

1

SOMEWHERE IN MIDDLE AMERICA

THE PLANE BOUNCED A LITTLE WHEN THE WHEELS TOUCHED DOWN.
It woke me up.

I looked out the window. Speckles of rain, sliding across. Gray day in Omaha.

This was already a mistake. I should've gone somewhere warm, and tropical and foreign.

The light dinged, and everyone on the plane stood up in unison, as though that would get them out of here quicker.

As though any of them wanted to be landing in Omaha.

We just can't wait to be here!

I stayed seated. Rooted firmly in to the window seat, I stared into the abyss of a town that raised me and wondered what I'd done to deserve to be back.

I wasn't back. I was just here.

Where had I heard that before?

My mom was picking me up.

My mom, without the cell phone or a proper navigational system or a watch or a working car clock, was picking me up. I expected this to work against me as I bumbled my way to the escalators. I say I bumbled, because on my full flight somehow, they'd let me carry-on the whole of my luggage. Heavy and complicated and all on my back. Everything I owned that I could get away with, I was carrying. Tripping, swaying back and forth, like Jesus and his cross.

If that wasn't bumbling I didn't know what was.

I pictured myself tumbling down the escalator with all four of my bags, tripping over my shoes or something. I took the elevator.

When it opened, the back of my mother was standing there.

"Mom?"

She turned around, startled, and hugged me -- hard and immediate.

"Baby girl!"

She pulled in tighter.

"Hi," she whispered in my ear.

"What are you doing here? On time?"

"Oh, stop," she said defensively. "I'm getting better."

My mother, the sixty-year-old work-in-progress.

"Give me some of those bags."

I handed them over to her without an argument and watched her bumble with them herself.

My mother was adorable. There was no way around that. She had a kind, round face that had always betrayed her age. You knew just what she had looked like as a toddler. The same deep, light eyes, still curious and foolish after decades of living. Her voice was soft, soothing, and nuanced.

Her black hair was barely streaked with gray and usually covered by a scarf, an Aunt Jemima style that she could get away with.

"We'll both take some," I laughed, relieving her of some weight.

"You look beautiful," she kissed my forehead.

“Do I? I feel like shit ran over twice.”

“What does that mean? That doesn’t make any sense. Who’s going back to see what it looks like?”

She wrapped her arm around me and we walked out together into the dismal Midwest October.

“Of course it’s raining,” I complained.

“It’s supposed to be sunny tomorrow; you brought the sun.”

“We’ll see.”

Mom was illegally parked right in front of the doors, where you were only supposed to drop off, pick up and not leave your car. The airport police officer was standing there writing her a ticket.

“Ma’am! You can’t park here. This is a drop-off zone.”

“It is? I just had to help my daughter. I was in there for five minutes. I’ve never done this before. I didn’t know,” she prattled off excuse after excuse in her too-calm voice. A voice that, whether she was playing him or not, sounded truly ignorant of any wrongdoing.

“It’s my daughter,” she pleaded, as though he must have surely understood the necessity of helping a fully-grown, capable woman with two carry-ons, a backpack, and a large purse.

He stopped, sighed and nodded toward the car.

“This is your warning,” he reprimanded, backing away and looking up the row for anyone he could pass the ticket off to.

“Thank you, thank you,” she smiled and ushered us both into the Jeep, which was packed with everything from groceries to blankets to random wood.

“Mom, you’re too good. You have to know you can’t park here.”

“The prices they charge to be in the parking garage are ridiculous. Then you have to remember where you parked, then you have to wait in line -- it took us no time. This city doesn’t need any more of my money.”

“Okay,” I said, giggling. My mother, the con artist. “What’s all this stuff?” I looked over my shoulder.

“Oh, just my things. Things I need.”

“There’s a birdcage back there.”

“Would you stop being so nosy, please?”

“You’re a hoarder.”

“It’s not hoarding if it’s in the car. You can only house hoard.”

I accepted her educated opinion on the subject with a scoff and an “Okay.”

“How long do you think you’ll be here?”

“Tired of me already?”

“Just want to make sure you’re not leaving again.”

She looked at me with true concern. That worried look your mom gave you that made you feel guilty for nothing. And loved for nothing.

“One-way ticket, Mom. I don’t know.”

“Is this everything?”

“No. Yes?”

I shook my head, trying to make sense of the confusion I was feeling.

“This isn’t everything I have; Alex said he’d order me a POD and have everything moved out here for me when I want.”

“What’s a POD?”

“It’s just a moving company.”

“Oh.”

“I just don’t know if I want anything else.”

“All your things?”

“I just brought 300 pounds of useless shit with me. What more do I need?”

“Okay, okay with the s-bombs.”

I could tell that was lost on her. The queen of stuff. There always could have been more. I didn’t have many things left behind in my house in Austin, anyway. Some Ikea dressers, a bed -- shit like that. Shit my mom had more than enough of. Most things were mutually owned by Alex and me, anyway; he could sell it all, and I

wouldn't miss it. I brought my favorite dresses, a million books I'd never read again, journals, and my laptop for work if I was needed. And of course, my camera, my never-leave-home-without-it. When I thought of my big things, they already felt like someone else's.

"I made turkey burgers. I thought we could watch a movie together tonight."

I smiled over at her profile. Her little bumped nose and filled-out lip line. All the times I looked at her from the passenger side of a car while she talked about dinner and movies.

"That sounds perfect. Do you have a movie you want?"

"Something old. I've been taping them."

"You have a DVR?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh no, no, no. I have them taped on VHS. What's DVR?"

I laughed and shook my head. I was longing to lose myself in this sweet, uncertain simplicity.

2

CHILDHOOD BEDROOM

MY MOM'S HOUSE WAS MY CHILDHOOD HOME. It had gone through many transformations, yet somehow was always the same. The paint rotated almost yearly. The knick-knack collection grew and the bedroom's purposes altered, but nothing really ever *changed*.

My bedroom had been a crafting room, a yarn room, a guest room, a music room, and a closet in the fifteen years since I had left. I expected to come home and find it filled with Tupperware or jewelry or whatever Mom's new momentary passion was.

I creaked open the door, one suitcase in hand, and dropped my head in shock. Mouth open. It was the same frothy pink we had painted it years ago, when I was thirteen and said I was in love with that stupid color. No doubt the same can of paint. My old, floral bedspread had returned to the twin-sized wooden daybed; the tube television I proudly purchased was there. All my ridiculous boy-toy posters were back on the wall. Usher, JT, JC, BSB, NKOTB, and, of course, JTT.

“Mom!” I yelled with a laugh in my voice, already hearing her training up the stairs. “What year is it?”

She showed up behind me with a giant smile.

“Do you like it? It’s just the way it used to be.”

“When I was a kid.”

“Yup, that paint is the same paint can,” she was too proud.

“That’s not a bragging right.”

I immediately got flashbacks of my adolescence there. Opening the windows, the cool summer air would come through as I lay on the floor, dreaming of how cool men were and listening to Elliott Smith or Barenaked Ladies. I was weird. I was romantic and sappy and quickly disappointed. I was also boy-crazy and obsessed with the heartthrobs of my generation. All that coming-of-age.

“This is so damn over-the-top, Mom.”

“It’s fun, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s fun.”

“I was happy you said you were coming home. Maybe I got carried away. Obviously, I wish it were under other circumstances,” her eyes and mouth drooped a little.

“I’m happy to be here, under any circumstances,” I rubbed her shoulder.

“You can unpack later. Let’s eat.”

I happily abandoned the chore and followed her down to the kitchen. The kitchen that had seen a spectrum of colors and was currently settled into an appetite-inducing yellow.

Golden yellow, not 1950s yellow. Natural yellow, not Crayola yellow. Dandelion, not piss.

The cabinets were a forced-antiqued white, and the knobs were turquoise blue.

We sat down to our usual seats at the table. A habit. Including a space for my grandmother’s memory. Josephine. Our third, who -- six years after her passing -- was still a powerful presence in the

house that we all once shared. She sat at the head. We surveyed the food and eyed each other with famished grins. We could say so much without words. It made our phone conversations taxing.

“So, what do you want to do here?”

“Survive,” I laughed. She didn’t. “Okay. I just want to relax. Really. I’ve been working so hard lately, and I need to just chill.”

“That’s smart. You have to mind your rest.”

“I don’t even know how to sleep in anymore.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I’m sure I can pick it up again.”

“Yes. Now, what about your friends?”

“Who?”

“Shep and Stassi -- have you talked to them? Are they going to be around?”

“Umm, I don’t know. I haven’t told them I’m here.”

“Why is that? I’m sure they want to see you.”

“Because I want to chill, remember? I’ll tell them eventually.”

“Okay. Well, that’s good. What’s Shepherd up to?”

“Oh, wow, I have no idea.”

“You don’t talk to him?”

“I do. I mean, he’s not up to anything. The same old.”

“You know,” she said, slow and thoughtful, “he deserves love.”

A snort escaped me.

“What?” she asked defensively. “Does he not?”

“No. He does. He does deserve love. I mean, it’s a weird thing to say.”

“So -- I just have hope he finds the right girl.”

“I hope that, too. But also, why are we talking about this?”

“That was never going to be you.”

“I know this.”

“Does he?”

“Of course he does. That was twelve years ago.”

“Well, it just seems like he hasn’t had a girlfriend since.”

“He’s had girlfriends.”

“You’re a hard act to follow.”

“Well, no shit.”

“And what’s Stassi up to?”

“I don’t know that, either. Raising kids, being Stassi, I guess.”

“She is just so sweet.”

I nodded with that face you made when your mom didn’t know a thing you knew, but you wanted to protect her innocence so you held it in.

“She’s married, right?”

“You were at the wedding.”

“She deserved love.”

“What is this? Your new thing?”

“What?”

“People deserving love.”

She stopped and thought for a second. Fork down and all.

“Well...don’t they?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s just a weird thing to say about everyone.”

“I’m just wishing them the best. Just like you. You haven’t dated anyone in quite a while.”

It was unlike her to bring up my love life. We didn’t discuss the men who couldn’t keep up with me over the years. I’d become fine with it.

“There’s no one to date, Mom.”

“There’s half a world.”

“Nope.” A mental Rolodex of men who never understood me rolled through my head. Each face with a giant, red X on it. “Plus, I think you know I’ve been a little busy.”

“Well, you look great.”

Yes, because that’s what counts.

“You’re one to talk, Mom. There’s half a world for you, too,” I said, my tone sharp.

The women in my family were famously manless. My mother spoke of my father once, when I asked her who he was and why he was gone. We hadn't mentioned him again.

My mother's father had left her and Josephine when she was five years old, for another woman.

My grandmother's dad died in a war before she could ever meet him. Her mother raised her alone too, finally remarrying long after Josephine was grown and gone.

"My mother always said that she had men after her, but she would never let another man finish what my father started. So she did it alone," my grandmother told me once, reminiscing about her own childhood. I guessed that was where it all started, my own run-ins with elusive romance. It was in my blood -- spelled out in the branches of a family tree infused with estrogen and mothers. But if anyone deserved love, I couldn't imagine a soul who should have been in line before Kim.

"So what about you, Mom?"

"What about me?"

"Do you deserve love?"

Her brown face turned bright pink and she giggled incessantly, looking around the dining room as if anyone else were there with us. What a show.

"What? Why are you asking me that?"

"You really brought it up. I just got to thinking when the last time you had some love was. And not in that gross way that I don't want to hear about."

"Well, it's been a while," she humbled, "but, I just don't have time for anybody right now."

"Why? What do you do?"

"I do a lot, daughter, thank you. And you will see that while you're here. I'm in classes, I volunteer, I have my garden out there. I mean -- a man? Really? Can you imagine? Where would he even

fit?”

“Right next to you,” I jokingly pointed to the large, empty seat next to her.

She feigned exhaustion of me. Or, maybe it was real.

“Oh please, it’ll happen when the time is right,” she sighed.

“Well, do you want it? Would you like a partner?”

“You make it sound like a lesbian!”

“What’s lesbian about that?”

“Partner. You make it sound like Ellen.”

“Oh my god. Mom,” my entire head and eyeball set rolled.

“Enough. All couples are partnerships. Ellen has a WIFE.”

“Oh. Well, I think having a ‘partner,’” she used the biggest air quotes ever. Like full on bear paws, “would be nice. I have a lot of stuff around here that needs to be fixed, I’d like to have someone take me out to dinner. You know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Mom looked down at her plate. Was she wistful? I reached across the table and grabbed her hand.

“Kim, you deserve love.”

“Stop it. Don’t mock me.”

“I am totally fucking serious.”

She smiled and shrugged.

“Thank you. I don’t like that language.”

That night, after falling asleep on the sofa with Mom, midway through an old William Holden movie, I climbed sleepily up the stairs and into my room, feeling all too familiar. Yes, many years removed me from this place, but if the constraints of time hadn’t existed, it could have been fifteen years earlier. I could have been a teenager. And JC Chasez could have been the love of my life. I stood in the doorway, taking in the room again. It was small. How did I ever grow so big in it? I always felt so much bigger than this room, or house, or city. Like I couldn’t be contained, though

everything tried its damndest to reign me in. Make me take solace in the normal. I was never comfortable in that.

I was Alice through the looking glass, and Omaha was full of oddities I didn't understand. Comfort zones and manageable thoughts and opinions. I drank the potion, and my legs shot out through the windows and my head through the roof, my arms the size of Boeings. The whole town shouting, "Off with her head."

I sat on the bed and bounced. I wondered if it remembered my body shape and would invite me back in with a wide open welcome and supportive springs.

Across from the bed, on top of the tube TV, was a memory board.

"Holy shit," I whispered.

I thought I had thrown that thing out forever ago. Mom salvaged everything; I should have known. It was covered in pictures, ticket stubs, pins, notes, stickers.

Stickers. Where did you even buy stickers anymore? I leaned in further to discover this treasure trove of a past life.

God, I was skinny. And I didn't even try, I never tried, and I was never thin enough.

God, those huge fucking glasses. Of course, now they were in style, and every hipster in town wanted a pair that I and other nerds paved the way for. Those shirts with built-in bras and spaghetti straps. Those damn wedge platforms. That damn blue eyeshadow. Why hath thou forsaken me, early aughts?

There was a picture of Stassi and I both sitting in tubs pulling each other's hair. It was the night of my first fight with Shep, and we played stupid games to keep my spirits up. Thought the world was coming to an end.

Shepherd and me at one of those radio station concerts. The ones with fifteen fledgling bands and a washed-up host. He was freezing, so I wrapped my sweater around him. Six foot three, 250 pounds, wearing a gray cable knit underneath a parasol with no

shame. I wore a tank top and cargo pants and jumped in the mosh pit and touched hands with lead singers, occasionally bringing him back Dippin' Dots. That was our purest essence. We had been inseparable, alter egos of each other.

Teenage clichés.

I remembered the shifts that happened gradually that led us to who we were going to be. The red flags that waved along the way that one day it wouldn't be like that. There was always a tectonic plate inside of me threatening to quake and destroy.

3

ALEX

I PULLED MY RUNNING SHOES OUT OF A DARK CORNER OF MY BAG AND strapped them on, feeling relief when I saw red, Austin clay in the crevices.

It wasn't a dream. I had actually been there.

I tightened the laces around my short socks and did a stretch before pounding the pavement in my old neighborhood. The old neighborhood, where everything was just how I left it, but me. The first leg of a run out of Mom's house was either straight uphill or toward a main street. I opted for the hill, hoping to disappear into the quiet rows of family homes. Large, historic Tudors made of brick and perfectly manicured lawns.

Three houses up, Mrs. Landon was in her yard with her hat and gloves, up with the sun. I quickly threw a hand up to acknowledge her and was gone before she could have recognized me. The rain the night before made way for a fantastic morning smell. Earthworms and muddy leaves raked into large, wet piles, surprised by the shower.

I turned right at the top of the hill, a shortcut into the bricked-street back alleys of historic North Omaha. A place known nationwide for shootings and gangs, which I knew for peaceful morning runs and mediocre pot, if you wanted it.

The path I was running had no sidewalks. Just bumpy, uneven streets with large curbs on either side, and hills. The chain-link fence that used to house a Rottweiler was the chain-link fence that housed a new German Shepherd. Rose bushes became azaleas, sand boxes became starter cars, and grills were still on front porches.

I twisted up an unused circle of pavement. At the top was an overlook with a panorama and a glimpse of the meager downtown skyline. I sat on a bench, feet in the seat for a wider view and said hi to my first Omaha autumn morning in god knew how long. Pricked with the cooling sweat underneath my jacket, it was just how I remembered October being.

Crisp and damp. Something somewhere smelling of fire. A hint of wintertime.

A heavy, blue Buick came driving up the street behind me, bumping loud music and selling that so-so pot I was talking about. I flagged them down.

“Oh my goodness, you scared me,” Mom clung to her chest when I came back into the house, half an hour later. I took a leisurely pace coming back so I could air out any skunky smell I might have been carrying.

“Why?”

“Well, I woke up and you were just gone. No note, your phone was here. I should’ve known you went out running. I just thought --”

“What? You thought I’d been raptured?”

“What is that? Is that the thing with the clothes being left

behind? I heard that was a prank.”

“It is, Mom,” I sneaked past her and poured myself a tall glass of filtered water. Nebraska’s tap water was among the worst drinking water in the nation, so I took the same precautions here as I did in Mexico, until they got it together.

“I drink the water here, and I’m fine,” Mom had told me over the phone when I warned her about it.

“No, you’re not fine; the chemicals just make you complacent enough to think you’re fine. And that’s what they want,” I surmised onto deaf ears. Watching her drink from the tap made me cringe. But what did I know about health and safety, anyway?

“Well, how was your run?”

“Needed. Everything is just where I remember it. God, from the news I thought I’d be coming home to a war zone.”

“They have to get their gang bang stories. You know it’s always been quiet on this side.”

“Yeah. Mom, don’t say gang bang.”

Although I knew the other side of the North O media sensation, it didn’t stop me from worrying about her living alone. I bought her a security system a couple years back. She tripped the alarm so many times herself, the police told her they’d do extra patrol on her block if she’d get rid of it.

Mom was always good at making friends like that.

“How are you feeling?” she asked for the first time of many.

“I feel great, Mom. I’m going to go take a shower.”

“What are your plans today?”

“Nothing really. I kind of just want to bum around your house if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t. You can do that. I have a couple of church meetings this morning, but I’ll come back to make you lunch.”

“Sounds good.”

I stepped out of the shower to a ringing cell phone and made no

quick attempt to get it. I thought about shutting it off altogether: one of those times when you wanted to disappear and have everyone forget who you were, that they ever knew you, and become as anonymous as a newborn baby. Only your mother cared that you existed.

There was no one I had a need to connect with. Not even *need*. I didn't have a moderate *want* to connect, just a full-fledged yen to vanish. Anonymity was impossible without someone thinking you were dead or depressed.

Three missed calls. Alex.

I threw the phone back on the bed, wondering what could be so important. I was sure he was being dramatic. I hadn't called or texted when I landed last night as promised. He thought I was landing in a cornfield somewhere, not in a city of nearly a million.

Alexandr Clinton was my best friend.

We had clung tight to each other since our sophomore year in college at UT. We both dropped out and refused to go back to our respective homes, Omaha and Atlantic City.

We'd shared phone numbers, whiskey bottles, beds, dreams, apathy, colds, secrets, and a deep well of pure, unadulterated, raw life. The kind of life you shared when you had the dangerous freedom of being completely accepted for everything you were and weren't. We had that.

We were business partners, running a successful photography company. Cohabitators, sharing our collaborative dream house. An old, married couple who forgot how to be intimate, and who weren't married. Old friends with nowhere to hide.

For that reason, I didn't want to answer his call. He knew me too well, and when you wished to be no one, that could really mess up the plan.

A text rang through.

Seriously? it said.

I rolled my eyes, knowing he could tell that I had read it. I sighed -- fine.

I'm safe. I'm home. I'll call you later.

I lied, but it was a good lie. Buying him peace of mind and me peace and quiet, at least for now.

I lay across my bed, still wrapped in my towel. I stared at the popcorn ceiling, which had a dusty fan attached to it. It was 100 degrees in Texas. Sweltering hot and humid, sticky like sugar water gathering fruit flies. Our Texas house was tiled, designed to keep you cool when the sun couldn't care less. Smooth terracotta floors in traditional ranch-style architecture. Arched doorways and open showers.

There was nothing like it in either Omaha or Atlantic City. The house was built around a courtyard patio that Alex and I filled with plants and furniture and fountains for our hidden adult oasis. We decided to buy the house together four years before, after another bad falling out with another shitty landlord. We realized that we were -- for the foreseeable future -- stuck together.

Hetero life mates.

He was worried and upset and probably hungry. It was very last minute when I sprung it on him that I was leaving for Omaha for an indeterminate amount of time. He had supported me, for the most part, and then, in the final minutes before my flight, had a total breakdown.

"Where is everything?" he said, suddenly panicked.

"What everything?"

"Everything in the house. I don't know where you put shit.

What if I need vinegar?"

"It's above the fridge. What would you need it for?"

"I don't know. I don't know. What the hell do you use vinegar for?"

"Cleaning. Eating. You can make salad dressing. Alex, what are

you talking about? You do all the cooking. You know about the vinegar.”

“See? What the fuck?” he was shaking his head sadly from side to side. “Fuck” was a word that had been missing from his vocabulary for a long time, as he replaced his party-boy lifestyle with finer things and stronger language. I knew he was cracking.

“Are you okay?” I patted and rubbed his back, comforting him.

“Why do you have to go back to Omaha? This shit just really...” he trailed off. “I don’t think you should go. I don’t want you to go.”

“You’re gonna come up and see me. I’ll see you in a week?”

“And then what?”

“And then I don’t know, Al. I don’t know. I’ll take you to the zoo.”

“It’s gonna be cold.”

“It’s mostly inside, anyway.”

“I have a lot of work to do. So it may be longer than a week. I have to train the intern. I have to --”

“I know your schedule. I built it.”

“Okay, so you know.”

“Yeah.”

He was still sulking but begrudgingly accepted my invitation to the zoo. The promise of a baby hippo could fix anything. If you ignored the fact that they were captive.

Alex had wanted to road trip the fourteen-hour drive north together; we had taken so many road trips, he thought it seemed right. I just wanted to get there. I didn’t want to stop at truck stops and play games and sing over each other listening to the Pixies. I didn’t want that much enjoyment. Just drop me off in the cornfield, Alex; I’d be fine.