

## Once

My feet drag. The sound of pants swishing together followed by a low scrape of sneaker on road always brings me some modicum of comfort in relatively uncomfortable situations. She holds out the pack of cigarettes and offers me one. I think about it, sigh, and decline.

“We’re gonna have to stop up here a second,” she says.

“Why?”

“Because I have really bad depth perception.” She says this as she tries to light her cigarette with one of those cheap lighters that smokers always have handy. Sparks fly uselessly into the dark sky, but a flame is nowhere to be seen. I’m staring up at the stars, wondering what depth perception has to do with getting a lighter to function properly. They seem so fresh and new, and I know I wouldn’t be able to find the North Star to save my life.

She’s trying again and again to light the flame, using her hand as a shield against the breeze. “You don’t do this stuff anymore huh.” She motioned with the cigarette.

“No...” I realize she would misunderstand. “I mean, I think I stopped for a couple days. Then I realized it was stupid. To stop I mean.”

“Oh.” She’s still trying to light the cigarette. “The other day I was with Danny and Josie, and I was just so mad so I took one of her cigarettes and I said ‘Give me that’ and I lit it on the first try and I was so happy, cause can you imagine how stupid I would have looked?” She lights it and we start walking again.

She’s talking about something. I don’t remember what. I keep looking down at my feet, then back up at the stars. I’m reminded of a dream I had when I was a kid. I was underwater and millions of stars were burning up in the air above me. I started to swim up towards the surface and when I got too close, I realized that there weren’t any stars. There were millions of bodies hanging from nooses, all burning. Just then, I couldn’t breathe, and if I tried to swim any farther it felt like I was slamming my fist into ice. It was one of those recurring dreams, but it never changed.

“What’s this road?”, she asks.

“Redridge.”

“Oh we’re not going down there. There’s a scary bridge.”

“What makes it scary?” I ask as we turn around to walk back the way we came.

“I don’t know. It’s just all metal-y and cement-y. Did you leave your lights on?”

“No.” and then she says “I think you did.” “Well I didn’t, and you’ll see when we get back to the house.”

“Well, we’re probably going to be walking past the house cause I like this road. So what’s up with you and Emily?”

“I don’t know.”

“Like are you guys just friends or are you talking like you were before?”

“I’m not very worried about it. It wouldn’t have worked out. I’m too selfish. I would need someone who was just as selfish as me and in all the same ways.”

“Well, what ways are you selfish?” she asks. I don’t really answer.

“There are four substances in my car right now that if my parents found them they’d kill me.” She just looks at me, the obvious question on her face. “Alcohol, cigarettes, weed,” she joined me in naming the second two, “and shrooms.”

She gasps and cries out. “No, don’t.”

“Why not? It will be fun.”

“I’m worried cause I know sometimes weed is a gateway drug.”

“You’re worried that this time next year I’ll be shooting up heroin? I promise I won’t.” She pulls out another cigarette and asks if I want one. “What kind are they?”

“Camel Crush.”

“Oh...that’s what I have,” I say as I accept it from her. She fumbles with the lighter again. I light mine without problem.

“My dad said he wanted to try shrooms. What happens if you have a bad trip?”

“Then I just don’t do them again, I guess.”

“No...you’ll just try them again because you want to feel good like everyone else. That’s what I did with weed.” I shrug and look back up at the stars.

“See, my lights aren’t on.” A pause and then “Dougie crashed into a tree yesterday. He did it on purpose.”

She starts laughing. “Oh my gosh I’m sorry this isn’t funny.”

“Yeah, it kinda is. Cause you knew it would happen sometime.”

“Was he hurt?”

“No, he slowed down before he hit. I guess he decided it wasn’t a good idea any more.”

Several moments pass. “He did it to get attention,” she says.

“I know.”

“The other day his status said he was ready to date again and asking if anyone knew

someone who'd go out with him, and then all of a sudden it was how he wanted her back. I don't feel like I can really say anything like some people do, but I hate the comments they leave. Sometimes I think you go too far, though, like the other day when you just said 'Fuck you'."

"I don't think I go too far. Someone has to counteract these idiots talking about God's plan and how Doug has so much to live for. I guess they did it too."

She jumps up and down and waves her arms in the air "Ewwww."

"No one would date him."

"No, no one would, really. I felt like a failure when I found out he had a girlfriend. Probably every 'single' person did."

"I bet you really feel like a failure now, huh."

"Yeah. You still don't really like sex do you? I mean, have you done it more? That sounds weird."

"No, I haven't. I'm kinda over it."

We're walking again. She's working on her second cigarette. I'm long done with mine. "I was talking to Alex before you came over. He wanted me to come see him, but I was just thinking how I'd rather go on a walk with you. And its good you accepted. This isn't really a chance that comes along very often."

"Oh? I feel like the possibility is always there."

She cuts in rather quickly. "No, I really have to feel like talking to you."

We're up to another stop sign. I walk up and wrap my fingers around it, then my whole arm and swing around. "I see. I guess that's all I am to you."

"It's not like this was a booty call or something." She's defensive.

"Its kinda like that."

"No, there's nothing sexual about this at all."

I shrug again. "Fine."

She's working on her third cigarette.

"I think you should stop smoking."

"Well I have to get rid of this pack and there's only one way to do it."

"You could give them away." She waves the suggestion away and I find myself looking at the stars again.