

Desert Girl

The October sun was falling fast in the sky, the shadows picking up speed as they chased her out of the town.

She slammed her foot harder against the gas.

40...

50...

60...

The needle in the speedometer quivered as it shot upwards.

Red dust was spilling through the open windows of her old Toyota, turning her long, tumbling blond hair pink. The car skidded, and her shaky hands fumbling with the wheel.

She let out a laugh.

A laugh that was long and hard and free, because there was not a soul in this desert, no one in this stupid, stupid town who would even care.

“Goodbye!” she screamed. “Goodbye and good riddance!”

The wind howled in response.

The red cliffs seemed to sprawl into nothing, and maybe if she kept driving she'd fall straight off this earth and into somewhere that mattered.

Somewhere that mattered with people that mattered, who didn't flush dreams down fancy garburators and cling onto some semblance of structure when everything was falling apart.

Why couldn't they let things fall apart?

It was all too good, too perfect, that town. Too stifling. The minute you stood up for a breath of fresh air you became alien. Was it so bad that she didn't want to be the washed-up prom queen for the rest of her life? To be forty years old and getting worked up over high school football games and golfing and lounging by the pool with a martini in her manicured fingers?

Was it criminal not to want the life her parents led?

She didn't care anymore.

She didn't care anymore whose heart she broke, who's reputation she shattered, whether it be her own or anyone else's.

Staring far out into the stained desert she couldn't help but feel as though some piece of her had been replaced. The part right from her middle had been sliced out with a jagged knife, but the hole was filling, slowly but surely. The farther she got from town, the less raw it felt.

Until his face appeared in her mind.

It appeared like the last ray of sunlight that's stretched across the horizon, bright and blazing, its last hurrah before it disappears for the night. It hit her hard, square in the chest, and she gasped for breath.

That Boy. The one she wanted - no, needed - to forget. The one who was the only reason she hadn't left earlier. They had fallen in love in the truest sense of the word - fallen, hard, fast, and brutally. They had been seventeen and the world was on their side and they would grow up to have lots of children. Their son would be the quarterback for the high school, their daughter the captain

of the cheerleading team. And in between dinners at the country club and picking their newest vacation home they would make it to all their children's games and make time for each other, going out on dates every other night.

And then... life slapped them in the face and they realized that maybe there was more than just that.

Or, more accurately, *she* realized there was more than just that... and he just couldn't accept it. She remembered lying on the hood of his car one Friday night in the desert, under the inconceivable map of stars. Her head was against his chest, and he was holding her close. "I love you, you know," he whispered into her hair.

"I know."

"We should get married." His voice was matter-of-fact, as if he had just suggested they go on a picnic.

"What?" She gave him a confused look, her stomach sinking. She had known this was coming, she had just hoped it would be a bit more delayed than this.

"You and me, Kate. We should get married. Why not?" He shrugged. "We're going to be together forever anyway. It makes sense."

She felt hollow inside, the beginning of that jagged knife sensation. She felt a little desperate, as though she was losing grip on her own choices, her own opportunities. As if someone was tearing them away just as she managed to hold on. "What's the rush? You just said it yourself- we're going to be together anyway. It's not like marriage changes anything."

Except it changed everything.

It tore to shreds her one-way ticket out of the town.

"You don't want to marry me?" he asked, his eyes darkening.

"Of course I do, I just — " She stops, surveying the night sky. "Not now, you know?"

"No, I don't know."

“It’s just a little restrictive, okay? It takes away... *options*.”

She regretted saying that the moment the words spilled out.

“Options? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you saying you’re interested in other people? I - I don’t — ” He let out a frustrated exhale. “I thought you were happy.”

Those words had haunted her since that night, since he sped away in his car, leaving her to stumble her way back home in the dark.

I thought you were happy.

Happiness was all perspective. She liked to classify it by micro and macro happiness. Micro happiness came from the hummingbird that darted to her window every morning, from the view of the desert from her bedroom window, the canyon moon that hung in its comforting constance every night. So sure, she was happy when she was with him. Happy enough to momentarily suppress the feeling of longing that plagued her every other second of the day, happy enough not to throw him away like every other person in this town. But that micro happiness wasn’t enough to satiate her, not even close.

Macro happiness... that was a little harder to come by.

As she drove on the road became less civilized, the concrete turning into sand that turned into dust. Rusty clouds enveloped her car. Her tires were squealing, the engine groaning.

She had no idea where she was going, and for the first time in her life, she didn’t care.

Her worries had been blown away with the copper dust and tumbleweeds and what was left beneath all that worry... was life.

Pure, unadulterated life.

The darkness was spreading quickly, and Kate guessed there would be only another few minutes of light before she was propelled into the heart of night. The heart of night in the middle of the desert with half a tank of gas, a third-empty bottle of water and nothing but the sound of her own heartbeat drumming in her ears.

She should have felt scared. She should have felt desperate. She should have felt anything but exhilaration coursing through her veins, veins that had begun to petrify, turn to stone - this shot of adrenaline had sent the blood pumping through her body again.

She wished they could see her now, her friends. Her former classmates. The people who had told her she would be nothing more than the forgotten beauty that wasted away among the desert flowers.

“You’re just so darn adorable. Just look at the spirit in you,” one of her mother’s friends had once said. “It’s a shame.”

Kate had given her a bewildered look. “What is?”

The woman had sighed. “That you won’t end up any further away than the rest of these folks in this town.”

At the time, she had been confused. Offended, even, that the lady had been implying that town life was less than satisfactory.

But now, she couldn’t help but soak in the aching truth of it all. The only reason she had gotten out was because she had done her best to avoid anything and everything that would keep her tied up there. She wanted to have to cut as few cords as possible.

The moon shone in her rearview mirror, full and comforting, the watchful eye over her as she drove into the night. Micro-happiness, she thought fleetingly. Except... perhaps she had been wrong before. Maybe a life spent focusing only on the big things wasn’t really much of a life at all. The little things had to count for something, surely.

She picked up speed, faster and faster she drove until she wasn’t even sure she was driving but flying over the desert. The endless desert with all its unknowns and mysteries.

She was now becoming one.

No more talk of ropes and walls to hold her back. No more tired excuses. She couldn't be the blond-haired, shallow sweetheart they expected her to be, but she didn't care anymore. She felt like a phoenix, reborn, rising from the ashes she left behind her as tires spun furiously.

And as she continued into the oblivion of red, she became a story, the familiar tale of the restless girl who couldn't stay as hard as she tried, who left behind a town, trading it in for a life only she could decide.

Then she disappeared.

She disappeared.

Word count: 1493