“Hey Ty, look alive. We’ve got another one.”

Marlee flattened the gum against the roof of her mouth, trapping air inside. She leaned casually on her crossed arms, strands of mismatched silver jewelry swinging from her black tee to clatter against the countertop. She stared at the stranger fumbling with the charge port.

He’d pulled in too fast. Backed up to straighten out but ended up just as crooked on the second attempt. And then discovered the charging cable was on the wrong side.

Ty looked up and brushed the dark hair from her eyes. She stepped forward from where she had been cleaning the floor and leaned on her mop. The late afternoon sun streaming in made her copper skin glow with additional warmth, the place where her rounded cheekbones met her eyes wrinkling slightly as she squinted to see.

Outside, the dry gravel yard baked, the rocks bleached to a gray uniformity with an east-west asphalt scar running arrow-straight to the horizon. Beyond was a ceaseless expanse of dead prairie grass.

“Whose turn is it?”

Marlee snapped the air bubble against her teeth with a loud pop.

“I better take this one,” she said, not taking her eyes off the fumbling traveler outside. Marlee drummed her black, acrylic nails on the countertop once, then twice. “I’ve got a feeling.”

“How much longer ya got?”

“Three weeks, about.”

“Not gonna be the same, that’s for sure.”

Ty took a few steps to the side to get a different angle.

“Looks like just one guy. Middle-age. Dressed like he was on his way to golf. No passengers. Don’t see any guns. No blood, at least what I can see. Or signs of struggle,” she said, almost sounding disappointed.

Ty returned to her wheeled bucket and plunged the mop in.

“Whadda think it is this time? Dead parents? Talking animals?” Ty brightened. “Maybe a reverse centaur?!”

“Yeah.” Marlee snorted. “Now shut up! He’s coming!”

The bell over the convenience store door announced its opening, and the smell of baked earth followed. The driver entered.

“Hey there,” Marlee said, turning to put both hands on the counter. “How you doing?”

He blinked several times, as if struggling to comprehend. When he did answer, it was slurred, slow-like.

“I’m… uh. You know.”

He gulped.

“Fine.”

He most certainly wasn’t fine. He turned to glance back at his car. Assured it was still there, he let the door close behind him. A bead of sweat fell from his forehead to land on the widening sweat bands darkening his shirt. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Charge usually takes twenty-five, maybe thirty minutes. You want to grab a drink or a snack?” Marlee gestured toward the pair of sun-faded wood-laminate booths along the windows where the garage door used to be. “Maybe sit a bit while you wait?”

“Yes… yeah,” he answered, trance-like. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Centaur,” Ty coughed, theatrically.

The driver didn’t seem to notice.

“You driving west?” Marlee asked, trying to sound casual.

That seemed to rouse him, a little.

“West? Yes… Yes I was.” He looked from Marlee to Ty and back again, taking them in. “How’d you know?”

Marlee looked down to avoid his gaze, pretending the pens in the cup beside the register were the most interesting thing in the world. She snapped her gum.

“You know.” She shrugged. “Not many people take this route anymore. The ones that do, well, they’re usually headed west.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s nowhere else to go.”

“That’s not true,” Ty said, interjecting. “If you’re going west on 212, you’ve got the Black Hills. Very touristy. Very Wiyohpeyata. And beyond that, in Yellowstone at the end,” Ty lowered her voice to a conspiratorial hush, “you’ve got the Devil’s Den.”

“No.” Marlee scoffed. “It, 212, doesn’t end in Devil’s Den. You need to stop telling people that. It *actually* ends at Tower Junction. Devil’s Den is farther south.”

Ty waved away the sentiment.

“But Devil’s Den sounds better. Spookier.”

Marlee snapped her gum while staring at Ty, unimpressed.

“Anyway, how long have you been driving?” Ty asked, changing the subject.

The guy reached over and idly picked at the dream catchers hanging limp above the endcap display.

“Dunno. Few hours, I think.”

“Straight through?”

“I think so, yeah.”

He swallowed as a thought occurred to him.

“Is it weird that I don’t quite remember?”

“No music? No calls? No podcasts? Nothing to break the silence?”

He looked at Ty.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"It takes all types," Ty said, leaning against the counter. "Most make a point not to notice where they are."

"The rest are usually one of a few types," Marlee said. "The lost tourist. The romantic."

"The *weirdo,*" Ty added, emphasizing it.

Marlee snapped her gum again.

"So which one are you?"

"I don't…" He looked down at the phone in his left hand, trailing off. When he tilted it up, Marlee saw the camera app was open. Must have been the entire time. He began swiping at whatever he found there.

"How far back to the last turn?" he asked.

"Turn?" Ty asked, surprised. "You are on one great straightaway, friend. What turn are you talking about?"

"The turn. East of here. The last turn."

He was scrolling through his phone, looking for something.

"There must have been a turn," he said, voice slightly plaintive.

Marlee lifted up the countertop gate to exit. She gestured toward the booth.

"Okay. Let's just sit down, and you can tell us more about your turn."

The traveler looked at her uncertainly for a moment, and then shuffled over. They slid into the booth, sending dust motes caught in the late afternoon light pinwheeling and scattering.

"I'm Marlee, by the way," she said, sitting down across from him. "And that's Ty."

"Hiya," she said, pulling out a stool from behind the counter and sitting down.

"Hey," he said, tentatively. "My name is Garrett."

"Nice to meet you, Garrett," Marlee said. "So. You were traveling west on 212. And you

said there was a turn?"

Garrett looked from Marlee to Ty and back again.

"Well, there must have been. It is the only thing that makes sense."

Marlee studied him for a moment.

"Why would a turn make sense?"

He looked down at his phone, framing it on the tabletop with his hands. Looking at… something.

A flash reflected off the metal window frame and caught Marlee's attention. Marlee twisted to look over her shoulder. Out the window, beyond the gravel yard, the sepia-toned grassland ran to the horizon. There, a line formed above it; darkening evening blue sky on one side, clouds on the other. The front seemed to billow with heat, lightning, and little else.

Ty took advantage of the distraction.

"Was it a person?"

"What?"

"The thing you saw. Was it a person?"

Garrett's expression hardened. "No."

"An animal?"

"No."

"A *mythological* animal?"

Garrett glared.

"I said no animals."

"What Ty is saying," Marlee said, reasserting eye contact, "is that sometimes people see things on the road. It's OK. It happens. So what did you see?"

Garrett set his phone on the tabletop and leaned back, crossing his arms. He pursed his lips,

relaxed them, and then opened his mouth, as if trying to stretch the muscles there.

"A house. I saw a house."

Ty tilted her head.

"A house?"

The dust danced in the sun just inside the door. Marlee could see Ty was disappointed. She felt it.

"My house."

"Oh, really?" Marlee said with feigned enthusiasm.

"No, you don't get it," Garrett said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "It was *the house that I grew up in*."

Ty hopped off the stool.

"That's… nice," she said, walking up to the coffee station. "I guess."

"What? I saw it. I really did."

"Uh-huh."

"Why are you so nonchalant about this? Isn't that crazy?"

Garrett looked between them.

"Because I'm most definitely *not,* you know."

Ty tore the top off a sugar packet.

"People tend to see a lot of things out on the road. Long stretches without much to look at, you know. People get the white line fever. Mind gets bored, starts to wander-"

"Some people see dead relatives," Marlee interrupted.

"Or animals talking," Ty countered.

"God. Lots of God."

"That's usually only after midnight, though."

“I know what zoning out is,” Garrett said, looking first at Ty and then Marlee. “This isn’t *that*. This wasn’t a mirage, wasn’t water on the road. This was a house, my childhood home. Clear as day.”

He scooped his phone back from the table and started flicking through it.

Marlee snapped her gum.

“Did you get a picture of this… house?”

“Yes!” He stabbed at something with his finger, squinted, and then exhaled sharply. “I mean, maybe. I thought I did but-“ He attempted to zoom and held up the phone for inspection. “These don’t make any sense.”

Ty came over, set one of the cups in front of Garrett, glanced at the photo, then retreated to her stool. “They always say that.”

“They?”

The hardened plastic faux leather creaked as Marlee leaned back and crossed her arms.

“Different people react differently to what they see. Some people cry.”

“We had a guy quit his job by the drink cooler,” Ty added, “just last Tuesday.”

“Marriage ended in the parking lot in June,” Marlee said, nodding to the window.

Garrett leaned over the table.

“But that’s not what happened to *me*.”

“Tell us, then,” Marlee said, avoiding his gaze with a preoccupation with the building storm. “You were saying something about a turn?”

“Right,” he said, “so I’m driving, and I see this building coming up on my right. I go by. I didn’t clock it at first. It’s only after it’s behind me that I get this feeling, like something about it was familiar.”

Marlee watched lightning jump from cloud to cloud. She tried to snap her gum with the next flash.

“But then, ten, twenty minutes later and I come over this hill, right? There is the same house, but closer, somehow?”

“Like the house was bigger?” Ty asked.

“No, like closer to the road.”

Ty squinted and set her coffee down.

“And is that when you knew it was your house?”

“Almost. Something was off, like when you see someone, and they seem familiar, but you don’t know where from. It was like that. But it wasn’t until the third time that I knew for sure.”

Marlee cocked her head.

“A third time?”

“Yeah, the third time. ‘Till then, I figured I had somehow gotten turned around and kept driving by the same house. But the third time-“

Garrett’s voice trailed off, and he seemed to stare out the window but at nothing in particular.

“The third time I saw it, the house was right next to the road. I couldn’t mistake it. There, where the window to the living room should have been, there was a sheet of plywood.”

“Okay,” Marlee said, drawing out the sound.

“No, you don’t understand. It was supposed to be temporary.”

He looked back and forth between them, searching for recognition.

“I was nine. Wild throw. Put a hole through the window.”

“Sounds pretty common,” Ty said.

“It was like that for three years.”

“Still,” Marlee said, chewing her gum between phrases, “lots of places need patching, have something to be worked on.”

Garrett traced the cup's edge with his thumb.

"We didn't have the money to get it fixed, then. My dad was an 'entrepreneur'."

He paused. Ty ran her hand along the countertop, sweeping off whatever it encountered. Marlee just waited.

"Sometimes things were good. But that wasn't one of them. That year, for my birthday, Mom convinced some of the kids from school to come over."

"Ah, that sounds nice," Ty said.

"Not really. From then on, I was the kid from the 'poor house'."

Marlee stopped chewing and studied him.

"Well," Ty said, straightening.

"So why did I see that house here? Now?" Garrett asked, voice rising. "How is that possible?"

Marlee took a napkin from the dispenser against the window and removed her gum.

The beverage cooler's compressor rumbled to life, breaking the awkward silence. The air began to blow, making a handful of dated, faded paper scraps to flutter on the nearby community corkboard. A flyer for last spring's school play. Local business cards for crop insurance and auto repair. Hand-drawn map directing traffic to the antique shop that closed last year.

Dust suspended in the light scattered into different orbits.

Marlee cleared her throat.

"Does the house where you grew up-I mean, does it still exist?"

Garrett's answer was as definitive as it was fast.

"No."

"No?"

Garrett shook his head.

"No. They demolished it after we moved out, sometime when I was in high school."

There was bite in his tone.

"I couldn't have been happier."

Ty stood to toss her paper cup in the trash, then reached for the mop, handle still jutting from its bucket.

"So what exactly did you see on the road?" Marlee asked, leaning in.

"I told you," he said, flatly, "I saw my childhood home."

"No one disagrees that you saw *something*," Marlee said calmly.

"It kept showing up."

Marlee caught another flash reflected in the metal frame.

"It was like it wanted to make sure I saw it."

"Okay, okay." Marlee pushed the napkin aside. "You're here now, right? You with us, Garrett?"

Garrett repeated himself, his voice sharper.

"I *did* see it."

"And now it's over."

"I thought it was over. I got out. I got as far away from that shit-hole as I could."

Marlee looked at him.

"Who called it that?"

Garrett blinked. "What?"

"A shit-hole."

Garrett hesitated.

"Uh-huh," Marlee said, making sure she had his full attention. "Garrett, that house is gone. You just said so."

“You’re not listening to me!”

Ty tightened her grip on her mop handle and inched closer.

“What is it you do, now, Garrett?” Ty asked.

Garrett blinked and furrowed his brow, as if trying to remember.

“Logistics, shipping. VP. We do a lot with the I-90 autonomous corridor.”

“Sounds impressive.”

“Yeah.” Garrett picked up his cup and drank. “Yeah. Lots of work.”

Recalling his job seemed to shake something awake. He looked around the room, studying the shelves as if for the first time. He shifted from stupefied to stimulated.

“You guys sell gas?”

Ty and Marlee exchanged surprised looks.

“Gas, like propane?” Marlee asked.

“No, like gasoline, you know, like vehicles used to use?”

“Well, we keep a pump on the side,” Ty said slowly, leaning on the mop. “We do get the occasional junker that stops; heritage pass sort of stuff. That, and farm equipment.”

“Do you also sell something to carry it?”

Marlee double-checked Garrett’s car in the charging lot and then looked back at him.

“Why?” she asked, eyes narrowing.

Garrett sized up the liquid still in his cup, swirled it twice, then downed the rest.

“Because I’m going to burn it to the ground, whatever it is.”

Marlee stiffened.

“But you said it didn’t exist anymore.”

“There shouldn’t be anything to burn. Either way, it’ll be gone,” Garrett said matter-of-factly. He slid from the booth and stood.

"You can't," Ty said, voice calm but eyes wide. "There's a Red Flag warning. We'd have a grassfire, guaranteed."

"Look," Garrett said, holding his hands up defensively, "I passed my childhood house that can't exist. *Three times*. On a road that hasn't turned for what, the last fifty miles? Whatever it is, it's a problem. And I'm a problem solver."

He found the trash, crushed his cup, and casually tossed the remains in.

"I appreciate all you've done, really, but I need to deal with this. I've already taken enough of your time. What do I owe you for the coffee and, say, a couple gallons?"

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Marlee slid out of the booth, alarmed.

"Are you joking?"

"Not at all," Garrett said, scanning the aisle. "I saw it; I'll take care of it."

Ty and Marlee exchanged looks. Ty moved to the door.

"Setting fire to it, whatever it is," Marlee said, "isn't going to solve things."

"There's something not right here, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

Marlee grimaced in disgust.

"What are you talking about?"

"It kept showing up."

"You just *think* it showed up."

Garrett looped around the far endcap.

"I *have* to go back."

"Do you?" Marlee asked, skeptically.

"Listen, I'll be careful." Garrett picked up a red plastic jug and tested its heft. "It's just a couple gallons. I'm not going to set off a prairie fire, or whatever. I'm not an idiot, despite how this

all sounds. *I'm not.*"

"I'm not selling you the gas."

Marlee crossed her arms.

"Ty. Lock it."

Ty took her mop handle and wedged it diagonally between the doorframe and the pushbar, keeping it from opening. She reached into the chest pocket of her green bib overalls and pulled out her phone, holding it up so Garrett could see what it was.

"The county sheriff is on speed dial. You're staying here until he gets here if it comes to that."

"Keep this up," Marlee said, standing next to Ty, "you're gonna get someone besides yourself hurt."

Garrett looked at Marlee, incredulous. His eyes narrowed.

"You two both know too much. You *know* there's something out there."

Marlee glared back.

"I know you saw something."

"Then you know I have to go back."

"No."

"How do you not see that what happened to me requires me to do something?!"

Marlee rolled her eyes.

"Oh, come on."

Garrett scowled.

"You don't understand. You'd spend your whole life getting away from a place like that, too."

Marlee looked past Garrett. Her eye followed the line of shelves sagging with age. Pointing

to the ancient faux-wood paneling. Beneath ceiling tiles discolored over years by various roof leaks.

"Maybe I do."

"Then you know what I have to do."

"I'm not selling you gas."

"Are you serious?" He gestured to the rest of the store. "Are you too busy with all your other customers? This dump?"

Garrett waited for a reaction, but Ty and Marlee remained impassive.

"This is ridiculous. You get that, right?"

Ty shook her head.

"Nope."

"You don't know anything about this place," Marlee said, her tone sharper than before.

Ty looked at Marlee, surprised.

"Say you burn it," Marlee continued, "Then what?"

Garrett blinked.

"Then it's gone."

"It already is."

Marlee let her last words hang in the air, riding the last of the afternoon's sunbeams.

Garrett studied the gas can.

"This is different."

"How?" Marlee asked.

Garrett turned the gas can over in his hands, as if searching for an answer.

"Because…"

Marlee waited.

Garrett looked toward the windows and beyond to Highway 212, weather-scarred and bleached to a flinty gray.

“I don’t know.”

From behind the counter came a melodic ding.

Ty glanced at the console.

“You’re charged up.”

Garrett looked at the canister one more time, considered Marlee for a moment, and then dropped it back onto its shelf.

“So now what?”

Ty looked at Marlee.

Marlee nodded.

Ty pulled the mop from the door and stepped away, clearing the path.

“You’re all set to go.”

Garrett looked from Ty to Marlee and back again. He opened his mouth once, twice, as if to say something.

Finding nothing, he gave up and slunk out the door to reunite with his car.

Marlee joined Ty next to the counter. Together, they watched the electric vehicle back up and creep toward where the turnoff met the highway.

The car sat there without signaling. Waiting.

The last of the setting sun was swallowed by the building storm. Heat lightning pulsed inside the blue-black clouds, pulled featureless against the coming front.

The car started forward, and then turned west into the weather.

Ty exhaled noisily. She turned to Marlee, eyes wide.

“Whew.”

“Yeah,” Marlee said, chuckling, eyebrows raised.

Ty reached across the counter and flipped the lights on. The unflattering fluorescents were blinding, but only for a moment. One with a bad ballast over the soda fountain kept strobing erratically.

“You sure you still want to leave this?”

Marlee went to the door and watched the EV’s taillights disappear into the distance.

“Hell yes. There’s a big world out there.”

Ty smiled.

“Three weeks.”

“Three weeks.”

Marlee looked around the store.

“Don't change everything while I'm gone.”