

West of Cody

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I think of you while driving west of Cody, Wyoming, where cattle and horse ranches settle up against the foothills that wind around the mountains. There's one piece of land in particular, right up under yellow and green pastures that goes for a half mile before disappearing at the base of jagged gray rock. I see you up there a few years from now, sitting outside of the cabin you talked about building, a paper-white cigarette between your delicate fingers and a cup of coffee at your side. Your bare legs are crossed in the early morning, and your breath comes out in circles like spools. You sit there with your chin up like you're waiting for something.

"Let's have a cigarette," I said.

"Right," you said, knowing I had smoked in the past but hated it now.

"No, really. I've never had a smoke after sex. Get your Spirits."

You got out of bed and moved through the dark, running your hand along the wall until you found your way into the kitchen. You filled a cup with water and brought it back with two cigarettes in your fist. I wanted you to say something to me about how good it was or

what you thought of me, but you only handed me a cigarette and put one in your own mouth.

I heard a click, and then a brief orange flashed over your face.

“Here.” You handed the lighter to me.

I rolled the paper stick in my palm, feeling like a fraud. I thought of Jack Palance and how he held his cigarette between tough fingers.

You propped a pillow up against the wall. Then we both half sat and half lay there, our shoulders even, our faces looking forward into the dark and open closet. Each time I saw a glow out of the corner of my eye, I took a puff of my cigarette so the orange tip was burning as yours was fading.

“You really want to build a cabin in the mountains?”

“Yeah. Someday.” You hesitated. I didn’t know what was in the pause, why it had to hang in the air so long.

I thought then of a long conversation we had on the phone a few nights earlier. You told me about your cabin, growing vegetables and coffee beans and tobacco and cannabis. I joked that the tobacco and coffee beans were a must, that you couldn’t survive without those things. There was more I wanted to say, a list I could have gone through about wants and needs and desires. But we had only known each other a few short weeks, and there have been too many times in my life when I’ve been incapable of just saying that I know a way to weave the thread of us together.

I want to pull off the road on Highway 16, to get out and walk around and breathe the Wyoming air you’ll be breathing in a few years. Instead, I keep on driving and think about you sitting out here all alone. In between coffee sips, you squint and brush your curls away from your face, put your hand on your forehead to see those mountains you were always so fond of. Then you take a drag, and out of your mouth comes that purple cloud, and I can’t see anything else for the rest of the drive, only the way you’re sitting out there with your legs crossed, looking up at the mountains with a cigarette between your fingers.

You finished your cigarette first and plunged it into the cup of water. I felt like I had failed somehow, allowing you to finish ahead of me,

the orange ember going dark in the ashwater.

“You all done?” I asked and wondered why I wasn’t enough to keep you here and what you were thinking about this last night we had together before you left me for Troy, New York, before we became only moments and memories and not an everyday accumulation of you and me.

I took a long drag from my cigarette so it burned to the end, then put it into the water on top of yours. They floated together in the dark under a soft stream of smoke caught in the moonlight from the window. When the smoke rolled away, I set the cup on the floor beside the bed.

In a sudden urge, I rolled over on top of you and reached behind your head, grabbing a handful of curls. I looked over your face, the half of it I could see in the flittering light. I thought of saying something. I tried to.

“What?” you said. “What is it?”

You moved to look closer. I could feel your rustling beneath me. I closed my eyes and pressed your face into my shoulder. I held tight to the back of your neck, smelling you as deeply as I would be able to remember, smoke and all.

