

The Refueling Station

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The sun pounding down on her windshield, Jennifer took one more long drag from her cigarette, then watched how the tremor in her hands sent shivers up the columns of smoke drawing like incense towards the pale blue sky. She could still feel the vibration of hot leather against her thighs, still hear the rhythmic drumming of potholes-to-be beneath her tires. The sun had traveled slowly across the unblemished sky, circling above like a patient vulture, dripping heat. Now it sat perched on the cusp on a distant canyon, as if waiting to be tucked to bed by a darkening blue.

People sometimes died in this weather. It was a dreadful thought, and yet Jennifer couldn't help but picture their skin sliding off their muscles in chunks, their desperate hearts thudding themselves into oblivion, knowing only how to heat, not cool. Perhaps neither of those things ever happened, perhaps both. Either way, she could suddenly feel her own skin crawling, her heartbeat heavy at the base of her neck.

She ashed the cigarette and, after a second's consideration, tossed it in the sand below.

A mere pinprick on the horizon, the gas station's pulsating neon lights rolled nauseous shivers of purple and white down a patch of sun-bleached dirt. Jennifer cast one last hopeful glance at the passenger's seat, but the shards of dark green plastic had not reconstituted into the familiar shape of an Arizona bottle. Her purse, she checked, was empty. Her tongue lay heavy and dry at the back of her throat. She could hold out another couple of hours, she knew- maybe even until morning. She also knew that people who thought like that often wound up with their stiff fingers permanently reaching for their flask, white knuckles peeking out from beneath splintering skin.

"Fuck it," she said, and removed the handbrake. She wrapped her sunburnt fingers around the blazing black leather of the steering wheel and swallowed down a sob. Then with a quick glance over her shoulder, she drove off.

The Heart Trail Refueling Station was the same as it has always been; moth-eaten and bruised with rust since long before the day she and Joshua had dragged their fifth-hand, sticker-spangled suitcases through its creaky front door. On the inside of the pumps' glass screens grime framed the spinning reels that once displayed bargainous prices in erratic splotches of black, like someone had flicked paint at it from afar. Her hands loosened around the steering wheel; she was home again, from God knows where.

Jennifer pulled up to the side of the main building; a little white cube with red window frames and massive orange-and-white striped canopies obscuring three small windows- two framing the door, one on the side. She took her purse from where it sat strapped into the otherwise empty passenger's seat and took out a small, still-shiny key; the last in a long legacy of copies. Mysterious green-brown chunks of plastic sat wedged between the ridges. She picked them out, one by one.

The dusty asphalt crunched beneath her flip-flops. White paint flakes lay like discarded fingernails in front of the front door; they scattered between the pumps as the wind sent a shiver through the canopies. One last flake lay stubbornly by the threshold; she kicked it loose from between the grooves of the asphalt and it flew off. Maybe Joshua had picked them loose that morning; he always got fidgety when she was gone for hours at a time. Who knows how long it had been this time? She brushed down her hair with her hands and wiped her sweaty palms off on her hips.

She wiggled the key into the lock, using the handle to lift the door half an inch off the ground, then shoved it open with her hip. Inside, a heavy, musty smell permeated the room. On the counter, receipts were impaled on a repurposed bobby pin. Black mold crept up the wall behind the counter, and between the aisles of candy and liquor, her flip-flops stuck to the floor.

"Joshua?" she said. She waited. Took a step forward. A cockroach crunched underfoot. She kicked it off the bottom of her sandal. "Fuck. Josh?"

The freezer next to the counter hummed, and in the break room a lazy ceiling fan rattled rhythmically. She made her way to the door of the breakroom left ajar, an acidic flavor coating the back of her tongue. She lay both hands on the cold metal handle and, eyes squeezed shut, pushed.

The door moaned open. The room was how she had left it that morning; their army cots stood slouched against the far wall and clothes erupted from badly stowed storage boxes underneath orange-juice stained cupboards. A few grains of rice hid between the tufts of a fuzzy sock. She took a step inside; the air was syrupy and warm. She stood still for a moment, listening for the air conditioning, while the ceiling fan pressed thick heat back down on her. Only the minifridge still droned from its corner.

Her throat was swollen and dry, she noticed- painfully so. She lurched at the kitchenette, spinning open the tap with one hand while she scooped the water into her face with the other. The water splashed her chapped lips, and she remembered performing the same action before, perhaps a hundred times. Her exposed knee against the laminated cabinet. Drinking so quickly she threw half of it back up. Plastic wedges, blue, then brown, between the ridges of worn-down keys. Purple and white neon lights.

She spun around, heart racing. A tingling crept through her fingers and toes. The world was hot, molten gold and spinning. For a moment, nothing moved.

Her hair, but longer. Her hands, but calloused, with blisters like bubble wrap from her wrist to her rolled up sleeves. Always the same scene: the remembering of the car, the lights-white and purple, the water. The images flooded past like blood rushing in her ears.

As abruptly as a heartbeat, it stopped. Her nails crunched over the counter's uneven, laminate surface. She breathed in twice slowly, slapped herself across the face, and then pulled out a mug for tea. Her eyes prickled, so she slapped herself again.

She kicked off the flip-flops and wiggled out of her pants. After unbuttoning her blouse, she unplugged the toaster and plugged the microwave on the floor back in. Waiting for her tea to boil, she tapped each finger to her thumb, then back. She walked back into the store and took a pack of the cheapest cigarettes. She would smoke it quickly, before Joshua got back.

In the corners of her vision, the room still tilted and spun. She pressed her palms against her closed eyes and breathed.

The microwave dinged. Extracting a cigarette while reaching for the lighter in her chest pocket, she knelt down. The cigarette clenched between her lips, she watched the steam leak into the room. Columns. Incense. Clenching the mug between ring finger and thumb on the hand carrying the cigarette, she threw open the back door and drifted out onto the cooling tarmac.

Dusk had started to descend like a film of ash, obscuring distant mountains. To the west oozed a deep, bloody red. To the east, the moon tottered on the edge of a jutting rock Jennifer had once drunkenly nicknamed after herself, due to its bulging, nose-like protrusion. Joshua had poured half a bottle of wine down the drain that night. This, too, was a memory, but Jennifer did not know whether of the true or false kind.

The moon beamed down at her, casting a column of radiant white light on the weather-beaten picnic tables out back. The steam breathing from her tea clouded white and frothy against the twilight.

She could spend entire summers straddling one side of the bench, facing the moon. Back then there had been a flickering light just above the back door that bled the same dull gold light as those out front beneath which she'd first carve a moon out of the white paper before pouring the rest with black and gray. Joshua would join her between customers. He would sit across her on the bench, absently tugging the label off a sweaty water bottle, and spill whatever thoughts arose: how many stars must have died since we were born, how many must have caught flame for the first time. That he should start writing poetry again. So often, he would tell her to put away the paper. He had begged her, even.

Where was he now?

Only the crickets' timid chirping dared break the silence. Around that time of the year the cicadas would be underground, she realized; suddenly, she could feel them thrashing beneath her toes, their small hooked feet clawing at her heels. Nearby, a light trap catching a moth spit and crackled. She realized her chest had been bare this entire time, her unbuttoned blouse hanging open and fluttering in the wind like a cloak, backwards.

Dropping the cigarette into the sand, she jumped to her feet. She slung her arms around herself, covering her chest. The darkness around her throbbed. Distant rocks creaked, looming over her shoulder as she tip-toed hastily towards the ever-distancing door. A guttural sob lay at the bottom of her throat which she could not swallow down.

Suddenly, two lights. Steady at first, the small white dots appeared to her left and expanded upon the horizon, gathering around them a smoke-like mist. Then they started

bouncing as if shaken, and as the mist swelled it fell like a sheet upon the smooth upper-layer of tar on the road, exposing countless small craters as little pits of darkness. Jennifer's arms trembled. She remembered two things at once: that she must not be found, and that she always would be.

A cold shiver ran through her spine as crumbling flakes of paint gave way to her back through the thin fabric of her blouse. The lights were trembling now. She could feel the car's spinning hum in her palms; a few seconds now and the light would speed by, spitting wind in her face. Already the lights were hitting her; her eyelids moved from black to a dark, meaty red, then back to black.

But then humming slowed into a deep rumbling. Pebbles and sand grinded beneath the car's tires as it slipped through the pumps and creaked to a halt. Within it something crunched: the hand brake. Her stomach hardened, nausea spreading to her temples and fingertips. A door clicked open, then slammed shut. Her forehead tingled where her eyebrows met on either side of a thick knot.

Sand scrunched beneath steady footsteps unequivocally coming in her direction, then stopped. She opened her eyes just before Joshua rounded the corner. He walked with a slight limp and was clenching his side.

"Oh my God, Jennifer." Then his solaced smile melted away. "Holy shit, are you crying?"

The warm ceramic of the mug burned against the red skin of her frozen fingers. Joshua's oversized leather jacket hung listlessly from her shoulders. Somehow she couldn't remember buttoning her blouse or throwing out the old tea, but her chest was warmer now and her hands were no longer shaking. Plastic scraped over wood in the other room. Seconds later, Joshua

ducked through the back door, tossing a threadbare old sweater onto the counter. A faded Arizona Wildcats logo stared up dully at her.

"Took me a second. Your favorite, right?" he said.

She ran her thumb down the mug's ceramic handle as blood stains like small rose buds unfurled throughout the gray polyester. A pang of disgust flooded her. She tilted her head back slowly; patches of black mold traced the edges of the eggshell ceiling panels, but no blood.

Joshua returned. He had changed out of his button-up and was wearing a muted blue t-shirt instead. He dragged a bar stool to the opposite side of the counter, two long cracks like claw marks running through the crackling leather. She recoiled when he leaned forwards on both elbows, pressing his pursed lips against clasped hands.

"You haven't finished your tea," he said at last. His hand on her wrist sent goosebumps shivering up her arm. "And you're cold. Do you feel alright? What happened earlier? Why did you run from the car?"

"I didn't-" Now blood coated her fingertips. It seeped down between her knuckles, tickling as it traced the crook of her thumb before oozing onto the counter. Bile rose to the back of her throat as nauseous shivers spread through the palms of her hands. She closed her eyes and whimpered: "I didn't run."

"Jennifer- you went out bare chested, in the cold. You know how quickly the temperature drops here at night. Are you trying to get sick? Is that it? What's next- you banging your head against the walls again?"

The same conversation, except her watch was still working. The same conversation, except she had already taken off her blouse and put on the Wildcats sweatshirt. The same

conversation, except Joshua stood between her and the collection of instant noodles, his hands on her shoulders, squeezing.

"I'm fine, Joshua," she said, forcing her eyes back open. "Really. I just need some sleep."

He leaned back for a moment. A muscle twitched in his jaw. He sighed. "I'm not sure why you're lying to me, Jennifer. I just want the best for you."

"Please, Josh-"

"I'll do anything to make you happy, Jennifer. Anything. But you'll have to stop hurting yourself."

A cold evening, years ago. Stars blurring in the windshield. A plan: a letter, at home. Her car, gasoline. A lighter. A shadow that started speaking. That said: "I'll keep you safe." A pop set the back of her eyes on fire. Joshua brushing her gasoline-drenched hair from her face, whispering.

"I know you would," she said, contorting her mouth into the semblance of a smile. Her eyes flicked towards her reflection in the microwave: a perfectly sharp-edged cutout of night, black overlaid with a dimly gold-gleaming reflection of the interior. She could make out the dark shape of her head and hair, but not her eyes.

The same conversation, except the sun cast long rectangles climbing up the shelves. The same conversation, except the sink was overflowing. The same conversation, except Joshua's fists were beating against rolled-up windows.

The same conversation, except a pool of black drifted into like an oil spill across the blue of his shirt, gleaming cherry in the faint light. Last night: his hands pressed below his ribs. Between his knuckles, an ocean of red. He had said: "You will not like what you find." She had

lowered his head to the ground as his chest fluttered into ash. Then she had rinsed off the knife in the sink and laid it back underneath her pillow where she'd found it.

The room swayed around her. Her skull ached dully and her vision blazed red around the edges, but she smiled. She remembered what it had taken. Her fingers lingering behind on the countertop, toes first, then heel. Slowly. One kiss to silence his protesting. One more for his hands on her back, for the floor to fall away beneath her feet. She said: "I need you, Joshua. I really do."

The night had crawled into Jennifer, clouding her eyes and her ears. She wiggled her toes and blinked until sensation shivered back into her skin and the shadows tore from the light-gray interior.

A memory: his skin like a balloon against a needle. He had been waiting, sitting slouched on the edge of the cot. He had wrapped the blanket around his naked body and was crying. She had kissed him and told his unhearing ears to rest for once.

Now the remains were on the other side of the room, where she had tucked them in. On her way to the door, she knelt down beside them. Just a few ashes were left on the pillow, and the blanket had deflated into various complex mountain ranges. She didn't have very long, she knew: this was not the first time she had, almost, won. Within a day, perhaps less, she would become blind to her provisions. A day later a new Joshua would welcome her back home.

The door creaked as she opened it. Milk cartons pressed thin in the middle leaked puddles of white into the aisle. Just before the counter, shredded bags of nerds sowed the ground like confetti. An empty bottle of vodka lay upside-down in the cash drawer. All the way down the door frame, the same message written over and over and over again: *Find the eyes*. The

handwriting was the same each time. Each time *eyes* had been crossed out. Her car key, dry paint and pale wood chippings still lodged between its ridges, lay at her feet.

She picked them up. Outside the air was cool. A faint breeze guided her to her car. She got in; the same sentence was etched all over the interior. It crept up the glove department and swept over the doors, just below the windows. She tilted her head back: *the eyes*, all along the roof. Turning around, she removed the handbrake. The moon- brighter now- had started its descent.

She slipped the key into the ignition. Around the hole, so many small, small scratches.