Nightcall

It wouldn’t work. Katie wanted to know why.

The distance, for one thing. An hour apart was almost long distance. Why was it so hard to explain?

“It’s not an hour apart,” she said. “It’s 30 minutes”.

“Well yeah, the way you drive.” I wanted her to smile so badly. Instead, her knuckles whitened on the steering wheel and she pursed her lips.

“It’s not a bad drive,” she said. “Maybe two or three times a week.”

“I wouldn’t want to make you do that.”

“You aren’t making me do anything.”

She was convinced we could make it work. I half-listened to her give me reasons we would be a perfect couple as I stared out the passenger window at the streetlights, gliding past like Chinese lanterns on a windy night. She was so different than when we first met. I’d noticed her on my first day in the music group, the shy girl in the back who went wild on the bongos. Everyone introduced themselves, and her voice had been so quiet that I hadn’t even caught her name. It wasn’t until later, when I was positioned with my bass in the back corner near the percussion, that I had learned her name was Katie. Shy, blonde, Katie. So different from the black haired, opinionated girl who drove me that night. Black hair, black makeup, black lipstick, black nail polish. I guess she was preparing for a funeral.
I tell Greg we should be together, that we would be a perfect couple. He doesn’t seem to be paying much attention, staring out the window and brooding. With his dark hoodie on, and his skeletal white complexion, he reminds me of the grim reaper. In a good way. Grim reaper, Grimm’s Fairy Tales, grim outlook. Not that he was the one with the grim outlook on life. That would be yours truly, Miss Suicidal, Miss Denial, Miss Cry Me the Nile, show me a smile and don’t miss. God, this kid is skinny as a skeleton, hardly filling up his seat at all. It’s accentuated by his skinny jeans and tight sweatshirt. With the outfit and the bangs over his eyes, he looks like a skater boy, which he most definitely is not. It makes me want to strangle him and keep his body under my bed so I can get it out and look at it whenever I want. Whoa, not really though, that’s messed up. Real messed up Katie, why you gotta think like that? What’s going on, chica?

Death is constantly on my mind these days. I went to a funeral last week, just to see the body. I had never seen a cadaver before, and it was a surreal experience. It looked like a wax statue. I say “it”, because I don’t think it was a man in the coffin. “It” had a man’s name, they referred to it as “him”, but I don’t believe it qualifies as man after it is dead. “It” was an empty shell that once held a man. I distanced myself from its family, stood in the corner and stared at it. No-one questioned me, no-one asked why I was there. I felt like I was staring at it through the wrong end of a telescope, distant and focused.

“Don’t you like me?” Her question pulled me back into the car.

“Yeah, of course.”

“And I like you. Why are you making this so complicated?”

I tried to find the words, tried to explain. “I’m not sure if I want to see anyone right now,” I said.
“Then why did you come tonight?”

She knew very well why I had come. “Um, it sounded like you could use some company.”

There was maybe two feet between us as we drove in her car. It shouldn’t have felt so far. I watched her drive along the twisted road, fast and reckless. She was beautiful under all the emo getup, in a dark, vampiresque kind of way.

“What did the doctors tell you?”

“That I need to eat.”

“When’s the last time you did?”

“They made me eat something while I was there.”

Looking at her, you wouldn’t guess she was anorexic. She wasn’t stretched out like the models you see in magazines; her bones weren’t clearly visible under her skin. She just looked so tired, black bags under her eyes to match the rest of her outfit.

If I had been brave, maybe I would have told her to pull over at Denny’s and forced her to eat with me. Maybe I would have gone to her parent’s house and told them what was going on, convinced them to get her help. Instead, I sat in the passenger seat and watched her drive, studying her details. Looking for weakness. Flawless makeup, not a hair out of place. Her skin was smooth and soft-looking. How could she be so composed while shaking hands with death?

_Greg is the only person I tell about my eating disorder who doesn’t try to force food down my throat. I both hate him and love him for that. It’s obvious that he’s uncomfortable talking about it, the way he coughs every time he says something he thinks will be awkward, the way he keeps_
zipping his sweatshirt up and down, like he’s trying to distract himself from me. I try to explain it to him, but it’s difficult. How can I describe the magnets in my bed that pin me down and make me lay there for hours after I wake up, and before I fall asleep? How can I describe the sour taste that every meal has acquired, how even a bite or two makes me feel sick and helpless? What a conundrum.

A couple days ago, I sat on the bank of the river and looked for rainbows. When I was a kid, I would try to skip rocks while I watched the whitecapped waves crash into each other and spray mist into the air, like Captain Ahab on the lookout for Moby Dick’s telltale breach. On sunny days, the river would be sparkling with a plethora of colors, and in the mist of the waves, I could occasionally make out a rainbow. I would imagine little fairies flying around with the water insects, blending into nature so no-one ever caught them, spreading rainbows around the water. The river was a magical place when I was younger. When I went a couple days ago, however, the magic was gone. I saw what I should have seen as a child, that there were no rainbows, no fairies, no sparkling. It was all grey. Dirty, and grey.

It had started shortly after Katie’s boyfriend had broken up with her. Before that, we had barely spoken. Then one day she just started texting me, all day, every day. We both had trouble sleeping, and we would often stay up until two or three in the morning messaging each other. On Sundays we would sit together at music group, painted with the colored light from the stained-glass, flirting and jamming. It was great, but something held me back. She had been with her boyfriend for almost two years, and I felt like I should give her some space. Over the next couple weeks, her texts grew darker and darker, and it became apparent she was in a bad place. Hate seemed to be one of her favorite words. She hated her parents, her ex, the small town she
had lived in her whole life, and, most especially, she hated herself. These were all hatreds that I could relate to, and I would commiserate with her about how awful our lives were.

She hadn’t told me about her hospital visits until the night of our car ride. Earlier in the afternoon she had been admitted to the ER after passing out while standing outside her truck, pumping gas. It was the third time, and the doctors were frustrated with her lack of co-operation. But, as Katie told me, they couldn’t force her to eat outside the hospital.

“Why don’t you eat something?”

“Same reason you don’t want to go out with me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I told her.

None of it made any sense. I didn’t understand why she had chosen me to confide all her problems in. She still lived with her parents, she had girlfriends, she had a sister, why would she dump it all on me? Was I the only one she had texted at one in the morning, saying it had been nice knowing me? And a darker thought, if she had told that to anyone else, why weren’t they there? I’d asked her what it meant, that it was nice knowing me. She told me her plan. She’d decided she wouldn’t eat anything until she found a new guy. Somehow, that made sense to her. Though I would never admit it, shamefully, it made sense to me too. It also made sense that I should go see her that night.

I never got caught sneaking out, despite my squeaky window and my parent’s room across the hall. Out the window, over the wooden fence into the front yard, leaping over the flowerbed, to my car. It was a crappy car, and there was a chance it would break down before I got to her house. As always on my late night journeys, I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as I started the
engine and pulled out of the driveway. Caught in the moment, I almost forgot to turn the headlights on.

When I was little, I was afraid of the dark. As I got older, I grew to appreciate it. The darkness was a place to hide, almost an alternate reality where daytime had no power. Familiar roads became new and exciting pathways to adventure. Everything had a different feel to it, as though darkness could seep into your bloodstream and alter your moods and consciousness. A dark road was a somber, reflective road, begging for lucid dreams and memories.

As I drove through the night, weaving between hills, descending into the valley, I thought about the last time I had been on that road. There had been daylight that time, and I skipped school and driven with a friend to see how far we could make it before we had to head back. Four hours out, four hours back. I got home before my parents questioned where I had been. It was refreshing to get out of town, as if physical distance could separate me from all the emotions I felt at home. For a few hours, at least.

I guess I could relate with a lot of Katie’s emotions. The frustration, the anger, the tiredness, and the apathy. Those days when you look into a bowl of alphabet soup and the only word you see is “shit”. Good times. It’s easy to get lost inside your head, to build a labyrinth and spend years running from some minotaur-ish monster that you think is chasing you, always just barely out of sight. At least Theseus had a spool of thread.

“Come outside, I texted.”

When she approached the car a few minutes later it struck me, perhaps for the first time, how pretty she was. Dressed for a funeral, yes, but what a beautiful funeral it would be.
It was sweet of Greg to sneak out to see me. I never would have suspected him capable of such rebellion. At music group, he’s always so quiet and courteous, awkwardly trying to flirt with me. He reminds me of Michael Cera, in a way. A good way. When I texted and said it was nice knowing him, it sounded a lot worse than I meant. It’s not like I was moments away from killing myself, but I wanted him to know, in case something did happen. If I fell asleep and never woke up, for example, I wanted him to know. But when he responded by saying he was coming over, I didn’t want to stop him. The two of us have never hung out alone before, so I consider this our first date. He might not realize it right now, but in time he’ll see how perfect we are for each other. I can picture him waiting at the altar for me as my dad walks me down the aisle. In that moment, I believe everything would be OK. Greg would help me uninstall the magnets from my bed, give me special glasses so the river has color again. I would find appetite for the cake that he shoved into my mouth, to the applause of our friends and family. One night, when it’s warm and sparkling outside he will bring home a jar with a little rainbow in it. “Look at what I found down by the river,” he’ll say, and inside the jar will be a tiny fairy, weaving rainbows around and around in circles inside the glass. We’ll look at each other and laugh until we think we are dying, and everything will be OK.

She told me she wanted to take her car, that she didn’t trust my piece of shit engine to make it through the night. OK, she’s got a little red truck. What a country girl. “Where do you want to go,” she asked.

“Anywhere but here.”

“I know a place.”
She drove back up the highway for awhile, pulled off onto a dirt road. It was bumpy and uncomfortable. I don’t think either of us said anything. After a few minutes she pulled to an abrupt stop in the middle of the road.

“Get out.”

We sat on the hood of her truck and looked down at the valley she grew up in. In such a small town, only a few lights could be seen, beacons for lost travelers.

Katie said in a way, she’d always looked at her hometown from up there, on the hill.

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes I think I’m a balloon, Greg.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

When we got back to the highway, she said she wanted to show me her flowers. It’s kind of a far drive, but that’s alright. She told me she’d driven this road a million times, and then she did something that startled me. Closed her eyes, leaned her head back, and sighed contentedly. Sped up eighty, with her eyes still shut.

“What are you doing?”

“Close your eyes,” she said. “I’ve done this before.

If I was brave, I would have climbed over the stick-shift. I would have straddled her, bent forward until our foreheads touched. I would have put my thumbs on her eyelids and lifted them up, forced them open. She would have looked into my eyes, and in the reflections she would have seen herself, seen what she was doing. We would have stared until she felt better, until she
saw that things weren’t as bad as she thought. Until she found comfort in the fact that her eyes were inside of mine. Comfort in the fact that just by looking at me, she could become part of me, if only a reflection. Instead, I closed my eyes.

“This is fucking scary.” I gripped the seat and the door handle tightly; bracing myself for what would surely come next.

“It’s not scary,” she said. “It feels like flying.”

“I’d hate to be a bird.”

“Relax,” she said. “You can open your eyes now.

_I’ve been driving with my eyes closed for about a year now. At first it was just for a second or two, but as I got more comfortable with it I started going for 20 or 30 seconds at a time. I roll the windows down and feel the wind on my face, imagining that’s what death will feel like. Darkness, a rush, the feeling of being pulled from my body. When I drive with my eyes closed, I can see myself in third person. I see a little girl dressed in black, head underneath the steering wheel, using her hands to push the pedals. The car starts to drift to the left, into oncoming traffic, but the little girl can’t see what’s happening, she’s under the dashboard. Still free of my body, I float out the window and look at the truck. It was red when I bought it, but now it’s grey. Everything is grey. I open my eyes and glance at Greg. He still looks shaken up from the experience, but he’ll get used to it. When we’re together we’ll go on long road trips and drive for hundreds of miles with our eyes closed, but we’ll never drift into the wrong lane because while I’m working the pedals he’ll be standing on the driver’s seat, telling me when to slow down or speed up, always steering us in the right direction._
That’s when she told me she wanted to be more than friends. That she would promise to start eating if I was her boyfriend. I wanted to tell her I wasn’t a solution, I was one more problem. She didn’t see it that way though.

“You’re different than any guy I’ve dated. You actually care about me.”

“They must have been pretty bad.”

“Did I ever tell you about the first guy I went out with?”

All I knew was she hated him, perhaps more than anyone else she hated.

“He had this car that he loved, this little black sports car,” she said. “There was a huge subwoofer in the back, and I could always hear him pulling into the driveway from the bass, all the way in my bedroom. He was always blasting gangster rap when he came over, but when I got in he would turn on country, ‘cause he knew I liked that.”

What a country girl.

“The theatre out here usually only has one or two movies at a time. It’s in this crappy little room with like twenty seats, and they give you little bags of popcorn with way too much salt on it. There’s always these annoying little black dots flickering on the screen the whole time. But there’s not much else to do around here, so every time they had a new movie, we’d go see it.”

As I listened to her tell the story, I fogged up the passenger window with hot breath and drew pictures. Smiley faces, stick figures, whatever.

“He always put his arm around me,” she said. “And sometimes he’d want to make out during the movie. A couple times, he tried to feel me up, reach under my shirt, but I always told him no.”
Katie’s voice was quiet, controlled.

“Then one time after a movie, that Ryan Gosling movie where he wears that stupid scorpion jacket, he took me up to the hills to look at the stars. We went to the same spot that I showed you tonight, ‘cause it has the best view. We looked down into the valley, and I remember him telling me how much he hated this place. I told him I didn’t think it was too bad.”

Katie laughed for the first time, but it wasn’t the laugh that I’d wanted to hear. There was no joy in it.

“We started making out, and he got on top of me. I didn’t want to, but he told me to be quiet. He was too strong, there was nothing I could do.”

I stopped drawing pictures on the window and looked at the girl next to me. How could she be so calm?

“I don’t count that time,” she said. “I still tell people I’m a virgin.”

“What happened after that?”

“I told him I didn’t want to see him anymore. I told all my friends to never go out with him, but I didn’t tell them why. I just said he was a creep.”

What do you say when a girl opens up to you like that? I’m not sure now, and I wasn’t sure back then either. I told her I was sorry.

“What happened with Chuck,” I asked. Chuck was her most recent boyfriend, the one she had been engaged to who had broken her heart.

“He cheated on me.”
“Shit.”

“With one of my best friends from high school.”

“Shit.”

“We were supposed to get married.”

“What’d you do?”

“Drinking,” she said. “I did drinking.”

“But not eating.”

“No. I guess I lost my appetite for life.”

“That’s not really something to joke about.”

“No,” she said. “It’s not.”

At this point, Katie once again pulled off the highway onto a gravel trail. Most of the landscape in the area was desolate. Tall yellow grass and large, sandstone boulders were spread sporadically across the hills. Up ahead, past the harsh beam of the headlights, I could make out the looming shadows of a patch of trees. “Where are we going?”

“To show you my flowers.”

A small stream had been dammed off to form a little pond out in the middle of nowhere, and trees had been planted in a circle around the water. On a hot summer day it would have been a peaceful place to dip your feet in and cool off under the shade of the wide, leafy branches. As I stepped out of Katie’s truck, I noticed one tree that stood out from the rest. One that didn’t
belong. It was a slender dogwood tree, with elegant pink blossoms decorating its branches. In accordance with the season, some of the petals had fallen to earth and lay scattered around its trunk in an exhibition of beautiful decay.

Katie took my hand and led me to the dogwood, and we laid down and looked up at the pink blossoms, watching for the occasional petal that would break off from its stem and gently float to the ground. Some landed on us, but we didn’t move to brush them away. Bathed in pink petals and moonlight, I closed my eyes and soaked it all in.

She said if she was a petal, she would be the first to float away from the tree.

“Katie, what are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I told her what I needed to say, that it wouldn’t work out between us.

She told me she already knew that.

“Will you eat something anyways?”

“Probably not.”

I told her I didn’t want to be the last person she talked to. I didn’t want to feel like it was my fault.

“It wouldn’t be.”
“I would feel like it was, though.” I tried to think of some motivation for her. Asked about her family, about her friends, about her future. She didn’t really feel like talking about it. After awhile I told her I needed to get home before my parents woke up.

*Greg says he doesn’t like me. I know he does, though, because he’s here. He’s lying next to me under my flowers, my grey flowers, at four in the morning. And the way he looks at me when he thinks I won’t notice. Not tonight, but soon, we’ll be together and it will be wonderful. I can wait. Right now though, I want to enjoy the moment. I want to sink into the earth and become one of this tree’s roots. I want to wrap myself around Greg and make him stay here with me forever. I want to bury him under the tree until only his eyes are showing, two grey spheres staring endlessly up at my flowers, reflecting the light of the moon. I want all of this. All of this and more, because in this moment, we are perfect.*

On the drive back to her house, we passed a semi-truck driver who was getting an early start on his driving day, bleary eyed and hugging a coffee. “What if I pulled in front of a truck, and just ended it right now,” she asked.

“Don’t do it,” I told her. “I don’t want to die.”

She looked away from the road and eyed me curiously.

Back at her place, we said goodbye. I asked her if she would be at music group on Sunday.

“Maybe.”

“Will you text me tomorrow?”

“Yes.”
When I turned to go, she called me back. She looked exhausted, but for the first time that night, she gave me a genuine smile. “Thanks,” she said.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine. How about you?”

“I’m good, thanks for asking.”

“Call me tomorrow.”

After I watch the taillights of Greg’s car fade into the hills, I creep inside, careful not to wake my family. I go to the pantry, and look at all the food that is stockpiled in it. There is bread, crackers, granola bars, Hershey’s chocolate, pretzels, various canned goods, and other assorted items. I pull out a snack-sized pack of fruit snacks, and rip open the package. Lifting the gummies to my nose, I take a whiff. The smell alone makes my stomach churn, but I dig around with my finger looking for cherry, my favorite flavor. I find one and hold it in front of my eye, studying the details in the half-light of dark kitchen. It’s round, smooth, and, most importantly, it’s red. I pop it into my mouth and swallow quickly, trying to suppress my gag reflex. Then I shove the rest of the fruit snacks in my pocket and head to my room, kick off my shoes and send Greg a message. “Goodnight”.

On the drive home, I thought about everything Katie told me. I imagined her truck pulling in front of an oncoming semi. I could see the fear in the truck driver’s eyes, and the unnerving calmness in Katie’s. I could see the airbags deploying, filling my vision with white before blackness overtook me. I could see my soul rising out of my body alongside Katie’s, and floating towards a clear blue sky while pink dogwood petals fell like rain around us. We would look down, and see her town as a tiny dark spot in a valley far, far below us.

“Sometimes I think I’m a balloon, Greg.”

When I was almost home, I got to a familiar road, one that was straight and long. I closed my eyes, exhaled deeply, and leaned my head back on the headrest. I imagined a car wreck with two
teenagers and truck driver. Police on the scene, trying to figure out what happened. Smoke rising from the crumpled hood of a red pickup truck. What a country girl. Pushed the gas pedal down and felt myself accelerate. I could hear Katie’s calm, collected voice talking to me, as though she was in the seat next to me. As though I had let her come with me. As though I had pried open her eyelids and let her become a reflection that lived just under the surface of my vision.

“It’s not scary,” she said. “It feels like flying.”