

On a Lonely Road

THE BEAMS OF THE car's headlights lanced through the night as the vehicle surmounted the hill. They cast about with a weary air, flickering briefly and admitting the darkness back into the realm to which it was bound at birth before casting it out again. The shadow licked at the patches of radiance that melted upon the asphalt, hungrily grasping at the lone traveler ensconced within the metal tomb. All about, the trees leered down at the car, their branches playing across its hood as the vehicle attempted to deny their presence. The car's engine was a blasphemy to the silence.

He sat in the driver's seat, one hand lazily set upon the wheel, the other hanging limply from the window and caressing the car door with the unfeeling apathy of a corpse. He pinched a cigarette between his fingers, the wind ushering it to a brief fury before extinguishing it once more. Spirits twisted from the flickering end of the cigarette and danced off into the moonless night.

The man felt some premonition carried upon the wind. It rose to a ghostly howl, the cry of the dead and dying ferried upon it as if nature itself was possessed of some knowledge of the land from which he was fleeing and wished to irrevocably tie him to it. No matter the strength with which he pressed upon the gas, his wings remained chained. Called to animation, his hand rose and placed the cigarette between his lips. His foot pressed harder.

Something nameless played on the radio, a forgotten tune. The man knew that the song had once held some significance to him, but the days of its relevance had long since passed into oblivion, and now the spectral notes that fled off into the night were no better than the dust of daydreams.

He took a quivering breath, felt the smoke writhe down his throat, plant a rot within his chest. He did not exhale.

The countryside leveled out, and the car's headlights pierced off into the distance, dispelling the phantoms that lay therein. One rose from the darkness, possessed with greater surety than the rest, and made to stand at the edge of the road. The man squinted. The specter took the form of a woman, clad in a white shirt and simple jeans, with a wicker basket clasped under her arm. The wind buffeted ebony hair about her head until she seemed a thing carved from the night itself. She turned to face the approaching vehicle, and, despite the fact that the woman stood too far distant for the man to make out her face, he knew that her gaze met his. He shivered, his lips growing tight upon the cigarette. She held out a hand, thumb elevated towards the heavens as if silently ushering him towards the only place that might bring him peace.

The decision was not his own when he pulled over to the side of the road. He unlocked the door, and she slid into the seat next to him, her lips curled into a smile. The car's engine screamed above the silence, frightening it from the night that was once its home, and lurched into motion, scurrying off down the road with the aspect of a shambling corpse.

The man knew not why he had paused in his voyage. He attempted to call his mind to action, to pierce to the heart of the matter so that he might find some excuse to abandon her once more and return to his solitude. His psyche lay empty. A blanket of pallid sterility lay across his being, strangling the first hints of thought or feeling. When he gazed within, nothing greeted him.

“Thanks for picking me up.”

He turned his eyes briefly to hers, returned them to the road. She favored him with a smile, her young eyes sparkling in the dead night. Pale, delicate fingers lay clasped about the basket placed in her lap. They hovered over its contents with a motherly air. Beyond their seeming

fragility, her hands possessed some nameless strength. The man knew, in that moment, that she would spare him nothing, should he bring harm to whatever precious mystery lay within the straw-filled basket. He struggled to suppress a shudder.

“Most wouldn’t, you know,” she continued. “It’s really kind of you.”

He nodded, offering no reply.

She sighed. “Lonely night, isn’t it?” She paused, awaiting a reply. “Don’t you think so?”

“I suppose.”

“I hate nights like this.”

“I don’t mind them much.”

“Really? It always makes me feel like it’s the end of the world. Like I’m not gonna wake up tomorrow.”

He winced.

“Anyways, it’s not so lonely anymore, ‘cause I’ve got you, huh?”

He shrugged. They passed into silence for a time, their brief companionship banished into the night. It writhed there, in the darkness, before being consumed fully, and the man’s chest was empty at last.

“Where’re you from?” Her voice pierced through the stillness and lodged itself in his side like a barb.

“Hm?” He struggled from his hopeless reverie like a drowning man.

“Where are you from?”

“Oh. I’m from Hartford.”

“Where’s that?”

“Connecticut. Few hours east of here.”

“Wow. Far from home, huh?”

“Yep.” He paused. Words writhed across the tip of his tongue, burgeoning against his closed lips. *Why does she deserve my speech? We’d both be better off without it. Besides, what could she have to say that’s worth any thought from me?*

“I’m from a little place off in the middle of nowhere. A nameless place. No road reaches it. I don’t think anyone who’s not from there even knows it exists.” A smile tilted through her voice. It called to mind the image of fields of serpentine grass that flowed and danced about like clouds on a windy day, or a flower placed in the hair of one’s dearest.

He raised a brow. “Do you need me to call someone?”

“Like who?”

“The police?”

She laughed, and the car seemed to glow. She leaned back in her seat, her exclamations of humor dancing through the darkness. Her form quaked with it, a purity of emotion cast forth from one to whom subterfuge was a mystery. He frowned, retreating back into his corner of shadow like some beast whose gaze cried against the light. At last, she stilled herself, and spoke again, tears glistening in her eyes. “Gosh, no! No, it’s nothing like that! Not at all. It’s a great place, really.”

“If it’s such a great place, why’d you leave it?” He failed to keep the bitterness from his voice.

“You left Hartford, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Never said it was a good place.”

“It’s your home, though?”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Well, regardless, I just wanted to see something new. In part, at least.” She grew sheepish, as if the information she was prepared to divulge were words not meant for human ears. “To tell you the truth, there’s another reason that I’m out here. A greater one. The greatest of all, I guess.” She stopped herself.

He turned his gaze to her briefly. “Look, if it’s not something you should be sharing, then maybe it’s for the best if we just stop.”

Her lips slid open, her tongue searching desperately for the proper words. Failing, her mouth closed once again, and she sighed. Her head hung limply, and the man’s jaw grew tight with some long-forgotten rage. His fingers tightened on the wheel before he could cease their action.

She seemed not to notice. “Maybe you’re right. I mean, I don’t even know your name!” She paused, emptiness filling her proposition. “What *is* your name?” Her voice shuddered with desperation.

Smothering the rage at last, he spoke. “Vince.”

She nodded, straightening. “Mine’s Abigail.”

His eyes swam. “That’s a nice name.”

“Thank you. Vince’s good too. Classy.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“You guess a lot of things, don’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, it’s just... you seem lost, is all.”

“*I’m* not the one who’s run away from home, okay? I don’t think you’re the best person to be passing judgment on who’s lost and who’s not.”

“I *told* you, my home is a good place. There’s a reason that I’m out here, and it’s not freedom.”

“Then why are you all by yourself, hm?”

“Because I have to do this alone.”

“Who the hell would send a kid out into the night by herself?”

“Someone who knows what has to be done.”

He snorted, shook his head. “Sounds like a load of shit to me. Any *‘purpose’* that sends a kid out into the wilderness by herself doesn’t seem like a very worthy one. Maybe that’s just me, though. After all, who am *I* to question your home? Sounds like a *lovely* place.”

Her eyelid twitched. “Do you wanna know what’s in this basket?”

“Doesn’t matter much to me either way. It’s not my business, and it’s not my problem.”

“It’s an egg. And, nestled up in this little egg,” she said, gazing longingly down into the basket, “there’s an angel. An angel, just waiting to hatch. *That’s* why I’m out here. I’m supposed to bring an angel into the world.”

He turned to her, the road and the night beyond rendered not but a distant memory. His face contorted, hundreds of nameless things warring within him for dominance. “What the *fuck?*”

She nodded solemnly, eyes closed, her shoulders hunched beneath the weight of her purpose. “Yep. An angel.” After a breathless moment, her gaze met his. Her eyes shimmered, a mirror to the starlight. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“It’s insane!”

“You don’t believe me, huh?”

He ran a hand across his scalp. “It’s a difficult thing to accept.”

“Are you religious?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“Then how—?”

“I remember the first time I watched an angel hatch.” Her voice grew wistful. Her eyes pierced through the darkness hovering past the windshield as if, in kinship with the car’s headlights, they might lance through the veil of time and summon the old memory to the present. “I’d lost a lot that year. My faith. My will. My life, almost. Ever since that moment, I’d just been... I don’t know. Hovering, I guess? Yeah. Hovering through the wreckage of my world. Often, I’d find myself staring off into the forest, calling the darkness to find me, give me some excuse to abandon the earth. Sometimes, I still do that, like I’ve forgotten I don’t have to anymore. Maybe someday I’ll get over it.

“But, anyways, one time my mom called me out to join her in the field behind our home. She’d been distant for so long, part of me wanted to deny her request, but she poked and prodded me so much that I gave in and went out with her. So, we walked for a while — must’ve been at least twenty minutes — until, eventually, we couldn’t see any of the other houses. That’s when she showed me the egg. It was laying on this patch of bare earth, just sort of twitching in the soil. There were already a few cracks in its shell, and it looked like it was about ready to burst. My mom fell to her knees and started caring for it, pressing on its sides to help the little angel out. I wasn’t all that interested, to be honest. I figured it was just some random animal, nothing to get too excited over. I tried to go home, but something stopped me. Something in my chest. Like a conviction, or a sense of purpose. Whatever it was, I stayed.

“It took about an hour for the thing to hatch. When the shell burst, my world just... tunneled in on it. It sounded like all the trumpets in the world started howling at the same time. It rose into

the air, still dripping with that gross fluid, and its eyes locked onto mine. I wanted to look away. I had to. But I couldn't. I watched my whole life pass before my eyes. I saw every moment of pain and misery stretched across the years. I felt it, too. None of the words I know could properly capture it. I'm not sure any could." She turned to him, eyes wide. "I watched myself die. I watched as I withered away, and you know what? I was *glad*. I was glad, 'cause the woman I saw in that future wasn't the one I wanted to become. And then, just like that, the angel vanished. Like it'd never been there. Only the eggshell was left."

The man forced his gaping mouth shut. With a quiet voice, he asked, "and then what?"

"A year later, an egg appeared on our front porch. *This* egg."

He swallowed.

"So it's not about religion. I still don't believe in God. It's just never found a place in my heart, and that's okay. But this isn't about faith. This is about the truth, and I know what I saw. I know what I have to do."

"It's just... How am I supposed to believe you?"

She sighed, her jaw tightening. "I don't really care if you believe me. Like I said, I have to do this alone. What everyone else thinks doesn't really matter, 'cause, either way, I'm gonna go through with it. Look, Vince. It's been very kind of you to take me this far. But if this is where we part ways, then say it. I don't want to be a burden on your company, and, no matter what you say, you're not gonna stop me. This angel needs to be born, and I have to be the one to do it."

He pulled the car to the side of the road. Before him, the headlights struggled out through the night, lone travelers who flickered and twitched as the last vestiges of life left them. Behind, the brooding crimson of the brake-lights lit the forest like a frozen hell. His fingers writhed across the wheel, spiders spurned by the flame towards which they had foolishly tread. He was unable

to still them. He cast a furtive glance at the girl beside him. Her gaze never left his face. He took a quivering breath, tears struggling from his eyes as he looked to her once more. Her face seemed a visage carved from the memory of a brighter time. His eyes flicked back to the road. Taking a breath that stretched across the endless eons, he spoke at last. “You’re coming with me. I’m not going to let you walk out there in the cold and the dark all by yourself. You shouldn’t have to do that.” *No one should.*

She smiled, a delicate thing. “Thank you, Vince.”

“Yeah,” he said, pulling off of the gravel lining the road. The car squealed off into the night, the weight of purpose settled upon its chassis. “Yeah.”

They rode for a time in silence. All the while, the man tried to collect himself. With each effort taken to tamp it down, emotion rose forth in his throat with redoubled fury. The night had given memory flesh in which to roam, and he was caught in its wake, dragged out to sea despite his desperate paddles toward shore. He commanded himself to speak before it could be unleashed in full. “When’s it gonna hatch?”

She gazed into the basket for a time, considering. “Tonight, I think.”

“How do you know where to go?”

“It lets me know when we’re getting close. We’re nearly there.”

“Where are you gonna go once this is all over?”

“I’m not sure, honestly.”

“I bet your mom would be happy to see you.”

“Yeah. But I don’t think I can go home. I’m not sure I’ll ever go back.”

“I get that. Still, though. Consider it, at least.”

“Alright. I will.”

“Good.”

“What about you? Where’re you headed, anyways?”

“I can’t say I know. All I’m sure of is that I can never go back to Hartford. It isn’t my home anymore. There’s nothing left for me there. I’ve got no reason to stay, every reason to go.”

“Seems like a pretty easy choice to me.”

“Yeah. Same.”

“Maybe it’ll find its way back into your heart, though. Someday.”

“I’m not sure I could bear it.”

“I think you’re stronger than you realize. Besides, you don’t have to face it today, or tomorrow, or the day after that. You’re allowed to feel pain. But, either way, maybe you’ll never go back, and that’s okay. Some places you’re better off without.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah, of course.”

The diner lurched from the darkness as they passed over the hill, its neon glow at constant war with the night to which it was a blasphemy. That isle of refuge called to them, beckoned them near with the promise of relief from the shadow’s burden.

He turned to her, his gaze filled with fatherly concern. “Are you hungry?”

“Hell yeah! Let’s stop.”

“What about the egg?”

She shrugged. “It’ll be fine. It’s taken this long to hatch; I think it can bear to wait a little longer.”

“Alright then. Let’s eat.”

They pulled themselves from the belly of the metal hulk, the slam of the car doors punctuating the silence. After its resonance had long since faded, the faint murmur of music filled the space of its prior occupation. Given animation by the night, the voices of ghosts greeted them as they hurried to the door, huddled against the chill.

After passing through the door, they emerged into a small room lit by a dull red glow, a window stretching along the front wall, the blackness without fended off by the neon sea flowing from the porthole. A lanky boy, stretched to awkward proportions by the will of his ensuing manhood, led the pair to a table near the room's end, the burning light playing across the contours of his shadowed face. They took their seats, the girl's gentle gaze meeting that of the abyss. The boy cast a smile to her, and the man met his eye. With a sharp glance, he banished the boy, and turned to his companion. They spoke not a word until their drinks had been set before them. Drawing his straw through the glass in a steady pirouette, he asked her, "do you really think you should do this alone?"

She dragged her eyes from the darkness, turned them to the basket, then to his. "I have to."

"But why?"

"Because it'll mean nothing if I bring someone in who isn't meant to be there. To witness it."

"Your mom brought you to hers! How's this any different?"

"Me being there was the *point* of all that. I'm certain of it."

"Then maybe *my* presence is the point of this one."

"No. It isn't."

"How are you so sure?"

"The egg would tell me if it was."

"Oh, really? The *egg* would tell you?"

“Yeah. Of course it would.” She turned her gaze to her lap, her voice growing soft.

Where her passion receded, his grew, soaring through the air in that empty room where only spirits spoke. “That’s ridiculous. I’m not going to let you wander off alone and place yourself in danger just because you think a damn *egg* will tell you what’s right and wrong! Do you even *know* what’s out there? There are horrible things and horrible people, and all of them would love nothing more than to see you dead! They devour people like you, tear you apart until there’s nothing left but the memory of who you used to be! Jesus, how do you expect me to just leave you behind?”

“I don’t know, okay!” Her palm met the table, silencing the roar of emotion surging through his chest. He shrank from her like a child. “I don’t know.” Tears struggled through her voice. “But if you care about me, you have to let me do this. *Please*. You *have* to.”

He did not reply. His hands twitched upon the table.

“Please, Vince. It can’t all be for nothing.”

The words failed to pull themselves from his lips.

Her face did not move as the tears squirmed from her eyes. They caught the neon glow as they carved their way across her cheeks. “What does tonight mean to you?”

“What I’ve lost.”

“Do you know what it is for me?”

He shook his head.

“A chance. One that’ll never come again. One that’s better than any I’ve ever had. One that could change my life forever. You have to let me do this, Vince. If you don’t, I’ll never forgive you.”

“It’s so dark out there, Abigail.”

“If what you say is true, if I die tonight, if something beyond me comes and destroys me, then it’ll have been worth it. I’ll have died in the pursuit of a dream, and that’s worth an eternity of a pointless life.”

“Every time someone like you passes on, the world gets a little bit worse.”

“I’ve rotted for so long, Vince.”

“Better that than destruction.”

“That’s not for you to decide!”

Weeping, he reached across the table, hands desperately questing about for hers. She pulled back, her own flowing eyes gazing upon his wretched state. “Please, Abigail. The angel doesn’t need you. You don’t have to give yourself to this. You don’t. You don’t.”

“That angel needs me more than anyone.”

“And if you die?”

“Then I’m gone.”

“Is that what’s going to make you happy? The abyss?”

“This isn’t about what makes *me* happy, Vince. It’s about you.”

“No. No, that isn’t true.”

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if it wasn’t.”

“Oh, God.” He crumbled in his seat, hands grasping at his face as if he might tear his sight from the world and the grief that pierced his heart. “Oh, God. Oh, God.”

“You have to let me go, Vince.”

He turned to her. “I’m not sure I can.”

“I know you can. You’ve got an egg of your own, deep inside your chest. It’s waiting to hatch. You just have to let it.”

They departed not long after, the two piercing off into the lonely night, together. The car trundled along the silent road, its journey endowed with the purpose of its riders. They were only ten minutes past the diner when the girl gasped, gazing down into the basket.

“It’s almost ready.”

“Should I pull over?”

“Yeah. I think it’s time.”

The car lurched off the road, the gravel whispering under its tires. The two riders stepped from the metal tomb, coming to stand in the beams of its stalwart lights. They regarded each other for a time, neither speaking. At last, a frantic quiver of the egg called them both to action.

“So this is it, huh?” he said.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Now you’re the one guessing things.”

She laughed, her humor lilted through the night. The darkness no longer seemed as cold.

“True. Tonight’s thrown a lot of things into question, that’s for sure.”

He nodded, thumbs looped through his belt.

“Thank you, Vince. I’m not sure I could’ve done this otherwise.”

He shook his head. “Oh, no. You would’ve. I’m certain of it.”

She smiled.

“And, um... thank you, too. I’ll never forget this.”

“Me neither.”

The egg quivered again.

“You should be going,” he said.

She nodded, turned, began into the forest that lay just beyond the reach of the car’s glow.

As she was about to vanish, she turned back to him, still framed in the gleam of the headlights. “Do I remind you of someone?”

“Yeah. My daughter.”

She nodded. “That’s what I thought. Goodbye, Vince.”

She had appeared in the manner of a specter, and now, an eternity later, she faded into the darkness once more, carving a path through the new world now laying bare before her. After a time, even the crackle of the branches from her passing had dissolved into the night. Yet still, the man stood there, gazing into the place where his companion had once stood. Drawing a hand across his face, he looked about, taking a breath that encompassed all of his existence. At last, finding nothing left for him, the man turned back to the car. He placed himself within that lonely machine, the memory of his partner seated beside him.

His gaze fell to the woods once more. He sighed, awaiting the tears he was sure would soon seep from his eyes. None came. His lips twitched, the beginnings of a smile curling across his face. *Why burden her memory with that? Enough have been spilled already.*

The car lurched into motion, called to animation once more, and hurried off down the road. From the open window, the driver cried out into the night, spreading his humanity across that frigid sea of trees. With a free heart, the car rushed forth, casting itself through the joyous night into which an angel was being born.

