won't be able to take back, whatever happens after. Words that could, one way or the other, bring this chapter to a close. Collapse the tangent universe and end the world.

_Take me home. I have a pack and you have a pack, and I still have over fifteen thousand dollars in cash, and I have wheels and a wing and this road and it's enough, it might be enough... We're wild, you know we are, and we both know sooner or later this is all going to fall apart, but we don't have to be here when it does. We can go. If you want. If you said. If I asked. If I asked you right now to fly away with me, would you say yes?_

_Would you take my hand and run?_

He's lost his fucking mind.

"Daryl," she says softly, and curls her warm little hand around his. "Daryl, c'mon. It's late. It's cold. Let me take you home."

He drags the air into his lungs and holds it, eyes shut tight, and weaves his fingers through hers. He's not going to ask her that. He's not going to do that to her. He's not going to be so selfish, so cruel. And he doesn't want to go. He doesn't want to leave. Whatever happens, he doesn't want to leave.

This is his home now. The only one he's ever truly had.

"Yeah," he murmurs, and tilts his head back, looks up, watches red Betelgeuse making its slow procession across the sky. He hurts so much, even if the hurt is still the good kind, and he's so tired. "Alright."

All the way back he feels the beacon of the radio tower like a fingertip against the base of his skull.

_Would you?_

_But he has other questions. And about halfway back he remembers them again."

After he kissed her in the rain but before she kissed him in the ruins, he drove out - like this - to an empty stretch of road and parked, lay in the truckbed and looked at the stars, and he wondered things. A lot of things. About her. Never expected to get many answers to those questions, if any,
ever, but things have changed.

Everything has changed.

The radio is muttering to itself but he can't make out any of the words. He can only hear his own as they rise in his memory and then in his mind and then find their way onto his tongue, and they're incredibly fucking weird and they feel like they fit the setting as perfectly as anything could.

"What's your favorite color?"

"What?" She's been silent for the past fifteen minutes, and he's been able to feel the wheels turning rapidly in her head, almost as if he's running a fingertip along the top of one and feeling the friction burn as it spins. She sounds bewildered, and he's certain she didn't even quite understand him.

"Your favorite color," he repeats patiently. "What is it?"

"I..." She looks at him for a few seconds and then back at the headlights stroking over the dark ribbon of road, her lips parted and her jaw working slightly. Then, abruptly, she laughs. "Why do you care?"

"Why you care if I care?" He rolls his head to the side once more and lets his gaze drift over her, feeling something warm and strangely - faintly - throbbing settle into him, like a toe stubbed minutes ago and already recovering. "I dunno what it is. I wanna know."

"I don't know if I have one," she says after a few more wordless seconds. "I mean... I like a bunch. I like blue. Green. Purple. I like yellow. Red. I like 'em all."

"Why?"

She laughs again. "What's with you?"

"I dunno." He doesn't. It's not just the tattoo - still burning into him, but less painful now. A bit. It's something else. The road, the night. The moon lifting itself higher and higher to their left, streaming its light between naked branches.

Silence. Then, low: "Blue is sweet. Like blueberries. Round sweet. It curves. Green is sharp, smooth - it's like cut grass. But it's also deep. Soft sometimes. Like moss. Purple is heavy and thick when it's dark and when it's lighter it feels like clean sheets, and it smells like mulberries. Red and yellow are..."

She looks at him again, and her eyes are glittering. And in his hand he feels the roughness of the stems of roadside wildflowers, collected into a bunch and bound with twine.

This is such a weird fucking evening.

"That's what it's like for you," he whispers.

"That's what it's like for me."

"Me too."

She smiles, wider and sweeter, takes a hand off the wheel and finds his with it and squeezes. "I love you." She pauses, takes a breath, slips her fingers free. "Ask me somethin' else."

He almost remembers the order in which they came, how they flowed out of somewhere far down inside him. Someplace gently ravenous for her and everything about her. "What's your favorite
"food?"

"Oh, that's an easy one. Spaghetti."

He arches a brow, slightly surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." She shoots him a Look. "Why, is that weird?"

"I mean, you're weird."

"Takes one to know one, Mr. Dixon," she says primly.

He releases a brief, hard laugh. She's very witty. "Yeah, fuckin' ow." Shrugs. "I dunno, it's just not what I woulda guessed."

"What would you guess?"

Now he has to think, which he's discovering isn't the easiest thing even now. If anything, linear thought is getting increasingly difficult. To the extent that he was capable of it before. "You love dessert. You love chocolate. Cream. All that shit."

"Maybe you shouldn't assume stuff." This time her smile is broadly teasing, a bit of an edge to it. He takes it in, enjoys it. All her edges are keen. They shine. "Maybe there's a lotta shit you don't know about me."

"Maybe." Definitely. Hence the questions - and such basic things, too. Now that he's going over them in his mind, it startles him a little that he didn't know them before.

But some of them aren't so basic. Some of them are anything but basic. He sent them out into the universe, asked in the most general and aimless sense, not because he expected he would ever know but because they seemed important. They seemed like the kinds of things one might want to know about someone, that might reveal a lot. Not that he had any practical reason for wanting to know or anything.

God, not that at all.

"Do you want kids?"

He hears it, feels it hanging in the air like motes of dust in a beam of sun that have randomly decided to coalesce into the shape of a sparrow in flight, and he knows he's pierced something. Touched something deep, quite without meaning to, clumsy but with bizarrely good aim. That when the question sat inside him, unasked except in that most general sense, it had nothing whatsoever to do with him.

That's not true anymore. Not now that he's made the words and put them there between the two of them.

That big scary future.

"Yes," she says, so soft he almost can't hear her, and he nods and looks away, and doesn't ask her anything else.

That big scary future. His and hers. He persistently hasn't thought about it. He kept it in its box, and even after that week alone, starting to be in the world, he didn't take it out. But it's still there.

Waiting.
He had no real idea what time it was when they left Abby's place, and he had no real idea what time it was when they turned around and headed for home. When they pull up in front of the house he finally tugs out his phone and checks; it's almost three.

Out there with her for hours, and it feels at once longer and no more than a few minutes. A few blinks.

She yawns expansively as she cuts the engine, rubs her eyes with the heels of her palms and turns to him. He's looking back at her, that streetlight once again oddly hardening her features, and he's thinking she might say something - no clue what - but instead she leans in and grazes her mouth over his, fingertips against his jaw.

He flows into it, eyes closed and hand lifting to cup the back of her head. And the pain flares, tightening his breath, and it's good.

"Can you get up there? On your own?"

It takes him a moment to figure out what she's referring to. Then he gets it and nods, lips brushing her cheekbone. "Yeah. Toldja, I'm alright."

He is. Or he's pretty sure he would be. But as they make their way up the front walk in a flood of moonlight, she curls an arm around his waist and he winds up leaning on her anyway. Not much, and it's not even that he needs to. She's just there, so warm and so real, and she's going to stay with him. She's going to go to bed with him, lie down and fall asleep and wake up with him, and they'll have the morning together. Maybe even more of the day. He never asked her.

He's pretty sure he would be able to endure weeks without laying a hand on her if it meant even a single night of this was waiting for him at the end of it. Endure it happily. It's enough knowing that she wants to be here.

And again, a tiny part of him whispers as they climb the clanking iron stairs, there's the big scary future. He won't look at it, not even now. Knew it, recognized it, and turned away. The present is more than sufficient for his desires and his needs.

But there it is all the same.

He opens the door open, follows her into the room, watches her shadowy form dip and fold as she crouches by the bed to turn on the light. He blinks in it, moving forward and shrugging off his coat and about to hold out a hand for hers, but she takes his instead, pushes up on her toes and tugs his head down so she can kiss his brow.

"Lemme take care of you."

He's not sure what that means. But it sounds good.

So okay.

He watches her head into the shadows of the hall with the coats, then kicks off his boots and moves into the kitchen, retrieves whiskey from a cabinet, returns to the bed and sinks down onto it. He doesn't need to get drunk. He doesn't want to dull the pain. He doesn't want to dull anything. He wants to be here for every precious second of consciousness.

But a drink or two will still be nice. For once it's actually not terrible whiskey.
"Don't overdo it, Mr. Dixon."

He turns, swallowing the sharply pleasant burn, and she's standing there half in the light, hand on her hip, amused smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. "I'm your chaperone, remember?"

"So you caught me," he says, perfectly amiable, and holds out the bottle. She eyes it, then eyes him. "Is it better than the moonshine?"

"Depends what you mean by better." He lowers the bottle. He's not going to push her. God, that's the last thing he would do. But she steps forward and takes it from him with a smooth and total lack of hesitation, lifts it and swallows. She waits a second, a thoughtful expression crossing her face, then squeezes her eyes shut and pulls her lips into a grimace.

"Don't like it?"

"I dunno." She opens her eyes, looks down at the bottle and swallows again, hard. "It is better than the moonshine."

"Better'n what I used to get." He shrugs. "Got the money for it now. Not that I'm livin' large or nothin'."

"No, I can see that." She bends and sets the bottle down by the bed, lowers herself onto the bed and crawls toward him. He watches her, once more bemused; beneath her coat she had been wearing the thick pink sweater she seems to particularly like, but she's taken that off too, and all that's left is a thin pastel purple tank top - almost a camisole, its neckline low and revealing and her breasts lovely little handfuls cradled by her white cotton bra. He gazes at her and at the purple, its shade paler in the soft light, and what she said in the truck comes back to him.

Clean sheets.

She reaches him, lays a hand on his shoulder - just above the tattoo. "What should I do for it?"

"Bandage can come off." What she's asking... The way she looked at him, like she wanted to take him into her hands and draw those sighs out of him herself, it had plunged into him, hot and sharp, straight between his legs and blowing his veins wide. She's looking at him a bit like that now, and he has no idea how to define what it's doing to him. "Should clean it. Careful. Pretty much all for now."

"Nothin' else?"

He shakes his head.

"Still hurts?"

He nods, rolls a shoulder. "Less now."

"I wanna see it," she breathes, and she leans in, presses her cheek to his upper arm, and nuzzles at him, and his lungs and heart twist into tight, complicated knots. She's so warm, pulsing through the fabric of his shirt, and he doesn't know what taking care of him is all about or what she has planned, and he doesn't know what he's able to do right now, but he wants her to see it. Touch it.

He wants her to touch him everywhere.

"Go on, then."

She rises on her knees and shifts around to the edge of the bed, moves to the floor and stands in front
of him, over him. He stares up at her as she takes his shirt off - gradual, careful - and it occurs to him as he raises his arms for her that he never knew what it truly was to be naked until her.

How wonderful it can be.

And of course she isn't stopping with his shirt. He didn't for a single fragment of a moment expect her to. She sets it aside - with odd care, it seems to him - and lowers herself to her knees, fingers working at his belt and zipper. He's hard - was as soon as she looked at him that way - and she pauses, curves her palm over him, kneads him slowly, shifts her attention to his face and gives him a lazy smile as his eyes fall half closed and a quiet moan escapes him.

"Got me wet," she murmurs. "Watchin' it. Watchin' you."

"I know."

"I know you know." She cocks her head, still working him, reaching into his fly and sliding her fingers over his squeezed length - delicious pressure, maddening. "I don't know why. I don't know what it means."

"Means you liked it, girl."

"Yeah, but I don't know why."

He leans back on his hands and stares down at her, her doe eyes and her shining, full lips, and tries to breathe. Rocks a little. "You need to?"

"Guess I don't." She bends low and he feels the heat of her even through pants that remain far too much on him, magnifying itself when she opens her mouth against the fabric that's holding his cock prisoner, presses down with her lips and drags upward, and there's something bizarrely obscene about it that flashes bright pleasure down his spinal cord.

"Takin' care of me?" His voice is rough, the words melting into a slight slur, and he both feels and sees the edge of her smile.

"Mmhm." She kisses him, pulls back, hooks her fingers under his waistband. "Lift up."

He does, and she slides his pants and shorts down - slow like fucking torture now that she's gotten him wanting it and she knows it - grinning when his cock springs free and grinning harder when she shoves his pants to the side to join his shirt and leaves him completely naked, hard and glistening and close to dripping with how ready he is for her, biting his lip to keep back his groans - though why he would want to is something of a mystery to himself.

He's been pretty considerate where Carol is concerned.

She nudges his legs apart and settles herself between them, closing him into a gentle fist and stroking him from root to head, and she laughs softly when he twitches in her hand.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Ahh... Beth." A shaky smile grabs him, stretches his face, but it's also almost pained. There is pain, twinges of it with every flex of the muscles in his shoulders, but it's only making this better, and it's only making it worse. And the words are, for some reason, playing very coy with him. "Beth, you..."

"Say it," she says, tone reproachful as she strokes him again. "Or you don't get anythin', how am I supposed to know what you want if you don't tell me?"
"Seriously, who's the fuckin' jerk now?"

She lowers her head again and kisses the very tip of him, lips butterfly-light against his slit, licking away the sheen of precome he leaves on her lips. "You deserve it."

The look he drops onto her is a hundred percent *are you fucking kidding me?* "I... Oh, fuck, for what?"

"I dunno." She shrugs, presses the pink tip of her tongue to her top lip, and he just about crumples backward. He's not sure how he's supposed to handle this. He's *weak*, she's completely taking advantage of him in the unfairest way possible. "Stuff. Things. I'll come up with somethin'."

"Beth. Please." He can say it. He can words. They're there, enough of them, and he can drag into his mind the order they should go in. "Please... God, please suck me, *please*..."

"Wasn't really so hard," she breathes - so hot on him, *scorching* him - and opens to him, takes him past her lips and into her, and he whines like a fucking dog and it's pathetic and not in a million years of trying could he care any less.

And he's giving her what she wants. He couldn't be more sure. He's pleasing her, and that's everything.

Apparently it pleases her to keep tormenting him. Because she *is*, if anything going even slower than before - drawing him into her and so deep he's all but certain he's going to collide with the back of her throat, backing off and sweeping her tongue across him as she does, transferring that to his head in broad, excruciating licks, and letting out a soft, happy sound like there's nowhere else in the world she'd rather be and nothing else in that same world she'd rather be doing.

Wouldn't you know it, he actually sort of believes that.

She has a firm grip around him as she ducks her head even lower and he watches, dense whimpers caught in his throat, as she laps at his balls, curves her mouth wide over him, tongues them past her lips and sucks so gently. And at that point he can't watch her anymore; he's managed to cup a loose hand over the back of her head but it falls away and he drops his head back and sobs, tries to gather up the broken syllables slipping out of him and beat them together into words, beg her to make him come, he needs to come, he *needs it*-

And naturally she picks that moment to stop dead and rock back on her heels, and when he manages to focus on her she's wiping at her mouth and looking enragingly pleased with herself.

With her other hand jammed inside her open jeans.

He can't know, obviously, but yet *another* bet he's very comfortable making is that the expression he's wearing is primarily conveying the message *oh my Christ would you STOP*

Except no, don't stop. *Please, please don't stop.*

"Beth," he whispers thickly, and she removes her hand and lifts sticky fingers to her lips and licks them clean.

He whimpers again, high and needy, and fights the urge to collapse onto his back. Because it won't be comfortable, and there actually *is* a limit to how much pain he wants to feel just now.

"Hey," she says airily, pushing to her feet and reaching down to tug off her boots. "I didn't come either."
*That is not even sort of close to the same thing.* But he says nothing, and as she moves past him and back into the hall and after a moment water starts running in the bathroom, and he turns all his attention to the task of getting his breath back - and soaking in the aching throb between his thighs.

He's felt it before, *likes* it, and that's another thing she knows.

He hears her coming back, her bare feet padding against the wood, and the mattress dipping under her weight. Hands against his shoulders, then the light sting of the tape pulling free and the brief shock of cool air against the abruptly exposed skin beneath. And another shock - and a slightly sharper sting - as a damp, lukewarm cloth passes over it.

He hisses, and she halts. "Is it okay?"

"Yeah. 's alright. Just still..." He lets out a breath. He doubts he has to explain.

"The lines are so clear," she says softly, and the faint wonder in her voice is bare as his skin. He loosens under her free hand, muscles slackening, and sighs.

"They'll stay pretty clear if it heals good."

"It's beautiful." Her fingertips skating down it; he can tell she's tracing its outline. Something that isn't fully at the level of a burn flares, and a moan rides out of him on another sigh. He's still hard, jutting up dark and bobbing slightly with every breath, and all at once it's taking everything he has to keep from wrapping a hand around his cock and just *holding* it, giving himself whatever pressure he can.

Whatever she'll let him have.

And hell, maybe she really can read his fucking mind, because he feels her lips on his shoulder, the nape of his neck as she moves the cloth again in slow, careful wipes, and he shivers violently when she whispers *touch yourself.*

Oh, she's so merciful. And she's so cruel.

He does. Slow, slow as she was because he doesn't need to be told that it's what she wants, and slow because if he's fast and rough now he'll come and he doesn't want to, not yet - and he shudders under her hands and whispers her name, the light in front of him fading into a warm blur. But he turns his head - no idea what prompts him to do so - and across the room is the shelf and the wolf with its stained blue crystal eyes, and the light touches them and they snap into focus like stars.

"Done," she murmurs, and her lips ghost over the wing's highest curve, the place where it folds, and he shudders again and presses back into it.

But she's gone.

He half turns, blinking, looking for her - in time to see her shifted back and up onto her knees, pulling her top off and tossing it onto the floor, reaching back to unhook her bra. Her eyes are huge in the dimness and her lips somehow seem even fuller than normal, plump and ripe, and he wants to close his teeth on them. Bite down and tug, so gentle. Scrape them down her throat, the line of her collarbone. Her pinched little nipples, falling into view.

He wasn't sure he was up to fucking her, but he thinks he can probably make it work.

"Daryl."

Her voice still isn't rising above a murmur, and she lowers herself, sits back, wriggles her jeans and
panties down. And he's seen her naked so many times now, has learned so much of her territory, mapped her with his hands and lips and tongue, but each time it's a bit like the first time, and as she moves up on the bed and reclines against the pillows, a golden moon opening itself into the night sky, his breath disappears into some neighboring dimension where breath goes when it isn't needed anymore.

He turns over, pushes up and starts to make his way toward her, cock a humming, swinging weight beneath him, but she stops him with a foot in the center of his chest, gives him another one of those lazy smiles, and rolls smoothly over onto her stomach, her ass lifted just a touch and her legs slightly spread.

"Like this." She cranes her neck and looks at him over her shoulder, still smiling, and his heartbeat joins his breath and his muscles are strongly considering making a day trip. "I want you like this." She arches, rolls her hips down and reaches beneath her, her fingers working. He can see them, brief glimpses. "God... Oh, slow. Go slow, I want..."

Everything. Everything slow. He should go slow, should be careful, with her and with himself. He's new. He's a new thing, and that's true every single morning. Every single moment.

The condoms are still by the bed and he laughs as he reaches for them, fumbles one free and rolls it on, crawls over her and bends to drag his lips across the ridge of her shoulder. "Think slow is just about all I could do anyway."

"I know." She lifts herself on her hands and presses up against his chest, reaches back and hooks an arm over his neck, and he can practically feel the warmth of her smile. "That's all I need. C'mon down here, Daryl, I..." She laughs, softer than he did, and when she rolls her hips again his cock slides into the cleft of her ass, and his breath hitches and twists as she lowers her arm and reaches beneath her and back and grips him, guides him. "C'mon in."

He does.

She wanted slow and it's slow, an easy slide into her that leaves them both gasping, and then he's settling against her back, not putting his full weight on her smaller frame but letting her feel him, that he's here, that he has her. That she has him. He braces himself on his elbows but lies flush with her, for a few moments not moving at all. Resting inside her, the way he did the first night she came to him here, leaning his cheek against her shoulder and matching his breath to hers. His wing still burns, but even lower now, a pleasant smolder like the last of a high fire, and it's so sweet to be with her like this. It's so good.

"I love you," she breathes, and when she rolls against him once more, he starts to move.

Barely moving at all, really; rocking his hips down and in and back, feeling her cunt tighten so hot around him, feeling her muscles tense and loosen as a little moan vibrates out of her. He's been on the edge for what feels like hours - might be hours in one way or another - but now it feels like he could do this for hours: just be in her, sleep inside her, fill her up and be filled. He doesn't even care about coming anymore. If it happens, great, but this...

*I want to stay here. I don't want to leave, that was stupid, all I want to do is stay.*

Even if she took his hand. Even if she said yes.

He does take her hand, closes his over hers and interweaves their fingers and squeezes, and squeezes harder when it starts to build after all, a warm swell upward like rising through deep water. She's moaning constantly now, an ahh-ahh-ahh sound in sync with his gentle thrusts, her free hand
fumbling beneath her again and fingertips grazing the base of his cock as she manipulates her clit -
even that done slow, rising with him, turning her head to press her mouth to his jaw.

And it's still burning, burning through him and hauling him up, pulsing itself into his head as he
stiffens and shudders and releases her name in ragged panting, over and over, losing it into formless
incoherence as she trembles beneath him and follows him over with a soft cry muffled by the
pillows.

"You're so good, Beth." He's only half aware of what he's saying and that's just fine, still breathing
with her. Floating on the wave. "Oh, you're so good, God, you feel so fuckin' good, I love you so
much..."

She laughs again and holds his hand so tight, and he maneuvers an arm under and around her - and
he can't stay inside her. But he can dream about it. All night with her against him and his back a
sweet, throbbing burn, like her touch inked it into him rather than the needle.

He wants to stay. He can. In his few scattered moments of brutal, terrible honesty, he knows what he
knows and she does too, but he can stay.

*My girl, we don't need to run to fly.*

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Five O" by James.
all the words that I've been reading have now started the act of bleeding

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for your patience, guys. I wanted to finish Safe Up Here With You, which took some brain, and also I think I'm just naturally slowing as we get close to the end. I might and probably will speed up again for the last few chapters - and in fact I'm going to release the final three in a single block, for various reasons. But yeah, hopefully the next update won't be quite so long in coming.

<3 always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He has no idea what smell he’s waking up to.

He knows that there is one, and he knows that it’s familiar and he knows that he likes it. A lot. But the context makes it incomprehensible. He lies curled on his side and half into a warm depression that can only have been left by someone else’s body, and he keeps his eyes closed against the insistent morning light even though opening them and looking around would probably provide some explanations.

He doesn’t want to. Doesn’t want to open his eyes, doesn’t care particularly about the explanations doing so might get him. He’s so comfortable and he feels so good—in spite of a faint burn on one side of his back—and he’s full of the vague but solid knowledge that something wonderful has happened and is still happening.

And it has something to do with that smell.

Then he hears the quiet clang of metal on metal coming from the direction of the kitchen, and he finally makes a concession to curiosity, opens his eyes a crack and peers.

Small blond girl, her long hair all in disarrayed tangles and dressed only in one of his older, softer button-down shirts with the sleeves torn off, her back to him as she does something with the stove.

So that explains the smell, and now he recognizes it as eggs. Eggs, cooking.

He watches her for a moment, unmoving and slightly incredulous, then pushes himself up and swipes a hand down his face, gives his protesting eyes a rub with the heel of his palm and stares at her again.

“Beth?”

She tosses a glance over her shoulder, a brilliant smile. “Oh. Hey.” Back to the stove again, shifting a skillet around against the burner. “Be ready in a minute.”

“Are you makin’ breakfast?”

“Yep.” She turns and moves to the side, reaching up and searching through cabinets. “You actually got plates, or do you just eat everything right outta what you cook it in?”
“You’re assumin’ I do any cookin’ at all.” He does. Not well and confined almost entirely to food that comes dried in boxes, but he does. Someday he dimly hopes to graduate to mixing in fresh ingredients and coming out with something edible. “One on the right there—Your other right, girl.”

She shoots him a look, opens the correct cabinet and gets the plates, rummages in the drawer beneath for forks—apparently she does somehow know where he keeps those. “Would’ve made bacon too but you didn’t have any, so it’s just eggs and toast. I had to make the toast in the oven. You think maybe you might eventually get a toaster?”

He scratches absently at the back of his head, mouth twisting. Smiling. She’s moving right in. Somehow that isn’t in the least surprising; she was respectful of his space and his claim on it the second she walked into it, but she’s also never seemed anything but comfortable here, at least in the parts of it he occupies. “The fuck am I gonna toast?”

“Uh, bread? Bagels? Pop Tarts—you actually have those, do you just eat them cold?” She turns to him, plates piled with eggs. Scrambled. They look very fluffy. She wrinkles her nose, apparently sticking to the subject of Pop Tarts. “That’s gross.”

“You always gonna get all judgy on me five fuckin’ minutes after I wake up? Is that gonna be a thing?”

Always. Like that might be a thing too.

She brings the plates over, drops to her knees and kisses the corner of his mouth—quick and firm—before she hands him his. “If you always smile like that when I do, then yeah, probably.”

He takes the plate but he doesn’t look away from her, and she holds his look, reaching up with her free hand and combing his hair back from his face. She smells like eggs, and she also smells faintly like yesterday’s shampoo, like mint toothpaste, like sex, and he leans into the touch, eyes half closed. God, if every fucking morning could be this way.

“You smile a lot more now,” she says softly. “I like it.”

“Maybe I got more stuff to smile about.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” She looks at him a moment longer, her own smile dancing at the corners of her mouth and in her eyes and her fingertips tracing down his cheekbone, then settles herself on the bed next to him, her plate on her thigh. “Eat your eggs, they’re gonna get cold.”

He does as he’s told.

The eggs are indeed fluffy. They’re basically perfect. Eggs are one thing he can do that isn’t out of a box that usually ends up pretty edible, but he can never get them like this. It might be some kind of dark magic. He wouldn’t put it past her. She has powers, after all.

After a few moments of eating in comfortable silence he tries to ask how long can you stay but his mouth is full, so it comes out in a jumble of syllables. She laughs, kicks at him, tells him to mind his manners, and he swallows and tries again. And she cocks her head and smiles wider.

“All mornin’. Lotta the afternoon, if you want. I should get back before five, but if you wanna kick me out earlier—”

He reaches over and cups a hand against her knee, catches her gaze. Holds it. She was kidding, he’s well aware of that, but even so. He needs her to know. “I don’t wanna kick you out ever.”
“Alright,” she murmurs, covers his hand with hers and squeezes. And it hits him that he means it. He doesn’t want her to leave. Ever. That’s always been true, sort of, but now it’s true in a violently insistent, nearly aggressive way that catches him and grips, shakes him a bit.

If only every morning could be like this. If only that could happen.

They finish the eggs and the toast at the same time and put their plates aside on the floor according to an unspoken mutual decision, and she rolls onto her back and he leans over her, plucks the buttons of the shirt open and spreads it, palms her and kisses and sucks at her nipples, slides down and settles between her legs and stays for a while, stays until she’s clutching at his hair and pleading with him, and he smiles against her and gives her what she wants with firm little flicks of his tongue. And he pushes himself up, turns her onto her side and lines himself up behind her, fumbles for a condom and fucks her long and slow and hard, fucks her until she’s whining and trembling and clutching at him again. Begging him—harder. Please, oh God, fuck me harder.

Then after, drowsing, tangled. He holds her close and thinks about the rest of the day in a vague, unfocused way under his doze, and by the time they both begin to stir he knows what he wants to do next.

After a shower. Which is also very nice, and which also goes on for a while—careful and slow because of the tattoo, but not entirely.

It’s not solely that he’s really and truly fucking someone now, and doing it semi-regularly. It’s that he’s doing it so much. And it’s so good every time. Even when it’s not explosive, even when it’s something he guesses might not necessarily blow someone else’s mind, to him it’s so, so good. Because she is.

She’s not a goddess. She’s a girl. And she’s not perfect. She’s better.

~

“Still not tellin’ me where we’re goin’?”

He glances at her. She’s leaning against the window, body angled toward him and one boot up on the seat, knee hugged to her chest, and she might be injecting some impatience into her voice but he can tell it’s feigned. She’s all curious amusement. This is something they do, he’s finding: they concoct surprises for each other, and so far—aside from one particular exception—the results have been positive almost without fail. She likes surprises. So, as it turn out, does he. At least when they’re hers.

He’s pretty sure she’ll like this one.

He shakes his head and she snorts a quick laugh, pokes at his thigh with the toe of her boot.

They’re heading out through the outskirts neighborhood full of smaller family homes—a clear late Saturday morning without too much of a bite in the air, so people are out and about and children of various ages are periodically running into and out of view, with and without toys, usually shrieking. Daryl has to swerve to avoid one—a pretty little girl with a collection of long, beaded braids and a battered scooter. It’s not at all a close thing, but she turns and gives him the finger in an amiable way.

He respects that.
“Sure you want kids?”

“My kids’ll be perfect.” And Beth’s delivery is so utterly deadpan that for a fraction of a second he’s not sure she’s kidding.

The experience of finding the place—and then the place itself—had been so strange and borderline surreal that part of Daryl is honestly wondering if they’ll find it again. If it’ll even be there. If it was some kind of location caught between dimensions, winking into and out of existence at specific intervals. If he’ll arrive at the street where he’s certain it was and there will only be an empty storefront, maybe some faded lettering on the window. And if then he’ll ask a passing resident about it, and they’ll give him a Significant Look and, in a voice calculated for maximum ominousness, say *Why, no one’s been in that building for TWENTY YEARS.*

It doesn’t feel impossible.

But when he hits the street in question, it’s there.

He pulls over—in front of it this time—and cuts the engine. Beth sits forward and peers past him and out the window at it, brow slightly furrowed. But not because she doesn’t like it. He can tell that immediately. She’s even more curious now. Her attention is well and truly captured.

Like he figured it would be.

“So what *is* it?”

He shrugs, smiling a bit. “Says it on the window.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. You wouldn’t bring me to just *anywhere* like this.” She leans in, hand on his arm, and he can see in her eyes the same species of thing he saw the night before at the tattoo parlor. The same thing he saw when he took her out with the bow.

This is so important to her. Simply because it’s something he thinks is important enough to share with her.

He reaches over and covers her hand with his, lifts it, presses his lips to her knuckles and says nothing at all. Because sometimes he gets the clearest, sharpest look at the workings of her wonderful mind, at how she throws herself into the world like every part of it might be worthy of her time, and he still can’t handle it. It still fucks him up in the best possible way.

He’s better than he was. But he still wants so badly to be like her, and he still suspects he never quite will be.

“C’mon.” He curls his fingers around hers and gives her a gentle tug, and when he gets out she follows him.

~

Next he’s wondering is if it’s open, given that it barely struck him as *open* before. But when he tries the door it swings in with that soft jingle, and as he holds it for Beth she steps inside, looking around and blinking.
She has every reason to blink. It’s as dim as he remembers, and in fact dimmer, because it appears to be even more crammed with stuff than before. Aaron expressed a desire to thin things out; instead it seems like he’s made some new acquisitions, though it’s less that Daryl spots anything specific and more a general feeling. A sense of increased compression.

Possibly Aaron didn’t acquire anything. Possibly this much stuff in this small a space is able to reproduce in some fashion. Or maybe this is some kind of dimension-straddling building, and objects keep spilling in from whatever the other dimension is.

Again, a lot of previously impossible things now seem distantly plausible.

Beth is slowly turning in place, hands in the pockets of her coat as she scans the shelves and the walls and the floors and the window and everything in and on and around all of it. She’s chewing meditatively on her bottom lip, and he remains where he is for a few seconds, breath suspended, before he realizes that he’s waiting to see what her reaction is and he’s feeling the slightest undercurrent of anxiety as he does. Because he can see someone walking into this establishment and looking around, taking in the junk and the dust and the basement-cellar smell that lingers thick in the air, and walking right back out again.

But this is Beth. So naturally when she faces him she’s smiling. Not wide, but clearly its width has little to do with the sincerity of the feeling behind it.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why’d you bring me here? You still haven’t told me.”

“You know the books? That shelf?” She nods. He goes on, though comprehension is already dawning on her face. “Got ‘em here.”

“Oh.” Her smile widens and she looks around again. Before he can say anything else—not that he’s sure what he would say—she’s moving forward in the direction of one of the aisles, reaching up to run a hand along a shelf featuring a dusty selection of grotesque bobbleheads of American presidents. They all start jiggling as she passes. “There’s so much… everythin’.”

“Yeah. Pretty much.” He follows her, watching her progress, and just as he had spotted the same expression she had been wearing when he took her to the woods, he’s feeling almost the same. Not that this place is his in the way the trees and the sun-dappled paths and the clearings and glades had been, but it’s somewhere he found. And if it comes to it, he does feel comfortable here. Though he couldn’t say why.

“Is anyone else here?” She glances over her shoulder, effortlessly dodging a hanging rack of kitchen knives. They look blunt, but it strikes him as hazardous. He makes a mental note to mention it.

“Dunno. I mean, probably. Door’s unlocked.” He raises his voice. “Aaron?”

Nothing. The slightly muffled sound of his and Beth’s footsteps over several layers of dust and a faint rustle in the distance that might be something opening, shifting, or falling onto the floor. He’s about to call again when a voice—unfamiliar—comes to them from that same distance. It sounds tense.

“Just a sec!”

Beth glances at him again, eyebrow raised. He shrugs. He thinks he remembers something about a
“Should we wait here?”

He shakes his head, touches her shoulder and nudges her on—deeper into what he supposes one could describe as the building’s bowels, though that’s not especially attractive. “Might never find us if we do.”

“Or we might get lost. Starve.”

“Won’t starve. There’s mice.” There basically have to be mice.

They hit the narrow end of the aisle and are forced down another one—this one featuring all furniture of various types and sizes, in various conditions. Some of it looks glossy and old and might be genuinely valuable. Some of it looks like several generations of children tried to refinish it with crayons. Some of it looks like absolutely nothing he’s ever seen before. All of it is interesting, and Beth is bending close to some of it, back to trailing her curious fingers over rough and smooth and knobby alike, but she looks up when the voice that called to them becomes audible again—muttering, tension remaining.

“What the hell did you—it’s not here.”

At an even further distance, and finally familiar, “Eric, I swear to God, I put it there.”

“Swear to God, you didn’t.” Scuffling. A hard sigh. “Where is there?”

“By the three mannequins who look like Johnny Depp.”

“I’m there, it isn’t here.” More scuffling, the sound of something small and soft thumping onto the floor, a quiet string of curses. “I thought you got rid of these, they’re really goddamn creepy.”

“Deal fell through. Hang on, I’m coming over.”

“No, don’t—” At that moment they hit the end of the aisle and turn again, and to their left is a wiry man with reddish-blond hair crouching over a collection of boxes, all of them open, two of them upended and spilling out cracked blank CD cases and moth-eaten teddy bears wearing garish bowties. He’s looking up and toward what has to be the back of the building, mouth open in mid-yell, but Beth’s toe nudges a stack of children’s books and knocks one of them to the floor, sending up a puff of dust. The man jerks his head around, clearly startled.

Standing over him are three mannequins that do indeed bear an uncanny resemblance to Johnny Depp. To Daryl’s eyes, anyway. To the extent that he remembers off the top of his head—or cares—what Johnny Depp looks like. All of them are naked except for the purple sequined fedora tipped at a jaunty angle on the center one’s head.

“Oh.” The man—Eric, Daryl gathers—swallows and gives them both an awkward smile. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Beth steps forward, and the smile curving the corners of her own mouth is both amused and pleased. “Are you open?”

“Not technically, but…” Eric straightens up and slaps an enormous quantity of dust off the legs of his jeans. “I’m guessing Aaron left the door unlocked again—” This shot toward the back with a flash of a glare. “—so yeah, I suppose.” He shifts his gaze from Beth to Daryl, still not completely at ease. “Is there something I can help you with?”
“Was here before.” This man doesn’t seem much like Aaron, yet somehow after about ten seconds of being semi-formally acquainted he strikes Daryl as exactly the kind of guy who might fit him in some ways. “Met Aaron. He’s—”

“Daryl?” About ten feet away—closer than Daryl would have guessed—Aaron’s head pokes up, periscope-like, from behind a mound of clothes. He’s smiling. He’s also dusty, hair streaked with gray. “Hey! Wasn’t sure I’d see you again. Eric.” He shuffles up and forward, clambering over another stack of boxes and hopping down. “That’s the guy I told you about.”

“Oh,” Eric says again, and this time he looks less uncertain. “You bought the books. And the shelf. Right.” He lets out a hard breath and wipes at his forehead, leaving a smear of dust. “I’d thank you for taking them off our hands, but I don’t think it helped much.”

“He saved my life,” Aaron says, reaching them and giving Daryl a quick, sunny grin. “Like I said.”

Beth sends him a quizzical look in the midst of her smile, and again he shrugs at her. Great, back to this. Though it doesn’t make him feel as weird as once it probably would have. “Stop.”

“No, seriously. I would’ve been trapped. Might have never been found. I might’ve starved.”

“You wouldn’t have starved,” Beth says dryly. “There’s mice.”

“Oh my God, are there mice.” Aaron turns his beam of a smile on her, Eric after him. “And you’re—”

“Beth.” She offers him a hand. They both take it in turn. They get it dusty, and she doesn’t seem to mind at all. She’s scanning, her focus scattered everywhere like the light through the cracks and crannies of the shelving, her eyes wide. Enchanted. This is all about as odd as it was the previous time he was in here, but Daryl also can’t think of many ways it could be better.

This is almost exactly what he was hoping for.

“Sorry about the mess,” Aaron is saying to her, gesturing at the mess in question. “We’re still going through all of it, and I swear to God, there’s more of it than there was when we started. I kind of keep hoping someone might walk in and take the whole damn thing off our hands, but—”

“—but that’s not going to happen, because I say.”

And there’s something in the look Aaron and Eric exchange then—an alchemically perfect combination of profound exasperation and warm fondness—that sheds a good bit of new light on the term partner.

Oh.

For the vast majority of his life Daryl has lived in surroundings and among people where and for whom this would be just about every possible problem. For whom this would be at best violently uncomfortable, and at worst cause for actual violence. He’s seen it. Once or twice he’s seen some very ugly things done to people like he now gathers Aaron and Eric probably are. And now he is uncomfortable, suddenly unsure of where to put his eyes or what to do with his hands. But it feels like discomfort that has far more to do with him than with them.

He looks at them, both now talking earnestly to Beth about what they’ve been going through regarding nightmares of inventory and being half certain one of them will walk in here and never be seen again, Beth listening and wearing that odd, pleased smile, and they seem like good guys, and it feels like something he should maybe get the fuck over.
He’s been told a lot of lies about a lot of things. A lot of people, and not solely himself. It’s both relieving and disturbing how many new ones he keeps discovering.

“So look around,” Eric is saying. “I’m begging you. Anything you see you think you might want to carry out of here, I can’t tell you what a favor you’d be doing us. I think some chaos is kind of cute, in a way, but.”

Aaron glances over at the mannequins. “I don’t suppose you’d like—”

“No.” He and Beth say it in perfect unison, and Aaron looks caught between feeling crestfallen and cracking the fuck up. And Beth grabs for his hand, gives it a quick squeeze, releases it and leaves waves of soft warmth rolling up his arm.

He’ll get over this. He’ll get the fuck over himself. He doesn’t even think it’s going to be all that hard.

~

They bid Aaron and Eric a temporary farewell and leave them—squabbling affectionately—to wander the aisles. Beth is quiet, her attention still soaking in everything around her, gathering it in and spinning it around itself in a way that’s nearly visible. Daryl watches her far more than anything else; he’s seen all of this he really cares to see, and now it’s just her. Seeing everything through her. Not her eyes but her whole body—her rapt, wide-eyed gaze, sure, but also her lips, parted and moving as if in silent conversation with someone or something unseen, the way her hands keep rising to touch and trace and outline, delicate and entirely unhesitating. He doesn’t know exactly when he started noticing this about her—how she moves through the world with all of her fully engaged in every part of it—but it must have been early, because it feels like it’s something he’s always known. Not only how she talks, how she feels. How she is.

The ruins? Was it that day, all sun-drenched stone and the rustle of trees, her practically dancing across the grass? Or was it the rain, the coffee shop, watching her out of the corner of his eye as he drove her into town?

Or was it even earlier than that?

He knows her so well now. But each time he sees something like this, it’s the first time all over again. He wonders if he’ll ever know her fully. And not because she hides anything from him.

Simply that there’s so goddamn much to know.

“How did you find this place?”

He grunts, reaches up to re-situate a large glass soap dispenser—a weird green that seems to glow with its own internally sourced luminescence. “Just did.”

“I dunno about that. I think maybe it was more.”

“Think whatever you like, girl.”

She halts, nudges herself backward and against his chest, and he catches her with his hands on her hips—automatic at first and then considerably less so. He leans down and presses his lips to the
crown of her head, and she rolls her head back and sighs.

She smells like them. Like him. It’s so faint it might be his imagination, but he knows it isn’t. Their times together are persistent. They can’t be washed off by a single shower. Whatever reality they have, it’s more than what lingers on and in the skin.

“I think…”

“What d’you think?”

He touches her lips, feels her smile. “I think I wanna find somethin’.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno.” She pulls easily away and starts forward, going swift, tossing her hair over her shoulder. A thin beam of sun lances through the dusty air and catches her braid, lights it up like woven golden rope. “I’ll know when I find it.”

He does the only thing he could ever do, ever for the rest of his life, and follows her.

~

He loses track of the hour. The sun isn’t absent but it’s difficult to see clearly, bounced around in a way that makes it impossible to glean anything about time of day from it. And this place seems to have a way of eating temporal increments, a form of time-dilation akin to but very different from anything she herself can do. They wander and they wander, mostly in silence, and she looks at the shelves and does so with meticulous care. Everything spotted and considered, even if only for a second or two.

Even the damn kayak on the wall. He thinks she’s appropriately bemused by that.

But finally—near the front of the store, in brighter and more direct light—she stops, looking to her right at something eye-level, and there’s a quality to her expression, a distinct sharp-edged brightness, that makes him suspect she’s found something.

He moves up behind her, hand on her shoulder. “What—?”

But then he sees.

It’s another one of those shelves—a whole series of them, actually—covered in a bewilderingly eclectic assortment of things. Things is the single word broad enough to capture the sheer variety; there are candleholders, snow globes, china figurines, plastic figurines, angels and fairies and unicorns and plain old run-of-the-mill horses, teacups that might be the only one of their kind in the universe for all they match any others there, jars, bottles, boxes, more jars, woodcarvings of animals and people and objects that don’t precisely exist, a metal tree dangling with what appears to be a hundred or so tiny prisms. He looks at these—at her looking at them—and all at once he’s back in her bedroom for the first time, awkward and hesitant in the warm glow of her lamp, turning his back on a beautiful girl wearing a huge pink Disney World tee and looking at her…

Her shelf. Where she keeps her things. Where part of her started, maybe, and went from there. Some of it like this other stuff—not unattractive but essentially useless and not seeming to possess any
special significance for him or for anyone—but not all. In among her own souvenir snow globes and cheap figurines there had been a carved wooden bear, and it had caught his eye over everything else. Because it was pretty in a real way that none of the others possessed, and because something about its placement told him that she liked it more than almost anything else there.

Then, putting it back, the falling book. He caught it. She plucked it out of his hand. And she read.

_I don’t know exactly what a prayer is._

_I do know how to pay attention._

Now she’s looking at the shelf right in front of her, where—sitting between a terrifying plaster clown and what looks like a toddler’s Play-Doh art project, its head raised and ears pricked, neck sliding in a graceful gleaming slope down to an equally graceful and gleaming back—is a small crystal doe with eyes stained blue.

Because of course there is.

She picks it up. She does so carefully, more carefully than she’s handled or even looked at anything else so far, and she lifts it into the light, turning it so every line and facet of it has its chance to catch the sun. The eyes glow brilliant, eerily so, and Daryl looks into them and thinks about shelves. About things. About how they wait on those shelves for just the right person at just the right time for just the right reason.

In literally any other context he would have considered this twee as all fuck. But here…

Not so much.

Could be nothing. Could simply be the same manufacturer—probably tens of thousands of these animals were made in some factory somewhere, and probably he could walk into any junk shop anywhere in this part of the country and have a better than average chance of finding something at least sort of like this.

Could be. Or could be nothing of the kind. Or the two might not even be mutually exclusive.

Beth turns to him and breaks open the circles his thoughts are spinning in, holding the deer out so he can see. As if he needed any help in that regard. “It’s like yours.”

He clears his throat. “Yeah.” It is.

She looks up and graces him with a thoughtful curve of her lips. “You didn’t spot this last time you were in here?”

He shakes his head. He could probably come in twenty or thirty times and not see even half of what’s here.

“Probably would’ve bought it if you had.” She looks down at it again, cradling it in her palms. It’s smaller than the wolf, but not by much. “It’s just as pretty.”

“You should have it.”

She flicks her gaze back up to him, faint surprise in the tilt of her chin. “I was gonna say you should ___”

“No. You.”
He doesn’t know why. He doesn’t need to know why. It isn’t even about the poetry of events or the rhythm and rhyme of chance. It isn’t about some externally reinforcing idea of what’s appropriate, and it sure as hell isn’t about fate, whose existence he supposes he has to accept on some level by now but which he won’t accept happily. He’s aware that there’s a thing people in love are supposed to do sometimes, where one of them has one half of a matched pair of trinkets, and this isn’t that; this is a deer, not a wolf, with the crystal and the blue eyes the only real similarity, and in fact they don’t look all that much alike. The deer looks older, smoother. The wolf is more angular. Harsher in some subtle ways.

It’s not about any of that. It’s about how she picked it up and it threw light onto her face, drew it out of her, and it’s pretty and she clearly likes it.

And he can buy it for her.

He wants to do so with the kind of desperation he isn’t sure one is supposed to feel in minor retail situations.

He doesn’t have anything to give her. Except he does. Now and then he does.

“Let me,” he says, before she can say anything else, and he doesn’t think he’s allowing any of that sweetly fierce desperation he feels into his tone, but something about the look on her face makes him think she knows anyway.

She knows him.

She curls one hand around the deer and presses the other against his chest, lifts herself on her toes, and kisses him soft and slow—sighs into it when he takes her face in his hands and presses deeper. And when there’s the gritty sound of a shoe in the dust behind him and an almost inaudible breath—Eric or Aaron, he can’t tell and doesn’t give a single particle of a fuck—he doesn’t break it for a second.

In fact, he suspects he might be here with two of the people least likely to judge him for this in the entire world.

~

And they aren’t.

Judging him, anyway. Judging either of them. Not that he can tell. The shoe in question turned out to belong to Aaron, who was somehow simultaneously looking at something on the wall and over his shoulder and firmly at the floor when Daryl and Beth finally turned around. He had the look of someone who had just finished blushing and was relieved about the timing. But when he smiled at them, it was utterly genuine.

Daryl isn’t sure Aaron can fake a smile any better than he can.

Leaving Eric behind to root around in boxes and string together elaborate curses under his breath, Aaron led them back in the general direction of the front. Daryl could feel it coming—same as last time—and he was right; Aaron took the deer, took a look at it, and it was so clear that he was about to offer it to them for nothing that he might as well have said it. But Daryl snagged his eye, shut him up.
Aaron must be perceptive, for that to have worked.

I can pay. Let me pay.

Aaron let him pay. Twenty-five dollars, actually. Daryl suspects he was overcharged. As a favor. He was handing the deer to Beth and turning toward the door, when he cast a look back over his shoulder and caught the crooked hint of a smile on Aaron’s face. Which he returned, remixed and sent back in compressed format. He doesn’t think he really had to explain much of anything to Aaron.

He wonders how much Beth picked up. It’s Beth, so probably practically everything.

He always sort of figured being in love with someone involved all kinds of weird one-scene dramas, pretenses acted out and carefully maintained even when everyone involved knows exactly what they are. But he didn’t know what kind.

Though he also suspects he and Beth might very possibly not be typical.

By the truck, she stopped and looked back, deer held in her hands, side and back glistening like ice. Now it’s getting colder, the air sharpening—real ice possibly on the way tonight. But then, in the sun like she was, everything was warm, and gazing at her he could almost believe it was summer again.

“You should go back,” she said softly, then turned her face to him, her expression as soft as her voice. Thank you. For taking her there. For taking her anywhere. For showing her anything. Everything. Moving through the world like this with her, intimate as being inside her. “When you. Y’know.” She rolled a shoulder. “Need more stuff.”

“Probably will.” He will. He pulled the door open, nodded to her side. “C’mon.”

Not a lot of time left. The sun, as it does, is moving, and it’s on the upper end of its downward arc.

So now they’re driving.

Not toward the farm. Out. Not toward Abby’s place, either, or toward the forest and the clearing, or toward the ruins. Or toward what he’s beginning to think of as The Road. This is a new direction, running roughly northwest—toward, Daryl imagines, where Alabama does as all right-minded entities should and gets tired of being Alabama, and instead becomes Tennessee. More mountains there, he thinks as the road unspools into a clean black ribbon cutting through a blanket of spreading gold. Beyond that… Kentucky. Illinois. Iowa. Lakes. Or he could cut harder west and hit Missouri and Kansas. Colorado and mountains beyond anything he’s ever seen in his life.

God, he could. If he wanted. He could go anywhere. He doesn’t want to; the wild, half-mad urge to do so from the night before hasn’t returned to him, and he doesn’t think it will. It feels like he’s slipped over and past something.

But something else has broken open in him and he can’t stop thinking like this.

“Where d’you wanna live?”

She looks sharply at him—surprise, not anger. She was toying with the deer, turning it over and over in the light, and now her fingers have gone completely still. He catches a glimpse of her face: eyes wide, clear, solemn. A little confused. “What?”

“When you move out. Get your own place. Where you want it to be? What kinda place?”
“I… I dunno. Told you, there’s a lot I haven’t figured out yet.” He thinks that’s all he’s getting—is feeling a bit stupid, in fact, because she did tell him that and it’s not even like he forgot, but the question burst out anyway—but she’s looking thoughtful, and before he can foreclose on any of the rest of the potential conversation she continues it. “For a while I thought the city, Y’know, maybe Atlanta. Maggie’s moved closer to it. But then… You remember I told you about the stars? About how there weren’t any, about how it was like someone shuttin’ off the sky?”

He nods. He does remember. That night in the field, where she told him she wasn’t ready and they told each other they wanted it when she was. Moonshine or no moonshine, he remembers every goddamn second.

“I don’t want that,” she says quietly. “That’s fine for visiting, but I don’t wanna live like that. So somewhere in the country, I guess. Or maybe a small town. Like this one.” She’s wordless another brief moment, her hand on the subtle incline below where the door meets the window; it’s far too cold to roll it down, and he notes that her fingers are twitching, like they itch to be making that graceful sine wave. “I know kids are supposed to wanna get outta that. Small towns. But I don’t. I like it here.”

“Me too,” he whispers.

It’s home. He doesn’t want to leave it. Doesn’t want to leave her.

But he could.

They climb up something that’s a little more than a hill and a little less than a mountain, the harbinger of a larger collection of low tree-covered ridges looking back on rolling waves of farmland and forest. Toward the top there’s an uninterrupted view from one side of the road and they park and get out, shivering in the wind that sweeps up the slope—which must, Daryl thinks, be nearly constant. It’s beautiful, all hard blue sky and fluffy clouds drifting between it and the ground, and he moves up behind her and wraps his arms around her waist, settles his chin on the top of her head. She sighs, and after a few seconds she covers his linked hands with hers.

It’s so good.

“Got one more question,” he murmurs, and in fact it’s not the end of all of the questions, and she knows it. But it’s the last one he wants to ask for now.

“Mm?”

“Why me?”

He can feel her nonplussed blink, as if it’s intense enough to make use of all her muscles. “Why you what?”

Now truth. It doesn’t hurt him anymore. It’s simply true. Truths aren’t always the options life goes with, but that doesn’t make them less true, and this is something he’s known since the beginning, even if he wound it up with angsty self-loathing, even if he used it as a cudgel to beat himself over the head and neck. And back.
“You could be with so many other people. Should be. I make no fuckin’ sense at all. So why me?”

She turns in his arms, a bit jerky, and lays one hand against his chest, the other rising to cup his cheek. Half a smile is toying with the corner of her mouth, but she also appears equal parts incredulous and uncertain. “You kiddin’ me, Daryl Dixon?”

“Not even remotely.”

She merely stares at him for a long moment, and as before he’s half certain that she doesn’t intend to answer him. He wouldn’t be upset, wouldn’t blame her; it’s a fuck of a question. But at last she strokes her thumb down the edge of his cheekbone, and he almost can’t stand the way she looks at him. Shining, that gaze. Shining like stained blue crystal as the wind gently fingers strands of her hair loose from her ponytail and dances them around her face.

“’cause you’re not like anyone else. ’cause the second I started talkin’ to you I could tell you were listenin’, and not like other people do. You really wanted to hear. You know how to pay attention.”

She smiles wider, and she’s no longer uncertain at all. “I feel like I can show you things and you’ll get it. You do get it, every time. You’re kind. You’re smart. You’re strong, you’re tough—I don’t think you know it, but you are. You make me feel good, just bein’ around you. You always have.”

She takes a breath, and he thinks Stop, please stop, I can’t, I literally can’t take any more of this. He can hear that he’s beautiful, and he can hear that she loves him, and he can believe both of those things, but all of this is something else, and she’s speaking each word with utter genuine conviction, and it’s slapping him in the face, twisting him up against her.

But he asked.

“You wanna try.” She pushes up again, up on the toes of those worn old boots, and she kisses his mouth. “You do try. You try every day.”

“Beth.”

But he doesn’t have to say anything else and she doesn’t either, and she curls a hand around the nape of his neck and pulls him down and kisses him so long and deep, and as he frees her hair and tangles his fingers in it, his moan drowns out a wind he doesn’t even feel anymore.

~

She’s meeting her family in town. They’re going out to dinner. He drops her off on an out-of-the-way corner not far from Main. She doesn’t say a lengthy goodbye; he senses that she said it back on the hill, the overlook. There are all kinds of goodbyes, and he’s been saying his share lately. One way or the other.

He doesn’t watch her go. She said she doesn’t know anyone in the neighborhood but he shouldn’t stick around. And anyway, his back is hurting again—burning in a way he can tell will linger for a while. He’s tired. He should go home and rest.

He does. As usual, the sheets still smell like her—like her hair, her skin, her cunt. As usual, it’s more than enough for him to curl naked into them, pull up the blanket, breathe her in. All through his half sleep he’s haunted by the memory of her fingers on his back, tracing every line. Her territory; she didn’t choose the design and she didn’t ink the thing into him, but she’s claimed him all the same.
But she can’t keep him here. He knows that now. She’s powerful but her power doesn’t extend that far. It’s for him to choose. This is what he chooses.

This is what he plans to do.

At the back of the neck
the old skin splits.
The snake shivers
but does not hesitate.
He inches forward.
He begins to bleed through
like satin.

Chapter End Notes

Poem snippet is from "Rain" by Mary Oliver.
we can find each other this way I believe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bite in the air promised ice, and ice is exactly what it delivers.

Not much. It’s not what he would call real sleet, when he gets up in the middle of the night and looks out to see. Nor is it freezing rain. It’s more of a freezing mist, a frigid haze that moves in and coats everything with a fine membrane of ice. Even at two in the morning, no illumination but a streetlight half lost in a blurry halo of ice crystals, he can tell that when the sun rises—assuming it does—it’ll rise on one of those glass worlds he loved so much as a child, everything made new and unearthly in a way not even snow achieves.

He stands at the window long enough to be sure of this, and then—smiling to himself—he goes back to bed.

He really should get some damn curtains, though.

~

The sun does rise, everything blown clear again, and it does rise on a glass world, so of course he has to get dressed and go walk around in it.

It’s just after dawn, and the streets are silent, windows curtained and shaded. He didn’t think about it at all beyond the most general kind of recollection, but three blocks away he realizes that he’s done exactly what he used to do—risen early so he could see it before it was shattered. Except no one is going to shatter it now—or sure, people will merely by virtue of moving around and going about the day, and kids will because that’s what kids do, but there’s no malice waiting for him when the sun hits a certain point. There’s nothing specific to be afraid of, no one going to be cruel or make him be cruel with them. There’s…

There’s simply the world, and living in it.

Nothing will be open yet—not that much will be open at all on a small-town Sunday—but the coffee shop will be, and doing a fairly brisk business later on with people coming out of church. So he walks there, though it’s a couple of miles, going swift until he’s warm, breath steaming into the air and then smoking when he lights a cigarette, watching the town start to stir around him. People making their way out of houses to their cars and bound for First Baptist/Presbyterian/Methodist, rubbing cold hands, groggy and frequently petulant kids who would and possibly will cheerfully become atheists if it means they get to sleep in two days in a row. There’s corn hanging on doors, wreaths of silk and plastic autumn leaves, squash and pumpkins. Happy cartoon pilgrims and turkeys in front yards. Somehow he never noticed these before, and he doubts they all went up overnight.

Now and then he still feels like he’s moving outside of everything. That he’s looking in on something he won’t ever truly be part of. No; more than now and then. A lot of the time.

But that’s all right.
It’s been a while since he saw Beth coming out of church, and he thinks he can treat himself. There’s nothing suspicious about it. He arranges it so he’s not even waiting there across the street. Just so happens to be passing, coffee in one hand. He gets waves from them. He waves back.

The ice is beginning to melt off everything, dripping in soft glittering rain. Beth is ducking out of the way of a dribble of it coming off the church’s eaves when she catches his eye for a moment that stretches out and out, her hand lifting to tuck a strand of her hair back into place in slow motion. Her coat is open and he can see the gray sweater she’s wearing over a forest-green wool skirt that stops just below her knee. Very pretty. Very proper. Very demure.

It’s not the first time he’s looked at her like that, at this smiling happy Nice Girl with her Nice Family, and—with a wicked little flush—thought about what she’s like when they’re alone. What she’s like now in his bed.

_Fuck me. Oh my God, Daryl, fuck me harder, I want you to—_

No conflict in this. There never was. Nothing is a front for anything. Not a scrap of artifice in her. She is and always was beautifully, deeply, gloriously complicated.

So is he.

He moves on.

~

Everything is taking on the feeling of simultaneously winding up and winding down, and it’s not fully explained by the work he’s doing—putting large parts of a farm to sleep for the winter. Of course during winter nothing on a farm really slows down—he didn’t know that firsthand before but he’s learning it now. Speed pops up elsewhere. The days are shortening and shortening, and he’s getting to the farm right after dawn and going home well into dusk, if not later. Usually later, if he stays for dinner. It comes to him halfway through the week that they’re about a month out from the shortest day of the year, and he has to pause, pitchfork in his hand, simply to let that sink in.

Wednesday night, he tells Beth about it on the phone, and he doesn’t have to go into why it hit him so hard, and he’s grateful for that. He’s never spoken to her about it, never put it into words and put the words down between them, but he’s pretty sure that he’s not the only one who has picked up that significant elements of this whole situation are fitting the pattern of a very old story. He was wrong about that; he wouldn’t be here if the fit was perfect. But that in itself is why it hit him.

There are things he wants to tell her, to ask her, and the questions he’s already posed to her are simply the beginning. He can feel a lot more of them now, churning beneath a largely placid surface. That big scary future is beginning to rattle around in its box. He doesn’t think he can keep it locked for much longer. It would be great in some respects to be able to continue taking this one day and hour and minute at a time—broken into week-long blocks with the ecstatic promise of occasional weekend sleepovers—but the Daryl Dixon who could and almost certainly would have done so to the bitter end no longer exists.

There’s more than _now_. Now is ultimately all that matters because now is all that’s _real_, but there is more.

He signed a lease. He put his literal name to the idea that there’s more. He made a promise, and it’s a
promise rooted in time.

He’s starting to wonder what other promises he might be capable of making.

~

On the subject of promises: he never made them. Not real ones. Some of it was that he always took promises seriously, always hated the idea of making and then breaking them, and refused to make any he wasn’t sure he could keep. But the deeper and more fundamental reason was that there wasn’t anything to promise, and no one to make the promise to. Who would have cared? What could he have offered? It’s not just that he has nothing much to give Beth; for his entire life he hasn’t had much to give anyone.

Or it felt like that. Now he knows better. He knows he did the best he could with Merle, that he made his share of mistakes but there were mistakes made on both sides, a lot of them, and those mistakes were unavoidable. Given what he had, who he was, who he is, he did the best he could have done. He doesn’t blame himself for how it ended. He doesn’t blame either of them.

Merle had his choices to make too. Now they both have to live with the consequences. Bad and good.

Wednesday night he talks to Beth about his pre-solstice realization. Before that, he drives home in the starry dark lost in the contemplation of endings, Annette’s meatloaf sitting warm and pleasantly dense in his stomach. Nothing that has ended so far has done so in a way he would have expected, and every single ending feels like the only one that could ever have come. Every single goodbye feels like a necessary one. Turning away from something and turning toward something else. He’s still in the turn. Still swinging into the dark. Still facing an oncoming December.

He doesn’t know if he’s ever going to see Merle again. Sometimes he’s sure he will, sooner or later. Sometimes he can’t imagine doing so. But the truth is that he won’t. He knows that. Even if he does, he won’t be him, and Merle will no longer be Merle. The skeletons of those people will be there, but on the surface in many ways they’ll be two strangers. They’ll have to start over. Assuming that’s even possible.

He wants to believe that.

He would never promise Merle that he’ll see him again. He would never promise anything like that. The future is big and scary and entirely obscure; he shies away from the idea of making any commitment that places him in a certain place at a certain not-yet time for a certain reason. Because what if he fucks up. What if he makes himself a liar.

But he thinks maybe he can promise to feel.

Closing his eyes and gripping the wheel, tracing internal fingers over invisible scar tissue. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever see Merle again. He can’t make any promises concerning that. But he’ll always love his big brother. He can promise that much. And keep it. Even if the one person he’s making the promise to is himself.

There are things he knows he feels, knows he will feel. Knows he can swear by. Make a vow.

Then there are the things he never saw coming.
They aren’t talking on the phone every night now but they make their little trade, when they can. Their little exchange. His words for her music. Her lying in her darkness and him lying in his, feeling her so close and knowing she’s feeling the same. Fingers in the sheets, reaching for hers and almost believing he might find her hand. It doesn’t hurt except in the softest, most pleasant way, and he doesn’t feel like he’s in danger of starving. She doesn’t sound like she is. This is so gentle, this kind of wanting her, even in its moments of fiercest heat, and he thinks he could go on feeling it for a long time without it becoming unbearable.

Without it becoming tiresome.

_Sing for me._ So she does, some songs he recognizes and some he doesn’t. Some songs he knows aren’t hers and some he’s sure are, and he doesn’t need to ask her where those songs came from to know. Those are less frequent, but they do come. But mostly it’s the words of others, like the ones he reads, and they fit every bit as well.

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ turn around to look at you, you light a cigarette} \\
I \text{ wish I had the guts to bum one} \\
\text{but we’ve never met} \\
\text{and I hope that I don’t fall in love with you}
\end{align*}
\]

Sing, Beth.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{but June is like an echo} \\
\text{of the sounds we never made} \\
I \text{ swear they find me in my waking hours} \\
\text{thirty days like poison flowers}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the wind in your hair} \\
\text{like a sigh, like a sigh}
\end{align*}
\]

_Beth, sing for me._

You read.

Oh, fine.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I don’t want you just to sit down at the table.} \\
\text{I don’t want you just to eat, and be content.} \\
\text{I want you to walk out into the fields} \\
\text{where the water is shining, and the rice has risen.} \\
\text{I want you to stand there, far from the white tablecloth.} \\
\text{I want you to fill your hands with the mud, like a blessing.}
\end{align*}
\]

Now sing.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{from the hills and up behind my town} \\
\text{is naked from the horizon down} \\
\text{the curvature is pressed against the raise} \\
\text{we walked up in the fields alone}
\end{align*}
\]
and the silence fell just like a stone
that got lost in the wild blue and the gravel grey

More.

No. Your turn.

Not that he especially wants to fight her on it.

Give me somethin’ really special. Give me somethin’ you can’t get out of your head.

And he has one of those, doesn’t he? More than one. Many. He can break himself open for her now.
It’s not even difficult. She broke him open a long time ago.

But this one.

The door fell open
and I knew I was saved
and could bear him,
pathetic and hollow,
with even the least of his dreams
frozen inside him,
and the meanness gone.
And I greeted him and asked him
into the house,
and lit the lamp,
and looked into his blank eyes
in which at last
I saw what a child must love,
I saw what love might have done
had we loved in time.

Two people he could be thinking of. One obvious. But then the other.

She’s quiet for a long time. He shudders and closes his eyes and presses his fingers against them,
watches the pressure send sparks bursting against the inside of his lids. He doesn’t have to give her
context, or explain why it’s this one and what it means. What it did to him when he found it. How it
came out of nowhere and left him reeling.

If Beth Greene isn’t really a goddess, Will Dixon wasn’t ever really a monster. A bad man, a cruel
man, a man whose very being was soaked in an utterly unremarkable kind of evil, but merely a man
all the same. A man who, once, maybe hadn’t been so different from Merle, so different from Daryl,
until something went so wrong as to become irreversible and he was too far gone, and he couldn’t
come back.

Maybe a tiny part of his father wanted to come back. Wanted to and never could.

“Do you think you could ever forgive him?”

“I don’t know,” he whispers.

“Do you want to?”

He can’t speak. It’s possible—it might be, it could be that it happens—that under a blanket of
darkness, unseen by anyone, he nods.
and we talk on the phone at night
until it’s daylight
and I feel clever
and I hear the slow in your speech
yeah, you’re half asleep
say goodnight

Goodnight, Beth. Goodnight, girl, my sweet girl, goodnight. I don’t want to have to say it but I do, so here it is. I love you, I love you, and goodnight.

~

The infamous Becca is proving to be intensely useful. Beth has promised to be careful to not overuse her, and it does seem as though the girl holds regular sleepovers—sometimes with one or two people and sometimes with many—and Beth has been a semi-regular attendee in the past. Annette and Hershel have never wondered at this; Becca and Beth have been friends since third grade, though not best friends, and Becca’s family is fairly wealthy owing to something to do with her mother and they have a large finished basement with a large TV and both a Playstation and XBox, in addition to a pool table and a pool. And Becca is a pastor’s daughter and therefore implicitly trustworthy. Which is extremely funny.

Hershel and Annette aren’t stupid by any means. But they are very trusting, and they appear to be sort of oblivious.

Fortunately.

So it’s fine, and as far as he’s been told Becca hasn’t asked for many details—though she’s asked for a few. How far Beth has gone, for one thing. What she’s done. What she gets up to. This isn’t odd, nor is it alarming. It makes all the sense in the world to Daryl that a girl would want at least some of the details of her friends’ sex lives, and if her cooperation is affording him and Beth opportunities to have exactly that, it strikes him as a pretty fair trade.

And she won’t talk. Beth trusts that. So he does too.

So on Thursday Beth texts him, tells him that she can come over again on Friday night and stay. She’ll have to leave early, no lazy morning and lingering afternoon, but he doesn’t even vaguely give a fuck; it’s another night where he can go to sleep with her in his arms, wake up with her there… And feel like it could happen again. And again and again. Like it’s possible.

On Friday afternoon—cold and gray and blustery—he’s helping Annette shuck corn in the kitchen. Talking idly about Thanksgiving—listening to her talk, mostly, but then much less idle and breaking in a way he doesn’t expect but doesn’t want to stop, and telling her directly and straightly, with few words but no evasiveness, that he never in his life had a real Thanksgiving. That he grew up poor, incredibly poor, and his parents weren’t much to write home about, and he didn’t have any of this. That this town is the first place in his life in which he’s truly felt like he could make a home.

That he’s happy she asked him to come.

She listens. His own honesty is like a kick in the spine but purely in terms of force, not pain. He feels
his brain and then his mouth forming those few words, giving them to her, and he feels the last of the version of himself from those early days of August dying and drying up and falling away like a snake’s shed skin. He can look at this woman—yes, he’s looking at her, not the whole time and a lot of it down at his hands, rough and calloused and scarred, the hands he’s put on her daughter, but even so—and he can tell her these things and he doesn’t have to be afraid of being judged, of being told he doesn’t belong and isn’t wanted in this nice bright world, of being told he has no place here and he has to go.

He’s not a kid anymore. He’s not a child. He’s a man.

And all the time, in his head: *I love your daughter, and she’s why. She’s not all of why, she didn’t do all of this, the only person who can make you well is you, but she’s why, and I love her. And that much I can promise.*

*That much I can give her.*

He’s quiet for a while, and after that while, though she doesn’t speak, she reaches out and covers his moving hand with hers, and stops him. And then he can’t look at her at all.

He’s not a piece of shit. He stopped believing that a while ago. He’s a good man, or he can be. He’s trying and that’s what matters. But also?

He’s kind of a piece of shit.


So that night Beth comes over.

And it’s not her fault, it has nothing whatsoever to do with her or her presence and it almost certainly would have happened anyway, it’s one of those wrong-place-wrong-time deals and no one is ultimately to blame except one specific person, and in the end it’s good that they’re there when they are and it ends the way it does, but that’s when something goes bad.

Chapter End Notes

Songs/poems are, in order:

"I Hope That I Don't Fall in Love With You" by Tom Waits
"Song For the Fireflies" by Josh Ritter
"Rice" by Mary Oliver
"Come and Find Me" by Josh Ritter
"A Visitor" by Mary Oliver
and of course "Be Good" by Waxahatchee.
I'm beyond your peripheral vision so you might want to turn your head

Chapter Notes

SO. We're definitely within the final ten chapters. I aim to be finished by the end of the month, probably earlier. This is the point at which things really start to get moved into place; I realize it's seemed like we've been coasting for a while, but I was doing some maneuvering during that period, and it's going to end up being important. And clearly now the coasting stops. Or begins to stop.

I'm going to be so. damn. sad. to stop writing this, guys. SO damn sad.

I should note: There's a new character (three of them, really, but two are nice ones and one goes unnamed and is therefore untagged) from the show in this chapter. I'm happy that they/he (the happy ones) showed up but I want to forestall excited speculation because I don't want to disappoint people: This is a cameo. We almost certainly won't see this one specific dude again. But yeah, glad he showed.

I should also note: I know next to nothing about police procedure aside from what I've seen on TV (always a reliable source, right?) and having my bag stolen from my car a while back. So if I made a silly mistake here, please forgive.

Onward.

Yet again, she comes over well after he gets home—not as late as before but a good bit after eight. She wasn’t there when he ate dinner at the farm; she stayed in town with friends, went back to Becca’s house with her to establish presence. Left when it seemed safe. And when she knocks and he opens the door and she pushes inside, it’s not as frantic as the last time she did this. She’s still on him and they still end up tangled on the bed, clumsily fucking halfway naked and laughing and having to adjust their bodies more than once to avoid muscle cramps. It’s fast, over in minutes, and they sprawl all over each other, coming down, slipping out of the remainder of their clothes and wrapping around each other, and even with their previous speed there’s a slow, lazy quality to everything. They don’t have as much time together this weekend but he feels like they have all the time in the world.

Around nine-thirty they pull apart, he gets beer from the fridge, she orders pizza, and they eat it naked in bed, and he licks sauce off her fingers and then a few other places, and it tickles her more than anything else and she clutches at him and giggles fiercely.

She drinks her beer like she’s an old hand and it’s entirely unremarkable, casual and unhurried, and he watches her wrap her pretty lips around the neck of the bottle and he thinks about what a bad influence he is, and that makes him grin. Which makes her ask him why. Which leads to some playful verbal dodging. Which leads to her setting her beer down and tackling him, and they barely miss getting pizza all over the sheets as they roll and wrestle and laugh some more, and when that turns to more slow, easy kissing and slow, easy grinding a part of him slips back and reflects on the fact that this is the sweetest thing he’s ever fucking known, the sweetest thing he expects to ever know.
This is the pinnacle, this thing he has with her. The apex of joy. After this, without this, he believes he could only go down. Which is okay.

Because he’s had it. Nothing can truly take this away from him.

Making each other come with their hands this time, and more sprawling. She lies on top of him, chin resting on her hands resting on his chest, and looks at him for a while, and he looks back, weaving his fingers into her hair.

He doesn’t need her like he did. It never hurts anymore, not that way. He steps away from her and he feels whole. But he’s so lost in this. She’s lost with him. And he’s looking at her like he’s searing her into his mind.

So he won’t forget.

And that’s when the thump comes from downstairs, the loud, angry sound of a man’s voice, another thump, something breaking, and he’s on his feet before he realizes it.

Because somehow he already knows what it is.

He turns back to the bed. Beth is sitting up, odd shadows thrown across her and her eyes wide and bewildered—but focused. Sharp. She stares at him, and the voice comes to them again—words he can almost make out. Not stopping at angry; there’s a vicious quality to them that he recognizes. Like the syllables are meant to be blows in and of themselves.

Yes, he knows this very well.

“What—”

“Woman downstairs.” He’s lunging for his clothes, dressing so fast and so clumsily he’s practically tripping over himself. No boots; it’ll hamper his ability to move as quietly as he wants. He’s lost track of the time but it has to be late—ten-thirty? Eleven? Doesn’t matter. What matters is what he does next. “She’s here gettin’ away from her husband.” He looks up at her in the act of zipping his fly, and her face is all comprehension, and he knows he doesn’t have to say anything else. She nods.

She’s also reaching for her own clothes, and he realizes that he’s not the only variable up here, that he and Carol and Ed won’t be the only variables down there, and all at once part of him is back on the broken pavement bank of that sudden and nightmarish river, reaching for her, her hand slipping out of his.

He can’t protect her from everything. And whatever anyone might think looking at her, she’s basically a grown woman. But another promise he made to himself then, one of his few, was that he would never again see her in danger because of him.

“You stay.” He lifts a hand, points at her. At the bed. “Stay here.”

She stops in the middle of pulling on her jeans and her face darkens. “Daryl, I’m not—”

“Stay.” Through his clenched teeth. He’s turned away from her now, strapping his knife onto his belt, going for the crossbow in the corner. He whirls back to her; her jeans are on but her upper body is still bare, and he hopes maybe he’s gotten through. “Call the cops. Tell ’em home invasion. Make it sound like it’s you in trouble.” It might not get them here any quicker than mention of a man possibly about to kill his wife. Then again, it might.

He’s an expert on certain matters that he wishes so much he had no knowledge of. But maybe right
now he should be grateful.

Either way, what he is grateful for is that she’s nodding again. And she looks like she means it, and she’s going for her phone.

He could use the inside stairs. But no. For a variety of reasons—many having to do with surprise—no. He’s most of the way to his front door when her voice comes from behind him and halts him for a second.

From below, more shouting. Carol’s voice now in the mix, though lower. That’s good.

“Are you gonna kill him?”

He glances back at her. Her face is pale, grave, but utterly unafraid.

“If I have to.”

Which leaves things rather open to interpretation.

Moving silent as he can, silent as if he’s hunting, he pulls open the door and slips out.

~

There were times—more and more of them as he got older—when he thought about Doing Something.

He had fantasies of running away, desperately vivid ones, but they weren’t his only fantasies. Not at all. Lying in the dark hurting, or sprinting into the shadows among the trees, or cowering and hoping the drunken storm would pass over him without emptying itself onto him, he thought about doing more than running and cowering and trying to protect his head and vital organs.

He thought about fighting back.

He could. There were weapons in the house. Will Dixon was a staunch believer in the Second Amendment—not that Daryl isn’t also, in a decidedly apolitical way because he doesn’t give two shits about politics but sometimes you need a fucking gun—and owned guns. Plural. And he didn’t keep them locked up or unloaded, and he taught his boys to use them, in his own violent style of instruction. Daryl was shooting a gun from the age of seven. He wasn’t afraid of them and he knew what they could do to living creatures. Because by then he was also being forced to kill, and then no one had to force him, and even if he didn’t like it he wasn’t afraid of that either.

He knew how to shoot a gun. He knew where at least one was, at all times. He knew how to use knives; he knew where those were too. Had one of his own. As he crashed into a terrified and painful adolescence, he was beginning to learn to use a bow, discovering that he had a special talent there.

Will Dixon taught his sons to kill, and to be good at it. Not people, but Daryl was possessed of a powerful imagination, and he imagined that taking down a buck and taking down a man probably weren’t all that different in the end in terms of the process.

His father must have believed himself immortal.
Or might not have cared.

He fantasized about fighting back. He fantasized about shoving a gun into his father’s face, pistol-whipping him, stanced with the bow in his hands and ready to send a bolt straight into his father’s forehead. Pulling a knife on him. Stabbing him. Killing him, but also hurting him, because he deserved to hurt, because he deserved at minimum a small taste of what he had been dishing out for years.

Protecting his brother. Protecting his mother. Saving them. Not being a hero—because he never thought that way about himself at any point in his entire life; it seemed and seems antithetical to everything he is—but simply ending it. Making it stop. For the family he loved—a twisted, poisoned, fiercely intense love that he never felt for anyone again—and not having to watch them suffer anymore.

Then he was alone. And he thought about protecting himself. As it got worse and worse, he thought about it more and more.

But he never did. Never. He left, but he never once truly fought back, not beyond a few pathetic attempts with his fists. Something stopped him. He has no idea what it was; he knows only that it was strong enough to destroy most of his deepest instincts of self-preservation.

He thought it was weakness, not fighting like his fantasies. He thought it was weakness, to be unable to murder his father in cold blood. He thought the lack of ice in his veins made him weak.

As with so many other things now, he’s no longer so sure.

The stairs are freezing against his bare feet but he hardly notices. He’s not tracking but his brain is doing something similar, that kind of hypnotized hyper-focus—minimizing the sound of his passage down the stairs, making himself as light as possible, every sense open and hungry for everything it can drag into itself. The voices—closer now, the man’s voice much louder, but he can hear Carol, and she doesn’t sound like she’s in pain. Angry, scared—yes, he can hear that. But if she’s been hurt, it’s not bad, and she’s not being hurt this very moment.

The stillness in the night, beyond and above those sounds. The weight of the bow in his hands. This is awful, and he might have to do something he really, really doesn’t want to do—and not least because it would be make a number of things complicated in a number of ways—but a sliver of this is almost comfortable.

Down to the walk and around the house, keeping himself low, quick and quiet. He glances up as he passes the living room windows, heading for the porch; the curtains are drawn and there’s light, but the light is at a weird angle, and after a second or two of pondering—still moving—he guesses it’s because a lamp has been knocked down.

If it looks like it makes the most sense to go in the front, he’ll go in the front. If it doesn’t, there’s the back—which might well be locked, but he’ll worry about that if and when he has to.

But the front door is open.

Not much. Not so much that it would be visible from the street. But enough. It’s an advantage, and in
a dim way he’s grimly pleased about it.

The porch steps creak as he pads up them, but softly enough that he’s comfortable no one will hear him. Bow ready but lowered, one hand on the knob, he pushes it smoothly inward.

The light is indeed weird, and it does indeed appear that a lamp has been knocked down and the shade knocked askew—or off, he can’t tell from the front hall. He’s wondering how the fuck Ed got in, given that he can’t imagine Carol would willingly allow him to enter, but he glances back at the door and the edge of it is splintered, the chain lock ripped loose and dangling.

More yelling from the living room. “—stupid fuckin’ bitch, can’t believe you’d fuckin’ dare, you’re gonna be so fuckin’ sorry when she’s back here—”

And Carol’s voice. Strained, shaking, but level. Barely audible. “She’s not coming back, Ed. She’s not ever coming back. Doesn’t matter what you do here. You’re never going to see her again.”

“She’s my blood. She’s mine.” Something else breaking—pottery of some kind. China.

“No one’s yours, Ed. Sure as shit not the way you were starting to put your hands on her.” Carol’s voice twists up into thin, fine contempt. “Or did you think I didn’t notice?”

And all the tense calm in him disintegrates and a red mist descends.

She didn’t tell him that part.

It’s stupid. He’s stupid. It doesn’t seem stupid, and in the seconds he watches himself act he understands that the stupidity may very well lie within the thoughtlessness, not the outcome. But regardless, it’s like he blinks and he’s in the wreckage of the living room, fallen lamp and splintered chair and overturned table, what looks like a couple of broken decorative plates against the far wall, and Carol backed against it—bleeding from a split at the corner of her lower lip but not cowering. Standing straight, her own tense calm clearly remaining in place. She hadn’t been kidding before, him or herself.

She’s scared, yes. But more than anything she’s really pissed off.

And Ed. Ed is just a man, he knows that too, but in the fallen light and the shadows it’s hurling around the room, he’s a grotesque hulk in a bulky winter coat, somehow both too large and small, piggish. Daryl can’t see his face but what he can see is utterly hateful, the set of the man’s shoulders and his upraised fist, hateful and so fucking familiar, and then the bow is up and Ed is in his sights.

Little bit of pressure and the man dies.

“Don’t fuckin’ move.”

To his credit, Ed has the sense to do as he’s told. Then again it’s probably shock, and shock won’t last. Daryl would love to believe he’s not too stupid to push his luck here.

He would love to believe that.

“You ain’t got no part of this,” Ed says, not turning. Beyond him, Carol’s gaze is locked on Daryl’s face, pale and tight. “Dunno who the fuck you are, but this ain’t nothin’ to do with you.”

“Think you’re wrong about that.” It has everything to do with me, you disgusting prick. “Turn around. Slow.”
Ed doesn’t move. Then he does, and when his face comes into view somehow Daryl isn’t in the least surprised.

The man is ugly. Not in an overt way, and not in a frightening way—his face is pudgy, sagging, and he looks like a sullen, surly child more than anything else. In fact once many years ago he might have been good-looking, and what makes him ugly is the childishness, the meanness in him and the offense, the clear sense that he feels he’s entitled to all of this and Daryl is indeed intruding on something he has no right to interfere with.

And he’s frightened. Under it all he’s frightened. But he’s trying not to be, trying not to let it show, and there’s something about that visible effort that makes Daryl uneasy.

This man is stupid, and stupid in a way Will Dixon never was.

Ed looks at the crossbow, looks at him, pulls his lips back in a sneer. “You gonna shoot me?”

“Ain’t gonna promise not to.”

“Who the hell is this cocksucker, Carol?” Ed glances back, a furtive jerk of his head. “You fuckin’ him, you cheatin’ slut?”

“What if I was?” She’s moving now, edging out from behind him and making her way toward Daryl. “Wouldn’t be any of your fucking business, Ed. Not anymore.”

“You’re my wife.”

“Told you. No one is your anything. Sure as hell not me. Not for much longer, anyway.”

Ed’s gaze flicks from her to the bow to Daryl’s eyes, to her again. Crafty. Not smart, but sly. Motherfucker is staring down a bolt to the head and even so, he’s looking for an angle. “Everything I did for you all those years. Provided for you. Made it so you didn’t have to work a day in your worthless life. And this is how you repay me.”

Carol reaches Daryl, stops at his elbow. She’s not looking at him, or the bow, but Daryl can see her face in the periphery of his vision, and more than anything she looks weary. Almost bored. “Shut up, Ed. Just shut the fuck up. I couldn’t possibly care any less about you right now. You might have a couple of minutes to walk out of here. Not that you’re smart enough to take them.”

It’s not that Daryl has never seen this in her. He has. There’s nothing surprising about it. But seeing it now, in a small and quiet way he’s awed. Because he never saw this anywhere else. Never saw his mother like this. She never could have done it.

She was too ruined inside.

But he narrows his eyes. “He ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“Daryl, please.” She gives him a look—brief but all the weariness in her voice is in that look. “He used to be my husband, let me—”

Ed might be stupid, and Ed might be a revolting porcine bully of a man, and Ed might be a sick fuck who was putting his hands on his own daughter. But Ed is also fast.

Faster than he appears. Much faster than he should be. That alone is his advantage because of Daryl’s sheer surprise, and Ed ducks beneath the line of fire, lunges, catches Carol around the waist with a hooked arm and slams her into Daryl. The air bursts out of his lungs in a pained grunt and he
stumbles back, groping one-handed for her shoulder as she stumbles too, the bow rendered practically useless. He scrambles to disentangle himself without knocking Carol down, shoving past her and trying to bring the bow up again, and Ed is whirling by the living room entranceway and reaching into his coat pocket, and Daryl knows what Ed is going for before he sees the gun beginning to emerge.

Fuck, this stupid fucking idiot is actually going to make Daryl kill him.

Or something much worse is going to happen. Because Ed is fast.

“You filthy whore,” Ed snarls. “I’ll show you—”

The crack sounds so loud that for a split second Daryl is certain Ed has pulled the trigger. But the gun isn’t even aimed, and he stands there, wavers, and his eyes cross and roll back and he crumples with bizarre, nearly ponderous slowness, blood starting to run down the side of his neck.

Behind him, flushed and furious and unutterably beautiful with the branch in her hands raised to take another swing, is Beth.

He stares at her. She glares down at Ed. He has no idea what Carol is doing.

She nudges Ed with the toe of her boot—Ed twitches and moans thickly, so he doesn’t appear to be dead—and looks up at Daryl and over his shoulder at what he vaguely presumes is Carol. “Are you alright?”

He should answer her. Answer her and then go to her, haul her against him, hold on tight and be so relieved that this didn’t end the way it might have. Instead he lowers the bow, his hands trembling, and drags in a breath, and when his voice comes out it’s strained, hard-edged. Threaded with anger. “Thought I told you to stay back.”

This time the full force of that glare is on him, and it’s considerable. Suddenly he feels about two feet tall. “You’re welcome.”

And sirens, rapidly increasing in volume.

He’s trying to process everything, the crossbow at his side. What happened. What’s going on. What this is going to look like to an outside observer—probably exactly what it fucking is, which is good—and what they’re going to have to do next. Carol moves past him in silence, going for Ed, and he sees her and Beth lock gazes and something pass between them that he can’t define.

The bow might not be something he wants to be found with. It might be awkward, even if Ed tells all about it later on. There are a couple of weapons here that should be dealt with, actually.

Carol is one step ahead of him, dropping to one knee and plucking the gun out from under Ed’s limp hand. She handles it as if it’s a dead rat. She looks back up at him, nods at the bow.

“Stash it in the basement.”

There isn’t much else to do but what she says, so he does that.

~
The police cruiser is pulling up outside by the time he comes back. Beth has leaned the branch in the corner but she’s not far from it—something he notes with approval, whatever else he’s feeling about that whole deal. Ed doesn’t look as though he’s going to be conscious for a good long time, and given how much he’s bleeding from the gash on the back of his head, he’ll be lucky if he gets off with only a pretty fun concussion.

Branches and head wounds and concussions. This is also sort of familiar.

Carol has placed the gun on a side table a safe distance away and is holding a kitchen towel to the back of Ed’s head. She’s doing this with no affection, no sense of care—really no emotion whatsoever, and Daryl suspects that she’s doing it far more for the sake of the floor than this man who had the audacity to think of her as his wife.

Knock on the door; the quality of the sound and then the voice announcing itself as belonging to the police reminds him that he never fully closed it.

Beth steps away from her place close to the wall, bends and touches Carol’s shoulder. “I’ll get it.”

She goes.

Carol looks up at him. Still tired, yes—of course she is, and even more so than she had been. There’s a flat quality to her expression that he doesn’t much like, and her lip is bleeding sluggishly, but otherwise she seems all right.

He moves over to her, drops into a crouch. From the front hall comes Beth’s voice in quiet conversation with two distinct others, both male. But it’s all distant, and all he can see for now is the blood at the corner of her mouth, streaking down to her jaw.

Perhaps she’s forgotten about it.

He reaches out, unthinking, and lays his fingertips against her chin, gently tilts her face so he can see her better. She doesn’t resist, her eyes slipping halfway closed. It’s not all that bad, and his relief must be visible, because she smiles tightly. Very small. Trying not to stretch her lips.

“He hits hard, but he has lousy aim.”

He ducks his head, hand dropping away, and just then the two police officers walk in, trailed by Beth, and the whole thing begins.

It’s not complicated, in the end. Neither man appears interested in making it more than it has to be. One of them—dark-haired and broad with a bit of a swagger—takes care of cuffing Ed and dragging him upright, smacking him into enough muscle tension to get him out to the cruiser, while the other takes Carol aside and talks to her. Of the two, he seems to be setting the pace and the approach, and his approach is calm, his voice low and level, and when he speaks to Carol it softens without being condescending. He shoots Daryl a look, a nod, and the message is fairly clear.

Stay put. Gonna talk to you.

Daryl mostly makes it his business to keep out of the way, and Beth is doing the same. It’s awkward for so many goddamn reasons, standing in the wreckage of this living room and this evening, standing close but keeping at a safe distance from each other, not speaking. He has no idea what to say to her. It’s obvious enough that she’s annoyed with him, but she doesn’t seem actually angry. She’s watching Carol, arms crossed over her chest, and now and then her attention flicks to Ed, and when that happens her face chills.
He’s opening his mouth to say something—fuck if he knows what—when she gets there first, speaking without looking at him.

“My grandpa beat my grandma.”

He blinks at her.

In some universe there might be a correct response to that

“Beat Daddy, too.” Her mouth twists sharply, almost wry. “Beat just about everybody he could get his hands on. I never knew him.” She pauses. “I’m glad.”

Words continue to refuse to have anything to do with him. But he’s starting to wonder if that might not be all to the good. Because maybe he doesn’t have to say anything right now. Maybe that’s not what she’s expecting, not what she wants. Maybe he shouldn’t say anything.

“Daddy said somethin’ when he told me about it.” She takes a breath and she does look at him then, and her eyes are clear and strong and they pierce him.

The door fell open
and I knew I was saved
and could bear him

“He said some men don’t earn the love of their sons.”

Nothing. The officer talking to Carol seems to be finishing up, is glancing at the two of them. His face isn’t unkind, but there’s a sharp quality to his eyes that grabs and holds and cautions against fucking-with. So this might be yet another awkwardness, this conversation. Then again it might be fine.

A brush of something against his hand. Warm skin. Beth. Her fingers. “I’m glad you were here,” she says softly, and moves away toward the kitchen—into which Carol is already vanishing—leaving him and Officer Friendly to regard each other in gauging silence.

Daryl doesn’t like cops. Never has. He’s never had any reason to like cops, and many reasons to dislike them. They’ve either been a pain in the ass, obnoxious, trying to fill monthly quotas, outright crooked and fucking with him and Merle and everyone they used to surround themselves with simply for the pleasure of it, or they’ve been useless. They were never going to help him. Never going to help his mother, Merle, anyone. Not poor white trash like them; poor white trash beating on each other was the order of the day.

He feels no specific dislike for this particular cop. He seems fine, for what it’s worth. He seems like he might be decent; he feels decent. But Daryl still doesn’t like cops.

Ed Peletier is in their car and hopefully won’t get out again anywhere but into a cell for a good stretch, so he should probably get the fuck over it and talk to the guy.

“Seems pretty straightforward,” the officer says, coming toward him. “But why don’t you give me a name, tell me what happened.”

So—carefully and using as few words as humanly possible—Daryl does.

He lives in the apartment upstairs. He was aware that Carol was in the process of separating herself from a husband who liked to use her as a punching bag. He heard the noise, came down, found the front door open. Found Ed inside. Confronted him, the man started to pull a gun—
And there’s the matter of Beth. He doesn’t know what Carol said—or didn’t say—about Beth. And this might not be anything worth getting freaked out over, because Beth is eighteen and there’s no reason to assume that this man or his partner knows her or her family...

But there is the matter of Beth.

He’s spent the last four months lying. A man who has never liked lying, never been very good at it, he has nevertheless spent the last four months living an enormous, elaborate lie, and just because it’s a lie by omission, that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a fucking lie.

And maybe it’s better to lie to as few people as possible right now.

“She came in. Girl in the kitchen. Got him with that branch over there. That’s all.”

The officer is taking all of this down, pen rustling softly. “Who’s the girl?”

“You gonna talk to her?”

“For a couple minutes, yeah.” The pen stops, lowers, and Daryl is grabbed and held by those don’t-fuck-with-me eyes. “Who is she, Mr. Dixon?”

Who indeed.

“Her name’s Beth Greene,” he says, and he may or may not be leaping off a cliff and dragging her with him. “She was upstairs with me.”

The pen remains motionless. “What’s her relationship to you?”

He has no fucking idea how to even begin to answer that.

“She was with me,” he repeats—simply. That simple. Nothing else is presenting itself.

The officer doesn’t move, doesn’t speak. Looks at him, and Daryl looks back. The eyes—a bright, clear blue not entirely unlike Beth’s—are what they are and are saying what they’re saying, but he’s not intimidated by them, and he doesn’t think he’s meant to be so. This man isn’t interested in throwing any weight around. He merely wants answers.

“Alright,” he says at last, and the pen resumes its swift passage down the page. “Hope you’ll forgive me for asking, Mr. Dixon, but is she over sixteen?”

Yes, he can forgive that. “Eighteen.”

“You know I can check that.”

“I ain’t an idiot.”

“No, I don’t think you are.” Once more the pen stops and this time it does so with an air of finality, underlined when it and the notepad are lowered. “Anyway, like I said. Seems pretty straightforward.”

Daryl nods. But there’s no relief in the conclusion of this, and after half a second’s thought he realizes that it’s because he doesn’t want it to be concluded. Not yet. Not when he hasn’t done something. Not when he hasn’t made as sure as he can that this man understands what straightforward actually consists of. He trusts Carol to be clear, to be blunt, but he can’t let it go.

And he has his own side of this. Regardless of what Officer Friendly thinks of him, what he’s about
to do might be the most foolish thing he’s ever done. But a long time ago he told Beth that when you
didn’t know, when you couldn’t be sure, you looked to your gut, to your instincts, and you trusted
them.

So.

“He was gonna kill her,” he says quietly. “He was gonna kill her, probably me. Or he was gonna
have a good fuckin’ try. That girl, she saved our lives.” He steps the tiniest bit closer, dropping his
voice even more. “She ain’t supposed to be here. Ain’t doin’ no one no harm, she just… She ain’t
supposed to be. She’s a good girl. Please don’t make her life hard.”

The officer is silent, face utterly impassive. It’s out, there’s nothing else to be done, and there’s no
sense in pleading and he wouldn’t plead anyway. But he takes a breath, looks the man in those clear,
keen eyes, and puts everything he is into the words.

“Ain’t got nothin’ to do with what happened here tonight. Please.”

Nothing. Daryl waits.

At last something shifts in the man’s face. Not softens, not exactly, but he’s no longer wearing a cool
mask, and what Daryl sees there solidifies it for him: this is a decent man. This is a man who’s not
out to hurt anyone he doesn’t have to.

“I can’t promise it won’t come up,” he says, voice as low and quiet as Daryl’s. “But if it does, ain’t
gonna be ‘cause of me.”

Daryl hadn’t let out the breath he had taken. Now he does so, and what floods him isn’t exactly
relief, but it’s something close to it.

“Turns out she’s a minute under sixteen, I’ll nail your ass to the wall.”

The corner of Daryl’s mouth twitches upward. That’s about all he can do.

“I’m gonna go talk to her, then.” He reaches into the pocket of his jacket, searching for something,
and pulls out a small white card. “Not sure why we’d have any reason to speak, assuming this is all
what it looks like, but if you need to get in touch with me, that’s how.”

Daryl takes the card. He devoutly hopes he’ll never have to talk to this man again. But he supposed
it’s good to have a name.

“Thank you for your help, Mr. Dixon.”

The officer leaves him gazing down at the card. After a moment there are voices in the kitchen.

All at once Daryl is very, very tired.

He pockets the card and turns in place, surveying the mess. Then, mostly because he’s not sure what
else to do, he starts to clean up.

This could have ended so much worse. Even now it might not end well. But he’s not worried about
that, not about what he said. For what that was worth, it went about as well as it possibly could have.
He believes what the man told him. Every instinct in him is in agreement about that being something
he can trust.

He doesn’t like cops, no. But Rick Grimes might be okay.
What’s broken obviously won’t be fixed. Not here, not tonight, and the splintered furniture and broken plates are a lost cause. But by the time Grimes leaves and the cruiser pulls away and the house is quiet again, he’s cleared away most of the larger broken pieces and set the overturned things upright. For the smaller stuff he’ll need a dustpan.

He should go into the kitchen anyway. He hasn’t heard anything much from that direction since the front door closed.

Carol is there, seated at the table, a different blood-spotted towel in front of her. Beth is standing at the stove, putting a kettle onto a burner. She tosses a glance over her shoulder as he comes in and gives him a minuscule smile. He can tell she’s still annoyed with him. At least a bit.

Carol is crying.

Not hard. Not loud. Not weak. Not ugly, not wracked with shaking or sobs. It’s a loose, low-key kind of crying, folded hands in front of her face almost as if she’s in prayer, and he recognizes it immediately. Intimately.

It’s release. It’s what happens to your body when you let something go.

He goes to her, sits down next to her. He’s close, but he doesn’t reach for her, and he doesn’t speak. She’ll reach out when she’s ready. If she wants to.

Beth leans against the counter, one hand in the pocket of her jeans and the other combing loose hair back from her face. “Everything’s fine. He didn’t have a lot of questions for me.”

“Me neither.”

They’re using very few words to talk about a number of topics.

“He seemed alright,” she says. “He seemed… good.”

Daryl nods.

And then there’s more silence for a while. Beth makes tea, brings a mug of it over along with the sugar bowl, cream from the fridge—moving right in, Daryl notes, not unlike how she has upstairs, but this is different. She’s doing this because she has to, because someone has to, because right now someone needs to take the situation and hold it until Carol can pick it up again and take it from here. He watches her do this, this girl many people would consider a child, and he knew she was strong, thinks he might know it better than anyone except her, but what he’s seeing here is quietly stunning.

No fear, no hand-wringing, no angst. No uncertainty. She’s identified a job that needs doing and she’s doing it, and she’s doing it with all the care in the world for a woman she’s known for all of a single ugly fragment of an evening.

Because that’s what she does. That’s who she is. There was never anything else she could have done.

*I’m glad you were here.*
Gradually Carol’s tears dry up and she straightens, wipes at her eyes, picks up the mug and drinks—no cream, no sugar, and taking big, deep swallows. And at last she sits back, hands curved around the mug, and looks at him. At them. The light in the kitchen is bright but not hard, and it smooths her out. Somehow she looks younger.

Or maybe that’s not the light at all. Maybe she’s regained something. Daryl knows what vampires do to you. Real ones.

“I’m alright,” she says, and he knows she is. “He’s…” She laughs, a dry puff of air. Nothing more than that, but a laugh all the same. “He’s nothing. He’s just… He’s nothing. He’s nobody. He’s just something I’m putting away.” She stares at the mug in her hands, her brow slightly furrowed. “I knew that before. But I really know it now.”

“You gonna press charges?”

She gives him a tight smile. “I’m going to crush the bastard. Any way I can.” She lets out a long breath and closes her eyes. “Then I’m going to Indiana, and I’m going to take Sophia and we’re going to start over.”

“Good,” Beth murmurs, and Carol opens her eyes, reaches and closes a hand over the beaded leather crosses on Beth’s wrist.

“Thank you.” She reaches out with her other hand, and when her fingers close around Daryl’s he squeezes. “Thank you both. I…” She shakes her head. “That’s all. Thank you. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Don’t gotta say nothin’.”

“No. I don’t.” She cocks her head to one side, shifting her gaze to Beth, and suddenly she looks thoughtful. Thoughtful, and a little wondering. “I don’t have to do anything now. Except get through this. Then…”

And she laughs again, and the laugh has some voice behind it. She’s behind it. “Figure out how to live in the world.”

~

They offer to stay with her, finish cleaning up, but she brushes them off. Her tears have dried up, and not only does she seem all right, but Daryl thinks she might seem more all right than she has since he’s known her. She says she’ll clear away the rest of the debris and really she would rather do it alone. Take her mind off things for a while. She might not sleep much. And that’s all right too. She has some more thinking to do.

“We’ll be up there, you need anythin’.”

She takes his hand in hers again, standing in the hall by the stairs, and reaches up to tug his head gently down and press a kiss to his brow. “I know.”

Another smile for Beth, warm and small. Then they take those stairs and leave the wreckage behind, climbing in mutual silence and in that mutual silence returning to the room.
The silence persists for a few minutes. Beth heads to the bathroom and he hears the water running, hears it splashing into the basin. He makes his way over to the kitchen, pulls the whiskey out of its cabinet, takes a swallow straight from the bottle and then another. He’s exhausted, but he’s not sure how much sleeping he’ll do tonight, either. The adrenaline has long since seeped out of his blood, but what it left behind is jittery and a bit fractured. He saw something tonight he honestly never thought he’d see.

And he Did Something. Finally. And he wasn’t alone.

*That girl, she saved our lives.*

Footsteps in the hall. Beth, returning, and when she enters the room she makes a beeline for the kitchen, plucks the bottle out of his hand and tips it back. She makes the same face she did last time, but she swallows, eyes closed in her own species of almost-relief, and leans back against the counter that serves as half divider, facing him.

The silence lingers for a moment. She’s looking at him, her expression difficult to read. He bites at his lip, takes hold of a center, finds some words. The words he owes her, that feel right.

“I’m sorry. About down there. What I said.”

She rolls a shoulder. “You were scared.”

“Yeah, but—”

“You were scared, and that’s okay. But Daryl… You can’t protect me. I mean, I figured you’d know that. I’m not a kid, I don’t need you to. Figured you’d know that too.”

“I do.” Suddenly he feels beseeching, sounds it in his own ears, is sure he looks it. “But Beth… You can’t…”

She frowns and sets the bottle down on the counter beside her. “What?”

“How much you remember? The flood?”

She frowns harder, but it’s clearly because she’s taking some internal stock. “I… Not a whole lot. I guess… I remember bein’ in the water, I remember you grabbin’ for me. Pullin’ me out. I remember I was cold. I remember I couldn’t breathe, and then I could. I think I remember you carryin’ me. Lights and sirens, people yellin’. Why?”

“I saw you go down. I grabbed for you the first time and I lost you, and I saw you go under. What you did, your wrist…” He drags in a tight breath. This is kind of awful, it’s kind of hard to look at her—her face going simultaneously dark and pale—but he doesn’t have to try for the words. They’re coming. “Yeah, they all saw it after, but no one was with you. No one saw you do it. You didn’t say, anyhow.”

“No one was with me,” she says softly. Barely more than a breath. “I was alone.”

“I know it ain’t the same, I know that, but I… I *did* see it, and swear to fuckin’ God, Beth, I thought you were dead. Got you outta the water and you weren’t breathin’, and I thought it all over again. Then they took you away and I didn’t know where you were. It was hell. It was fuckin’ *hell.*”

He’s honestly not sure he’s ever said this much to her and this quickly in one single stretch. Not even when he came to her and told her what he could, about him and Merle and about everything. And she’s just *looking* at him, in her pale ineffable silence.
“If you got hurt tonight, if you got… Think about that. Just think about it for a second.” You. Me. What it would do. Having to explain to your goddamn family. Knowing it. That it was me who put you there, that I might as well have done it myself. “Havin’ to live with that.” His voice drops. Shakes. But his eyes remain dry. “Bet your ass I was scared.”

For another long moment she says nothing at all. As for him, he’s run out of words. There simply aren’t any more. So he pushes away from the counter and leans forward, takes the bottle, leans back again and lets it flow down his throat.

He doesn’t want to get drunk, no. But he doesn’t really want to be sober, either.

He’s setting it down again when she crosses the distance between them and curls her arms around his waist and presses her face against his chest. Everything in him loosens, trembles, and then his eyes are stinging after all as he wraps her up and lays his cheek against the crown of her head, breathes her in. Beyond her, half obscured by the tousled golden cloud of her hair, is the space they’ve been sharing—rumpled sheets, a half empty pizza box, half empty beer bottles. Happiness and light.

Everything started so simple. Relatively. Got complicated so damn fast.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry you were scared. I’m sorry I made you scared.” She lifts her head, tips it back and looks gravely up at him. “But when you told me to stay, you didn’t let me choose. I know you didn’t want me to get hurt, but…” She sighs. “I told you. I’m not a child. If somethin’ happens, if it’s bad but I think I can help… It’s not your choice. It’s mine. I’m not like you, I know I don’t look like much, but I made it, and you don’t get to save me. Not like that.”

He nods. There is quite literally nothing else to do.

Except then he lifts his hands and frames her face, and he hurts, aches, and he’s so afraid, because she’s right. He doesn’t get to. He can want to, he can try, but he doesn’t get to. He pulled her out of the water, but she went in for the boy, she chose to do it, and if he had tried to stop her…

It wouldn’t have been his choice to make.

“I love you,” he breathes, and she smiles, and it’s a little sad.

“I love you too.” She leans up and kisses his mouth, light and nearly chaste, but he can feel the ferocity behind it. Because she is not and never was a goddess and she doesn’t need to be. She’s strong and brave and beautiful and absolutely terrifying, and he loves her more than he knows he will ever love anything in his entire life. “If you love me, you’ll let me choose.”

So he will.

“You’re not like me.” He says it in a whisper, can’t manage any more than that, and he strokes her cheeks with his thumbs and somehow he can still breathe. “You’re more.”

He pulls her back in before she can answer and parts her lips with his, gentle and almost delicate, and he kisses her for a while. She tastes like whiskey and pizza and very decent beer, and for a time he manages to forget everything else. And of course they end up back in bed, and like the kissing there’s something almost delicate about it, how he settles between her legs and lifts her thighs high on his hips, moves slowly inside her until she’s quivering and rolling her body up, pushing him back to give her space to reach between them and send herself over and take him with her.

And it’s good. It’s very good. But after, lying in the dark with her curled close and so soft and warm, stroking her hair and watching her eyes dart beneath her lids in whatever dream she’s found, he’s gripped and held—like Rick Grimes’s eyes—by the feeling that this was yet another goodbye. To an
illusion he was clinging to without really knowing it—and maybe to something else.

He’s not a child. Neither is she. Those days have been over for a long time. The good days happen, are happening, but they’ll never be like they were.

That’s all right. But it’s also true. And doesn’t he have words for this? Not his own, but they fit.

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,

to let it go.

Chapter End Notes

Poem bits are Mary Oliver's "A Visitor" and "In Blackwater Woods".
it's funny how you just break down waiting on some sign

Chapter Notes

Six chapters to go after this one. I mean, I've been wrong before (see Safe Up Here With You) but I really think so.

Sigh.

Those of you who hate cliffhangers: there will be more cliffhangers after this. I'm sorry; that's just the shape of these chapters. I'll try to write fast enough that there's not too much time between them, but frankly I don't do this for a living (THAT WOULD BE VERY NICE) and I can't promise anything.

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday is cold. Not icy, not gray; it's brilliantly clear, brilliantly sunny. Daryl says goodbye to Beth standing in a pool of it, groggy and blinking—didn’t sleep much, no, and not for the reasons he prefers—and after she leaves to take the relatively short hike back to the richer neighborhood where Becca’s family makes their home he stands at the window and watches her go until he can’t see her anymore, the light moving over her in waves and her moving through it like it’s her most natural environment, and he wonders when this is going to stop blowing him the fuck away.

He can’t see how it will.

He eats breakfast—cold pizza, always bizarrely great. He waits until the sun is higher, until it’s getting on to ten and soaking the world, and he goes downstairs from the inside, softly calls Carol’s name. Turns out she’s in the kitchen again with a cup of coffee, and she looks up at him as he enters and gives him a faint smile. The cut on her lip somehow looks worse than it did the night before and she has dark pits under her eyes, but otherwise she actually looks pretty okay. He gets himself coffee, sits down across from her, doesn’t say anything. He suspects that it’s enough for him to be here.

At some point he runs out, gets a tremendous quantity of donuts, brings them back, and they eat a bunch of them. And at some other additional point her smile is a bit less faint.

She really is okay. So, he’s now certain, is he.

A little after noon he leaves her and, operating on whatever whims his subconscious digs out of itself and hurls at him, he goes back to Aaron and Eric’s place and he buys some curtains. Plain ones—all the available patterns were vividly colored and very busy and they made him vaguely uncomfortable—but they’re a light blue that looks as if it’ll admit a fair amount of light even when drawn, and they’re yet something else that feels right. He takes them home, puts them up.

Standing there, looking at them, for some reason it occurs to him that he still has no TV. No stereo. No computer. Still not even a fucking smartphone. Nothing whatsoever to provide him with an audiovisual connection to the outside world, aside from going the fuck outside. This doesn’t seem to be a problem for him, not so far, and it also isn’t something that gives him any special gratification; he’s never been impressed with how self-impressed people become about turning off their fucking
whatevers and really being in the moment. He doesn’t think really being in a moment is the kind of thing you get self-impressed about.

But it’s the case. He has no music but Beth, and the memory of Beth, and his own internal and external voices. Otherwise he lives in gentle quiet.

Looking back on it, his whole life has been noisy, and none of it was especially pleasant noise. There’s a lot of quiet to make up.

He goes out again and drives.

Nowhere in particular. No radio on. Somewhere in the back of his head remain two truths, and they hiss and whisper and won’t leave him alone: that there’s a world out there which, sooner or later, he has to figure out what to do with, and that he doesn’t want to leave this one. He never planned to leave. He expected that he would have to, but he never planned for it. He isn’t planning for it now; he has a home, he has a job, he has Beth, he has every reason to do whatever it takes to hold onto all three. Nevertheless, he can’t stop his mind turning in circles around it, reinforcing itself endlessly.

He seems to be capable of being happy when Beth isn’t around, but he’s never as happy as he is when he’s with her. That shouldn’t need reinforcing. That fact is strong enough and big enough and loud enough to stand on its own and for itself.

But the world is out there, and it doesn’t mean what it used to.

And it feels like everything is moving faster now.

There’s considerably less than a week until Thanksgiving with the Greenes. He has no idea how one does Thanksgiving. If there’s something specific he should wear. Something he should bring. Something unexpected that’s going to be expected of him. Something that’s going to hit him out of nowhere, completely blindside him.

He should probably be afraid. Nervous, at least. He isn’t either of those. He supposes that when the time comes, he’ll figure it out.

Not that long until Christmas, either. About a month. Less.

He should start thinking about something to give her.

What does Beth Greene want for Christmas?

Something else he trusts he’ll know. When the time comes.

~

He calls her Monday night and asks her. Not about Christmas—he never had a Christmas any more than he had a Thanksgiving—but about Thanksgiving itself and what it’s going to be like. She doesn’t give him a whole lot of detail, but he gets the sense that it’s less to do with not telling him and more to do with there not being much to tell. Not by her estimation.

“It’s just. Y’know. Thanksgiving.” She laughs softly. “We eat turkey and stuffing, sweet potatoes, biscuits. Pie. Whole lotta everythin’. We talk about stuff. Maggie’s gonna be home, she’s bringin’
“Yeah, but… What d’you do?” He’s pacing the room, he realizes, and has been since the conversation started. Usually with her he’s lying in bed, often on sleep’s doorstep, her voice lulling him into it. Lulling him into other activities. Now he can’t seem to stop moving. It’s not nervousness, he’s pretty sure, but it is a kind of nervous energy, an anticipation. Neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It’s just there. Something new, bearing down on him.

“I mean…” He can hear her thinking, searching for anything that might adequately answer his question. “Oh, Daddy goes ’round and asks everyone what they’re thankful for. So I’d have an answer ready for that if I were you.” Smile there. Teasing.

“Everyone?”

Okay, maybe a little nervous. Because it sounds like talking in front of people, not like any—very limited—dinner table conversation in which he’s ever taken direct part. He doesn’t do that. Talk in front of people. When he was in first grade—before life started getting truly awful—and not so good at cutting out when he was being told to do something he didn’t want to do, he dimly remembers being forced into a pathetic school play about magic animals or some shit and being so nervous he puked beforehand and almost during, and he didn’t even have any fucking lines.

He thinks they made him be a bunny. He vaguely remembers something about floppy ears. As trauma goes it can’t begin to match the rest of the hell that followed, but even so.

Not that his father or his mother or Merle ever knew about it. He was careful about that.

“It’s not a big deal,” she says gently. “Just one thing. Simple. Doesn’t have to be some big production.”

“Alright.” Because he can’t back out now, and anyway it shouldn’t be a big deal. He’s faced down worse. Plenty worse.

What is he thankful for?

How the fuck does he begin paring that list down?

“I’m real glad you’re comin’.” Still gentle. Tired, he can now hear. She yawns. “I think you’ll be glad too. I know maybe it feels weird, but you will.”

“I am.” He is. When he said it to Annette he wasn’t lying. Not about that, anyway.

“Good,” she murmurs. And he’s expecting them to start moving toward goodnight, but she’s not done. “Oh, and we sing. We also do that.”

Sing. That could be nice. Very nice.

“You and your mom? Maggie?”

“Everyone.”

Oh.

The hundred different implications of this—actually there aren’t anywhere near that many but they’re all terrible—swing gleefully through his brain. He stops and blinks at the wall. “You don’t mean—”

“No one’s gonna make you do anythin’.” Her voice is soft. “But you should think about that too. I
know you don’t really… But you don’t sound bad. Not at all. I promise, you don’t. And I wouldn’t just say that.”

“What do you sing?” He’s practically whispering. This is so strange.

“Whatever we feel like. Mama and Daddy sing hymns a lotta the time. Me and Maggie sing different stuff… More like what I sing now. Shawn doesn’t usually do it alone, he’s always with someone. The new guy, I don’t know what he’s gonna do. I mean, obviously.” She pauses, and he knows exactly what her face is doing. That open, wide-eyed look, coaxing, firm but sweet. The look she has when she doesn’t expect to hear no but only because she has good reasons for getting a yes. “You can do whatever you want, Daryl.”

Whatever he wants. Sure.

But he knows that there’s something she’s hoping for. She won’t be upset if she doesn’t get it. She won’t be resentful and she won’t hold it against him. But she’s hoping.

“Alright.” A promise of nothing. As noncommittal an affirmative response as he can manage. But after he says goodnight to her and hangs up, he’s thinking about it. About how it might be.

He won’t do it. Of course he won’t. But he’s thinking.


As always the body
wants to hide,
wants to flow toward it—strives
to balance while
fear shouts,
excitement shouts, back
and forth—each
bolt a burning river
tearing like escape through the dark
field of the other.


And he thinks of something else, on Tuesday night. The day before the day before. It’s literally freezing outside, and through a kind of unspoken mutual agreement he ends up downstairs with Carol, sitting on the floor in front of the fire and smoking and picking spongy freeze-dried marshmallows out of his hot chocolate. Hot chocolate and peppermint schnapps. He doesn’t like schnapps of any kind, but turns out this is okay in hot chocolate, so there you go.

He likes all kinds of things he never expected to.

But then, staring into the flames and scratching one of the Unimpressed Cats behind the ears, this occurs to him, and he turns. She’s sitting in that same chair—a survivor of the attack—gaze locked
forward and firelit. She seems half aware of him, and when he touches her knee she jumps slightly.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She resettles herself, gives him a faint smile. “Fine. Just thinking.”

“Got a lot to think about.”

“Mhmm.” She cocks her head. “What is it?”

“You doin’ anything for Thanksgiving?”

She’s quiet for a few seconds, brows drawing together, before she answers. “I wasn’t really going to do anything, I guess. Why?”

“You wanna do somethin’?”

She shoots him a quizzical look. “Like what?”

He takes a breath. This strikes him as tremendously presumptuous, and from more than one angle. But Beth is presumptuous. When he first met her she was presumptuous in every possible way, taking him by the arm and maneuvering him into her world of light and Niceness—and deeper, bigger realities he couldn’t have imagined at the time—because she saw him and saw need he didn’t know he had, and the songs in her bones reached out to the silence in his. She’s a force of nature, and nature abhors a vacuum. She wanted to fill him. Wanted it with all the force and irresistibility of primal instinct.

He doesn’t only love her with everything in him. He wants to be like her. As much as he can.

That involves a degree of presumptuousness.

“I’m, uh… I’m havin’ dinner with the family I work for. On that farm.” He pauses, realizes that this necessarily introduces a subject about which they haven’t yet spoken. “Beth’s family.” He rolls an awkward shoulder. “They’re good people. I think maybe… You think maybe you wanna come? I think they’d probably be fine with it.”

And he has no reason to assume that. Except when he thinks about it, he does.

This time Carol’s smile is odd. He can’t quite pinpoint what’s behind it—except pain. Some. Pain that may have no specific source and defies any easy description. “They don’t know me.”

“They know me.”

Really? Do they? “They were… I wasn’t even workin’ there a whole day and I was already havin’ dinner with ’em. ’s just how they are.”

Carol doesn’t answer. He watches her for a moment or two, studying her, and when he doesn’t get much solid info out of that he turns again and allows his eyes to unfocus into the deep light. So maybe it was a stupid idea. Could be. He feels awkward about it, but not as much as he might have expected. It was worth a try, anyway.

“The girl who reads you poetry,” she says softly.

He stiffens. Because here it is. “Yeah.” He pauses again, then huffs a quiet laugh. “Actually these days I’m readin’ to her. But yeah, that’s. That’s her.”

“They don’t know you’re seeing her, do they?”
Actually he’s not surprised she’s picked that up. Imagining him and Beth side by side, guards down, it probably doesn’t take a lot of mental gymnastics to arrive at that conclusion. “No.”

“She’s pretty young.”

No judgment. Not that he can hear. Merely an observation. So while elsewhere he might have gotten defensive, here he nods, still not looking at her. “Yeah. She is.”

“Y’know, anyone else, I think I’d have some concerns,” she says, tone casual—he can tell it’s carefully so. “But not you. Somehow. She didn’t strike me as the kind of girl who gets taken advantage of. Not easily, anyway.”

He shakes his head, takes a drag and exhales. Not much to say to that. Not much to add. She isn’t. He doesn’t know what would happen to someone who tried to take advantage of Beth Greene, but he’s not sure he would want to be on the other end of that little experiment.

But she says not you and low, pleased warmth wells up in him. No loud voices in him rush to argue or deny. She says she doesn’t worry about him doing something like that, and, well, yeah. He wouldn’t. He hasn’t and he wouldn’t and he’s honestly not sure he could.

And there is something to add, actually.

“I love her.”

“I know.”

He glances back at her and she’s smiling again. It’s small and it’s warm too, matching what’s inside him, amplifying it, and he’s suddenly so glad that she’s here and he’s with her that his lungs clench and for a brief moment he can’t get any air into them.

“Please come,” he whispers.

Another short patch of silence. On the other end of it she nods, and somehow he knew she was going to. “Alright. I’d be fine on my own—really, I would… But you ask them, and if they say yes I’ll come.”

He ducks his head, looks back into the red depths of the fire. The cat flops onto her side and rolls, arches in a sensuously feline stretch and exposes her belly to the heat. The cigarette is burning down between his fingers and he flicks it into the flames. When he picks the mug up it’s warm in his hands, warm as anything. It feels like nothing happened here. It feels like this place was never touched by anything bad. And in fact it wasn’t. It came close, but he thinks maybe the House of Light mounts its own defenses, and that night they were there.

He’s happy. Sometimes that simple fact hits him and bowls him over, knocks him on his ass, because he had no idea what it genuinely felt like before all this.

He’s happy. Even a second of this is worth any pain it takes to get here.

~

On Wednesday morning he asks Hershel. Hershel seems a bit bemused, but he says yes. Yes, sure,
his friend can come.

And there’s something about the way Hershel says friend that makes it clear what the assumption there is, and wow, that’s really fucking awkward, but as he gives the man a small smile and hopes it doesn’t look too tense and walks away into the path of a cold hard wind, he understands that there isn’t much to do about it now.

Might even be good. Might be good if they think that. Might be additional cover, and that is most certainly good. Because he’s tired of lying, or he’s starting to get there in a new and much bigger way, but the necessity of it is there. If he wants this, and he does, very much, the lie must remain in place.

At least for as long as possible.

There’s still a lot he thinks he’d be willing to do in order to make sure it does.

~

There’s also the matter of what the fuck he’s going to wear.

He agonizes over this. Nearly every single item of clothing he has is second or third-hand and considerably worn. And that’s never been something to which he had to give a second’s anxious thought, because he’s never done anything or been anywhere that required more than that. Dinners before now—coming off a day of hard work, he’ll wash his hands, but of course he’s not going to be all dolled up. But this feels different, because it is.

He puts it off until Wednesday evening. Drags his ass out to the much-despised Walmart and stomps around the aisles, glaring at things and sometimes at people. Yeah, he’s generally happy a lot these days. With Beth he’s deliriously so. Doesn’t mean foul moods can’t find him.

So it’s the awful tinny music on the PA and the hard, flickering lights poking a headache into his eyes, a bunch of kids running and shrieking toward the electronics department and something that smells like and may in fact be weeks-old spilled cheap perfume. But also, yeah, he’s nervous. That thing from before about not being nervous was bullshit. He’s nervous, and turns out he’s not an asshole who ruins everything, but he is in over his head, more even than usual, and he doesn’t want to fuck this up. Not in front of Beth. Not in front of Beth’s family. Now not in front of Carol.

Oh God, what was he thinking.

Well, as a family they don’t strike him as overly formal. Coming out of church they’ve never been all that fancy. Okay, so. He has information to go on. He has intelligence on which to base a strategy.

He is making this way, way too complicated.

He grits his teeth and in the end he settles for a pair of jeans, unusual for him in that they’re new and unstained and have no thin spots or holes, and a dark gray button-down shirt with no discernible pattern, and boots that are intensely cheap and which he expects to fall apart in about a week but which also look fresh and new. Not fancy, but neat. He can be neat.

He tells himself over and over, in the ponderous checkout line, that he doesn’t have anything to prove to these people. They already think well of him. If he shows up sober and coherent and mostly
not a mess, and he minds his manners like he already knows he can, he’ll be fine.

Halfway home, the lights of surrounding traffic bleeding into bright, blurry obscurity, he thinks about Maggie’s mysterious guy and bringing him home to meet the parents and what that must feel like from his end and what he must feel like he’s up against, and he almost has to stop and put his head down on the wheel. Because he didn’t mean for this part to happen, but it’s happening, and he didn’t know it would feel like this, and he frankly should have.

He knows these people. He does.

But they don’t know him.

~

Lying in the dark, extremely awake and staring up at the ceiling and biting at his lips, whirling circles. Worrying and nosing like a freaked out dog. This is dangerous. Or it might be. He didn’t realize how much until now, until he’s locked in. It’s dangerous because he’s out of his element, as he already knew, but that means part of him might break open if he flounders. He might slip. He might do something stupid. And not stupid in a way that embarrasses himself or Beth or Carol. He might do something stupid.

Not because he’s desperate. Not because he’s starving for her and he’s struggling to control himself because he can’t bear it. Simply because he’s moving through new territory all the time now, unfamiliar terrain, and even if he’s very careful it doesn’t take much to trip. Tripping when he’s by himself? Not a big deal. Tripping in front of others, strangers? Apparently that can be managed. Tripping in front of these people is potential disaster.

He’s not a complete idiot, and he’s not completely oblivious. Part of him knows: this can’t go on forever, not as it is, if for no other reason than that nothing can. Nothing does. But not like this. Please God, the God who isn’t there but sometimes you want to hedge your bets, please not like this.

He has to go, so he goes. Early Thursday afternoon he and Carol get into that damn truck, and he goes.

And yes, it’s pretty much a quiet little disaster.

Just not exactly in the way he was afraid it might be.

Chapter End Notes

Poem snippet is "Lightning" by Mary Oliver.
a-laughing and a-singing and thankful to be free

Okay, disaster might be a strong word for it. At the time he thinks it is; he interprets it that way and it ties him in several kinds of knots in the way a minor disaster would. Much later, looking back on it, he’s not so sure. He’s not certain what it is, only that something happened and it’s staying with him. Possibly for the rest of his life. Hard to say.

It’s quiet and on paper it’s little. That much is true.

But that’s yet to come. For now he pulls up the Greenes’ drive, breathing evenly, trying to ignore how the house somehow looks twice as big as it usually does, its graceful old white gables and balcony suddenly sort of ominous instead of offering the welcome they’ve come to extend to him. Carol is a comforting presence at his side and he’s guessing she can sense his tension, and his gratitude to her for not asking him about it has all the force of something eternal.

He doesn’t want to talk about it. He wants to put it away. He’s being stupid. It’s like he’s been plucked out of these better days, where he feels like he belongs in the world and might even be able to make a real place in it for himself, and tossed back to the beginning of the summer where he had to do everything and didn’t feel like he could do anything at all ever, and being calm was a mysterious state that happened to other people but which was entirely unattainable for him.

Back when it was Beth Greene tying him in knots. Back when she was the quiet little disaster, a whirlwind catching him up in herself and tearing off his roofs, knocking down his walls.

Oh my God will you stop.

On paper he has absolutely nothing to worry about. On paper.

But he still doesn’t know what to say when he’s asked what he’s thankful for.

It’s a gray day, as gray as it has been, clouds hanging low and heavy and wind whistling across open spaces and playing havoc with anything loose, tossing it gaily about. He sees Carol pulling her coat closer around her as they start up toward the house—her dressed in basic slacks and an attractive tan blouse, as simple as he is, which was also comforting, but neither of them are bundled.

Usually it’s not this cold this early. There’s something odd about the quality of the clouds, the light, and as they climb the porch steps and he casts a glance upward, he realizes what it is.

It looks like it’s getting ready to snow. Muffled sun through clustered ice crystals, bouncing around in the way only snow clouds cause. It even smells like snow, something he’s never been able to pin down or put words to, something simultaneously fresh and thin and solid.

Then he’s knocking and Beth is opening the door for them, and he forgets about the damn clouds.

He doesn’t stare. He’s sure he doesn’t do that, as she stands aside to let them in and gives them both a wide, cheerful smile. Or he doesn’t stare with his eyes, shrugging off his coat and handing it to her when she offers to take it, but all his attention locks itself on her and goes tunnel-perception, everything else fading into the background. Once again it’s like it was before—such a long time ago now, or that’s how it feels—and he’s helpless. Caught and trapped.
What she’s wearing.

He hasn’t seen it since that night. Not at the coffee shop, not coming out of church, not any other time. And it’s strange that she should wear it now, because it’s decidedly a summer dress, but she is all the same, and she doesn’t look out of place in the least. As if she takes the space around her and makes it summer again.

Knee-length dress, sleeveless, speckled purple and blue and white. Or mostly white and speckled purple and blue now that he looks at it; he never really saw it close up. Her hair braided and wrapped in a loose coil around her head. Minimal makeup. Leather wrist cuff. Boots.

She’s so beautiful he wants to fall the fuck down. Simply collapse to the hardwood at her feet. She can’t possibly have known what wearing that would do to him.

Then again.

He allows himself to watch her for a few seconds as she walks away toward the hall closet with their coats—seems safe, it’s only the three of them here. But there are voices coming from the parlor and from the kitchen, more than usual, and he’s now conscious of utterly unearthly smells wafting to him on warm puffs of air and pouring into his sinuses—he can indeed identify turkey and biscuits and there’s also pie of some kind and a host of mingling scents he can’t separate blurring into an ideal of Deliciousness—and these are all things he’s going to have to attend to.

Not exactly like it’s a chore.

But there’s her.

And this might be a problem.

~

Unsure where to go first, Carol standing beside him—to her credit, calm and quiet and not at all awkward, at least not compared to him—he defaults to the kitchen. That’s where the smells are coming from anyway.

It’s very, very warm—actually close to steamy—and though it’s a big kitchen it seems unnaturally full. Annette is there, bending over the stove, and chopping green beans at the table in the center of the room is Maggie. Shawn’s there, asking her about something, and as he stands, taking it in, Beth slides by and heads toward the fridge, pulls out a plate covered with squares of what looks like some variety of cornbread and carries it out again without a glance in his direction.

Okay, good.

Annette is turning to him when he reaches her, Carol still in tow, and before he knows exactly what’s happening she beams, leans up and in and pecks him on the cheek. She’s wearing a light green dress that sets off her hair, and she’s flushed and a bit sweaty and she looks profoundly pretty, and he can only stand there and stare as Carol introduces herself and Annette gives her as wide a smile.

Annette has never done that with him before.
This already feels kind of out of hand.

Watching, though, he’s getting all the confirmation he needs regarding the assumption they’ve made about who Carol is to him. Subtle turns of phrase, simply something about Annette’s manner—and except for the fact that he isn’t sure if Carol has picked up on it, he’s discovering that he does not, in fact, have much of a problem with this. There are so many goddamn advantages.

He should make sure Carol gets it, though. Soon as he gets a chance.

He doesn’t get that chance, though, not immediately. He’s being ushered over to say hi to Maggie—Maggie looks slightly harried, her thick dark hair escaping where it’s tucked behind her ear and falling around her face, and he doesn’t think it’s because of the beans—and she remembers him, smiles one of those warm Greene smiles, and this time he actually has the presence of mind to haltingly introduce her to Carol.

And they’re sent into the parlor to say hi to Hershel and Maggie’s guy—name of Glenn, apparently—and sit a while.

This is actually bearable. Awkward but bearable. He can do awkward. Once it was the water through which he swam. He was at home there, to the extent that one can be.

There’s a fire burning in the grate, leaping and crackling, and Hershel and Glenn are sitting near it in a couple of ancient but comfortable armchairs in an arrangement that frankly looks comically picturesque—like one of those wholesome pieces of Americana artwork from old magazines. They both get up, come forward, and there are more introductions, and everything is more navigable with each iteration. Whatever conversation had been going on before they arrived, whatever grilling Glenn was being put through, he doesn’t have the look of a man being hunted, and that’s good for him.

Nice looking kid. Nice in the way Daryl imagines would be very acceptable to the Greenes. Clean-cut, with a hesitant but genuine smile.

Maggie’s own age.

He and Carol sit down on the equally ancient couch and there’s what he now understands as small talk, having been through the initial phases of it when he first started coming to dinner. Where you’re from, what you do, what you like—none of them questions he ever wanted to answer in any depth if ever, and almost all of which he had been rescued from by Beth. He sucked at it then, and even if he’s gotten better at a lot of other things he sucks at it now, and he’s starting to get worried before he realizes Carol is doing exactly what Beth did, and with near as much skill. Steering the conversation subtly away. Filling in his silences. Being charming, and fielding the questions she herself must not want to answer. He observes her as unobtrusively as he can, and it doesn’t take him long to realize why she can do this. Why she’s good at it. Manipulating a situation. Placating. Distracting. Why she’s had to learn.

He was never good at it, and if it could have been a skill he learned, it might not have been so bad for him. In the end.

Though he also doubts his father could ever have been placated by conversation, his time-bomb moods defused. His father generally talked with pain.

Most of it’s true. Carol is here house-sitting for her older sister, Daryl lives upstairs, yes, it’s a nice house, she’s in the process of moving but this is a bit of a way station to give her a chance to get herself settled. One daughter. Father not in the picture. Carol is manipulating but Hershel also isn’t an
inconsiderate jerk, and seems to recognize a potentially sticky subject and backs off.

And that pings something else in him. All three of them, sitting here together with Glenn figuratively circling outside, all managing in their own way. Except those ways aren’t so dissimilar.

*My grandpa beat my grandma. Beat Daddy too.*

God, what if he could somehow crack this all wide open. If the three of them could all see it, instead of only two out of three—the nearly invisible filament binding them together.

Maybe everything would be different.

There are the mini-cornbreads. They’re good. Beth brings in iced tea, asks if anyone wants tea hot. She doesn’t stay. This is a mercy.

Finally at some point it closes up in him. It’s not any one aspect, and it’s not panic; he’s not even upset. It’s just too much, he’s feeling crowded-in-on, more overloaded with sensory input than he ever did in the noisiest roadhouse, and he gets up and excuses himself, goes out onto the porch in his shirtsleeves and fumbles in his pocket for his cigarettes. It’s cold but he can breathe out here, and in fact he barely feels the chill. If he’s fumbling, if his hand is shaking slightly as he raises his lighter and flicks it into flame, it’s not because he’s *cold.*

“Hi.”

He doesn’t turn. Doesn’t jump—he didn’t hear the kid come out but he’s honestly not surprised that he would be followed, that his company might be desirable. Daryl is not a parent or a brother, but he’s attached to the family in a way, and he’s here. He’s much less threatening.

Which is kind of funny.

He leans against the porch railing and inhales, taps ash into the bushes below, grunts. He doesn’t dislike Glenn but he also doesn’t much feel like talking to him. To anyone. That’s why he’s *out* here.

“It’s cold.”

He does half turn then, shoots Glenn a look over his shoulder. *Really?* “Hadn’t noticed.”

“Yeah, uh… Yeah.” Kid is moving up beside him and he sighs; he might not want to talk but he also doesn’t much feel like being an *asshole,* especially not to someone who doesn’t appear to be feeling much more comfortable with this than he is. This isn’t exactly a kindred spirit, *fuck* no, but.

“It’s pretty here.” Glenn rubs his hands together, tucks them into the sleeves of his sweater and folds his arms across his middle. “Must be nice in the summer.”

*You have no idea.* “Ain’t bad.”

“You were working for them then?”

He takes another long drag, staring out at the distant, empty road. Christ, it really does look like snow. “Started in summer.” He must not have mentioned that. He honestly can’t remember.

“So you know them pretty well?”

Daryl shoots him another look, shrugs. He has the feeling that this is going somewhere and he’s not sure he’s going to be pleased with the destination. “Guess so.”
“You don’t know Maggie.”

“Only met her the once.”

“Her parents, though?”

He doesn’t whirl, but he does turn to face Glenn with a degree of sharpness in the movement, one elbow still on the railing, not far from glaring. “You goin’ somewhere with this, or what?”

Glenn somehow takes a step back without moving at all. He looks abashed and without any attempt to hide it, and Daryl does give him credit for that, and a fair amount of it: Glenn seems to be almost as lacking in artifice as Beth. He doesn’t think he’s seeing anything other than what he would get. That counts for a lot.

Glenn glances at the front door and takes a breath. “Okay. Look. I know… I know I don’t know you, I know you have no reason to give a shit about me, but if I tell you something, will you not mention it to anyone? And I mean anyone?”

Daryl blinks at him. He had expected to be talked at, he had expected it to be weird, but he hadn’t expected to be taken into anyone’s confidence here. It’s baffling. Given that, he doesn’t suppose he has much of a reason to say no.

And he’s already keeping one motherfucker of a secret. What’s one more?

He shrugs again, slides the cigarette back between his lips and drags. “Ain’t got no reason to tell no one nothin’.” He allows Glenn a thin smile. “Unless you’re some kinda serial killer or some shit.”

This is where you serial-kill me, isn’t it?

“I—No.” Glenn appears unsure about whether Daryl is totally kidding. “No, it’s nothing like that. It’s…” He takes another, deeper breath and gathers himself. “I want to ask Maggie to marry me.”

Oh. Well.

Daryl fixes him with a cool, level gaze. “You got my sympathy.”

Glenn’s already furrowed brow furrows more. “What’s that mean?”

The women in this family are fucking forces of nature is what it means, and can’t be resisted or fought against, and you probably don’t know what you’re getting into.

Run. Run while you can. Save yourself. It’s too late for me, I’ll only slow you down.

“Nothin’.” Glenn doesn’t look ready to let it go. Too bad for him. “Why’re you tellin’ me this?”

“Because—” Glenn drops his voice again, hugging himself tighter. “Because I just met her parents and I’m trying to figure out if there are… You know… If there’s stuff I should know. Stuff I could mess up.”

“You ask Maggie any of this?”

“Yeah. But she’s… They’re her parents, I don’t know if she would see everything. If she would tell me everything. Look, I just want to make sure.”
Daryl regards him in silence for a moment, cigarette burning down between his fingers. The kid is practically squirming and clearly bad at playing his cards anywhere in the remote vicinity of his chest, and one thing is abundantly clear: Glenn is in love, hopelessly so, and he means everything he says. He desperately does not want to fuck this up.

*You poor stupid sap.*

But Maggie isn’t Beth. And Glenn is not in Daryl’s position. Glenn’s position is considerably more solid, considerably more advantageous. Daryl doesn’t have a position. He’s the rough drifter farmhand. No one is going to give him a position. He’s in love, he’s loved, he’s not some redneck asshole who ruins everything, he’s a good man, but it’s still true.

“They’re good people,” he says quietly. Because the truth works best here, so far as it goes, and he might as well tell it to the degree that he can. “I think they wanna like you. I don’t know Maggie, like I said, but you don’t seem like an asshole. Think you’ll probably be fine.”

*If you love her, if you’re good to her, if they see that—and if you can give her a life, if you have something real to give her and they see that too—you’ll be fine.*

“Oh,” Glenn says quietly, and he looks down, away, out at the deepening gray and the brown fields, the bare trees, everything falling into true winter even if calendar winter is a month distant. “Alright. I… Thanks.”

Daryl goes for his pack, pulls out another and lights it. Something to do with his hands. Suddenly he doesn’t want to be here any more than he wants to be inside. “You gonna pop the question here?”

“I’m not sure. I have a ring. Maybe, if it feels right.”

“Think she’s gonna say yes?”

Glenn passes a hand down his face. Most of the nervousness has gone out of him—rather suddenly but without making a big deal about its exit—and now he seems merely thoughtful. Maybe uneasy, but manageably so. And Daryl understands that even if he tried to talk Glenn out of this—and why the fuck would he? It’s not his damn business and Maggie is very pretty and if she’s anything like the rest of her family she’ll be also be pretty goddamn extraordinary—it would be a fool’s errand. You don’t reason someone out of love like that.

Fuck knows he’s tried.

“I hope so.”

“Yeah,” Daryl murmurs, and he doesn’t say anything else. He smokes the cigarette down most of the way, flicks it over the railing into the dirt and dry grass—something he normally wouldn’t do but it’s largely hidden where it is—and turns back to the door.

“Good luck.”

He means it.

He goes inside and leaves Glenn to stand and gaze at the world in meditative silence, apparently now heedless of the cold.

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Dinner.

In many ways it’s not much different from any other Greene dinner. Hershel says a short but eloquent blessing. Everything is delicious and there’s a lot of all of it. Conversation isn’t raucous but it’s not exactly quiet, either, and increased numbers and high spirits means people interrupt, talk over each other, rush to finish sentences and stories. Share news. Maggie is taking a job at a law firm near where she lives, and while it’s primarily administrative stuff, she’s thinking—in the least committal way—about law school. Annette is going to be volunteering at the vet clinic a couple of times a week starting in January. Shawn and his girlfriend—who Daryl has hardly seen—have been together almost a year, and Shawn scoffs and looks down at his turkey-piled plate and actually turns a little red, and says that yeah okay maybe it’s getting kind of serious, whatever. Teasing laughter, and Daryl can tell he doesn’t really mind all that much. Beth’s classes are going well except for Calculus, which she’s perfectly able to handle but finds dull, and doesn’t try as hard as she could. Has she joined the school chorus yet? Finally? She has one more semester to do it. No, she hasn’t. She makes a bit of a face. She doesn’t like Mrs. Gates, the new choral instructor, and she doesn’t want to sing with that big a group. It’s not that she thinks she’s too good; she just doesn’t want to. It’s not fun for her. She’s considering going out for the play in spring, though. It’s going to be *The Tempest*—she likes it about a hundred million times better than *Romeo and Juliet*, which was last year’s production.

Glenn and Daryl listen. Once or twice they exchange glances. Not anything like kindred spirits, but yeah, they are in somewhat similar situations. They’ve both been welcomed in. But neither of them truly has a place here.

For Glenn, that comes with a caveat of *not yet*.

For Daryl it simply is.

Carol, for her part, might have been awkward at the end of the table but isn’t at all, quietly eating and not saying much either but appearing totally content as she is. Once or twice she catches Daryl’s eye and the message is clear—*are you okay?* And he nods. He is. This isn’t *easy*, but it’s not at all the disaster he was afraid it might be.

And he’s still very glad she came.

After a while the circulation of plates slows down and everything settles. No one has announced anything but Daryl can feel it—the rhythm of something long codified into ritual. Sitting at the head of the table, Hershel produces a battered, leather-bound Bible and opens it to a marked page.

Daryl doesn’t know the Bible. Has never had any reason to, and has never missed the knowing. He knows it’s lengthy and terribly complicated and that there’s a tremendously long history of people fighting bloody wars over what amount to notes in the margins, and he knows the basic stories with which most people are at least sort of familiar—Noah and the Ark, Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, something about a parted sea, David and Goliath, and the more salient details of the life of Christ.

He didn’t know there was poetry.

Hershel slips on a pair of gold-framed reading glasses and looks up and around at them, and lowers his head to the book, clears his throat and begins to read.

*He sendeth the springs into the valleys,*  
*which run among the hills.*
They give drink to every beast of the field:
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation,
which sing among the branches.
He watereth the hills from his chambers:
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works.

He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle,
and herb for the service of man:
that he may bring forth food out of the earth;
And wine that maketh glad the heart of man,
and oil to make his face to shine,
and bread which strengtheneth man’s heart.

He appointed the moon for seasons:
the sun knoweth his going down.
Thou makest darkness, and it is night:
wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth.

O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom
hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.

It isn’t like what he knows, what he’s become used to. But there’s a rhythm and a cadence to the words that isn’t unfamiliar, and as he listens he finds himself being lulled in the same way. Pulled in, drifting through the sounds and the images they call up in him. Everyone else’s head is bowed, and he’s done the same—sure, he doesn’t share in this devotion but it seems like the polite thing to do—but his mind gently separates the lovely words from the entity toward whom they were originally directed and refocuses them outward, makes them diffuse, far-reaching. Because there’s so much. Ancient stones scattered and formed by hands into structures, oceans of grass, forests that were old when he was born and which will outlive him, perhaps by centuries. The calls of the birds of the air and the whispering passage of the beasts of the land. Every river, every creek, every chuckling stream. Sunshine and moonshine and the light from stars that may be long dead but touch the living all the same, and might eventually make it to the edge of everything before the photons go their separate ways. Galaxies innumerable.

This is a universe full of light. Until her, he never knew. And at the heart of it, there she is: fallen down naked into the grass, idle and blessed and soaked in light, warm and soft and wet and open to receive him, laughing and singing, calling his name.

I didn’t know what a prayer was. I still don’t.

But this might be all I need.

He doesn’t realize Hershel has stopped until he’s aware of new movement and new voices, and he tunes himself back in time to realize that they’ve started going around the table, and he better figure out what the fuck his answer is because if they’re going clockwise it’s his turn after Maggie, and Annette—to Hershel’s left—is currently talking.

He’s only half focusing on what Annette is saying, but he gets the gist. That it’s been a good year, that they’re all together and happy. Hershel has the book Beth mentioned—a small notebook not unlike what he’s imagined her journal might be—he’s nodding, writing it down. Maggie next: Maggie is thankful that she’s met Glenn, and she smiles and blushes when she says this, and the latter is something Daryl somehow doubts she does very often. Hershel glances up at this, and Daryl catches the hint of his own smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.
He still doesn’t know what he’s going to say.

Then it’s his turn.

It’s easy. Should be simple. Say a thing, make it sound okay, make it a coherent collection of words, and shut up. This does not have to be and should not be a complicated thing, or a thing to be terrified of. Yet he is—he’s frozen and his mouth is not cooperating, and even if it was it wouldn’t make any difference because his brain is rocking back and forth in a corner of his skull with its face in its hands and whimpering, and is therefore unlikely to be helpful.

Not because there’s nothing. But because oh fucking Christ, where the hell does he start.

Everything changed. Everything fucking changed and I couldn’t stop it and it just kept going, and I lost some things but I have more than I ever thought was even remotely possible and I know things and I can do things and I’m not nobody and I’m not nothing and I’m not some redneck asshole who ruins everything and I’m not a creep and I’m not a jerk, and I can be a good man, I can… and maybe that was always true. And now nothing is the same and it never will be the same again, and it’s still so scary and I still don’t know how to live in the world but I’m thankful. I’m thankful for all of it. Every second of it. Everything.

Her. I’m thankful for her. But also everything.

Because it’s all precious.

He clears his throat, looks down at his hands where they rest useless on either side of his plate. At the scraps of gravy-soaked turkey, remaining globs of sweet potato. Biscuit crumbs. A stray length of green bean. Stuff. Things.

He can clear his throat, so maybe he can do more with it. And it should be simple.

And maybe it is.

He raises his eyes and there she is, sitting diagonal to him at Hershel’s right, and she’s looking at him. Not any differently than any of the others, except she is. He’s seen that look before, so many times. That sweetly coaxing look. But firm. Unyielding.

You should do this, and you can.

“I’m here,” he says softly, gruffly, and he meets her gaze and blinks hard, looks down again. “I’m here. That’s… Guess that’s all.”

Quiet murmur around the table, the scratch of Hershel’s pen, and everything moves on. He doesn’t hear what Carol says—for which he feels guilty later but can’t figure out how to ask her. He doesn’t really hear anyone else. He’s sitting there and he’s basking in Beth’s warmth, radiating to him from across the jumbled collection of mostly empty serving dishes, the half-picked carcass of the turkey. Bathing him like sun.

He’s made her happy, and he doesn’t have to see her face to know it. But it’s not only her. He did it. He can.

So he’s happy also.

When they get to her, she says she’s thankful to be here too.
They all get up, stack a mountain of plates in the kitchen, and head back to the parlor for dessert and coffee and tea. A couple of extra chairs are pulled closer to the fire along with a wooden coffee table bearing dishes and pie. Daryl and Carol are sitting side by side on a small worn cream-colored settee, just the two of them, and he’s freshly conscious of how it looks and freshly grateful to her for being there. Her shoulder nudges his as she sips her coffee, his knee now and then bumping hers, and the moments of contact are like anchors. He’s not floating. He’s grounded.

He gazes across the semi-circle they’ve all made, at Beth—a second or two of eye contact, something that might well be accidental—and catches a smile playing around her mouth that he knows is totally for him.

He ducks his head. He’s almost gotten through this. It’s okay. More than okay. It’s…

It’s been nice.

But then Beth gets up, goes to a corner by a tall bookshelf and comes back with her guitar, and he remembers what they haven’t yet done. What they’re doing now.

Well, that’s fine. He can listen. By now he’s very good at listening.

There’s no real introduction, and in fact it doesn’t begin with Beth or the guitar. Annette sets down her tea and rises, goes to the nearby piano and takes a seat. Hershel follows her but doesn’t sit on the long bench beside her; he stands, one hand on the piano’s glossy top, as Annette begins a soft melody adhering to a slow and steady rhythm. When she and Hershel start to sing it’s also soft, and where Annette’s voice is sweet—though not as sweet or as clear as Beth’s—Hershel’s is low and slightly wavering. But there’s strength under it. And there’s strength in the words, and in how their voices join to form them.

sweet is the day of sacred rest
no mortal care shall seize my breast
oh, may my heart in tune be found
like David’s harp of solemn sound

then shall I see and hear and know
all I desired and wished below
and every power find sweet employ
in that eternal world of joy

The song dies away. Glenn appears as if he’s about to applaud, pauses, sees that no one else is and drops his hands into his lap and clearly tries to not appear sheepish. Maggie gives him a sidelong look, equal parts sharp amusement and affection.

Yeah, the kid will be fine.

At the table, events proceeded in a circular fashion. There’s no circle here. There’s no order to anything that Daryl can see. People seem to be moving as they’re moved. Beth picks up the guitar and she and Annette and Shawn fall into a wistful ballad about a soldier and a fair maiden who would rather not talk to him.

you’re not a man of a noble honor
you’re not the man I had taken you to be
or you wouldn’t impose on a single lady
who your bride can never be

The fire is burning down. Shawn builds it back up again, and then abruptly everyone’s attention swings toward Glenn. He looks around with widening eyes, looks at Maggie, swallows, and for the span of a second Daryl half expects him to bolt from the room. But Maggie grins and takes his hand.

“C’mon. We can do one, we were listenin’ in the car. You know which one I mean.”

Glenn glances away and back at her and is practically squirming, but he squeezes her hand and manages a smile, and he’s looking at no one but her as he and Maggie make their way through something quiet and a little halting, pretty in a strange way, prettier when Maggie lifts her voice into harmony.

\[
\text{I will write you letters that} \\
\text{explain the way I'm thinking now} \\
\text{I will return to you} \\
\text{what I have taken long before} \\
\text{I will return again} \\
\text{when it gets dark and day is done} \\
\text{and lay me down} \\
\text{in the hallowed ground} \\
\text{down by your side I will stay} \\
\text{so lay me down}
\]

Then actual applause at this, gently teasing and genuinely pleased, and Maggie laughs and pulls Glenn close and kisses him—quick but firm—and then Daryl knows without requiring gifts of prophecy or hard evidence that by the time Maggie leaves at the end of the weekend she’s going to be wearing a new piece of jewelry.

That might actually have been the question. Right there, in front of everyone, but between the two of them. Like music could be a secret language, like Beth standing in the kitchen in front of the sink and singing *let’s play hide and seek inside my bed.*

He’s seeing this and it’s so familiar, and it’s also untouchable. Out of reach.

He has coffee but he hasn’t drunk very much of it, and it’s getting cold. He doesn’t care. He thought he could listen and believed it was something he was good at, but he wasn’t ready for this, this cascade of music right here in front of him and somehow unlike anything he’s ever experienced—because when Beth sings for him it’s just *her* and it’s just *him* but this is everyone, so *much* music, and it’s so easy for them. It flows out of them without any apparent thought or effort. It doesn’t seem like they think about it at all. Even Glenn didn’t have such a hard time once he took Maggie’s hand and let her get him started. Beth has always been this way, and it makes sense that ease would come from somewhere, but now he’s immersed in it, trying to keep his head up, a knot slowly tying itself under his breastbone and the air thickening in his throat.

When Beth picks up the guitar again and sings alone, he has to take part of himself away.

It’s like the pain. Disconnection, distance. He pulls back and floats over everything, observing but not part of it. He does it without meaning to, without trying, and as he realizes what’s happening the knot in his chest jerks into a clenched fist. Because he *shouldn’t have to do this.* He should be able to be *present* for something like this, her graceful fingers moving over the strings and her head bent, her
eyes half closed, a few tendrils of loose hair tickling her cheek and jaw. Her voice, that sweet terrible voice—listening to it like this is like being naked in front of everyone.

*does life seem nasty, brutish and short*  
*come on up to the house*  
*the seas are stormy*  
*and you can’t find no port*  
*come on up to the house*

If he lets himself feel it, he doesn’t know what they might see. So this is necessary, this distance. He has to protect himself. He has to protect both of them.

But it feels like blasphemy. He has to look down at the floor, at his cheap clean boots, biting at his lower lip, the world blurring into shapeless firelight. He doesn’t know if he could tell her he’s doing this. He’s ashamed.

Then everything is quiet, and when he hears his name he raises his head and he knows—he *knows*, like watching a bullet coming at him in slow motion—what’s happening. What he’s being asked.

It’s not a big deal to them. They have songs in their bones. They can’t hear the deafening silence in his.

“You have anything?”

Annette, brightly, taking another slice of sweet potato pie. He stares at her, at everyone, their faces blurring like the world around his boots. If Carol is next to him he can’t feel her anymore. He can’t feel *anything*. The rest of him has simply drifted away into that safe distance and left him behind to cope with this fucking oncoming freight train of a question.

*Fuck’s sake, just say no. It’s not a big deal. She said it wasn’t a big deal, it’s NOT.*

But it is.

Because he can see her. She’s *all* he can see, and she’s looking at him with her beautiful doe eyes, wide and expectant. No pressure there. No sense that she’ll be disappointed if he does say no. She meant what she said; he can do whatever he wants.

But she hopes he’ll say yes.

*I don’t have anything.* That’s what Annette asked. If he did. *No. No, I have nothing.*

*I have nothing to give you.*

Except there was one thing. There was something. When he was much smaller, back in those few short days before everything got so bad, when life was almost good sometimes, when his mother would stand at the sink on an evening in early summer and do the dishes and sing. And he would be fucking around with broken toys on the grease-stained kitchen floor, playing in that aimless way a bored child plays, except now and then he would stop and listen to his mother’s cracked, tired voice. Cracked and tired—but not untuneful.

Those songs came from somewhere.

Sticky linoleum under his hands and heels, rough edge of the fractured plastic of a stegosaurus plate against his thumb, cicadas thunderous outside, drunken laughter from the next room and the TV turned up way too loud—and his mother’s voice, and a song.
And each minute of that song was a tangent universe, and within each one everything might have been different.

Or maybe it was a language. Maybe she was calling, to anyone who could hear her. Maybe she was reaching for something or someone and he was there, and she gave him something of her own. One of her pretty things.

Fighting back.

He stares down at his hands. They’re strong, ungraceful hands—thick fingers, skin cut through with scars, a new one on the left edge near the base of his thumb. Nails ragged here and there where he’s bitten them—not as much as he did, but it’s so habitual that he doesn’t notice it anymore. They’re not ugly, these hands, or he doesn’t think so, but they aren’t far from it.

But she took them in hers. And he knows she would take them now if she could.

He rolls a shoulder. But it’s not a no. He knows the words, he remembers the melody—it was sweet and sad, it was aching, and it’s still inside him, all still there. Making its way through all his cracks like shafts of late autumn sunlight.

He’s not silent. He has this. He opens his mouth—

And it’s her. It’s only her. Everything else vanishes and it’s just them alone, together, looking at each other across an expanse of nothing. Because there are these moments where you look at someone and you can see only them, and you never want to see anyone else for the rest of your life.

And he couldn’t stop it now if he tried.

one morning, one morning
one morning in May
I overheard a married man
to a young girl say

go dress you up, pretty Katie
come along with me
across the Blue Mountains
to the Allegheny

I’ll buy you a horse, love
and a saddle to ride
I’ll buy myself another
to ride by your side

we’ll stop at every tavern
we’ll drink when we’re dry
across the Blue Mountains
goes my Katie and I

they left before daybreak
on a dapple and a roan
past tall shivering pines
where the mockingbirds roam

past dark cabin windows
where eyes never see
across the Blue Mountains
to the Allegheny

He only truly hears himself after he falls silent. And she was right. She was. He doesn’t sound bad. His voice isn’t unlike his mother’s—rough, low, clearly untrained and not used much, not for this, but there’s something in it. A spine.

A bone.

Then the world is fading back in, light and focus, and suddenly panic grips him—because he was looking at her. He was looking at her, at her and no one else, and he was singing that, and fuck, fuck, did they see something? Did they see him? Did he break it all open, spill it all over the floor? Did he give them away? Fuck, he must have, they must have seen. They must have noticed. Annette and Hershel might be a tad bit oblivious, but they aren’t stupid, and they aren’t blind.

And they aren’t deaf.

But like at the table, people are murmuring approvingly. Like it’s nice but it’s not a big deal, not a bigger deal than anything else anyone has done. Hershel is nodding. Annette is smiling at him, carving off a forkful of pie. Carol is squeezing his hand. Beth is smiling too. But it’s that same smile, the one from before.

The one just for him.

~

The evening winds down. Outside, the darkness is deepening. It’s getting on to six. No one is sending any actual pressure in Daryl’s direction, no one seems to actively want him and Carol to leave, but he figures they probably should all the same. He offers to help Annette with the cleanup; she waves him off. That’s why she had children. She’ll be fine.

She gives him leftovers. A lot of them. There’s no way in hell he’d turn them down.

When he takes the tupperware from her, his hands aren’t even shaking anymore. So this hasn’t been completely horrible.

It was good. Weirdly. He almost fell apart—kind of did—but he’s pretty sure no one saw it. Maybe not even her. Maybe she couldn’t tell how close he came to ruining everything. It was hard for him to do what he did because it could never be anything else. That’s all.

Except it’s not. Standing in the front hall and catching glimpses of her in the parlor clearing plates and coffee cups away, he knows something else has happened. Something big. He doesn’t know quite what, but something in him is unlocked and open wide, and what’s emerging can’t be put back.

He didn’t merely succeed in doing a thing he was afraid of. He changed. Again. Or he found something that had always been there, like hidden ruins. And he doesn’t think she understood the language he fell into using. He doesn’t think she understood what—without ever meaning to—he was asking her.

What he doesn’t actually want.
He’s confused. He’s tired. Part of him hurts. He wants to go home. Carol can sense it, or some of it, and as they put on their coats and head for the door she’s studying him, brows drawn together. He hopes she doesn’t ask. Not because he doesn’t want to tell her—though to be honest it’s not what he would prefer—but because he’s not sure how he would.

There may simply be no words for this. No arrangement in which they could get the job done.

They say their assorted goodbyes, brief ones to Maggie and Glenn and Shawn. Beth catches his eye on the way to the kitchen, waves, passes on. Annette hugs him, Hershel shakes his hand. They’re glad he could come. It was good to meet Carol. Have a safe drive back. Happy Thanksgiving. Goodnight.

Okay.

Cold wind washes across them as they step out onto the porch. It’s getting dark, sure, but there’s also a bizarre quality to the darkness, the low cloud, and in fact it’s getting light. When they make their way down the steps and toward the truck, he glances up and understands.

Tiny cold points of contact on his brow, his cheeks, his chin. His eyelids, when he closes them. Tiny frozen fingertips.

The snow has come.

Chapter End Notes

The psalm Hershel reads is Psalm 104: 10-24 (King James Version). It’s not one of the more well-known psalms, I think, but it’s lovely and it fit.

The hymn Hershel and Annette sing is "Sweet is the Day", but I first knew it as "Devotion" from Sam Amidon’s wonderful album Lily-O. It’s beautiful. If you want to know what it sounds like, here it is.

Beth, Annette, and Shawn sing an old folk song called "Pretty Fair Damsel." Maggie and Glenn sing "Lay Me Down" by The Frames. Beth sings "Come On Up to the House" by Tom Waits.

And the song Daryl sings is "Blue Mountains", an Appalachian folk song. There are many versions of it, but his version is here. It’s gorgeous, and when I say it aches, it fucking aches. It’s probably the best auditory representation for his emotions right now that you could get.

The video is also beautiful. It has a feel that matches this story eerily well. Seriously, the girl should just be Emily Kinney.

I need more people to love Sam Amidon with me. Sam Amidon and his weird Kermit the Frog voice.
Okay. So this is the first of the last five chapters (The Final Five, as I've come to think of them; thank you, Battlestar Galactica). The one after this is written; I won't be posting it immediately but I will post it soon.

The final three chapters won't be posted in a single block, as I was intending, but they'll follow in very rapid succession, over a period of no more than three days.

I'm not sure what to say at this point except what I'll be saying again probably more than once, which is that this is a much more emotional thing than I was expecting, and a much more wrenching thing (there has been crying). I can't tell you how much I don't want to finish this. At the same time, I recognize that it has to end and what's coming is the right ending. This could never be a story that wandered or explored something long-term (and it has gone for so much longer than I expected). One way or another, this was always a road that had a final destination. A terminus, if you will.

Stories end.

I know a number of people are simply holding off until the whole thing is wrapped. I know - or I gather, from what's been said - that a number of other people are tremendously anxious about how this is all going to turn out. All I can tell you is what I've said before: you need to remember what kind of story this is.

At the same time, you can't fully know what kind of a story it is until it's finished. This is where faith comes in.

As usual I continue to be absolute crap about responding to comments. But as has been true from the beginning: I can't tell you how much it means to me that you've come this far with me. Truly.

I hope you'll come with me just a little further.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Read me somethin’.”

Daryl turns, rolls onto his side and looks down both his body and hers at her lazy smile, her head propped on her hand, and as he watches her she lifts a foot and the soft shimmer of her pastel purple nail polish seizes his vision as she nudges his cheek with her big toe. He makes a face, grabs for and tweaks it, and she laughs and drops back into the embrace of the pillows, the late afternoon sun spilling over her as generously as it always does.

Lazy Saturday, lazy as her smile—at least the latter part of it. Family visiting means family time, but she was able to get away for the evening, and she thinks she can wrangle it into a sleepover. Possibly not, but to the extent that she can do so without being suspicious, she’ll try.

Things feel better. The contents of his chest and gut are sitting easier since Thursday night. But he
hasn’t talked to her about it, and she hasn’t asked, and he’s not sure whether it’s because she can sense he’s not totally comfortable with what happened or simply because she’s waiting for him to decide how he wants to bring it up. Or both.

But he is sure that she knows it was a thing. A Thing. Proper noun. Unspecified and nevertheless quite specific.

Regardless.

She got here. Things happened—things that don’t need to be proper nouns. Delightful things that went slowly and easily and ended with him kissing and biting gently at her neck as she came apart sitting in the cradle of his loosely folded legs, her own slung over his hips, arms around his neck and their bodies flush and her clit finding the perfect friction against him. Never done it quite like that before. Will have to do it again.

There’s still so much he hasn’t done.

Now they’re sprawled all over the place, very decadent, and somehow his head ended up next to her feet, his own next to hers. For the last half hour he’s been lying on his stomach and reading, one hand stroking up and down her smooth bare leg as she dozes in the winter sun.

Thursday and what he did and the whole bizarre heaviness has lifted away, and there’s only her and the bed, and light. It’s simple again. Always was, really.

Apparently now she’s awake. Awake and grinning at him.

He looks at her, amused, marking his place with his thumb. “Why the fuck should I do that?”

“’cause I can kick you in the face?” She laughs and arches her back, the little curves of her breasts flowing gracefully up and down into the bumps of her ribs, her nipples flushed a specific shade of pink that sets his fingertips tingling. “’cause you love me and you wanna give me what I want.”

“That’s what you think?”

“That’s what I know.” She pushes up on one elbow and fixes him with an abruptly serious gaze, her hair a golden tangled glory around her head. “C’mon. Read me somethin’. Anythin’.”

He closes the book, lays it down and settles his hand over her knee, squeezes and begins trailing his fingertips up and down the inside of her thigh. She jerks, giggles, and everything inside him whirls ecstatically around itself. “What’s in it for me?”

As if this wasn’t about twenty times more than enough.

Again, she nudes his cheek with her toe—more of a caress this time. Despite her giggling, her expression has retained a solemn quality, and even though her legs are parting wider, he doesn’t think what she’s going to say is about what’s waiting for him between them.

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want.” His fingertips drift up to the jut of her hipbone before he can’t go any farther, then back down and just clear of the soft curls of her bush. “I’ll do mine, you do yours.”

She lowers herself with a quiet, happy hum, her own hand on his thigh. “What d’you wanna hear?”

“Anythin’.”
“So you’ll do it?” She smiles at the ceiling, her eyes closed—brilliant. Her whole body glowing. Outside it’s dropped below freezing, despite the sun, but in here it’s all warm, a ghost of summer. In here they can lie in this bed he made for them and claim a tiny piece of everything for themselves, construct a world in which, for a while, nothing else can touch them. That’s what he wanted this place to be, that’s what he’s made it, and now she’s here in it with him and despite his teasing he would do anything for her. Give anything. Anything she wanted, as much as she wanted, for as long as she wanted, and afterward he would simply look for more to give her. He doesn’t have much to give her, but he’ll give her whatever he has.

She knows it. She knows he’s hers. He’s his, at last and finally, his and his alone, and she knows that too, but the fact remains.

He’s hers.

He kisses her ankle. “For a song.”

“For a song,” she echoes dreamily, her fingers drawing abstract designs on the side of his calf. “Yes.”

He picks up the book again and thumbs through it.

He hasn’t marked individual pages. He hasn’t needed to. As he’s learned this book, he’s learned where his favorites are, and it’s not uncommon for him to stumble on new ones. Not unfamiliar ones, but lines and words he reads in a new way—unsurprising, given that he’s a different man every time he reads them. So lately different ones have been moving forward in his mind, taking hold of him in ways they didn’t before, and yes: there is one. There’s a specific one. He read it on Thursday night, read it with the wind howling its last outside, and as he finished it the wind died and everything went quiet, and when he turned off the light and tugged back the curtains and stared out the window the world was bright and soundless.

There is this one. The page whispers into place and her listening is like her hand in his, their fingers threaded.

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

He falls silent. She doesn’t speak. For a moment—a very strange moment—he wonders if he’s upset her somehow. If this isn’t what she wanted. If it hit her in some wrong way, or he’s disturbed her with the subject matter. Which makes no sense, and in the moment after he knows that, but his diaphragm clutches and he opens his mouth to ask if she’s all right, and raises his head.

And sees her gazing up into the light with tears shining in her eyes.

“Beth?”

“I’m okay.” She wipes at her face and smiles, and he’s seen that smile—not often but he’s seen it. When she smiles through her tears it’s like the sun shining through rain, and he wants to push himself up and go to her, wrap himself around her, but he can’t move. His muscles won’t obey him. “I just… I dunno what to sing.”

“You don’t have to sing anythin’.”

“I want to.”

Finally the control of his limbs is returned to him, but he doesn’t reorient himself. That’s not what he’s chosen. He sets the book aside and rolls in close to her, hand on her thigh, and presses his lips to her ankle again. “I’ll make you sing.”

He didn’t think about this before and he doesn’t think about it now. It’s perfectly natural, like falling into water, into the grass, into bed. It takes none of his conscious effort. He feels himself sinking into her, pulled and pulling, closing a hand over her ankle—where his lips were—and closing his lips around her toe, stroking her with the flat of his tongue, holding on when she twitches and releases another tight giggle which drops into a soft moan. Of course it feels good. Of course he could put his mouth here. He can put it anywhere he wants and he does, perfectly focused, licking and sucking his way over her feet, kissing along her fine bones to the knobs of her ankles as his hands glide across her skin. And he suddenly remembers one of those lovely, aching afternoons that came after he understood how much and in what way he wanted her—but before she did—and sitting with her in the grass and looking at her bare feet. Thinking about kissing her toes one by one and knowing it was impossible. It could never happen.
Now she’s singing. Breathy and light, she’s singing for him and it’s beautiful. He smiles against her shin and keeps moving.

She must know where he’s headed long before he gets there, because her legs are spreading wider and she’s angling herself to be open to him, grooping at his hips and sighing his name. He’s dragging his mouth up the hot skin above her knee and biting carefully at her, smelling her, seeing her, the slick sheen on the insides of her thighs and her dark folds, and her sigh sharpens into a whimper as he kisses her there, the nub of her clit thrumming under his lips.

Sing, Beth. Sing for me.

She does. He doesn’t have very much to give her but he gives her his mouth, his lips and his tongue, light scrapes of his teeth, and he gives them to her so deep and firm and slow until she’s clutching at his hair and sending ragged moans down to him, half formed versions of his name, and he licks her juices in and laughs against her—and even if he didn’t expect it, it’s no surprise whatsoever when he feels her hand closing around the base of his cock and her warm, wet mouth taking him in, her tongue dancing over his head and down his shaft, and he pushes deeper into her at the same moment she rolls her cunt against his face.

It’s a duet, he thinks somewhat whimsically as he moans with her, holding onto her and being held, swirling his tongue over her and feeling the same. They’re doing this in harmony, drawing each other up higher and higher as they chase more of each other, catch, dance, intertwine. How soaked she is, so sweet down his throat when he swallows her, knowing that she’s lapping him up and loving it just as much. It should have always been like this; he should never have been afraid of taking something for himself. He should never have believed he couldn’t give and take at the same time.

Only it’s not even giving or taking. It’s a single flow through both of them, rushing faster and heavier, an oncoming tide, a wave toward which they’re running hand in hand, and it’s so easy and so good, and he hears her muffled cry and feels her start to shudder and flood onto his eager tongue as he stiffens and wrenches and releases into her with a sob.

And then more laughing. Holding each other so tight, licking at the taste and kissing every inch of skin they can reach as everything subsides back into that warm summer ghost, all so bright. Like stone towers glittering with flecks of mica, like the gleam of hidden marble. Like water under the moon. Like the grass into which they keep falling, in the sunlight and moonlight and starlight, keeping it for them until they can return. Like fresh snow.

She was always singing. She can’t not. The songs are in her bones.

They’re in his too. They always were.

The sun is sinking into the trees when they open his door and step out into a new world.

Not new to them, not now. It was new that night when he looked out his window at it: a blanket of snow that turned out to be a good three inches deep. The roads were all cleared fairly quickly, the ones that even needed much clearing, but it’s been cold since then and nothing has melted. There’s been no wind since the storm ended; the last of the snow fell afterward and clung to branches and
roofs, everywhere it could get purchase, and it’s still there. Where no one has walked or driven or shoveled it away, it’s pristine.

They aren’t perfectly weather-equipped, walking down the stairs in their regular boots with only their coats as additional protection—taking particular care not to slip; he managed to get his hands on some salt but even so—but they don’t care. Cold iron under their bare fingers, the ache of it—it makes her gasp and shake her hand, laughing again, and when she reaches the bottom she runs away from him across the lawn toward the street. He watches her go, her hair streaming out behind her, tossing a glance over her shoulder with that wild, incandescent smile, and his heart soars with agony and joy and a hundred things he’ll never be able to name.

She’s so beautiful. And she’s so young. For a while she made him feel almost that young again. Except there was no again.

He never felt young before her.

He follows her to the truck.

~

Five miles outside of town, the sun throwing itself across the snowy fields in a strange, gentle crimson, she rolls the window down. It’s freezing but he doesn’t ask her what the hell she’s doing; she throws her head back and sings, her hand arcing through the air, red with cold. He doesn’t remember turning the radio on but it’s on all the same, a song he knows well by now. It keeps coming back.

Put your arms around me, what you feel is what you are and what you are is beautiful.

And of course there are the lines that come after those. Do you want to get married, run away. But they no longer matter. He asked her that question. He didn’t mean to, and he doesn’t think she understood, and it wasn’t exactly that, but he did.

He’s not going to ask it again.

They take the road past the farm, hurtling down it. He checks the speedometer and they aren’t going any faster than normal but he feels like they’re flying—like how she drove him the night he finished the wing, him high on endorphins and arousal and on her, the night so big and the sky so huge. It’s not night yet but night is coming, and they don’t have a lot of time if they’re going to get this started right.

They’ve been here in the night before, in the dark. But that was different.

He swings them into the turnoff and they slow as they bump and rattle over the gravel and then the rougher road, dirt and the knobs of roots, protruding stones. The field is a stretched white sheet to their right, streaks of it stained red, the shadows of naked tree branches extending across it like those clichéd reaching fingers. But they aren’t unfriendly, and neither is the deeper forest that swallows them when he bears left and starts down the slight and steepening incline.

This place knows them.

He stops when it gets too steep and they get out. She grabs the thick blanket he tossed in for this
purpose, and when her back is turned he grabs something else—two things. The jar of moonshine, and a plastic bag wrapped around something small and oblong.

He bought it from Aaron with the curtains. He wasn’t certain why at the time. He had no obvious reason for needing it. But something about it caught his attention and held it fast, and he couldn’t leave it there. He would find some use for it, he was sure, and now he has. Because he doesn’t know what Beth Greene wants for Christmas, and he doesn’t have much to give her, but this seems right.

And it’s not Christmas. But it’s the last day of November. That has a meaning too.

The slope is slippery and they move down it with extreme care, finding secure footholds before proceeding with the next step. Getting back up might be an adventure—getting up is always more difficult than people think it’s going to be. But he feels ready for an adventure, and anyway they negotiate it just fine and only stumble a bit when they hit the level ground of the bank.

He looks around, looks toward the ruins. The creek is running too fast to have frozen, but the calmer pools made by collections of stones are crusted at the edges with ice. The snow seems to have clung even more heavily to the trees here, capped the stone towers and collected on the broken walls and tiny ledges formed by decades of slow erosion.

It’s all white and clean and still, and bright even in the gathering dark.

But it’s not pristine. There’s a set of footprints from where they’re standing leading through the archway and into the big room beyond, and she glances at him and gives him a single nod.

He was out here as soon as she told him what she wanted to do. She couldn’t get away, so he came and prepared it for her. He thinks he did well.

He takes her cold hand in his and leads her through.

Beyond the arch in the center of the open space is a wide circle of stone surrounding a depression in the earth, and a pile of thick branches and kindling. It wasn’t difficult and it didn’t take him long; some of the wood he bought—and getting it down the slope was definitely an adventure—but most of it he was able to scavenge, and the ruins and the creek themselves gave him the stones. On Friday he worked through the better part of the afternoon, no gloves, hands stiff and raw. He could have worn some, but he wanted to feel it. The chill. The roughness of the stones, the harsh wet of the snow melting on his fingers, the cracked and flaking bark. Dirt packed under his fingernails.

You touch things and you make them real.

They stop in front of the circle, her with the blanket over her arm and him with his jar and his plastic-wrapped package. It feels like a Moment, and he takes a breath, glances at her.

“Y’alright?”

He had worried, a tiny bit. Because of what this is, what she’s doing. This is her place, and it’s been untouched for so long. Now she apparently wants to scar it. Not permanently, because nothing is permanent, but for a while.

But he has scars. So does she. Not all of them are the kind you can see.

The world is deep with scars.

She nods, steps forward and takes her own breath. “It’s perfect.” She looks back at him with a sweet little smile and he doesn’t feel the cold at all. “Thank you.”
He nods, looks down for the briefest of seconds. It’s good to be told thank you, to have such direct
evidence that he’s pleased her, but it’s also retained its essential strangeness. The performance of
these acts is pleasure in itself. She’s thanking him for something in which he takes joy, regardless.
Something for which he feels he might want to thank her.

“Know where I got the idea?”

He lifts his gaze to her, shakes his head. She’s no longer looking at him. All her attention is on the
pile of wood, and her head is uncovered, her hair pulled back and tumbling from its ponytail. Silver,
like it was the first night she took him into herself. Straddled and rode him and they flew together.

The last of the sun is fading but the moon is rising, a few days past its full. It streams through the
trees, and like she always does, she soaks it into herself and keeps it, radiates it like it’s her own.

Draws it down.

“Becca again. Or she started it. She got me curious about witches, I looked some stuff up. There’s
somethin’ some of them do in one of the celebrations they have. It was supposed to be in the fall,
but… Well, I liked it.”

She steps closer, her hands clasped in front of her, and he watches her because he can’t see anything
else anymore.

“They build this bonfire. Then they write down somethin’ they wanna get rid of, somethin’ in
themselves they wanna let go of. They throw it into the fire, and that… It helps. Helps it happen. It’s
like startin’ over.” She lifts her head. “I wanna do it. With you.”

She turns back to him, so solemn and so beautiful he almost can’t keep his feet. But he can move his
hands and he sets what he’s carrying down in the snow, and he’s reaching into his pocket for his
lighter at the same moment she’s reaching her own coat and pulling out pens and a couple of slips of
paper. In unison. As if their bodies agreed something for which they didn’t need words.

He holds out the lighter. “You wanna?”

She flashes him a grin that seems to come from her very core and takes it from him. “Hell yeah.”

He picks up the moonshine and moves past her, unscrews the lid, upturns it and spills what’s left
over the kindling. Steps back, and she gives him one of the slips of paper.

He doesn’t have to think. He thought he might, but it’s not necessary. It’s something he’s been trying
to let go of since this all began, maybe before, and he doesn’t think paper and a fire is going to finish
the job, but it might be another step in the right direction.

He writes against his palm—clumsy but it’s not like it matters—folds it up and hands it to her. She
takes it without a word, holds his and hers both between her fingers, flicks the lighter into flame and
transfers it to what she’s holding.

She tosses it onto the kindling and it ignites with a soft wompf and spreads, licking its way over and
up the wood, drunk on the moonshine. Consuming.

Like that also was an offering.

He thinks about what’s beyond this, waiting in the trees like it’s been waiting for who knows how
fucking long. Who the fuck knows how much longer it’ll be there. He made offerings to that, too.
Not meaning to, but he did all the same. His words, his rage and his desperation. Then, later, his
pleasure. Hers. Letting her take his cock into her mouth, letting her love him that way. Loving her. Possibly the offering that damn thing always wanted most of all.

Beth shakes out the blanket and shifts nearer to him, and as she covers both their shoulders he feels her fingers brushing his. Curving against them, wrapping, threading. She squeezes at the same moment he does, and they stand there, hand in hand like children, watching the fire burn.

“You don’t have to tell me what you wrote,” she murmurs, but he already has the words and he’s already speaking, and he wants to. Something he’s learned is that if he doesn’t have his own words, that’s all right. He can use someone else’s if they do what he needs to do.

*I want to be afraid of nothing*, he whispers, *as though I had wings.*

He doesn’t have to see her smile to know it’s there. He can feel it like the fire.

“How did you know?”

*Because I love you.*

The flames seem to touch the moon. For all he knows, they do.

~

They stay as long as they can, together in the snow in silence, watching the fire die down and the moon rise. Then they have to leave, so they do.

They always have to leave.

But before they walk away, the blanket once more slung over her arm, he bends, and what he picks up isn’t the moonshine jar. It’s the package, plastic crackling in the stillness, and he holds it out to her without a word.

She blinks at it, looks up at him. “What’s that?”

He still doesn’t speak. Proffers it, nodding. Clearly bemused, she takes it. Unwraps it. And stops, cradling it in her hands, gazing down at it as wordless as he was.

It’s pale in the moonlight, but in the day it would be a tawny color, like the coat of a lion. A small sheath containing an equally small knife, all of it pleasantly worn, none of it new. When he first held it, he knew it was one of those objects that has a story, and it felt almost as if it wasn’t even from here. As if it began its story somewhere else, and has now entered their story because it’s time for it to do so.

He swallows. It’s not that he’s nervous. It’s not that he’s afraid she won’t like it. He just thinks she might not know *what* to make of it.

She draws the knife from the sheath and merely stares at it for a moment or two, then lifts her eyes again, and her smile…

Tiny. But it comes from somewhere so deep, and looking at her now, he knows she might understand even better than he does.
“It’s beautiful.”

He lets out a breath, closes his eyes for a second. “Call it an early Christmas present.”

“How?”

He shrugs. *I unno.*

“How,” she says softly, turning the knife so the moonlight gleams off the blade. In flashes it looks vaguely unreal—not so strange for this place, and not really so strange for this thing—and his focus is as utterly locked onto it as hers is, nearly entranced.

Knives are supposed to be objects that cut and injure and kill, dismember. Destroy. Even usefully. But it doesn’t feel like that to him. It feels like something else. Especially in her hands.

Then she slips it back into its sheath and the enclosed pocket of time is open and gone.

“Thank you,” she says again, lays her hand against his cheek and pushes up on her toes, kisses him. Her lips are cool but the kiss itself is warm and gentle and sweet, and too fleeting. Too soon she’s pulling away from him, bending to slide the knife into her boot.

He has a quick flash of anxiety—they might wonder where she got it from—but there are probably a host of ways she could explain it. She buys stuff for herself. Why shouldn’t she?

If he has to worry about something, it’s not that.

He shakes himself, glances around. Touches her shoulder. “Time to go.”

They kick snow over the low coals until the last of the glow fades into the night. They turn and pass back through the arch, and as they cross over the snow-covered stone walkway and climb slowly up the slope, neither of them looks back. The moon sends their shadows out before them, dark on white. That down there was yet another goodbye, putting something else to sleep for the winter. Ahead is where they have to look now.

Much later, lying in the soft night he made for them and holding her tight in his arms, he sees those shadows again, painted on the inside of his eyelids.

Those were their last days as children. Now comes December and the winter, and these are the first days of something new.

*Chapter End Notes*

Poetry is Mary Oliver’s "When Death Comes" and "Starlings in Winter" (what Daryl says at the fire); the song is of course "Slide" by the Goo Goo Dolls.
the freezing sky with its depths of light

Chapter Notes

Not a whole lot to say. Just another thank you. As I write this I'm approaching the final chapter, and it feels good. It feels like I'm exactly where I need to be.

Almost done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The cold doesn’t go anywhere. So neither does the snow.

Life goes on mostly as normal—as much as it can. The roads are fully clear by Monday, albeit still icy in patches. Daryl has seen places thrown into wild panic by a couple of inches of snow, but this town seems considerably calmer, as if somehow they’ve all had more chance to get used to it. Or possibly the floods of summer were toughening enough that none of them are fazed now by a little extra unexpected precipitation, in whatever form.

Maggie and Glenn go in the early evening, a bit after dinner. Their leavetaking is emotional. This is because, fifteen minutes before they were scheduled to walk out the door, Glenn seized his moment —nothing particularly extraordinary, no grand gesture, maybe just the moment he finally screwed up his courage and wasn’t going to waste it—and got down on one knee right there in the parlor, right on the threadbare oriental rug, and produced the ring and asked his question.

Daryl wasn’t there. He had gone home. He heard all about it later. He can imagine—Maggie kissing Glenn, hugging him, crying, laughing, Annette doing the same, Beth smiling wide as she ever has, Shawn shaking Glenn’s hand, Glenn’s dazed grin and Hershel looking, if not outright pleased, at least content with the situation.

He imagines it. It’s very clear. He imagines it and he sets it into a tableau, circles slowly it in his mind and takes it in and studies every part of it. It’s very sweet. It’s very pretty. It’s very nice.

It’s very not him.

This is something else Thanksgiving made clear to him, if it hadn’t been clear before—and it had been, pretty much. For a while he thought maybe he could stop being such a tourist in that world, make a place for himself in it and be there. Perhaps not a real full-time residence, but a vacation house. Something. And regarding some parts of it, that may actually be true. There are parts now in which he doesn’t feel like a stranger, even if he does feel somewhat strange. But there are other parts he won’t ever share in, and it has nothing to do with not being welcomed or wanted. He was welcomed. He was wanted. It was real, and they were happy to have him there. It’s not that there’s no place for him at all.

That’s simply not who he is.

And that’s okay. He doesn’t have to be anyone other than who he is. He shouldn’t make the attempt. Every day he feels more and more himself. He suspects a great deal of what’s made his life miserable up until these last few months has been rooted in trying to be something he’s not. Thinking he’s something he’s not.
Life is too short to fuck yourself up that way.

“Gonna have a brother-in-law,” Beth says musingly. “Feels weird.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. It just does. It’s like…” She trails off into a thoughtful pause. “It’s like that part of life is real now. Like… It’s one thing when it’s other people gettin’ married. Havin’ families. But this is Maggie.” She laughs quietly. “I dunno, maybe I’m not makin’ sense.”

He rolls onto his back, his hand over the lamp making slow, fluttering shapes on the ceiling. Birds bleeding into other birds—crows, mockingbirds, juncos, starlings. Wild geese. “Do you ever?”

“Jerk.”

“Not a creep, though?”

“No,” she says softly, and there’s something bittersweet in her voice that he can’t name and can’t explain. Except he feels it. He feels it as if it had its source in him, curled into his throat, resting in the cage of his ribs. “I should go.”

“Alright.” He’s tired. It’s been a long day.

But he’s not sure how well he’ll sleep. He’s been restless.

“Love you.”

“Love you, girl.”

He knows some people say that reflexively. Like goodnight or goodbye. Not that they don’t mean it, but it’s something they say without thinking. But he says it and every time he remembers the first time. Lying on blankets in the grass, moonlight drenching it and them and the broken towers of stone, the rustle of mockingbird wings—lifting her head from his chest and looking down at him, her eyes huge and deep, whispering.

I’m ready.

Tugging her hair free, letting it spill over his hands like that light. How easy it suddenly was. How effortless. Opening to her, like she was opening herself to him.

I love you.

Many things since then have been hard. But that hasn’t been one of them.

It never will be.

~

Snow here hardly ever sticks around for long. Everyone is expecting it to be gone any day—really any hour. But it doesn’t go, and it doesn’t go, and the end of Tuesday comes and if anything it seems to be settling in, a thin crust of ice across its surface having far less to do with any melting and far more to do with the stuff erecting defenses and signaling that it intends to stay for the foreseeable
future.

It’s pretty. It’s also weird. But hey: *weird* doesn’t mean what it used to. Daryl isn’t bothered. Most of the big pre-winter work is done anyway. He can roll with it, especially if Hershel can. And Hershel can.

Tuesday is bright and quiet and taking care of the cattle, assisting Shawn with the milking, taking the horses to the paddock for exercise. They like the snow; they trot and gambol and play with each other in the way horses do. He watches them for a while, and Nellie comes over and nudges him. He strokes her velvety nose and murmurs something to her that even he isn’t sure he understands.

It’s been months now, helping to take care of her along with the others; he supposes they’re kind of friends at this point. He’s never ridden her, though. He can ride but it’s been a long time. Suddenly he imagines taking her out on open ground and letting her go, letting her run as fast as she wants, flying with her like that bike. He doesn’t think she would be afraid.

Maybe Hershel will let him do it. Sometime.

~

Short conversation that night. Has to be. They’re still being careful, still not taking any unreasonable chances. The risks inherent in talking on the phone late at night are better understood now, and there’s less worrying, but even so.

So not much. No song, no poetry. Not a lot in the way of words. But before she lets him go, she catches him in the middle of a short span of quiet and murmurs, “*I know why you gave me the knife.*”

“Yeah?” He’s mildly surprised. *He* doesn’t actually know, or at last he’s not sure. He has some half formed ideas, some scraps of directed intuition, but he doesn’t *know*, and if she does he’s interested to find out. “Why?”

*“It’s kinda hard to say. I mean…”* She hesitates, clearly working through it, at least as far as the words go. *“Like when you took me out trackin’. Showed me how to use the bow. Like what I told you after, the night they arrested Carol’s husband. Someone looks at me… You know what they see.”* She laughs, wry. *“Even now that I have the scar. Just this… little girl. But you don’t see that. You see me.”*

She’s quiet for a moment, and so is he. What she’s telling him… Yes, of course that’s right. That’s exactly it. And not only that. Not only in general but in specific. She told him, he understood. He wanted her to *know* that he did.

As usual, what he did was show her.

*“I love it,”* she says softly. *“I love everythin’ you ever gave me.”*

But he doesn’t have anything to give her.

Except maybe that’s not true. Maybe that’s not true at all.
On Wednesday afternoon the clouds begin rolling in.

They aren’t heavy. They’re high and flat, moving slow. They aren’t snowclouds, nor are they the clouds of oncoming storms; those storms are long done with and won’t be back until spring. So there’s no threat there. But they leach the color out of everything and turn the world into an old movie, all white and black and shades of gray. Even Beth’s hair is touched by it, gone paler than cornsilk. It’s not like what the moon does to her, though he supposes it might be its own species of pretty.

He’s not sure what would make her unpretty. He’s not sure what could happen to her to prevent her from being the most beautiful thing he’ll ever see.

Their hands don’t find each other under the table anymore. But passing her the peas at dinner, his fingertips meet hers. There’s no spark. There’s no explosion in his nerve endings. There’s her and warm skin—a preview of when he’ll see her again.

Friday, she tells him that night. She sounds excited. Not a sleepover—can’t make that work this time and anyway they probably shouldn’t push their luck—but they’ve shifted open mic nights at the coffee shop to Fridays, and he should come hear her sing. After, she’ll be going to friend of a friend’s Let’s-Try-To-Cope-With-Inminent-Finals party, and it’ll be both big and a considerable distance from home. Not a ridiculous distance, but some way. Between forty and forty-five minutes. Different district. It won’t be attended by very many people from her school. There will be a lot going on. It’ll be sort of chaotic. He can pick her up without being noticed. Drive her most of the way back. They won’t have much time, but they can park somewhere in the dark and fuck hard and fast in the front seat, her straddling him with her dress rucked up around her waist and her lip gloss smeared shining across her face, windows fogging and the air thick with their gasping as she bounces in his lap and laughs all wild against his mouth and shoots them both over the edge like twin bolts at the sky.

She doesn’t exactly say that last. But it’s in the sudden huskiness of her voice, an exhale that’s nearly a sigh, how he can practically hear the wet sheen on her lips as she licks them.

And she does say fuck.

You can fuck me. God, Daryl, I want you to fuck me.

He moans softly and she giggles with equal softness and something close to glee.

Girl.

“It’s kinda funny,” she says before they say goodnight. “It actually seems like they’re fine with me not bein’ home so much. Bein’ out more. Mama was talkin’ the other night about how I’m the last one growin’ up. How I should be… I should be spreadin’ my wings.”

She sounds meditative. Faintly pleased. He closes his eyes and imagines her with birds in flight inked across her skin. Murmurations. Exaltations.

“You are.”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “With you.”
He has no idea what to say to that. So he says nothing. She’s never made him feel like he had to say anything anyway. All she ever wanted from him was to try. To be there. To be present.

Occupying roughly the same space.

~

Thursday the clouds remain, darker. Not low and not rapid and not ominous, but the world appears more colorless than ever. To Daryl it looks like some kind of photograph, something you see in coffee table books and calendars. *Picturesque* is the term, he supposes, because it has all the qualities of a picture. Something composed, something so general and so unspecified that it might be anywhere at any time, and might appeal to anyone for any reason.

He’s not sure he likes how it feels.

But it’s beautiful. He stands on the side of the porch and smokes and leans on the railing, looks out at the horses in the paddock cloaked in their heavy winter blankets, their breath great clouds of steam dissipating into the air. Beyond them the fields roll out white into the dark fences of the trees. The road stretches past far to his right, long and lonely. Everything is still except for in the distance across the field past the road, where a deep gray cloud rises, spreads and warps, comes together and falls back into the treetops. Starlings, murmuring.

*Tell me what you see.*

Lines. Angles. Planes. I see seasonal geometry. I see how clean and simple it looks and I’m not fooled, but it is simple, isn’t it? It’s very simple. The world is covered over. The world is stripped bare. There’s sun but who the hell knows where in the sky it is now. Who the hell knows where it’s going.

*Close your eyes. What d’you hear?*


*What about what you smell?*

Smoke. Snow. Cold. Sharp and thin.

*What d’you feel?*

He doesn’t want to leave.

He would do almost anything to be able to stay.

~

That night he dreams about a distant red light pulsing in the dark. He tries to follow it, because it’s the only light he can see, but he never gets closer. It’s always out of reach.
Then it all bursts in on him, the entire universe exploding into all-color light, light like a fist slamming directly into his brain. Light like a punch in the eyes. He should be in pain but he isn’t. He should fall back and cower, should be afraid, but he’s not.

He stands there inside it and he feels like he’s home.

Very far away, he can hear someone singing.

~

so I thought:
maybe death isn’t darkness, after all,
but so much light wrapping itself around us —
as soft as feathers —
that we are instantly weary of looking, and looking,
and shut our eyes, not without amazement,
and let ourselves be carried,
as through the translucence of mica,
to the river that is without the least dapple or shadow,
that is nothing but light — scalding, aortal light —
in which we are washed and washed
out of our bones.

~

She says he should come hear her sing.

Yes is the only answer there could ever be.

Chapter End Notes

Poem is Mary Oliver's "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field".
try to hit the brakes and you slide

Chapter Notes

Here we go.

I'll try to post these reasonably quickly. That said, I want to make very careful editing passes, and I start teaching tomorrow, so we're not talking, like, within hours of each other. Expect the next chapter sometime tomorrow, probably not late. To steal from Lupe Fiasco, I know that irritates and you have my sympathies.

I'll be posting an afterword/post-mortem/sign-off with the final chapter and I'll have things to say to you there that I hope you will read, but here and now, as we prepare to go the last mile, let me just grab what I said from this post:

Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you, you made this such an incredible thing. You were inspiring. You helped keep me going. I don’t think this would have been nearly as good without you. Thank you for having faith in me, thank you for caring enough to say things - regardless of what they were. Thank you.

And I’m not, like, demanding comments, but if you do read all the way to the end, please tell me what you thought. If this meant anything to you, please tell me so. You don’t know how happy it makes me. It’s not just I AM SO GREAT I AM SO GREAT EVERYBODY LOVES ME I AM SO GREAT; it’s that I love this and it makes me so damn happy to share it with people. Like sharing anything you love, regardless of whether or not you had a hand in making it. Like why fandoms happen in the first place.

Finally, to those of you coming to this story after it's all done and posted: You may be tempted to skim to the end of the last chapter to see if the ending is happy. I can't stop you from doing that and you should read however you want. But let me request that you not do so. Let me request that you read this the way it was written - one word at a time, in order, until the final one.

Which means you have to take my hand and trust me, and trust in what kind of story this is. Whether or not you can do that is something only you can answer.

Thank you, again. So much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s been a while since he’s been here to see her. But when he walks in it’s like nothing has changed. Different day, sure, and perhaps that might draw some different people—though that’s probably unrealistic in a town where there’s a pretty limited number of things to do on a Friday night—but in the low light it looks like the same crowd as the last time he was here, the same people and the same number, and aside from the winter coats all over the place and the boot-slush in front of the door, no time might have passed at all.

Except it’s also very warm, warm in a way only external cold allows for, and the windows are fogging up. There are a lot of winter coats but no one is wearing any of them, and they’re strewn all
over, tossed on chairs and over the backs of the couple of sofas, making everything look lumpy and somehow formless.

He doesn’t take his own coat off. Something about doing so feels like exposure. Maybe later if he really gets uncomfortable, but for now he makes his way to the barista—the one he knows, the Perceptive one—and she gives him a quick smile and puts through what he wants without him having to ask.

Black, absolutely scalding. Bitter and painful. Once that would have made him darkly amused. Now he thinks it’s straight-up funny. Still kind of dark, but he can look back on it with amusement and also a strange affection for that person.

That person was doing the best he could.

Whenever he’s come in here before he’s hugged the back, kept to the more shadowy corners of the place—without, he thinks, being creepy about it. He’s not actually lurking or anything. Which is good, because someone his age who looks like he does should under no circumstances lurk. Especially not given what he’s here for.

That big, pretty girl with the banjo and the pleasantly rough voice is up on the small stage. He hasn’t seen her for a while either, and he likes her and he’s glad she’s here, though her presence really makes it feel like no time has passed, makes him feel like he’s being flung back along a timeline that was already intensely weird when it was moving forward. By now he’s used to this, to feeling like linear time isn’t reliable when it comes to this entire fucking place—this bizarre pocket of what he’s always felt is an otherwise boring state—but he’s washed over by a slow wave of vertigo, not so much his inner ear as the inner rest-of-him. It’s not dizziness. It’s disorientation.

Disorientation literally means the loss of a direction. He’s not sure how or why he knows that, but he does.

Well. Whatever. He’s standing on his own two feet and the coffee is good, and he doesn’t see her yet but she’ll be here any minute and that’s even finer.

He’s been waiting for Friday since she mentioned it. In truth he was waiting for it before that. He’s mostly stopped, but now and then he measures his life in weeks; that’s another thing that hasn’t changed.

In some ways it’s surprising how little truly has.

He listens to the girl with the banjo, its pleasant, tuneful jangle and the equally pleasant grit of her voice. Though the song she’s launching into is different from the last—there’s something sharp about it, something jabbing, almost angry. The banjo no longer jangles; to him it sounds like tiny explosions of music bursting light brighter than the one hitting the stage.

\[
\text{she lay down in her party dress and never got up} \\
\text{needless to say she missed the party} \\
\text{she just got sad} \\
\text{then she got stuck} \\
\text{she was wincing like something brittle trying hard to bend} \\
\text{she was numb with the terror of losing her best friend} \\
\text{but we never see things change} \\
\text{we only see them end}
\]
and some vicious whispering voice
kept saying you have no choice
you have no choice

The door swings open and cold air puffs in. Heads turn—the ones near the door, nearer the back of the room where he’s standing. People closest to it shiver and pull in on themselves; tonight is even colder than it’s been, and the clouds are lower than ever. So for a moment it’s like a bubble has been pierced—not burst—and the world it kept out slips in like the point of a pin.

Then the door falls closed and she’s standing there alone with her guitar case in hand, pulling off her wool cap. She’s bundled up in a thick coat, a scarf, but as she moves forward he can see her black boots—the ones she wore with that stupid bee costume—and her skirt clinging to her legs just above the knee, solid color beneath something gauzy and semi-translucent.

A deep, rich blue—almost the exact color of his sheets. Of the bed he made for them.

He’s staring. She doesn’t even have her coat off yet and he’s staring. At her hair—very simple, resembling the plain braid-augmented ponytail she always wears, but somehow smoother, swept back in a way that seats itself well within the territory of elegant, a few tendrils falling around her face in a way that looks fetchingly artless and which he can tell is in fact very artful.

Tiny stars twinkling in her earlobes. He’s at such a distance, he shouldn’t even be able to spot them, but with her his awareness has always approached the preternatural, and if they aren’t diamonds they sure look like they could be.

She sets the case down and shrugs off her coat, unwinds her scarf, and again there’s the problem with the staring, and he really shouldn’t do that, because as he is, he could be in here for any reason. Could be in here for the coffee, could be in here to see anyone. Could be in here to see her and it wouldn’t be a huge problem; a fair number of people appear to come in to see her anyway.

But staring at her like he knows he must be? Little bit harder to excuse away.

Series of gold bangles on her wrist. Gold heart lying against her breastbone, gleaming when she turns. The dress is cap-sleeved, neckline falling in a deep scoop, patterned from the waist in a lacy texture the same shade as the skirt. The waist itself is accented with a silky ribbon pulled into a bow, the shade of early autumn moonlight, delicate and lovely between the soft flare at her hips and the tracery of the top. Hugging where he knows his hands fit so well.

He shouldn’t stare. But he has an even bigger problem, which is that he’s pretty sure his heart has literally stopped and he’s not sure he can get it going again.

She looks around. Her eyes meet his and something flickers, something like a fragment of the blunt edge of the banjo’s sound, and she looks away at the same instant he does. Like it was strained too far and snapped.

He kept his coat on and that was fine before but now he’s much, much too warm, sweating against the lining and shirt sticking to his back, blood humming under his flushing skin, between his legs but also everywhere. It’s nothing like it once was, nothing like that terrible, wonderful, helpless agony, but he is in pain, watching her pick her guitar up and head in the general direction of the front, smiling at a few people as she passes. She’s moving easily, her strides even, but something about the sway of her hips matches the hard rhythm of the song in a way he can’t entirely explain.

‘cause when I look at you I squint
you are that beautiful”
and my pussy is a tractor
and this is a tractor pull
I’m haunted by my illicit, explicit dreams
and I can’t really wake up
so I just drift in between
thinking the glass is half empty
and thinking it’s not quite full

The vertigo swells like the proverbial rising tide. He has to close his eyes against it. This is nothing like it once was, and nothing at all has changed.

The girl with the banjo is finishing up, the song tapering off into a breathy repeated chorus that falls silent a good few seconds before anyone applauds. The applause is enthusiastic but a bit startled, and Daryl wonders if it’s the first time she’s done a song quite like that.

He dimly wonders, if so, what made her decide to do it tonight. What kicked her into that gear.

He doesn’t know and he’s not going to ask her. She’s stepping down, unshouldering the strap of the banjo, and Beth is laying her things over the back of a nearby vacant chair and removing the guitar from its case, taking the single step up onto the stage.

What he recalls noticing about her, that first night he saw her step up there and begin her last-minute tuning, was how utterly at home she looked. He had also been freaking out in a new and intensely unwelcome way, looking at her and at Jimmy and at the door and wondering if it was possible to do an emergency ejection before this whole situation augered itself right into the fucking ground, but under that and under his panicky bewilderment he had simply been watching her, and he noticed how at ease she seemed. How she wasn’t especially nervous, and it also didn’t seem like she had anything to prove. She could have been standing in a full room or a nearly empty one and it would have made no difference to her.

She came to sing and be listened to, and that’s what she’s going to do. And she knows she’ll do it well. She’s comfortable in that fact, and she’s not afraid.

He knows she would sing if no one was there at all.

She’s not looking at him. She’s not looking anywhere in his direction. That’s good; he’s cooling down on his own and he can focus on her without it being a problem all over again. But as she stops her tuning and fits her fingers to the strings, flashes everyone that wide, radiant smile, the pain returns. Or the vertigo tide washes out and leaves it exposed like broken rocks.

She said she could want him without it hurting so much. He said the same. And it doesn’t hurt, not like that. But God, it does hurt. And it’s not even about wanting her. That’s not why. He looks at her now and he just… He hurts.

Because you can’t look at something this beautiful without it hurting you, a little.

She speaks into the mic. He’s still lost and he doesn’t quite make it out. That’s fine; he doesn’t need to. Whatever she’s saying is not for him, and he didn’t come to hear her talk—and he knows that she would sing if no one was here, and he knows she’s here to sing to these people, but he also knows that when she opens her mouth to do it, whatever she sings will be for him.

So she does.

The first time he heard her do this, she crashed into it and it was like running out across a field in the
sun, careless, happy in a way that knows it’s fucked and is perfectly all right with it. *I’d rather be the one who loves than to be loved and never even know*. She made the guitar laugh. He never heard anyone do anything like that before. Didn’t know it was possible. Didn’t know she was possible.

It’s not like that this time. She slides into the song, drifts—the first strum is soft and dreamy, and when her voice rises over it, it’s dreamy too. Gentle. Wistful, like she’s remembering something far in the distant past, something she won’t ever touch again. But the memory is a good one, and whatever is going on now is good too.

```
the last forty days have been rain
the sun is a prodigal one that seems bent upon
giving itself a bad name
and leaving us deep in the lurch as we walked down the lane
it’s a long time, oh such a long time
and I hope for your sake I’ve changed
and I hope for my sake you managed to remain the same

is it raining for you, raining for you now
like it’s raining for me, raining for me now
```

He’s used to words resonating, sometimes eerily. It seems to be simply another natural law of whatever weird tangent universe he’s stumbled into. But how she’s singing, her eyes closed and her face slightly uplifted, it’s for him like he knew it would be, and he doesn’t think this is some kind of accident. Nor does he think this is some kind of fate.

It’s her language.

```
you tied your old bike to a tree
came in from the weather though not yet together
I felt your hand light on my sleeve
as light as a bird that might offer a sinner reprieve
we don’t know too much, I know we don’t know too much
but love rains mysteriously
and behind every cloud is a purpose only now we can see

that it’s raining for us, raining for us now
raining for us, raining for us now
```

The song dies away. Applause—very solid, very meant, but also very gentle, as gentle as the song, as if she’s settled that feeling over them like a blanket and they’re all reluctant to throw it off. She opens her eyes, smiles that smile and gives them a bob of her head, and starts in on the next one.

If it was really the way it was then—that first time—he would run. He would surrender to the panic that churned in as a storm, when he realized the rest of the world was fading out like the song and all he could see was her. All he can see now is her, too, but he stands there, coffee cooling in his hands, and he surrenders to something completely different.

He surrenders to her, and there are no conditions.

She sings three more songs, none of which he knows, all floating through that same dreamy gentleness. He drifts inside them, and when she stops for the last time it’s jarring, like being abruptly woken out of a sound sleep—someone’s hand on his shoulder, shaking him. She does another one of those head-bobs, deeper, and that’s his cue. He moves toward the door, feeling as if he’s edging into a ghost territory where no one sees or hears him clearly, dropping the cup into the trash as he goes.
He doesn’t look back at her. He doesn’t need to. As he steps out into the cold, a gust of wind blasting into his face, he feels her small, warm hand clasped in his.

He heads down the quiet street to where the truck is parked. He has a few hours until he’s supposed to meet her. He doesn’t know what he’ll do with them, but it doesn’t much matter.

Her in that dress, coming to him out of the dark. Wearing that smile.

He would wait for the rest of forever for that end.

~

He drives home. He doesn’t do so quickly. He has those hours to burn, and something is keeping him out here, driving up and down familiar streets and streets that aren’t so familiar, scanning everything around him and seeing some of it and sort of not seeing a lot of the rest. His mood has turned odd—not that it wasn’t odd anyway. He watches the shifting pools of light from the streetlights as he passes beneath them, a hard yellow-orange against the snow. A lot of the latter has reached a point where it’s gray and slushy; despite the lack of melting, a week of cars has done its work. Mostly clear roads lined with a dirty mess. It was always going to happen, it’s not like he’s going through some manner of bereavement over it, but there’s always that nostalgia for when it was fresh and hardly anyone had touched it.

It’s remarkable enough that they even have it.

Lights of houses, of passing cars. Lots of light. He thinks about her in the light, bathed in it as she sang, sang like it was breathing. He still can’t imagine what it’s like to be that confident, that fearless. She always was; it was one of the first things he noticed about her. Pulling up beside her at two in the morning, a strange and disreputable-looking man clearly much older than her in a shitty pickup, offering her a ride and being more than a little persistent about it. Frankly creepy. She had been wary of him, but she hadn’t at any point displayed any fear.

If he had been horrible enough to try anything—something else he has difficulty imagining, though for very different reasons—he’s completely certain she would have found a way to fuck him up, and she was confident in her ability to do that too.

Though she be but little, she is fierce.

It’s strange to be thinking so deeply along these lines. Then again, given the context and what he’ll be doing in a few hours, it might make a kind of sense.

He does eventually go home. Walking up toward the porch, he runs into Carol coming down the steps, tugging on gloves. She’s bundled up and shapeless but he can see that she’s wearing makeup, earrings—small glass beads, nothing big or ostentatious, and her makeup isn’t much, but she’s never done that in all the time he’s known her.

Beth isn’t the only one tonight who looks beautiful. In his opinion.

“I’m going out.” She says it in a calmly determined tone, like she’s made a decision and she refuses to be shaken from it. She also sounds pleased with it. The determination has a bright edge.

She studies him. “You look happy.”
He shrugs. He doesn’t have a whole lot to say to that, given that he is. And she can probably make a good guess at the reason.

“Should bring some asshole home, get laid.” He gives her something close to a grin, quick and gone again but he feels it and doesn’t mistake it for anything else. “You got some stuff to pay me back for.”

She snorts a laugh, but in the dim, monochrome light he can nevertheless see her cheeks flush in a way he doubts has anything to do with the cold. “Not sure I’m as loud as you.” She moves past him, glances back over her shoulder with an arch smile. “Or her.”

“Maybe someone give you a reason to be.”

“Maybe.” She pauses and looks back one more time, and now her smile is almost sly. “You know… I’m not sure about it anymore, but if there’s a God I think He owes me at least one decent fuck after everything He’s put me through.”

He laughs. It’s also quick, but it feels good. He couldn’t possibly agree more.

~

The time dilates. Expands. By ten-thirty he’s on the road, negotiating light late Friday traffic out of town and into the bright-dark of snow cover. The clouds are lower and moving more rapidly than ever but there’s nothing about more snow in the forecast so no one is entirely sure what’s up with it. But again, people are also mostly unconcerned. This has been a weird few months for weather. Whatever.

He’s among the unconcerned. As far as it goes, he figures they’ve been hit about as hard as they can be. They’ve come through. He never expected it would be an easy winter; patterns hold true over time. He was never that much of a fool. The primary thing, the thing standing out for him behind everything else, is that it’s December and he’s still here.

He made it. Summer fling survived the fall.

This is not that kind of story.

The radio is on, cranked, beating with the fence posts as they blur by on either side of him, dark on light—yet another song he recognizes but hasn’t heard in a while. Since he went out to the farm after that first night. Windows rolled down. Feeling good to be out. To be away. To be going back to her.

Not knowing why.

\[ all \text{ last summer in case you don’t recall} \\
I \text{ was yours and you were mine, forget it all} \\
\text{is there a line that I could write} \\
sad enough to make you cry \\
and all the lines you wrote to me were lies \]

He’s burning up the speed limit, pushing this loyal, shitty vehicle as hard as he can. He doesn’t care. He really doesn’t think he’s going to be caught. The clouds are all that’s chasing him.
He has somewhere to be.

The party is indeed big. So is the house.

He parks down the road. Might not matter—she said they were vanishingly unlikely to be spotted in a way that would make people wonder, provided he didn’t actually try to come in—but there’s no reason to not play it safe, regardless of how reckless he’s feeling. This doesn’t seem to him like stupid reckless. Desperate reckless.

He’s simply happy.

He walks, hands stuffed into his pockets—gloveless. He’s aware of a stubbornness about that, rather than not getting around to it, as if some deep-seated part of him wants as little as possible between the world and what he uses to be in it. And he’s not cold, and as the house comes into full view, he feels warmer looking at it.

Damn thing looks like a fucking bonfire.

It’s one of the huge McMansions for which he bears particular hatred, but rather than being part of a development it stands in splendid isolation, surrounded on all sides by open land rimmed with trees but for a copse of young oaks closer in toward the rear. Cars are parked in the drive and on the side of the road and in a few places on the lawn, haphazard, clearly left wherever anyone could find an accessible place to do so. The house itself is blazing with light, every big window seeming to pulse with it—the pulse in time with the bass hammering out through the walls, like the light itself is vibrating. Most of the windows are uncovered by shades or curtains, and occupants are visible, shapes moving past, some quickly, some slowly, and some in twitchy, uneven ways that indicate a form of dancing.

This has all the hallmarks of a party a rich kid throws when their parents are out of town.

He watches this abomination as it begins to loom and idly considers how pleasant it would be to burn it to the ground. There are some resentments he’s not and possibly never will be over.

She’s been here before; she gave him the basic layout and a place. There’s no fence here and he swings wide and off the road, making his way across the field, crunching through the frozen crust of the snow. The wind is gusting, falling down and surging back up again, now and then slapping him in the face—bracing more than painful. He feels very awake, very alert, every sense sparking at the edges and all of them blurring into each other the way they sometimes do when they’re running at their full capacity. The bass has a texture, rolling bumps like moving hills, and the light tastes sharp and faintly bitter. The smell of the snow is like the edge of a piece of paper against his lips.

His form must stand out dark against the snow, but he’s all but certain no one will be paying enough attention to see him, and the glow of that white isn’t what it would be if the night was clear. He has darkness to move through, and the vigilance of a bunch of drunk, stupid kids enjoying the last days in which they can be drunk and stupid before they go off to college to be drunk and stupid in a different and potentially more troublesome way.

He turns in an arc, moving inward. The copse of oaks is close. Beyond it he can now see the house’s enormous back deck, strung with Christmas lights. It might be freezing and windy but there seems to
be a sizable contingent of kids who don’t much care; the deck is crowded with people moving, dancing, weaving through each other holding plastic cups. Laughing. Pressed against the railing and sloppily making out.

He sinks into the shadows of the trees and leans against one, lights a cigarette. Watches.

He doesn’t feel creepy, though he probably should. What he’s doing is creepy. With her, he now only occasionally feels how much older he is in a way that bothers him; when he becomes aware of it it’s with a soft bittersweetness, in part for the time he lost and the time she has ahead of her, the life she’s going to live without the hell he had to go through to get to where he is now.

To get to her.

But here he is watching a bunch of children all living a comparatively rich, spoiled version of that hell, a parody of it where they play at being something they aren’t, where they want to grow up too fast because they have no fucking clue, and he does feel it. He does feel older, and it’s not with any particular softness. It’s not unpleasant and he doesn’t hate it; instead he regards it with bluntly detached acceptance. It’s not bad that he feels this way, and he’s not wrong to do so. These things are all truths.

He exhales smoke at this scene. Yes, he’s being creepy. Guy pushing forty pretty goddamn hard, standing in the shadows and looking at something he’ll never have. The fact that he doesn’t want it makes little difference.

The creepiness also makes little difference. Because somewhere inside that great big slightly pathetic bonfire is her, and any minute now she’ll be coming out to him.

Any minute like this minute.

Here she is.

She slips out through the crowd on the deck just as the music shifts into something familiar, something pounding but musical in a way the last song wasn’t. She moves through the crush of people like they aren’t even there, her coat over her forearm, her upper arms bare and her neck and collarbones and the soft skin between her breasts revealed by the neckline all creamy pale in light that should turn her sallow. Cornsilk hair toyed with by wind that refuses to be any rougher with her than a breeze.

It’s basically like something out of a stupid fucking movie, but whatever.

* midnight
  you come and pick me up, no headlights
  long drive
  could end in burning flames or paradise

And as soon as her boots touch the snow she starts dancing.

He’s never seen her dance. He’s seen her sing, seen how it possesses every part of her, flowing out of her marrow and through her skin. He’s seen her run, seen the incredible picture she makes when she rides, seen her dive into moonlit water, seen her dodge puddles with graceful skill like some kind of puddle-dodging expert, seen her grin when she hops into the passenger’s seat of the truck. He’s seen her drenched in rain and furious, he’s seen her wet head tipped up for kiss, seen the same in the sun, in starlight, and he’s seen her sunbathed and naked and falling into the grass, all wild and laughing, spreading her legs for him and spreading her whole self into the sheer ecstasy of being
alive. He’s seen her lying beneath him with every part of her loose and uncoiled with pleasure, and all silver and ivory as she straddles him with her head thrown back and her belly taut and waist long, her back arched and her breasts proud and perfect and her mouth wide in a cry, exploding into the air as she comes. He’s seen all of these things, and he’s seen a hundred others he can’t name, and they fill him and overflow and he can’t imagine ever wearying of any of it. He can’t imagine ever having enough.

But he’s never seen Beth Greene dancing.

She said she liked to, that night he picked her up. Said she liked to dance and sing and that’s why she was at that stupid party where Jimmy got drunk and basically left her to fend for herself, and she didn’t get to do any of what she wanted and left in a storm of frustration and impatience, and maybe he should be grateful to Jimmy for that because otherwise he’s not sure how any of this would have found a way to happen. Though maybe it would have. Maybe there was never any way to stop it. So that night she got to sing after all, because he asked her to and she did. She granted him that blessing, and then bestowed upon him every other blessing he could have imagined and so many he never could.

But he’s never seen Beth Greene dancing.

Until now.

He knew she was graceful—graceful in that slightly gawky way a young doe is, still learning how to be in her own skin, how to make her delicate, powerful limbs do what she wants them to do. But it wasn’t like this, how she turns and her skirt spins with her, how she lifts her arms, moves them with the whirl of her body, how her hair follows. Somehow it’s like she’s not even holding her coat anymore, like there’s nothing in the way of anything she’s doing, like gravity itself is reluctant to hold onto her. It’s not like the dancing anyone else is doing, and he’s sure most of them would say it’s strange and not even necessarily good, but he watches it, watches her dance across the snow toward him, and he wants to fall to his knees and weep with how beautiful it is.

She’s a woman. In truth she was never anything else to him. But she dances like a little girl, with utter abandon, like the whole world is hers to dance in, and it’s so fucking beautiful.

so it goes
he can’t keep his wild eyes on the road

No goddess could ever hope to approach this.

She’s smiling when she reaches him and breathing hard, no longer pale but flushed and happy, and he falls on her like a starving man, seizes her by the hips, and she drops her coat as he pushes her back against a tree and cups her jaw with his fingers sliding into her hair and lifts her, takes her mouth, kisses a gasp out of her and then a long, sweet moan as she surges forward, her hands already slipping into his coat and under the back of his shirt and so cold against his skin—which might literally be about to burst into flames and make a true bonfire to put that monstrosity out there to shame.

It’s not even that he wants to fuck her. Not like that. When he kissed her in the rain he didn’t want to fuck her then either. He simply wanted her, needed her like air, needed her in every way it’s possible to need anything, and now she’s here under his hands and his mouth and he has her.

And he’s hers.

And he’s yanked backward, and the world slams into searing light that reels him and nearly sends
him tumbling into the snow.

He can tell that there’s sound. He can’t quite make it out. He can see blurry shapes in front of him, taste blood; he knows he should be in pain, and maybe that’ll happen soon, but for now he’s locked into a stasis of pure shock, gaping at this world that’s suddenly stopped making what minimal sense it was making before, totally uncomprehending.

He does understand one thing.

He doesn’t have her anymore.

Beth. Beth is yelling something, shoving someone away from her. The world is slipping back into focus and sound is coming along with it, and he can tell she’s as angry as she is surprised, her voice shaking, another voice answering her with equal fury. Whirling back to him, and he recognizes clenched fists and then the face, bone-pale with rage and teeth bared into a snarl, as she yells the name that goes with it.

“SHAWN.”

Well, then.

He’s holding his jaw. He didn’t know he was. It doesn’t matter, but it’s something he notices and notes and files away, along with everything else. It’s probably good to have as much information as he can.

You know. To the extent that he can do anything anymore.

Part of him is rearing up, claws fully extended, its own teeth bared and far sharper than Shawn’s. Shawn isn’t as big as him and Shawn isn’t anywhere near as strong. He could fuck Shawn’s shit up if he wanted to, and there isn’t a tremendous amount Shawn could do about it.

But he’s not going to do that.

“You. You sick motherfucker.” Shawn’s voice is trembling too, his whole body is, and for a jagged shard of a second Daryl is actually kind of sorry for him. Because this can’t be fun. And he probably came out to have a good time.

Though Daryl is the one being attacked right now.

“Shawn—” But his words run right over her, and Daryl has time to see that her expression has lost most of its anger and is now horrified, stricken, before Shawn is eating up his entire field of vision, stalking a couple of steps forward.

“You keep your dirty fuckin’ hands off her. How dare you, you piece of shit. How dare you.”

Daryl has what he thinks is probably a very ill-advised urge to shrug. I’unno. It wasn’t about daring, not in the end.

In the beginning, sure. Teenage daring. He gave her that.

She’s trying again, almost pleading with Shawn even though there’s still a hard edge in her, and it’s horrible and he wishes she would stop. “Shawn, stop it, he wasn’t—”

“Get in the car, Beth.”

Her face goes stony. Not sullen, and not angry. Stone cold. “Don’t you tell me what to do.”
“Get. In. The car.” Shawn hasn’t taken his eyes off Daryl. That’s reasonable and he’s not to be blamed for it. Daryl sees no particular reason why he should. “We’re goin’ home. Now. And you.”

Another step. Daryl stands his ground. It’s not about courage and it’s not about defending something. He just doesn’t want to move. “You touch her again, you come near her again, I swear to God—”

He raises a fist, because of course. “You come near the farm, you step one toe on our land, I will fuckin’ kill you. You got that? I will take you out. Don’t think I won’t. You’re done with us.”

“Shawn,” Beth says quietly, and her voice is full of the same stone he sees on her face. That dancing little girl is gone. In her place is something frightening. Something Daryl isn’t sure Shawn is recognizing, and for his own safety he possibly should be. “That ain’t up to you.”

Shawn shoots her a look, all scorn twisting into outright contempt, and that’s when that part of Daryl rears a second time, and this time it’s tearing up through his forebrain and suddenly he’s not terribly inclined to try to reign it in. Even if he has to. “You think Dad is gonna say any different? You think he’s not gonna be worse? This prick wants to stay alive, he should probably clear outta the cou—”

“Beth.”

Everything in him has gone still again. Still as a winter night. And it’s bleeding out of him, filling the air around him, and he watches with strange impassivity as Shawn goes still as well. Beth turns her gaze on him, her glossy lips parted, and there’s no way for him to tell her how sorry he is.

No possible way.

“Go with him, Beth.”

She stares at him, hands loose at her sides. Shakes her head slowly. “Daryl, no, I—”

“Beth, please.” Low, but yes, now he’s pleading. Not in her face about it, not overwrought, but he has no power to make her do anything and he needs her to do this for him. “Just go with him. I’ll call you. Alright? Promise, I will.”

“You will fuckin’ not,” Shawn hisses, but what Shawn doesn’t seem to understand—among a great many other things—is that he might as well not even be here anymore. He’s inconsequential. All Daryl sees is her. All that matters is her. Her and his ability to remove her from this moment, in which no one is going to win anything if they stay.

She doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t move. She swallows, and the tears in her eyes are like knives cutting into his.

Then she nods, bends to gather up her coat and hat and scarf, and grips her brother’s arm.

“Shawn. C’mon.”

For a second or two Daryl thinks he actually might refuse. Then he snorts—rather like a bull—and turns away. “I mean it,” he growls over his shoulder. “You come back around again, you’re dead.”

Beth doesn’t look back at all.

So then they’re gone.

He had her. He doesn’t have her now.

All at once his body unlocks and he stumbles forward, wavers, catches himself against a tree. Leans, head down, spits blood into the snow and wonders if he’s about to puke, decides he isn’t, and merely
leans some more, focused entirely on his breathing.

He has no idea what he’s feeling. He’s pretty sure it’s awful, but beyond that he can’t put words to it. It’s enormous and consuming and it hits him far harder and far deeper than Shawn’s fist. He’s intimately familiar with what happens when someone hits you hard enough: you simply can’t process the pain so all you feel is the impact. The pain comes later, sometimes considerably much. In the meantime your body is left dazed, staggering, unable to make sense of any input. Barely able to function. You no longer feel like you’re truly part of the world.

In many ways that’s a mercy.

So there’s that. For now. He lifts his head and peers blearily back toward the house. Everything appears exactly as it was. The festivities have continued without a pause—or if there was one he didn’t see it, and no one is coming to investigate.

He should really go.

But he can’t. Not yet. All he can do is lean there and breathe, and begin to feel the pain in his jaw even if he isn’t feeling pain anywhere else, and wait for something else to go wrong.

And he does know one thing. It’s a terrible thing, but it also isn’t particularly surprising. Under the dull pain and the deeper dullness hiding the even deeper agony, he’s aware of at least one thing he can put a word to.

Under it all, staring blankly at what happened and what’s going on, is a perverse and selfish species of relief.

He doesn’t have to lie anymore.

~

Somehow he makes it back to the truck. It’s possible that a few things happen after that.

It’s possible that he simply drives. It’s possible that he drives straight back to town and it’s possible that he drives in the exact opposite direction and circles endlessly, unable to go anywhere at all. It’s possible that he drives some distance away and stops and gets out and screams into the dark, screams his throat raw, screams until his diaphragm and every muscle in his stomach are doing their own screaming and he doubles over and dissolves into a fit of coughing and once again comes treacherously close to vomiting all over his boots. It’s possible that, having done that—or without doing that at all—he runs at the truck, hurls himself at it, punches his fists skinned and bloody, beats himself against its side until he leaves dents, because he does have a history of getting slightly melodramatic and it’s accurate to say that pain can be its own kind of coping mechanism, and the pain in his body might be far more bearable than the other kind roaring through his head.

It’s possible that he stands and gazes up at the sky and wishes for stars in place of these low and rushing and increasingly apocalyptic clouds that have no obvious practical reason for even being there.

It’s possible that he pulls out his phone and brings up her number, stares at it, almost hits send, doesn’t. Stuff it back into his pocket.
It’s possible that he finds the crater-scar on his left hand and digs his fingernail into it until it opens up and bleeds.

It’s possible that he leans his head against the wheel and cries in heaving, shuddering sobs hard enough crack his ribs, cries until his eyes are swollen and his face is blotchy and wet with tears and snot and he’s a fucking mess in every sense of the word. It’s also possible that he cries silently, cries like a smoothly flowing river, cries everything out of himself until he feels like he can allow the truck to drag his sick, sorry ass back to town.

All of these things are possible, and it’s possible that all of them happened. It’s possible that any number of them did, or only one. Afterward he’s never sure. His knuckles are scraped, but not badly and that could have been something else. He hurts but that could merely be the pain in his jaw metastasizing. There’s a scratch over the scar but it doesn’t look much like an injury from a fingernail and it could be from something else as well.

His throat is raw. That much he can’t explain any other way. Though whether it was screaming or crying or a combination of the two, he has no idea.

He’s never sure what happens after that.

What he does know is that eventually he goes home.

~

He knows he does because here he is in his room, in the dark, sitting on the bed and staring at his phone.

He doesn’t have the luxury of not knowing what to do.

Saying he would call her was stupid. It was spur of the moment, and he really did believe it and intended to and he wants to, God, he wants to so bad, but at present he can’t imagine any scenario in which they allow her to talk to him, or him to talk to her, ever again.

Then again, she’s eighteen. There are a number of moves she could make now and a limited amount anyone could do to stop her.

Please. Please, God, you’re not real but please, please to anyone who’s listening, who gives even a tiny fragment of a fuck, please keep her there. Please don’t let her do anything stupid. Please don’t let her do anything to make this worse than it already is, if that’s possible, but let’s face it, it actually could be a good bit worse, so let’s operate under the assumption that there’s a minuscule chance that even now this is salvageable and keep her there, and keep this shit at its current level until we can figure out how to dig ourselves out of it.

Please.

He said he would call her. He’s said that twice before, in situations vaguely like this one. One of those times he didn’t keep his promise. The other one, he did.

He can at least get two out of three.

He sits for another moment, then collapses back onto the bed in his coat and boots, phone clutched in
his hand. He stares up at a ceiling lost in shadow. Carol’s car wasn’t there when he pulled up. The house is empty and silent—empty even with him in it.

One step at a time. Look at your feet and you’ll trip. Always.

He lifts the phone and goes ahead and jumps.

It rings for a while without going to voicemail. He closes his eyes; yeah, okay, he’s not surprised but he is disappointed in a numb way. He did want to talk to her. Hear her voice. He’s alone with this, completely, and he’s used to that but just because he’s used to it, that doesn’t mean he likes it. Doesn’t mean it’s something he would choose.

And she’s alone too. And she might not be used to it.

But yes, it was idiotic to think she would pick up, and he’s about to cut the call when she does.

“Daryl?”

He releases an enormous breath, and that’s when he realizes he’s about to start fucking crying. Again, probably.

“Hi.” Another breath. This is basic, he can do this. Breathing. He does it all the time. Then, “I—I didn’t think you were gonna answer.”

“Almost didn’t. Daddy wanted to take my phone. Mama talked him down. Said that was ridiculous. Said I’m not a little kid, whatever else is goin’ on. So.” She sighs heavily. Warily. There’s a hitch, a tremble in the last of it, and he knows she’s been crying too. Though now she sounds calm. “He’s so angry. Shawn is so angry. I didn’t even know he was gonna be there, he never said. Mama is…” She laughs. It sounds grim. “She sure as shit ain’t happy.”

He lays an arm across his eyes and watches the colors dance behind his lids. “They mad at just me? They mad at you?”

“Both, I think. Way more at you.” More sigh. “It’s like I thought. Like I told you it would be. They think you made me. Or you… Not made, maybe, but they think you went after me and talked me into it. They think you seduced me.” She sounds ready to laugh again at the word, and he finds himself in the same place. It’s very funny. It’s very sickly funny because it matches that old story in some ways, though in others it’s extremely off the mark.

This wasn’t that kind of story at all. He was right about that. Maybe the basic framework was there, is there, but framework is only a skeleton. It’s not organs and muscle and skin. This is something other.

“Yeah, well.” He bites at his lip. Pain flares bright. “Wasn’t ever gonna be nothin’ else.”

“They don’t know you,” she says softly. “I really… I thought maybe they did. They don’t. They don’t know you at all.”

“No. They don’t.”

In so many ways, they don’t. In so many ways, they were so wrong about him.

Silence. Silence for a long time. If it wasn’t for the whisper of her breathing in his ear he might think she was gone. Taken away from him again. But then he hears her voice, still almost a whisper, and it’s tight with fresh tears.
“Is it over?”

God. He bites his lip again but it doesn’t help much. “I dunno.” He doesn’t want to cry anymore. He’s so tired. “I don’t want it to be.”

“Me neither. Daryl?”

“Yeah.”

“What’re we gonna do?”

“I dunno.” He lifts his arm, swipes his hand roughly down his face. That doesn’t help either. “I’m gonna… I’m gonna come out tomorrow. Talk to your dad. I got no idea if that’s gonna do anythin’, but… I dunno, I’m gonna try. Meantime…”

“Meantime what?”

This feels so unfair, and it feels like he’s responsible for the unfairness of it. And probably he is. Probably this has all kinds of less than admirable motivations behind it, but he’s not going to unpack them right now, because again: tired. “Meantime, I guess just… Just leave it alone. Much as you can. I dunno if it’s gonna help. I mean, you think you can do somethin’… They’re your family, I just… I dunno. I’m sorry. I dunno.”

“Okay.”

More silence. He lets it roll out beneath them like a road. Maybe she’s in the dark too. Maybe they have that in common. All those nights lying in the bed he made for them and talking to her, feeling like she was here. Right here, her warm, naked body slid in between the sheets. Like he could reach out and search for her hand and it would be there.

She feels very far away from him now.

“We were stupid,” she whispers. She’s crying. “Daryl, we were so fuckin’ stupid.”

“I know.” And he can’t stop it either. It’s overflowing him, hot and trickling sideways over his cheeks. Burning his neck, his ears. He doesn’t want to be doing this but his body never did listen to him and there’s nothing else to do. “But it was good. Wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was.”

It was.

“You should go.”

“I know.” She heaves in a huge, shuddering breath and it aches in his chest like it’s his own. “I don’t want to.”

“I don’t want you to. You gotta.”

“Yeah.” Another pause, and he listens to her, and he doesn’t want to be here and there’s nowhere else he would rather be, because at least he can hear her like this. At least he has that. Even if it’s not for long. “I love you.”

“I love you, girl.”

“Goodbye.”
He doesn’t say it back. Later he’ll wonder if he should have.

He’ll decide it was better not to.

Chapter End Notes

Songs are "Slide" by Ani Difranco, "Rainslicker" by Josh Ritter, "Found Out About You" by the Gin Blossoms, and "Style" by Taylor Swift.
Maybe the world knew.

It makes a kind of morbidly romantic sense, and something the last few months have taught Daryl is that he’s possessed of a healthy sense of morbid romanticism—which isn’t the best thing to have when you get yourself immersed in a lake of shit like this, though it probably explains why he’s in this lake of shit anyway.

Or maybe not.

Whatever.

But maybe the world did know. Because here, the farmhouse growing large in front of him, looming so much more than that fucking monstrosity of the night before, it seems like the process that’s been going on all week—the slow bleeding-out of the world’s color—has reached its final stages, and there’s almost nothing left at all. Black, white, and gray.

He supposes that’s all you need in the end.

Except that’s bullshit. All his ridiculous ideas of fate and rule-suspension aside, he and Beth are ultimately of no consequence where this universe is concerned, and this is random fuckery on top of random fuckery, and none of it ever meant anything. None of what seemed like magic was real. It was there, and it was wonderful, it was beautiful, it was precious—none of that was a lie. It was good. It was all so good, and everything he knows, everything he learned, it’s all true. She’s not a goddess but she is a girl, and she was always totally without artifice, always honest, always wise, and everything she gave him remains.

He didn’t sleep—heard Carol come in around one, sounded like she was alone—but when dawn slunk up and that no-color light seeped into the room it was like waking up, and he knew it was all still there, and everything sucks but that was one thing. That was one good thing.

The nice thing he always did deserve.

But the rest of it was his imagination. His fucking morbid romanticism. And now it’s all burned away and there’s this flat, colorless world, and what he’s about to do, which is probably not the single most ill-advised choice he’s ever made but which has to be somewhere in the top ten.

He told her he would come out. He told her that without thinking and only after did he understand what he’d said. But what the hell else is there? She didn’t leave him the option of doing nothing. And he doesn’t want to do nothing.

And he has no idea what the fuck else to do.

He turns the truck up the drive. He is fully expecting to be shot.

Wouldn’t that be nice. The horror of last night, whatever she was put through when she got home, and now seeing her secret lover gunned down in front of her house by her enraged and honor-stricken father. Brother. Both.
He laughs. It’s a horrible laugh, silence would be better, but it happens anyway.

He also isn’t getting shot at. That’s possibly a good sign.

It’s mid-morning. Normally some chores would be getting done, Hershel and Shawn might not even be here, but the snow is lying thick on the ground and some things aren’t possible, and even regarding the things that are, he doesn’t think anyone will be doing much work today. Especially not after they discover he’s here.

He stops and cuts the engine. Waits a moment or two, hands loose on the wheel. They have to know. They have to have seen him by now. Heard the truck. Something.

And in those moments he looks around. Not at the house but at everything but the house. The old barn. The silo he helped to rebuild. The chicken coop around the side, the pig’s pen. Annette’s vegetable garden. The ancient trees under which he used to eat lunch, sit in their shade, listen to Beth strum her guitar and sing. The paddock. Inside the barn and the stable, the cows and the horses in their stalls, and Nellie, and the thought that he might ride her across these beautiful fields, the fields from which he helped bring in a harvest, that he cleared and he put to sleep for the winter. These fences he mended, all these tiny details he created and altered, all the objects here that his hands have touched, and that’s when he realizes that he’s fallen in love with this place. This whole place. He fell in love with it like he fell in love with her, completely and hopelessly, and he loves it so much even now.

And he doesn’t really believe he’ll be able to be here anymore.

He squeezes his eyes shut and wipes at his face, angry, so angry at everything, because he was stupid but it was good.

It was all so good.

He shakes himself, a hard jerk of his shoulders, and as he opens the door and climbs out of the truck, the front door opens and out comes Shawn.

Out comes Shawn carrying a fucking shotgun.

He almost laughs again, because this is such a fucking cliché, and he’s playing his part to a tee. Hitting all his marks, remembering all his lines.

Wouldn’t his first grade teacher be proud.

“I told you,” Shawn is snarling, steps quick and sharp like the ground itself is Daryl’s face, “you fuckin’ come out here and I’ll—”

“Shawn.”

Shawn doesn’t stop dead, but he does stop and look back, and Daryl looks with him. Hershel standing on the porch steps, hands thrust into his coat pockets. He looks cold. He looks as tired as Daryl feels. He looks furious, but it’s a chillier species of fury, tightly contained, tightly controlled. It’s exactly how Daryl suspected Hershel might look when enraged—the idea that Hershel might shoot him was way off and he knew it but was lost in the sheer pageantry of it all—and he’s not sure he can deal with it any better.

He’s accustomed to yelling, bluster, impulsive violence. Used to be an expert in it. He thinks this might be a lot worse.
Shawn returns his gaze to Daryl, brows folded together in a murderous glare. “He’s got the balls to come back here, you know he’d—”

“I really don’t think he’d come back in here to storm the castle,” Hershel says coolly. “That doesn’t seem like his way.”

“You don’t know him.” Shawn’s attention is locked on him, still hotly murderous, the gun not raised but easily could be. “You didn’t see him with her, you didn’t see how he had his fuckin’ hands on her.”

He expected this to be misery. He didn’t expect it to be quite this surreal brand of misery, standing here with his entire body hanging pointless and pathetic off his bones, listening to them talk about him like he’s not even here. Talk about him like he’s some kind of animal who’s stumbled in from outside and torn up the living room, shit on the carpet, bitten people. Hershel isn’t saying as much but it’s in his tone beneath that coolness. Contempt, and contempt nothing like what poisoned Shawn’s voice the night before.

There’s no place for him here. There never was.

“No, I didn’t.” Hershel starts down the steps, moving slow and calm, and Daryl watches him come like a prisoner watching the approach of the hangman. Cliché on top of cliché on top of fucking cliché. “Go inside, Shawn. I’ll call you if I need you.”

Shawn’s mouth twists, everything twists, his whole being threatening mutiny. But then he seems to wrench himself into obedience, and he grips the shotgun and takes a step away, turns, stalks toward the porch and up to the door without a look back.

Then it’s simply him. Him and the father of the girl he’s been fucking for three months, staring at each other.

Him and the father of the girl he loves enough to die for.

Hershel stops a few feet away from him, hands still in his pockets, still with that cold mask fixing his features, all the wrath of heaven behind it. Looking at it, seeing the difference, Daryl understands, and knows that he was right: it’s not even about a rough drifter twice her age putting his hands on Hershel’s teenage daughter. That’s bad enough, plenty bad, but it’s not that.

Daryl was trusted. He was trusted, and he betrayed.

And that’s simply true.

“How long?”

Very quiet. The wind howls some distance away, but here, all around them, nothing moves. Daryl’s gaze flicks past Hershel, just for a second, and he can’t help it: he’s searching the windows. Looking for a small, pale face. Looking for her. If she knows he’s here. If they’re keeping her inside somehow, if she wants to run out to him, if she will.

_Stay, girl. Please stay._

But it’s only a second. Then it’s all Hershel again, that iced-over face and nothing else in his field of vision.

“You talk to her?”
“That’s none of your business. Right now I’m talking to you. How long?”

He’s been lying. He’s been lying to these people who have been nothing but kind to him, nothing but generous, who opened their doors to him and broke bread with him, told stories and prayed and sang and gave him permission to be there in their nice, bright world while they did so. They didn’t welcome him in as a son, but they did welcome him, and he’s been lying to them all.

The fact remains: he doesn’t have to lie anymore.

“Three months. Give or take.” He swallows, and he can’t bear it; he looks down, away, and he’s a fucking coward but that’s fine. He already knew that. “Since… around beginnin’ of September, I guess.”

“Beginning of September,” Hershel echoes, still quiet. “Three months. This has been going on under my… Three months.”

She didn’t tell him that. She couldn’t have, if this is how he’s reacting. Maybe she didn’t tell him anything.

Daryl can’t decide if that’s better or unimaginably worse, and if it’s worse, he’s not sure for whom.

“How far did it go?”

It’s like being slapped. The question, the bluntness—more than slapped. He can’t quite breathe. Can’t look; he squeezes his eyes shut again and gnaws at the insides of his lips. How far did it go, and what he can’t say, can’t hope to put into words for this man, is exactly how far it went, what they did together, what they found together, all those incredible little discoveries, revelatory pleasures, those seemingly endless floods of joy. all the ways he could touch someone, be touched, that it was all right and he was all right and he didn’t have to be afraid and it didn’t have to hurt and it didn’t have to be this dead mechanical job, that it could be falling down into the grass and being so idle and blessed together, rolling and playing in the sun, laughter, tears, that he could be so happy and at home in his own skin, that he could feel so good. Riding with her in the moonlight, flying with her, releasing, giving her everything. Resting inside her. Making a bed for them. Holding her in the night.

How fuck is the best word he’s managed to find for how far they’ve gone, and it’s pitiful.

There are no words for what they’ve done.

So he says nothing at all, floating behind his eyes in a burning knot of darkness, and Hershel exhales heavily and otherwise lets the silence be, for a moment that stretches out.

Then, very soft and very cold and very terrible: “In this house? Under this roof?”

He can’t. That night. Her trellis. The book, the words. Her body so hot under his, a flame in his arms, the sound that escaped her when he finally satisfied his obsession and made her come, made her feel that way, gave her that. How she let him follow her. Rough and clumsy and the slick of her cunt, all gasping and sticky fingers—and suddenly he sees it from the outside, sees what it would have looked like to someone else. This nearly middle-aged redneck asshole cradlerobber rutting on top of her, fumbling under her shirt. Groping into her pajamas and between her legs, coming in his own fucking pants. His thick, scarred hands and his body holding hers down, his harsh panting, his groans.

It’s obscene.
It wasn’t. He knows it wasn’t like that. He remembers and he trusts that memory, he remembers how it felt, he remembers what it was like to hold her after. The sweetness in it. Yes, it was awkward. No, from the outside it probably wasn’t pretty. But it was so good.

And he loved her so much, and all he wanted to do was show her.

He opens his eyes and from somewhere inside him he finds the strength to meet Hershel’s gaze, and that contact is the only answer he can give, and it’s the only answer he needs to offer.

“My God,” Hershel breathes, looks down at the flat gray ground between them, and for a long time he says nothing else.

Please, let her not be in any of those windows. Please let her not be watching.

Please let her not see this.

“I want you off my land.” Hershel raises his head and his eyes are clear as polished crystal. “I don’t want to ever see your face again. If we meet in town, if by some chance that happens, I want you to keep on walking. Don’t speak to me. That goes for my whole family. That goes for her. Don’t come near her. Don’t look at her. If I could keep you from thinking about her, I would.”

Daryl thinks there might be more. It feels like there should be. A real exchange. This is so… short. So sharp. He’s startled into silence. It’s ending so suddenly. But Hershel is already turning away, and his silent back has all the finality of a slammed door.

But it’s not totally final. Over his shoulder, words without a look, and they’re cold and hard but also so disappointed: “I thought you were better.”

“I love her.”

He doesn’t mean to say it. If it were up to him he would have said nothing at all; nothing can make this any better and surely it can only make it much worse. But the words come anyway, tear out of him in a hoarse whisper, and he can’t take them back.

He can’t lie anymore.

Hershel stops. Turns. This shouldn’t be happening. It shouldn’t make any difference. He’s done what he’s done and whatever he was thinking, feeling, as far as this man is concerned it shouldn’t be worth shit. But Hershel is turning slowly, looking at him again, and while there’s no surprise and no sign of mercy…

He’s listening.

He said it to her, the night he fucked her in the ruins. The night she was ready. He said it and it was easy, because it was true.

“I love her,” he repeats, and he’s shaking all over, but even now it’s not difficult. “She—She made me better. I’m not askin’ for nothin’, I’m not… But she did. She made me better. And I love her. I love your daughter so much.”

Nothing. And he has nothing. So he drops his head, and tears are threatening and he doesn’t want to stop them.

It doesn’t matter anymore.
“And I wanted you to know.”

There was never going to be any change of heart here. There was never going to be any bending, any giving of ground. He knew that the second he started to speak. He knew it the second he came up the drive. The second he started driving. The second he told her he would come here at all. This was never going to swing back into his favor. There is no favor.

But suddenly there’s a question.

“What can you give her?”

For a second he’s sure he’s imagining it. It makes no sense. Hershel shouldn’t even have turned around; he definitely shouldn’t be asking any other questions, and very fucking definitely not this one, which doesn’t even belong here in this conversation. But Daryl raises his head and blinks the tears away and meets that clear, impassive gaze, and he knows he heard right, and he knows an answer is expected of him.

And he knows that his answer can make no possible difference.

He shakes his head slowly. Helpless. At least he doesn’t have to search himself. At least there’s only one answer.

“Just me.”

Hershel nods, as if this was expected. And something opens in his face, opens a crack, and there’s no more anger there—or if there is, there’s no more fire under it. There’s simply that weariness, that disappointment—and something like sadness.

Something very much like that.

“I’m sorry, son.” Hershel turns away again. Finally. The ice sets back into his voice and it’s over. “You have to go.”

Yes, he does. He always does.

He always has to leave.

She might be in there. She might be coming out to him, she might be there any second, bursting past whatever is between them, through the door and tearing down the porch steps and into his arms.

That might happen. Probably will.

So he’s gone before it has a chance to.

~

He still could.

Parked somewhere between the farm and town, sitting on the tailgate and smoking and staring numbly down at his phone—and also at nothing in particular—he knows he still could. It’s an option. It’s a feasible one. And he wrote it off a week ago, but that doesn’t mean it has to stay written.
He has a home here, sure. He has a life he was starting to build. But it’s not overwrought and it’s not melodramatic; it’s simply correct to say that about seventy percent of that life he was building just shattered like a fist into a plate glass window. Thirty percent is better than zero, but what was keeping him here, keeping him off that road… There’s a lot less of it than there was.

So he could. Right now, he could. He can. Under this gray, roiling, end-of-the-world sky, he can call her and he can ask a simple question. And if she says yes, there’s nothing anyone can do to stop her.

He has money and wheels. The one thing missing in this equation is her.

And this is a very old story.

He pulls up her number, oblivious to the cigarette ashing onto his leg. The wind barrels across the field to his left and whips angrily at his hair; he doesn’t notice. The entire world has narrowed, compressed, packed itself into the shapes of ten bright digits. All he has to do is send and ask and it could all be his.

She could be his.

Because he knows she’ll say yes.

*Say she did run off with you. Say she married your redneck ass. Got a tumble-down shack in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere. Pumped out a couple kids.*

*Say she did that.*

But it wouldn’t be like that. He knows that too. He’s learned better since that day: he’s not his father, and he’s not poisoned. He’s not cursed. Whatever else happened, it wouldn’t be like that.

So what would it be like?

He asks. She says yes. She gets away, she meets him in town—or here, he waits for her here, or he goes back close enough to the farm to pick her up on foot. Drives her back to his apartment. They pack. He leaves enough money to satisfy the time period within which he’s supposed to give Cathy notice. Apologizes to Carol. Goes. Maybe they stop off and pick up a few items, but then they go. They find that road. Get out of town.

They don’t look back.

And it’s amazing. It’s so amazing, on the road and free with her, and they’re so happy—they bed down in motel rooms, some shitty and some not so shitty, but it doesn’t matter either way because every night they lie down together and every morning when they wake up the first thing they see is each other. And it’s perfect. It’s everything he wants, needs.

After a while they look for a place to settle. Maybe in Georgia, or maybe they do what he was thinking and head north. Maybe to the Carolinas, maybe further. Or west. There’s so much out there to see. So many places they could stay, so many places they could find to call at least some kind of home. A cheap little apartment somewhere—cramped and not fancy, but again, if they have each other it’s more than enough. He finds a job—rough, labor, something with his hands, something that probably doesn’t pay well. Maybe under the table. But it’s okay, she can get something too—waitress, maybe. She’s pretty and she has an incredible smile; she’d make great tips. Possibly she works somewhere she can also sing. It’s not easy but they scrape by, and it’s still amazing.

Within the first few months they go before the magistrate, sign the papers, make it official. It’s not a church wedding, no friends or family, only her in a plain white dress and him in the best he has,
which is cheap and clean. It shouldn’t matter to her; the grass and the moonlight were good enough for her first real fuck, why shouldn’t this be fine? She says no, it doesn’t matter. She smiles. It really looks real, that smile.

Lying beside her that night, lingering taste of sugar icing from a store-bought cake and twenty dollar champagne, he thinks about that smile and allows himself to wonder.

One year. Two. By the middle of the second year she’s pregnant, and at that point people mostly stop assuming she’s his daughter. Except now they look at them both in a different way when they’re out together. That old, distasteful assumption is gone, but now there’s a new one in play. He shouldn’t care and much of the time he doesn’t, but he knows what the two of them look like, and even if it’s not like that…

Isn’t it?

She doesn’t talk about her family. Neither of them do. Not one word in all this time. But she gives birth and she’s holding their baby in the maternity ward the day after, cradling this tiny creature in her arms, and she’s crying, and she won’t tell him why.

And she doesn’t say very much to him, and she doesn’t sing, and something isn’t right with her and the baby, and the term *postpartum depression* gets thrown around but he’s not an idiot and he knows that’s not all it is.

She can’t go back to work right away so he pulls double shifts, but she’s struggling at home. A neighbor helps out as much as she can—an elderly woman whose kids have grown up and gone away and don’t call much or visit anymore. It’s something and he’s grateful, but he comes home dead tired and looks at his wife, looks at his child, her on the couch staring dully at the TV and the baby crying in its crib, and it’s not horrible. It’s not as bad as it could be.

But God, it’s not good.

So maybe he doesn’t spend as much time at home. Maybe there’s a bar between home and work. Maybe he starts stopping there after shifts, just for one drink, and one becomes two and two becomes three and one night he doesn’t go home at all, not until the next morning, smelling like stale beer and stale cigarettes and stale vomit, and she looks at him when he staggers in and she’s disgusted with him.

Okay, it’s that one time. It was stupid, he’s an asshole, he won’t do it again.

And he doesn’t.

For a while.

Another year and she’s pregnant for the second time—an accident—and she’s been working, trying to pull her own extra shifts because as it turns out a baby is expensive as hell and neither of them gets health insurance through their jobs and what they do have on the private market is now eating through paycheck after paycheck, and the bills are stacking up no matter what they do. And he wants to be happy about this new baby, he wants to be overjoyed, because this is his *family*, isn’t this what he *wanted*, but in silence they look at each other across their tiny kitchen table and in silence at night they lie down facing each other, look at each other in the dark, and everything they won’t and can’t say is hanging between them like a stormcloud waiting to break open and bring the flood.

That scar on her cheek is getting sharper every day. She still doesn’t sing much. She’s getting old right before his eyes.
She’s not even twenty-four.

He lies there after she falls asleep and he thinks about the bed he made for them in the House of Light, that sweet, soft night, and all the beds before, the sun and the grass they fell into and the water, their baptism, that wild and precious summer and their last days as children, and he didn’t know what it was going to mean. He didn’t know it was going to mean this.

He didn’t know what he was asking her.

He pitches headfirst into the black and dreams about that pulsing red light, until the screams of the baby wake him up and he lurches out of bed, this bed, the one narrow creaking bed they have.

Their second child is born.

So there they are in the hospital, and they’re trying not to think about more bills, about how much this is going to cost them in the end, and they’re supposed to be happy about this, this precious tiny life held between them, but all he can do is look at it and look at her, her pale, exhausted face—and she’s still beautiful, she’s still the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen and he still loves her so much it’s agony—and wonder if at some point he’ll try to tell her that he’s sorry. Because it wasn’t supposed to be like this.

This isn’t a tumble-down shack in the middle of fucking nowhere, and he’s not a drunk—regular after-work drinks and the occasional all-night bender aside—and he’s not beating her. He never so much as raises his voice to her, let alone his hand. He loves her. He wants to take care of her. He does, the best he can. It’s better.

But this isn’t how it was supposed to be.

He used to know poetry. He used to know line after line of it; he has an extremely good memory and without meaning to he learned many of his favorites by heart. He used to whisper them to her, used to give her words so much more beautiful than any he could ever write, words that were him even if they didn’t come from him, but he tries to remember them now and he comes up empty.

Except.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

He forgot them. He forgot a lot of things. He used to know so much more than he does now. Something went wrong, and he doesn’t know what it is, but he stands in their bedroom in the middle of the night and he watches her stir in her uneasy sleep, his wife, the mother of his children, the greatest love he will ever have, and he thinks about the high school she never graduated from, the college she never went to, the family she never sees and never speaks of. The songs she doesn’t sing anymore.

And he does know. What happened is that he asked her a question.

He asked her a question and she said yes.

~

He doesn’t have a lot of time.
He practically runs up the front walk, takes the iron stairs two at once and slips twice, nearly falls. He doesn’t have a lot of time, and the sky overhead looks and feels and smells like impending disaster. It’s not about not having as much to keep him here. It’s not about having nothing to keep him here. It’s about how he has to get out, he has to get away from her, and he has to do it as fast as he can and go as far as he can, because she’ll be coming, of course she will, and he has to save her from that. He can’t let that happen to her, that nightmare vision. He can’t do that to her. Can’t drag her into it by the love she feels now.

He won’t.

But in the doorway he halts, briefly frozen, gazing at the room. At his room. His bed, his lamp, his shelf and his books and the crystal wolf. His curtains. Dishes in the kitchen cabinets, towels in the bathroom. Little by little, he was filling this place. Little by little he was making it his.

He was making it home.

It’s worth it. He’s telling himself that as he stumbles through it with the pack he brought here, shoving stuff into it, half blind—not with tears. His eyes are dry. Clothes. Toothbrush. A few other things; he doesn’t need much. He always traveled light. Really he doesn’t need anything, he’s traveled before with nothing but the bow and what’s on his back, but it seems prudent to take a few semi-essentials with him.


He left his phone back on that road. More than left; he threw it, hurled it at the ground, watched it break. Shatter. Made sure it did. He would have run the damn thing over but it seemed like overkill. He doesn’t need it. Needs to not have it. That’s essential.

Okay.

He doesn’t want to look at the bed. He doesn’t want to know that he could drop the pack and the bow and fall into it now, bury his face in the sheets like burying his face in her hair, and he would smell her. He doesn’t want to know that. He wants to cut that information out of his brain and leave it here in a bloody lump on the floor.

So instead he looks at the shelf. The books. The wolf.

This is all wrong.

He drops the pack. He drops the bow. He goes back to the kitchen and rummages in a drawer full of loose random shit until he finds what he’s looking for. Three things. An ancient method of reliable, last-ditch communication.

He puts them on the counter and bends over them and does what he has to do. What he’s doing isn’t going to make anything right. Nothing he could do now will. But it’s something, and it’s real and true. His brother…

His brother was a fucking prophet.

He straightens up and goes back to the pack, the bow, picks both up and slings them over his shoulders. Only two items come with him from the shelf. He’s going to embrace the simplicity of this. One more stop. Just one.

But God, it’s so bright in here. In this house. So much light.
He doesn’t look back.

~

Carol stands in the doorway and stares at him. Stares at the envelope he’s holding out. Stares at him again.

“You’re… leaving?”

He nods. There’s not much else to be said about it. Above them the sky is darker than ever and a wind is picking up. The Weather People have been insisting no storms are coming but he’s calling bullshit, and he wants to be well on his way before anything hits. He holds the envelope out more firmly.

“Three months’ rent in there. Should be enough. Tell her I’m sorry.” He swallows. He’s still not crying. He might actually get out of here without doing so at all. “And there’s… There’s somethin’ else in there. Pretty sure Beth’s gonna be comin’ ‘round. Sooner or later. You see her, you see she gets it. Alright?”

Carol doesn’t answer. She takes the envelope from him—takes it like she’s half expecting it to cut her. Her gaze is locked on his face, worried and keen. And knowing. Because of course she would know what this is about. At least in general terms. Probably figured it out about ten seconds ago.

“You shouldn’t run, Daryl.”

“Ain’t runnin’.”

“Really?” She glances past him at the truck. “From where I’m standing, it looks a hell of a lot like exactly that.”

“I ain’t standin’ where you’re standin’.” Hard. Flat. He’s not going to argue about this. He has to go. “Don’t matter. Just see she gets it.”

Carol sighs and looks down at the envelope again. She’s going to argue anyway. He’s sure she is. She’s not a fucking doormat and she knows him by now and he knows her, and she’s not going to let him go without making him even sorrier for it than he is.

But instead she lifts her face to him and her expression is as flat as his voice was.

“I can’t stop you,” she says softly. “But you shouldn’t. Don’t do this. Don’t be stupid. Whatever happened… You earned your place here. You shouldn’t.”

“I gotta.” He takes a few steps back, shakes his head. He’s not going to cry. He’s so close to making it. He’s not going to. He’s not. He’s nearly home free—and isn’t that some phrasing.

This is all wrong. But it’s also right.

“Daryl—”

“I gotta,” he says again, and he turns and shoves himself down the walk, head hanging, the gray world blurring away.
Merle, the prophet. The fucking oracle.

I told you, brother. This ain’t headin’ nowhere good. Can’t. Never does. Ain’t headin’ nowhere good, ’cause believe me, if she don’t break your heart...

Man, if she don’t break your heart, you are sure as shit gonna break hers.

~

He no longer clearly remembers the day he came here.

It feels like a lifetime ago. In a sense he supposes it was. A memory a lifetime old, looked back on with all the unreliable recall of great age. There are fragments of sound and image, and he knows what he probably did, what he probably saw—knows that a day after their arrival he had that shit job at the feed-and-seed and they had that pathetic excuse for an apartment—but he remembers no specifics. Clouds or sunshine. Temperature. What time of day it was. What kind of music he might have heard through passing car windows, what was happening on Main. Any of the people he must have seen. Whether they stopped anywhere to eat, and if so, where. What he said to anyone, what anyone said to him.

He’s no longer even sure how they got here. It was like he opened his eyes and here they were.

But he doesn’t think he’s going to forget the day he leaves.

There isn’t much to it. He doesn’t do a grand farewell tour. He doesn’t linger. He doesn’t visit old haunts. Old ghosts of the days gone by. Doesn’t go to Aaron and Eric’s place; he wonders dimly if they’ll miss him, if they’ll wonder whatever happened to that guy, if eventually he’ll be another indistinct face in a long succession of them. Probably; they only saw him a few times. He can’t have made that much of an impression, alleged life-saving aside.

He doesn’t drive past the feed-and-seed. Doesn’t drive past the place where the park used to be. Doesn’t drive past the high school. Doesn’t go near that fucking coffee shop. There aren’t any goodbyes to say here and he’s not going to say them anyway. It was all real, it all meant something, but it’s done. It’s over. He’s leaving.

And it’s not even a bad thing that he is. He knows that, and on some level accepts it. It’s not a bad thing, aside from how it’s happening, and maybe it’s even what he should be doing, regardless of the disaster that he and she have become. Because there’s the road and there’s what’s on it, where it goes, and maybe he was always supposed to be there. Maybe eventually this had to be part of what’s happening to him. Maybe it’s time.

Letting go.

He tells himself this. He believes it. Mostly.

On the shitty end of the outskirts, back in the general direction of the farm—the scrubby grass and shacks and trailers, all black and white and gray, all flat and stiff as an antique photograph—he tries the radio. He doesn’t know why; could be habit. Could be unconscious desperation. Could be that the silence is the silence in which he’ll be living from now on, the silence of the absence of her voice, and just because it turns out that he has songs in his bones, that doesn’t come within light years of replacing what she gave him. Could be that silence is eating him alive.
The radio is silent too.

He flicks it off. On again. Twists the dial—like that ever did anything. The volume knob. For the fuck of it he pushes all the buttons on the tape deck, then punches them so hard his fingertips come away feeling bruised. Nothing.

He doesn’t realize he’s slamming his fist against it until it cracks. Crack right down the face, and his knuckles are bleeding.

Again.

He’ll get through this. Gone are the days where he would collapse and slump in the middle of the floor, pulling inward and closing off all points of entry and exit, giving up in every meaningful way. Gone are the days when he would look at this now, the whole fucking fiasco, and conclude that his life might as well be over. His life isn’t over. His life just fucking started, and this is not the end of it, because he loves her and he wants her and the sheer monumental force of this is pulverizing him from the bones out, but he doesn’t need her in order to survive. He doesn’t need her in order to live. He can do that on his own.

He’ll get through this. Even if he doesn’t know how yet.

Time to let go.

He swings off the main road out of town—the one he’s taken so many fucking times he could drive it blindfolded—and out onto the long two-lane road he knows will lead him to the farther road, to The Road. He never intended to find it before, those times he found himself on it, but he will now. The periodic houses fall away on either side of him and twist into trees, bare and harsh and black. Behind him, receding, is the swimming hole, the field where he told her he wanted her, the ruined mill with its fresh fire scar, the forest that hides their clearing—theirs, always. All of those places are still there. Nothing can change that. He’s leaving, yes, but they never depended on his presence in order to exist, and they won’t now.

And that’s good.

That expanse of water under the moonlight and all those childhoods that went into it, dripping and laughing, and came up a little less pure. Came up changed.

The trees gather in and the shadows stretch; it can’t even be noon yet but it’s getting darker and darker with every silent mile he drives. He realizes, somewhere in those miles, that he’s looking for the radio tower, that red beacon—something to guide him, because there’s nothing else now. And it has to be dark, or he won’t be able to see it.

There’s a hiss through the stillness, sudden and angry, and he peers out through the windshield and sees that a fresh wind is kicking up around him, ripping at the skeletal treetops, those bony fingers grazing a dangerously low sky. That storm they said wasn’t coming—well, it’s almost here, but if he’s fast enough it won’t touch him.

She’s going to wonder why he’s not answering her texts, her calls. She’s going to worry. She’s going to come looking for him. She’s going to find what he left for her.

Maybe someday she’ll forgive him. Maybe she’ll even understand.

And maybe she’ll understand better than he does. Because that night on the road, on the ledge, he called her, and she asked him if he was coming home and she knew. Fuck, she knew. Maybe she won’t even be surprised. Maybe she saw this approaching.
Maybe she’ll only hate how it happened.

He’s going to get out of here, ride the road, see where it takes him. Find somewhere else. Learn something new. It hurts so much, but he doesn’t have to be afraid of this; it’s not a long, slow death sentence. It’s not a downward spiral and it won’t drag him in. It won’t hollow him out like he feared it would. It won’t gut him. It won’t leave him a shambling and vaguely humanoid shell of a man.

It won’t leave him walking dead.

He’s going to be all right. He has a wing. Half a set is better than no wings at all. It’s healed and dry, and his flight is going to be unsteady and unbalanced and he might fall more than once, he might fall many times, but he’s going to be all right.

So is she.

He isn’t crying. He isn’t crying and he’s not going to cry, not anymore, but suddenly his throat is locking up and it’s so hard to see, because when he doesn’t look to his right he’s sure she’s sitting there beside him, window down and her hand extended out into the slipstream, graceful dolphin arc, sine waving in the air. Singing to herself, feet up on the dash, the wind toying with her hair.

He could reach over and tuck a loose strand behind her ear. She would let him do that.

He could dare.

And he smiles, almost, and he closes his eyes for the briefest of seconds and he wishes she was here. Because she would understand, and leaving everything else aside, all the bullshit… He wants her to see this. He wants her to know. What she did. What she did to him, for him, when she took him to the water and drew him out again. What he’s strong enough to do now, because of her.

He doesn’t know what a prayer is, but there’s this. As he speeds into the gathering dark, there’s this. In the distance directly ahead—baleful against the sky—is the pulsing red light, and there’s this.

Beth.

I’m ready.

And there she is.

~

He measured his life in weeks.

That was wrong. We divide our lives up in all kinds of ways—decades, years, months and weeks and days, and there are those few of us fortunate enough to look back and count one full century—and each incremental measurement is a form of perception, a way of knowing, but the truth is that lives are lived and should therefore be measured in seconds.

Seconds are all it takes for everything to change.

Seconds to meet someone, to speak to them. Seconds to start down a road you don’t even realize is there, seconds to get into something and have no idea what you’re getting into. Seconds to hear a voice, touch someone’s hair, skin; seconds to inhale and breathe them in. Seconds to break
something open, something you’ll never be able to close. Seconds to see something and never see anything the same way again.

Seconds to look at someone and see only them, and never want to see anyone else for the rest of your life.

There’s a story—not this one, but you may know it. Death is in that story, and one day, accompanied by her brother, she does her work. Makes her rounds. She visits people, she takes their hands and leads them away, and one man gets philosophical about everything. He looks around and says that he had quite a run, didn’t he? Fifteen thousand years, in fact. That’s pretty good.

Death tells him that he got what everyone gets. He got a lifetime.

We get one of those, and it’s wild. And it’s so precious.

Because it’s seconds long.

~

There she is. Honest to fucking God, there she is, standing in the middle of the fucking road with her cornsilk hair dancing, staring at him with those wide doe eyes, and he jams the brake pedal into the floor, is sure he jams it through the floor, and this road was never all that well traveled or all that well plowed and ice streaks its surface like pale veins in black marble. And this is a piece of shit truck in every way possible—really kind of a deathtrap, he’s thought that more than once—so he’s not shocked when he feels it sliding out under him, spinning past and away from where that delicate, lovely little creature is standing, all warm soft brown with the spots on her flanks long faded, staring at him with her wide doe eyes, her long ears pricked, watching as he watches her and watches the world tilt and then jolt, everything sideways and then all ways, nothing pointing the way it should be, dark above and below him and ahead of him—still—that pulsing red light, the only light he can see now, always out of his reach.

Doesn’t everything?

And too soon?

He doesn’t know exactly what a prayer is. But there’s this. And right now, in these final seconds, he’s paying very close attention as the world shoots him into itself like a bolt and his head cracks open and the scalding, aortal, all-color light pours in. A universe full of it. Before her, he never knew.

He doesn’t have to follow any light. It’s everywhere. It’s all around him.

Her.

Girl.
I’m bad with words. I always have been. And anyway even if I wasn’t I couldn’t find any that would make what I’m doing ok. I know that. I won’t insult you by asking you to forgive me and I won’t ask you to try to understand. I’ll just say maybe it’s better how I’m not saying goodbye. I hate goodbyes. I think you do too.

And I’ll say I love you. I love you more than I ever loved anyone and I don’t think I’ll ever love anyone like this again. I think there’s only you for the rest of however long I have. Only you and no one else. That’s ok with me.

I know you’re probably so pissed at me. I know you’re going to be fine. I know you’re going to have an amazing life and you’re going to meet someone who loves you so much and gives you everything, because how could anyone not want to do that, and you’re going to be happy. I hope you’ll remember me. I hope you won’t remember me too much.

I know this is the end of something. But I think it’s the beginning of something too. It will be for you. It could be for me. I don’t know what’s out there but I want to find out. I want to see it. I never felt like that before, like I could. Like there was anything to see. I used to be afraid all the time and now I don’t feel like I’m afraid of anything. That’s because of you.

I can choose this because of you. I can do that now.

I won’t say goodbye. I’m never going to see you again, but I won’t say goodbye. I love you, Beth. In the end I guess I wasn’t a creep but I’m being a jerk and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I love you.

I’ll love you for the rest of my life.

Chapter End Notes

Soundtrack, from the time Daryl leaves. The end corresponds with... well, the end of this.
She knows this scent.

She’s young still, but she learns fast, and her continuing survival is testament to that, though luck has also played a significant role. Summer was good to her, and the fall as well, and deep inside she’s beginning to feel the hot stirring that will eventually lead her to her own version of this scent—strong, she hopes in her way, strong and good to her as the summer was, and putting good new life inside her that will survive as well as she has.

This scent, yes—her hooves picking their way daintily through the snow-crusted grass, curious, her ears open to everything but her primary attention fixed ahead and down. The scent of the two-footed Male—several times now she’s come across it. Once not too far from her; he was there and watching her but he never came for her, and she noticed that, noted it, filed it away. So when she scented him again she wasn’t afraid, and she wasn’t afraid of the new scent with him, the Female—lighter and fresher, smaller. She grazed and left them to themselves, and later she tracked them back to where they came from and found the clearing in the last of the evening sun, the shadows long, and she nosed in the grass and smelled the musky, happy scent of their mating.

It was a good place. She stayed there for a while and moved on into the dusk.

Then a final time, or a final time before now—almost too late, she realized later, in the simplest possible way. Almost too late she scented him, and scented something hard, something like anger, but when the tree near her broke open there was no bloodlust mingling with him, no predator stench, and as she fled she knew he wasn’t trying to hurt her.

And now here he is again.

She can’t see all of him. His body is half lost under the broken pile of metal. She can see a hand, an arm, shoulders and a tangle of dark hair, and she can smell the sharp tang of blood, and she can see it spotting the white of the snow.

And she can smell the sharper, darker odor of pain.

Fully half of her instincts are screaming at her to run. But this two-footed Male has three times been near her and never once threatened her, and he’s hurt and she doesn’t know that he would be able to do much threatening now even if he wanted to.

She bends her head and noses at him, licks at the blood on his fingers. The back of his hand. She nudges his arm and he twitches, groans faintly, but otherwise doesn’t respond.

Run.

She won’t.

She closes her teeth on the odd, loose hide the two-foots seem to often have and tugs, tugs harder, and when she gets nothing out of him she begins to chew it, until at last he twitches once more and twists himself, does so violently enough to roll partway onto his back. His face is partially obscured, but she can see that it’s streaked with blood as well.
A lot of it.

He’s motionless again, and silent. She looks down at him for a moment, then raises her head and
looks off into the trees. She glances up at the sky. The clouds are strange and have been strange all
day, but not in a way that frightens her.

Nothing is frightening her right now.

She returns her attention to the Male and watches him, and tries—in her ungulate fashion—to think
what to do.

~

“Well, what have we here, brother?”

No.

The words themselves are pain and his very organs cringe away from them as they hammer through
his ear canals. No. No one is supposed to be talking to him. Certainly not Merle. Unless something
happened to Merle and Merle beat him here. Which wouldn’t actually be all that surprising. He spent
a lot of the last two years expecting that exact thing, even if he hadn’t wanted to admit it to himself or
anyone else.

Wherever here is. Sure as shit not any sort of Heaven he’s ever heard of, if they let Merle in.

“C’mon, little brother. The fuck’re you doin’?”

I’m being dead, what the fuck are you doing?

The world is red—more of a deep maroon, and it’s flickering faintly, something like film grain
floating around. Vague shapes that he can’t make out. He’d try to feel his way through it, see if he
has anything he would recognize as a body in an afterlife he hadn’t really believed would be there,
but even thinking about doing so hurts—and the fact that he hurts at all is indicative, come to think of
it.

“You fuckin’ pussy, you had worse in about fifteen separate bars before you got us stuck up the ass
of this shitburg.” Something cold smacks against his cheek and the grainy maroon explodes into an
excruciating white. “Open those big baby blues, Darylina.”

Under the rolling shudders of pain: profound irritation. Merle won’t even let him be dead without
harassing him.

“You ain’t dead, you fuckin’ idiot.”

“Fuck you, bro.”

Three words. They pass up through his throat like a cheese grater and claw their way over his
tongue, somehow make it out in a breathless croak. They must have done something else in the
process, because now he can taste blood, and when he moves the slab of warm roadkill that his
tongue has become and presses it against the inside of his cheek behind the right corner of his mouth,
the sting and the texture of badly bitten flesh and the fresh swell of sweet copper solves that
particular mystery.

If he was dead, or dead in any conventional sense, he doesn’t think this would be happening. So it’s time to entertain other possibilities.

Such as.


He can’t. His eyes are stuck closed, literally stuck; he manages to scrounge together the will to try and he feels the pull between his lashes and his skin, tries to lift his hand to wipe at them, can’t do that either. Fucking hell, if he is alive… What else? If he can’t move, what does that mean? What happened in those final seconds? He rolled. Hit the windshield? Hit the window? If he was thrown forward and through the former… There wouldn’t be any surviving that. But his head against the window—he felt a crack. He remembers that. The sensation of something breaking.

His back could be broken. His neck. He might be paralyzed. Lying here in the snow and fucking paralyzed, on the frozen shoulder of a road he hasn’t seen anyone else on since he started down it.

Surviving a crash that should have killed him only to freeze to death. There’s a kind of horrible, senseless poetry in that.

Snow. He’s in the snow—he can feel it cold against the back of his hand, and he can also feel it stuffed under his coat and shirt, melting wet. He can feel. Not paralyzed, then. Probably not. But thrown clear, at least partially, somehow. Not in the truck anymore. Might be good. Might be quite bad.

He can wiggle his fingers. Tries his toes; those too.

And now he wishes he couldn’t feel, because the pain hits him again, pummels him all over, like he’s one gigantic contusion.

He moans and it rakes against the back of his throat.

He saw her. She was there.

“That’s what you think, man? Really? How the hell would that have happened?” Something crunches in the snow by his head. A shifting boot. Merle sounds close. That might be the heat of another body near his face, the warm moisture of an exhale.

“How the fuck’re you here, then?”

“You got yourself a powerful imagination, brother. Always did. Saved you, sometimes. You know that. You’re an Olympic fuckin’ champion at seein’ what you wanna see. And you’re just as good at not seein’ a whole fuck of a lot else.”

He tries to open his eyes again. This time there’s a tiny bit of success; light beams in through a sudden crack, jabs his optic nerves, and he winces. But against the light, shadowy movement. Yes, very close indeed. Inches away, maybe. He smells it now; old cheap cigarettes, cheap liquor, sweat and the odor of a chronically unwashed body, the faintest sallow thread of sickness. No mistaking that. Not ever.

“Don’t wanna see you, bro.”
“You know that ain’t true neither,” Merle says softly, and this time the touch is gentler. Not truly a slap. Almost a pat. “Look at you. Lyin’ by the side of the road like a used rubber. Wake up, little brother. Wake up and deal with the world, or fuckin’ die in it.”

“Tryin’.”

“Try harder.”

“Shit, liked you better when you was in prison. Why can’t you just leave me the fuck alone?” It sounds petulant and he’s not proud of it, but what the fuck? He got this far, he told himself he was going to be all right, and now he’s lying bloody in the snow with—for all he knows—a couple tons of shitty truck wrapped around his lower body. He lost his home, lost her, and he was prepared to deal with that much, knew he could move on and survive and maybe even eventually thrive again, but now he’s tired and he hurts and yes, he wants to be done with everything. It’s not even about melodrama. It’s simply about practical exhaustion, and about the fact that he already did what he had to do. He did the most important thing, much more important than himself and any life he was going to build anywhere else.

He saved her.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, you stupid prick.” Merle is all exasperation, and Daryl catches a blurry glimpse of grizzled features twisted into that same exasperation, eyes rolling. “You forgot what she told you? You made like you understood. You lyin’ to her or somethin’? Breakin’ her heart ain’t enough? You gotta treat her like a kid too?”

He coughs, tastes more blood. “The fuck you talkin’ about?”

“You don’t get to save her,” Merle says quietly. His touch had been nearly gentle; now his voice is as well. But hard. Unyielding. “She said it, you got it. Now you chuck it away the second it ain’t convenient for you to remember. She said you gotta let her choose, but you just left. Didn’t say nothin’ to her. Didn’t give her a choice. Made it for her, like she can’t make it herself.” Merle pauses, shifts again and leans closer. “Like you don’t know how that feels.”

“Ain’t the same.”

“Hell it ain’t.”

“It ain’t.” The rush of anger is grimly pleasant. It makes him feel stronger. It gives him what he needs to move his legs; he can, a little, but they’re pinned under something. “I was gonna… I ask her to come with me, I do that to her, it fucks her up. Her whole life. She’d say yes, but she’d be sorry. She would. You know she would. Fuckin’ hell, man, you said it.”

“And I ain’t never been wrong about nothin’, sure. Really is amazin’ you’re still breathin’, you been walking around carryin’ that much dumbass your whole damn life.” Merle sighs. “Ain’t even about her. You ain’t a dumbass, actually. You know that too. You just got real good at fakin’ it. But you was always the smart one, not just the sweet one. Deep down, you know she ain’t why you left.”

“Yeah? You know so much, you… you fuckin’ tell me.”

“You ran ‘cause you’re scared.” Simple. Calm. Very, very certain. “You ran ‘cause you looked at the shit you could do and you only let yourself see one thing. You think you stayin’ is gonna fuck her life up too? Brother, here’s a truth missile flyin’ up your tight ass: you ain’t that important.”

Daryl blinks. Sort of. His eyes aren’t fully open, and nothing in front of them is clear. Merle isn’t much more than a dark blur against a seething gray background. “I ain’t…”
“Don’t get me wrong. You matter to her. Fuck of a lot. But she don’t need you. And she can make up her own mind how much she wants to let you fuck her life up. If you even would. Yeah, she might decide she don’t wanna see you no more. She might decide that’s best. But then she decides. Not you. Either she’s a kid to you or she’s a woman. She can’t be both.”

He should have something to say to that. There should be some kind of response. Some verbal ammunition he can use to shoot back. But nothing is coming, no matter how roughly he fumbles through his aching head, and instead he drags in a ragged breath and shivers.

“She asked you a question, Daryl.” And now, quiet and calm and close, Merle sounds the most fully like Merle Daryl has ever heard. Grating, sure, and with that sardonic edge he’s always possessed, but clear. And present. There with him. Real, regardless of whether or not he actually is. “Early on. In her room that night, she asked you a question. Your big scary fuckin’-up question ain’t worth shit, but that one was worth a lot. You remember it. I know you do. You ain’t answered it yet. Think maybe it’s time you did.”

Confusion. He whimpers. “What—?”

Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Not Merle’s voice, and not hers.

This voice is a lot closer to home.

There was a new voice, which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you could do.

Determined to save the only life you could save.

“Time to let go, little brother,” Merle whispers. Suddenly his shape isn’t quite so dark, isn’t quite so solid. It seems to be melting into the gray. Into the low sky. “Been time, for a long time. Enough, now.”

“Merle…” And he can reach, then, and he tries, lifts his hand, sees streaks of blood along its back, but Merle is gone, and in his place is a narrow head and pricked ears, doe eyes, and a rough, warm tongue licking at his cheek.

He yelps in pure surprise, bats at it, and it jerks back, awkward on its gangly, graceful legs as he manages to focus on it.

Okay, yeah, that’s just weird.

The doe looks at him. He looks at the doe. Then, as if her job here is done, she turns away from him and flicks up her white tail, and bounds lightly off into the trees.

He stares at the place where she was. Stares at the clear prints of her hooves. Stares at the trees and tries to process.

After a few moments of this his body takes over. He’s sick of the snow, sick of being in it, and it’s agonizing to do it but he can: he pushes himself up and manages to turn and see what he’s dealing with.

Totaled doesn’t capture what he’s looking at. The truck doesn’t even look like a truck anymore. It’s a
pile of twisted, rusting metal, a significant part of the cab deformed and crumpled inward. As near as he can determine, it came to rest mostly on its side, and at the point of impact—or right before—the driver’s side door must have come open, and he was hurled most of the way out of it. His legs are pinned under the seat—which has been shoved forward and down at an odd angle—but they’re not pinned badly, and when he tries to move them nothing seems to be broken. He grunts, braces his hands against the ground, and with a grinding effort he hauls himself backward, drags them free.

And he sits there, blood congealing on his hands and—he’s pretty sure—on his face, and he might be bruised all to hell and he probably has at least one fun species of head injury, but he doesn’t think anything is broken anywhere. Not badly. Not badly enough to stand out from the rest of the pain when he moves.

And he’s alive.

He doesn’t believe in God, no. But he’s not sure what to call this other than a literal fucking miracle.

He turns at the waist, looks back toward the trees. “The FUCK,” he yells hoarsely, and ignores the sandpaper-scrape in his throat as he does so. “I save your fuckin’ LIFE, this is what I get?”

But then he’s laughing. He’s laughing, and it hurts a lot, and he can’t stop.

So he does that for a while.

He’s cold. The pain is abating, maybe because numbness is setting in. Maybe he’s in shock. He looks down at his hands, wipes at his face, and his fingers come away sticky and bloodier. Gash, maybe. He feels again; there’s a violent sting and a ragged edge of skin along his hairline, so that’s another explanation. His hands; there’s a long, ugly cut along the back of his left one.

Right over his burn scar.

He’s not sure where else he might be bleeding, but of the places he’s aware of, the flow seems to be slowing to an ooze. There’s a lot of blood, yes, but head wounds don’t have to be severe to bleed a lot. Same for hands. He’s awash in pain, but he really does think he might be mostly okay.

So he looks at the road, a few yards away. Looks to his right and sees his pack, also thrown clear, fallen open. Clothes strewn across the snow. The book, facedown like he was, pages wrinkled. Barely visible, the curved back of the wolf.

Wedged halfway under the mutilated front of the truck are the sad, broken remains of the crossbow.

He sighs. Looks at the road again. The clouds are close and moving fast. It doesn’t look at all like a winter storm. It does look oddly familiar, though.

*The fuck you want me to do now?*

Go back, man. Jesus.

*Ain’t exactly got wheels no more.*

Got legs, don’t you?

Got a wing.

He has no answer to that. It’s miles. The road he chose took him partway back to the farm before it turned north, but it’s a good way. He has no idea how long it will take him.
Better get going, then, huh?

*The fuck’s her dad gonna do when I come staggerin’ up the drive?*

Maybe best not plan too much right now.

Just saying.

He stares at the road for another few minutes, legs stretched out in front of him. Looks back at the truck for another few, and at the pack. The things he brought with him. All the things he has in the world, except for the boots on his feet and the clothes on his back. The money; he still does have that in his pocket.

How much of the rest of it does he actually need? How much of the rest of it has he *ever* needed?

The wolf, the book. He gazes at them and he expects the pain to flare, but it doesn’t. He somehow senses that the wolf has done its work. As for the book…

He has an extremely good memory. And he has songs in his bones.

Groaning, he drags himself to his feet. Stands there for a long, final moment. Limps toward the road. His boots touch it and he doesn’t hesitate; he turns left, south, back toward the farm, and he has no idea how far it is or how long it’ll take him to get there, except *far* and *a long time*, but he has legs and he has a wing, and maybe he’s nuts…

But maybe he’ll be all right.

And it’s slow going, sure, every step fresh pain, but then after a little while, as the trees crowd in and move away again, the pain fades and it’s better, it’s *easier*, and he’s standing straighter, as if every one of those painful steps back toward where he came from is healing him. That’s ridiculous, there’s no way that can be happening, but there’s what he feels—and he’s good at seeing what he wants to see, so maybe he can make himself feel what he needs to feel. Maybe he can do that.

Maybe he can do all kinds of things he never knew he could do.

Wide, white fields. Darker and darker, wind picking up, but he’s moving fast enough to keep back the cold… And is it really so cold now? Is that a wind that carries a chill?

What’s that *smell*?

The light explodes and the thunder crashes right over him the second the ozone hits his nose, and he stops hard, jerks his head up, and just as he does the sky opens up on him in a flood.

A flood of warm summer rain.

He stands there and stares at it long enough for water to fill his eyes. Then he squeezes them shut and tilts his head back as far as it’ll go, wrestles off his coat and lets it fall and spreads his hands to catch water in his cupped palms, opens his mouth, and as the rain rinses away the blood he starts to laugh again, laughs until he hurts, laughs until he feels fine, starlings and mockingbirds bursting out of the trees and the snow around him melting to nothing, the world washing clean of winter, and he knows he’s well.

He runs.
They still talk about that storm.

They say it shouldn’t have been possible. That’s hyperbole. When it comes to weather all manner of things are possible, and this particular thing was merely a freak occurrence, yet another oddity in a year full of meteorological oddities, so maybe it’s not even that strange in context. But it might have been the strangest, so they still talk about that December summer storm and they shake their heads in amused bemusement. No one has ever been able to explain it, including the people whose job it is to explain things like that. It simply happened.

An Act of God, some people say. Which is what we call events when we don’t know what else to call them.

The fact that we even have the term is evidence that these events do happen, regardless of the reason. So maybe the storm was possible and maybe it shouldn’t have been, but either way, it came. When it was over the snow was gone, and there was no more snow for the rest of the winter.

Everyone was perfectly content with that. After so much strangeness, everyone was happy to get back to normal. No one has ever been able to explain it; maybe there was no explanation.

Except we know better, don’t we?

Because this is a very old story.

He runs. He runs and it’s so easy, splashing through puddles, arms pumping—the pain present but distant and unimportant and no longer bothering him. He’ll hurt later. Later, when he can afford to. In the meantime he’s soaked, soaked to the point where he can’t get any wetter, which is actually kind of a good place to be, kind of freeing, because you don’t have to care anymore. You can simply be wet.

You can only get drier.

He might still be laughing. He has no idea. He’s panting like he might be, but he’s also panting like he’s running, gaze simultaneously locked on the road ahead and expanded to take in everything around him. Paying attention. Confused birds hurtling through the air in flocks and murmurations and exaltations, grass and trees whipped by the wind, clouds churning above him—not ominous, no matter how low and dark they are, but feeling like they’re urging him, pulling him. Get your ass in gear, come ON. Because he has mere seconds, even if he doesn’t know exactly how many.

Run.

He does. No idea for how long. Half an hour. An hour. Longer than he should be able to. Nothing is working the way it should. Nothing is making any sense. He pounds the road, and it’s like being on that bike, like he could spread his arms and soar, like the wing on his back bursting free of his skin and tearing through his drenched shirt and lifting him into the air—unsteady, unbalanced, but flying.
I want to be afraid of nothing, as though I had wings.

Except it can’t last.

It abandons him all at once, just after he turns back onto the road that runs between town and the farm, and he staggers to a halt, bends over his knees and gasps in wrenching heaves, throat raw and head throbbing and all the pain rushing through him like water behind a broken dam, and he’s so angry because he’s so close and he’s come this far and he should be able to go the rest of the way. He should be. For her.

For her song.

Sudden heat on his back. Sudden burst of light. He raises his head, and if anything it’s raining even harder but now sunlight is streaming down with it, pouring over everything and burning away the last of the snow. It’s almost too much and he blinks and scrubs one-handed at his eyes, his hair dripping all around his face.

That’s a truck.

That’s a truck down the road, coming toward him. He can’t lift himself—now that he’s stopped he’s not sure he can move much at all, not sure why he isn’t simply collapsing, but that’s definitely a fucking truck, and his breath knots in his throat, twists itself around his heart, and he watches it get bigger and bigger, faster, until all at once it’s there and braking hard, spraying water.

He should lift himself. Can’t. All he can do is stare, hysterically relieved laughter tearing at the tangle of his respiration, tears mingling with the water in his eyes, as Beth shoves the door open and stumbles out, her hair and shirt and jeans instantly as soaked as his and her doe eyes wide.

“Daryl?” She stands for a few seconds and then plunges forward, and all he can do is wait for her. “Daryl, you—Oh my God.” She reaches him quicker than he would have believed—except there really is no limit to what he can believe right now—and takes his head in her hands and pushes back his hair, searching him, her eyes gone even wider. Huge and clear and crystal blue. “Are you alright? What happened to you?”

She’s so fucking beautiful. Not that this comes as any form of surprise. She was beautiful in the rain that first night, and she’s every bit as beautiful now.

“There was a deer,” he gasps. Yes, keep it as simple as possible. Stick to the facts. “And I’m an idiot.”

“You’re… Daryl, fuckin’ hell.” She’s trying to pull him closer, looking him over, but he manages to straighten up, frames her face and lifts her to him, and finally he has the words and they’re not good but they’re his own, and they come all in a flood like the rain, just as true and just as easy as that first I love you.

“I can’t go.” He swallows, chokes, lurches onward. “Beth, I… It’s so fuckin’ stupid, I know it’s stupid, but it’s—it’s you, what I plan to do, it’s always been you, and I know it’s the worst fuckin’ idea, I know it’s probably not gonna work, I know that, but it’s you and I wanna stay and I wanna try and if you wanna try, if you think you can do that, I—”

“Shut up, Daryl.” And she clenches a fist in a fold of his shirt and drags him down.

She’s very, very good at shutting him up.

“He was talkin’ to me about it.” She leans back and combs her fingers into his dripping hair, tips his
forehead against hers, and she’s talking in her own rush, a helpless, giddy smile curving her lips. “Daddy. He came back in, and I don’t know what you said to him, and he’s still so mad and I still don’t think he wants you anywhere near me, but he was askin’ me about it and he was listenin’ and I think he was actually tryin’ to understand, and—” She kisses him again, open-mouthed and wet and pulling him into her, pushing into him, and he has no idea if he’s moaning or laughing, holding her close, and he’s pretty sure he’s bleeding on her and it doesn’t matter.

“I wanna try,” she breathes against his mouth. “I wanna try, I do. Yeah, I know it’s probably not gonna work and I don’t care. Let’s try.”

_Girl_, he whispers, and then he kisses her for a long time, kisses her in the warm summer rain, kisses Beth Greene and she kisses him back, and she’s not a goddess, she’s a girl, she’s _his_ and he’s _hers_ and he has no idea what comes after this break in his life, this dividing line, this ultimate delineation. No fucking idea.

But he knows he has this.

“C’mon.” She pulls back again, tugging him now. “Get in the truck.”

He totters when he tries to follow her, but she slides a shoulder under his arm and bears him up, and he can go this last little bit, his head falling back, rainbathed and sunbathed and so blessed.

“Where’re we goin’?”

She opens the passenger’s side door and steadies him as he levers himself, wincing, onto the seat. “I’m gonna take you to the _hospital._”

Oh. Good. Good, that’s probably a smart idea.

“What about after that?”

She lays her hands against his cheeks and leans in, kisses him again, again and again. Kisses him hard, so hard the bite on the inside of his lip stings like a _motherfucker_, and he can’t even begin to care. She grins against him, and this isn’t perfect.

It’s better.

“I can take you home.”

And will I tell you that they lived happily ever after? I will not, for no one ever does. But there was happiness.

And they did live. — Stephen King
For those who care, this song guided the pacing and feel of essentially the whole final half of this chapter. It is this chapter, in every important respect, and has been for months.

And it's perfect, and I love it.
The first thing you need to know about this is that it wasn't supposed to happen.

I'll be blunt here: This is the kind of AU I hardly ever read. Seriously. For the most part this is just not a storyline I'm all that interested in. There's nothing **wrong** with it; it's just not really my thing. I tend to prefer either fic set within the world of the show, or fic that features some kind of speculative element. I don't read contemporary romance, ever. I hardly ever watch romance as a film or TV genre. Clearly I'm on board the ship here, I just do often steer clear of this specific stuff for whatever reason.

I don't usually read AUs like this. I was never going to write one.

Then it happened.

This past year has been incredibly hard for me. I'm in a PhD program and my funding ran out, leaving me essentially unemployed. I haven't been able to find another day job (I have now); I've been stuck scrounging together whatever spotty income I can. I've been wrestling with some serious depression and anxiety. I've been feeling like maybe I wasted the last six years in grad school, like maybe this was a huge mistake, like maybe my life wasn't going anywhere and I was doomed to just be stuck for the rest of whatever, surviving and doing mostly sort of okay but never much better than that.

Over the course of the winter I spent a lot of time visiting my parents. They have a nice house and are very kind people, and they have a hot tub, and I spent a lot of time in that hot tub when I stayed there. Two things tended to happen over the course of those visits: I would write a tremendous amount of fic, and I would spend a lot of time in that hot tub thinking about what I was going to write next. It was sort of my relaxation/idea space.

So very late one night - around about two, probably - there I am in the hot tub, smoking and looking at the stars and listening to Josh Ritter's fantastic album *Hello Starling*, and his song "Kathleen" comes on. One of my faves. Tells the story of this party and this girl and this guy who's smitten with her, and how he's not cool enough to get near her - this girl who's so beautiful she's untouchable (**all the other girls here are stars, you are the northern lights**) but he can do one thing for her. He can drive her home. And that one thing, that's better than all the parties in the entire fucking world.

*and I'll have you back by break of day*
*I'm going your way anyway*
*if you'd like to come along*
*I'll be yours for a song*

So I think, "Huh. That's a cute story. That might be a cute little one-shot. Not my thing at all, but let's give it a go and see what happens, see if I can do it at all well."

The result was what eventually became chapter 1. I posted it, and Mollie went nuts in the tags and started yelling ideas at me and I thought "Well, okay, yeah, writing that was fun and there might be more of a story here, let's see what it is."

So chapter 2 happened.

And very shortly after that is when things got completely out of hand.

This story has utterly consumed my imagination for the last half year. Literally **not one single day** has
gone by where I wasn't at least thinking about what I was going to write next. I have never in my life been so immersed in a world. I have never in my life written something that came so smoothly and so easily, at least most of the time - that really did seem to almost be writing itself.

That feeling was intensified tenfold when people started pointing all this stuff out and saying they thought it was cool - little turns of phrase, callbacks, repetitions, coincidences, connections, imagery, themes. Threads that tie this whole thing together in an incredibly complicated webwork that all somehow manages to harmonize.

And I didn't mean for most of it to be there. It just came. I had no idea a lot of it was there until people pointed it out to me, or I went back and reread later and saw it.

I can't stress this enough: *that has never happened to me before.*

None of this has.

*I'll Be Yours For a Song* began as a cute little one-shot which became an odd and vaguely quirky romance-thing, but it rapidly became something much, much bigger. It started to be about family. It started to be about pain and trauma and the agony of growing up, and what happens when you simultaneously aren't allowed to do so and are forced to do so much too quickly. It started to be about mental illness, about scars, about recovery. It started to be about healing and about how much it can hurt to heal. Most of all it started to be about love, and not just romantic love. It started to be about learning to love yourself, to love the world, to recognize that your life is wild and precious and as far as we know you only get one.

It's about Beth and Daryl, and Beth is really the heart of the whole thing, but ultimately it's about Daryl and Daryl, and how it all comes back together again.

I know this all sounds terribly pretentious, and it is. I've been wrestling with this the whole time I've been writing it - the feeling that this story is so incredibly personal, so much bigger than I expected, so much more important, that in a lot of ways it may be the story I've been trying to write all my life... And it's just fanfiction. And it's just a story and it's just one of many many other stories every bit as good.

Except I don't believe stories are ever just stories.

Here's what this thing did to me: I didn't want to finish. I cried at the thought of finishing, and I cried very hard and very frequently as I wrote the final chapters. Yet again: that has never happened to me before. I've never been so lost in the world of a story that imminent departure was gutting.

And the strangest and most painful and most wonderful part of it was that I knew it was *right.* “Well, just don't stop writing if you don't want to stop writing.” No, I had to. This was the end, and it was the only end there could have been, and it was time.

I knew very early on that it was going to end this way, long before I had any kind of clear picture of how I would get there. This is how I tend to write: I have a starting point, I have an ending, and I have a rough plan of what I want to accomplish in between the two. The terrain itself remains mostly a mystery. I enjoy that, because it helps keep me surprised, which helps keep me interested. If it's a good story and I'm telling it well, I often find myself writing simply because I have to know what happens next.

(This is why I've been fanpersoning this thing so hard; I really don't feel like I *wrote* it a lot of the time. I just love it a lot of the same way a reader would.)
So I'm often surprised. But this fic... This story surprised me constantly. Events. Dialogue. The appearance of certain characters (I always intended to keep the inclusion of the show characters to a minimum and not to force anything, and I had no clue Rick and Shane were coming until they decided to show up). Some of it I had no idea was coming until a chapter or so before it did, and I know that's not so unusual, but much of it I had no idea was coming until literally five seconds before I wrote it. A textbook example is the appearance of the crystal wolf in the apartment the first time Daryl and Merle go to look at it. Had no idea it would be there. In my head a camera panned up and there it was. It startled me. Badly.

Freaked me out a tiny bit, in fact. That happened a lot.

But I knew the ending. It was very clear - very visually clear. I had a soundtrack for it right then; as I said in the notes for the previous chapter, I knew Glen Hansard's "This Gift" was simply The Song that had to go with it, and in fact that song guided a huge amount of the pacing of how the final sequence was written. It's written to be read with the song in mind.

The one thing that worried me was how to make it make sense without being overly trite, that Daryl would leave Beth and then return to her. That he would be willing to do that, and that his decision to turn around at the last minute would be reasonable. Initially the truck was going to break down, but then the idea of a crash asserted itself, a kind of near-death, and that felt right.

The appearance of Merle came much later, much more recently, and was obviously inspired by his scene in “Chupacabra”. Though of course he's kinder here.

But the final piece of the puzzle slotted into place as I was writing it. Really when I finished and looked back. Daryl's anger at not being allowed to choose when Merle left him, his anger at not being allowed to be part of the decision. His sense that he was being treated like a child. That he was being abandoned.

He's doing exactly that. Making the same mistake. Merle had to be the one to talk him out of it, and to make his decision make the sense it needed. No one else would do.

And then the rain. That I also knew very early. That this story was a cycle, a Mobius strip, that it was going to end where it began in the most joyful way possible. That there would be summer in the midst of winter, and that the final line of the story would be the first line of chapter 1 - a mirror.

Not a broken one.

And why all the coy-playing? Why the end of the next-to-last chapter? Why that much pain? Because again, it felt right. It felt like what the story - and Daryl - needed. Regarding my behavior, all I can tell you is what I may already have told you, and what I said in this post (note: it's pro Team Delusional if that matters):

A good storyteller strikes a balance between two extremes - between joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, darkness and light. And - this is very very important - uses those contrasts to intensify the effect of each thing. Greater sorrow means greater joy. More intense pain means more intense pleasure. Deeper darkness leads to more brilliant light. Each thing complements its counterpart, and the resulting harmony serves the story.

But storytellers don’t like telling you what goes where, or even what will happen, because we want you to take the journey with us. We want you to experience the depth of the sorrow so you feel the fullness of what comes after. We want to make you happy; we want that happiness to be as powerful as it can be. We want you - to crib from C.S. Lewis - to be “surprised by joy”. If you knew for a fact that it was coming…
Well.

Do you see what I'm saying? We infuriate you on purpose, but not simply to infuriate you. We infuriate you because we want to make you so goddamn happy in the end.

I didn't want you to know. I wanted you to be surprised by it. I wanted you to feel the dark, so the light would be brighter. I hope that worked. If not, I truly apologize, and thank you for coming this far with me anyway.

I'm guessing some of you are also disappointed to be leaving Daryl and Beth here, with hardly anything actually resolved and their future still so much in doubt. All I can do is tell you that again, when stories are over they're over, and if you're writing them it's best to accept that and let them go.

I've known for a while that the story was going to end in this place, so I've also known for a while that there was a lot we simply weren't going to be told. But for me, that fit, because this ultimately isn't a story about everything working out and being fine and settled, even in the sense of knowing about stuff and having all your questions answered. I think, among other things, it's a story about not knowing about stuff, about learning to be okay with not knowing about stuff and pushing forward anyway on the faith that you're doing the best you can. Daryl doesn't know if this is going to work; neither does Beth. Both of them are aware that the odds are against them. But both of them also believe in the goodness of being willing to try, even if things don't end the way you hoped, because trying has value in and of itself, as does the hope that serves as its foundation.

One of my favorite lines of film dialogue is from The Shawshank Redemption (adapted and directed, ironically, by Frank Darabont): Remember, Red: Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.

Daryl is now brave enough to try, to accept the very real risk of failure and to regard that failure as not necessarily a failure at all. Beth is the same. This story has been in part the story of their journey to that point, and as such that part of the journey is now over and a new one is beginning.

I don't know what the end of that journey will be. Authors don't always know everything. One thing the process of writing this has taught me is that I often know very little about my own stories - or I've known very little about this one until after the fact - and that finding the faith and the courage to throw yourself into a project without much in the way of planning or hard information can result in rewards, albeit not always the ones you wanted or expect.

I've been asked more than once about a sequel. There will be no sequel; this story is over. I've packed up my truck, said my goodbyes, and left town. I don't expect to return to this world again. That's very sad for me, but it's also satisfying, to know that I've seen my part through to the end and I'm taking my leave when and where I should.

I'll miss these people so much. I'll miss Daryl. I'll miss riding around in his head, I'll miss his company. He was very odd company a lot of the time, sometimes difficult, but always wonderful. He became a friend. And yes, I'll write him again many times, but it won't be this one. This one is special.

I won't ever see him again. That's hard.

(Great, I'm crying again)

But he'll be all right. He's nuts, but he'll be all right. It's very good to know that.

And in many ways I won't see you again. There will be other stories, of course, and I hope you'll see
me there and we'll travel together for a while, but it won't be like this. It won't be the same.

(Great, I'm crying again)

I'll miss you. You also were wonderful company. If this was special, if the last half year was extraordinary, it was because you were along for the ride, window down, radio on, making dolphin arcs in the wind.

So thank you for that.

Not a lot else to say.

Here's the Road. Let's see where it goes.

3/11/15 - 8/31/15

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