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THE OCEAN

Mielle Hubbard

Marie opened her door after the second knock to find Stewart, arm still raised for the third, standing on her stoop.

"I guess you're ready to go?" he asked.

"Have been for a couple weeks," Marie said. "I would offer you a cup of coffee, but..." she gestured to her empty apartment.

Stewart leaned in to see it and whistled at the sight of the bare walls. "I know you're not sentimental about your things, but damn," he said, "you remembered everything?"

"Really?" she responded. "You want me to quadruple check?"

"Sorry, habit from the kids," Stewart said as he helped Marie carry her bags to the car and loaded them up. "I'm impressed you fit your whole life into just three bags."

"You'd be surprised how little a single person needs. This is just the essentials. Plus underwear."

Stewart laughed as he sat in the passenger seat and Marie drove off. Fifteen minutes later, by the car clock set three minutes fast, they stopped in front of a small house that stood out against its neat neighbors with its bright colors and unkempt garden. Marie honked the horn and Stewart shouted, "Get your butt out here, Ron!"

The door flew open and a small woman with a huge bush of greying hair rushed out, knocking over nearly everything on the cluttered porch as she ran down the stairs.

"Marie, Stew!" Rhonda threw aside her bag and ran to her siblings, just barely out of the car.

"Jesus, Ron, I saw you yesterday," Marie said through a squeezed chest into her sister's hair.

"I know, I'm just so excited." Rhonda picked up her suitcase and crammed it into the full trunk. "Woah, Marie. Three bags? That's good, even for you."

As they all got into the car and drove away, Rhonda and Stewart tapped their feet excitedly as Marie merged onto I-90 and the trip was finally begun.

"So Marie, what's our itinerary look like? Where are we

staying tonight? How many miles a day?" Rhonda handed a bag of chips up to Stewart in the passenger seat.

"No idea. No plan. We're just gonna go until we stop," Marie said.

"Wait, no plan? You, the master of all plans, planner of all forty-four years of your life, do not have a plan for the next week?" Stewart said, mouth full of chips.

Marie shrugged. "I've been making plans since forever and look what it's gotten me. A job that wore me down and an apartment full of plants."

"This all feels like a movie!" Rhonda said. "The chief editor of the *Boston Review* suddenly quits and moves across the country, having affairs with silver foxes along the way."

"I don't know about the silver foxes," said Marie.

"Fine, young stallions, then," said Rhonda.

Marie woke up every day at 7:00. She did her morning yoga while water boiled, and sat down for tea and oatmeal at 7:20. She had toppings that she rotated daily, so she could tell herself that every morning felt like a new meal. She finished eating by 7:30, put the dishes in the washer, and got into the shower. Out of the shower at 7:45. Put on light makeup, the set of clothes laid out the night before, and out the door at 8:00. The walk to work took her thirty minutes, where she used her red pen liberally on articles, took care of everyone's questions and problems, and occasionally sipped from her mug of coffee. She took a break at 1:30, ate an apple and a sandwich (brought from home, made the night before, also on a daily rotation), and looked out at Boston laid before her.

She liked to look into people's windows, imagine what they were doing or thinking. On occasion, sunlight would shine off the water through the cracks between the skyscrapers, reminding her of the harbor just out of sight. Her heart ached at this, forcing the memories of her mom pulling her out of school and going to the beach on a whim. Marie was grateful for the often cloudy city, so that she didn't have to remember her mom too often.

Marie's phone buzzed, telling her it was 2:00, and it was back to the red pen, back to problems, back to coffee sipping. She left the office at 6:00, walked home, took out a frozen dinner, and put it in the microwave. While it heated up, she decided on a TV show, put it on, then ate the dinner, always burning her tongue on the first couple of bites. She let her show play while she made lunch for the next day, picked out her clothes, prepared her overnight oatmeal, cleaned the kitchen. Then she got into bed at 9:30, set her computer next to her, drank her vodka water (no lemon, she already brushed her teeth and didn't want the acid), turned and scrolled through her endless feeds until she fell asleep around 11:00, the computer still on next to her. She woke up again at 7:00 and did

yoga while the water boiled.

The trip from Boston to Seattle was a forty-five hour drive, not that Marie was thinking about it. She also wasn't thinking about the approximate number of stops they would need to make and the nights they would spend in hotels, making their entire trip about five days. And she absolutely was not thinking about how if Rhonda didn't get out of the shower in the next three minutes, they would all miss the continental breakfast, so they would go to a diner, which would add at least two hours to the day.

She took a deep breath. The whole point of this was to not have a plan.

"I'm going to get a muffin from the continental breakfast," she called to Rhonda.

"Oh, I was thinking we could just go to that greasy spoon we passed last night," Rhonda said over her shower. Marie heard squeaking, and the water stopped. "But you can grab something if you're hungry. I'll be ready in about thirty minutes."

Marie followed the familiar sweet smell of continental breakfast carbs to the lobby and sat at a corner table with a muffin and a pile of oddly wet fruit salad. She opened the notebook she had brought with her and stared at her scribbles, the handwriting that came out when she wrote too quickly. She picked up her pen, turned to a new page, and began to write, a little more controlled.

Someone approached her table, holding their own plate of muffins and croissants and sat down.

"Rhonda's going to be ready in an hour," Marie said.

"Yeah, I figured," Stewart said. "Decided to do a little carbo-loading before we head off for the day. Where are we supposed to get to tonight?"

"Madison," Marie looked up. "Or whatever."

"I knew you still had a plan," Stewart smiled. "So what is it for when you actually get there?"

"I got a little apartment in Queen Anne, security deposit paid and papers ready to sign. But honestly, that's it. I don't have a job lined up. I don't even know if I want a job." Marie smiled and shook her head. "This is so dumb, but I think I want to write a book."

"Eh, it's a little cliché, but it's not dumb. What would it be about?"

"I want it to be about me, but not about me. Like a made-up version of me. I don't know if that counts as fiction, but I don't know what else it could be about."

"I think fiction's best when it's rooted in some reality." Stewart held Marie's hand. "I'm excited to read it."

Marie squeezed his hand and smiled. They cleared their table together and walked up to their rooms to sit and wait while

Rhonda finished getting ready. Marie checked her watch as they walked out of the hotel. Just a couple hours past the schedule she was definitely not thinking about.

It was easy to forget about the days slipping away when you do the same thing for all of them. Marie realized this when she was laying in bed, sipping her vodka water, scrolling through her Facebook memories, and came across a post she had made twelve years ago. First day at her new position, chief editor. She closed the laptop, turned onto her back, and stared at the ceiling, trying to remember all the time, the stories, the magazine issues, but it was all just one blur, the same routine over and over again. She remembered reading some time ago that when you go somewhere, it always feels like it takes longer to get somewhere than it does to get back. Same thing happens when there's not enough variation in your routine; the brain filters away the repetition. Same thing happens when there's no variation in your routine.

Marie opened her computer, opened a new tab to Google, and stared. How do you solve all your problems with a Google search? She hesitated for a moment, hovered above the keys, and closed her computer again. She walked to her bookcase, pulling out a small journal. The last entry was from two years ago. Back in bed, her hand began to write furiously. The vodka water was forgotten about, became room temperature then undrinkable as she wrote through the night.

Marie looked out the window at Wisconsin. The sky was cloudy, the sun hung low in the sky, the only constant as fences, poles, cars, fields whizzed by. They'd been on the road for just over an hour today. They stopped for coffee, refreshed their snacks, Stewart checked in with his wife and kids, and they took off again. Marie sat in the back seat, methodically bringing crackers up to her mouth, and letting her vision go soft. When they were kids going on their annual family road trip, this is how it was. Music washed through the car, the whole family lost in their own thoughts, and the road spinning past. She always imagined that a giant was behind the car, peeling up the roadway as they drove away from it, on and on and on.

"What are your favorite memories of Mom?" Stewart broke the soft magic entering the car.

"What?" Marie lifted her head and looked to the front seat.

"I mean, when you think of Mom, what do you think of?"

"Her laugh," Rhonda answered. "It was just. So. Loud."

"And it was so characteristic, you could pick it out of a crowd in a second," Marie said. "I remember how she could strike up a conversation with anybody. She could talk about anything with anyone for hours."

“God, she could talk forever,” laughed Rhonda. “I think I got that from her.”

“You? Talk a lot? No way,” Stewart said.

Rhonda looked at him. “Put your hand out,” she said.

“Yeah, right, Mom, not falling for that one,” said Stewart. He laughed as Rhonda reached across and hit his thigh anyway.

“Remember how she would take you on those little trips every once in awhile? We always stayed at home and made friendship bracelets,” said Rhonda.

“We went to the library, she let me take out any book I wanted. I accidentally learned about sex way too early,” said Stewart.

They all laughed at that, Rhonda turned up the music, and they all returned to their snacks and daydreams.

The hours went by, the sun rose and fell through the sky. They forgot what state they were in. State of delirium, Stewart joked.

Marie woke up at 7:00 the morning after that long night of writing. She skipped her yoga and took a long shower. At lunch, she looked out her window, trying to see the water through the skyscrapers.

She sat down, closed her eyes, and allowed herself to watch her mom walk to the shoreline and place her hand on top of the water, just for a moment. Her mom closed her eyes, took a breath, and settled into the water. As a young girl, Marie never understood this part of it, why her mom always had to touch the freezing cold water. Then her mom opened her eyes again, smiled at Marie, and they spent the rest of their day running to and away from the waves. They collected rocks and sea glass, yelled as they ran through swarms of seagulls, until they had to leave for the day.

A hand shook Marie, and she opened her eyes to see the nervous face of an intern, the one elected to wake her up. Marie smiled and stood up. She told him she was leaving for the day and walked home.

That night, she wrote her resignation letter and called her siblings, telling them she had a new plan, she would buy their return tickets if they drove with her to Seattle. She didn't have to give any explanation before they both said yes.

The siblings stared at Old Faithful, or the hole that the geyser was set to come out of in twenty minutes.

“I guess you had one thing planned,” said Rhonda after the silence had stretched too long.

“I'm surprised you didn't see it coming, you know how much Mom loved Old Faithful,” said Marie.

“I know we didn't stop just to look at water come out of the

ground. What are we really doing here?" asked Rhonda.

Marie took out a piece of neatly folded paper and began to read.

"It's 10:23, I'm in bed, my heart hurts. Remember when you're a kid and you think that your life will end when you turn forty, that everything will be stuck and nothing can change? And then that actually did happen, at least to Mom. She turned forty, got sick, and her life ended. Nothing changed for her after she died. I think I always thought the same thing would happen to me, even just in the back of my mind. Maybe that's why I've stayed at this job for twelve goddamn years, maybe that's why I've let myself just drift along. I have all of these routines, these plans, but they just let me pretend that I have some control over my life, that I'm not just the background character in a play that should be about me." Marie stopped reading and looked up. "And then it's just me being melodramatic for a couple pages."

There was another long silence as the siblings looked at the ground.

"I didn't know you were feeling that way," Stewart finally said.

"I didn't either, not until a couple weeks ago. Facebook reminded me how long I'd been at my job, and then I started thinking about how I'm about to turn forty-five, and Mom died when she was forty-four, and it feels like we've both lived the same amount this past year." Marie kicked at some rocks on the ground. "Mom always made people happy and went on adventures. And she lived life on purpose. I want to live life on purpose too."

Rhonda started laughing. "So to live life on purpose, you had to give up your very much on purpose plans?" She hugged Marie tightly. "You're a lot more like Mom than you think," she said. "You weren't old enough to remember how many plans she made when we were little."

Marie squeezed back, letting tears fall onto her sister's shoulder. They stayed together as the geyser erupted behind them.

Marie couldn't help but still wake up at 7:00. She went to the bakery she had walked past for twelve years and got a scone to eat as she read the news. Over the couple weeks before the big road trip, she methodically checked off her list as she sold furniture, ended her lease, said goodbye to her few friends. The days blurred together, but buzzed with an unfamiliar energy.

The night before she left, Marie mentally went through her packing checklist, picturing where each item had been put. She fell asleep in her sleeping bag, woke up early, and got ready. The knocks came at 8:03. She opened the door on the second to greet Stewart.

They entered Seattle on the sixth day after leaving Boston. It was the early afternoon, the sun greeting them as they drove

across the last bridge. As she drove through the tunnel into the city, Marie thought of it as a fitting entrance to her rebirth, then immediately rolled her eyes for being so corny.

“Where should we go first? Hotel, food? The apartment I know you definitely already have?” Rhonda said.

“I want to see the ocean,” Marie said.

“Ocean it is,” said Stewart, who began giving directions off his phone to a sculpture garden along the water.

It was impossible for Marie to not imagine all the possibilities in this city, so she let her mind jump from life to life. She imagined which coffee shop she might sit in to write, the food trucks she might visit, the friends she might make in the bars she might go to. Stewart dragged her back to reality as they got to the park and got out.

Marie quietly walked to the shoreline, leaving Stewart and Rhonda behind. She reached her hand to the water, braced through the shock of cold, and let it float on the small waves. As the cold began to spread up her arm and into her body, she closed her eyes, took a breath, and settled into the water.

“You know, this isn’t actually an ocean, it’s a sound,” Stewart said as they caught up to Marie.

“We always called the harbor the ocean,” Marie replied. “This is pretty much the same thing.” She shook her hand as she pulled it out of the water.

They stood in silence as the wind whipped from the water. Marie stood, breathing in the salty air that was so familiar, so similar to her old home in Boston.

“What now?” Rhonda asked.

Marie turned to her sister, grinned, and said, “No plan.”