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Foley Beach, SC Evening

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DECEMBER

Mina Pattanaik

After the funeral, you took me to a dingy Wendy's in the middle of nowhere, five miles out from the grave and ten miles out from the school. It wasn't much, but the half-hour drive felt endless enough that you could mistake the fading of the identical suburban houses into scraggly uneven bushes for something profound, for an escape. I had as a kid when I came here with Jessica. Now it just felt like a Wendy's.

You'd never talked much about things that mattered. You didn't talk much about them now, either. You just ordered two fries and two milkshakes because you knew I wouldn't be able to keep anything more down, and where I should've felt grateful for this quiet, easy knowledge you had about me, I mostly just felt hollow. I missed her. I wanted her here instead. You knew this and you were rambling around it, spilling lamentations about going back to work Monday and how so many more people had ended up coming back to live here after high school than you'd thought.

The last time I was here had been the day Jessica died. She'd looked at me with the same face she had all winter—with a careful blankness, like she couldn't decide what she wanted to feel. "I want to leave," she'd said, and she'd held my hands within hers and smiled, brilliant. "Let's run away together. We could go to Indianapolis. Or Los Angeles."

I laughed. I shouldn't have. "You love it here," I said, and I stole a fry. "You'd be miserable after a week."

Her face had shuttered then. I'd thought she was just in a mood; she fell into them often these days, with long hours at work and the Chicago frost biting at her ears. "Maybe," she conceded, and she batted my hand away as I reached for another. "But maybe not."

Foley Beach, SC Evening

M Candace Thomas — Oil on Canvas

