

The Devil on Her Shoulder

Chapter 4

Isaac woke with a start. Both he and Mia had set their alarms for the same time. The alarm jingles were different, but their respective beats were nearly in sync. This made the combined noise much more annoying because the rhythm almost matched, but not quite. Isaac turned his off first. Mia stirred next to him, slowly mustering the energy to shut the abrasive sound off. She was taking too long. Isaac fought the urge to reach over her and do it himself. She wouldn't like that, and he didn't want to start the day off on the wrong foot. At long last she turned it off. Isaac's mood immediately improved. Mia groaned and pulled the blankets over her head.

Isaac sat up in bed. He turned to the blankets beneath which his wife was hiding. Morning. Two more days. The majority of one of them would be spent driving. What a waste. They should've rented the cabin one more day. He should've taken more time off. He should've asked everyone at church if they knew any separatists. There was no end to all the things he should have done. The panic began to take hold again. He stood abruptly and walked into the kitchen. The only way to ward off the fear was to keep busy.

He started the coffee, then went to the bathroom, then put on the bare minimum of clothes needed to start packing the car. He tried to remember how the movie they had watched the night before ended. He had drunk too much. His memory of what they had done and talked about after dinner was hazy. The only thing he remembered with perfect clarity was his feeling of disappointment. He had that same feeling as he loaded their bags into the car. He was upset at himself for missing an opportunity the night before. An opportunity for what exactly he wasn't sure, but he knew he had missed it. Soon there would be no more opportunities left to squander. He was angry at himself for drinking. Now one of their last nights together would forever be muddled in his memory by vodka goggles. At least he wasn't hung over.

As Isaac threw the last of their packed bags into the trunk a new fear gripped him. Had he charged the car the night before? He closed the trunk and walked around to the front of the vehicle. It wasn't plugged in. He let loose a string of curses, walked to the charging station, yanked the cord out, and shoved the jack into the car's charging port. He opened the car door and stepped inside. He turned on the computer and checked the battery life. It had a quarter of a charge left. Isaac had charged the car one day so they could run errands in town, otherwise it would've been completely dead. Isaac checked the time. Checkout was in two hours. Why was it so damn early? Two hours of charging would bring the battery life up to just over half its total capacity. This would mean there would be another stop to charge the car. Three stops altogether, including the mandatory break. That wasn't so bad. He breathed a sigh of relief. They wouldn't be delayed too much in getting back home. Neither he nor Mia wanted to spend any more time on the road than was absolutely necessary. Isaac punched the route into the car's computer, accepted all the warnings about taking breaks, saved the route, and walked back inside the cabin.

Inside, Mia was dropping re-hydrated strawberries into two bowls of oatmeal. Isaac poured himself a cup of coffee and leaned up against the counter next to her.

“So... I have bad news.”

Mia paused, “Oh?”

“I forgot to charge the car last night.”

Mia sighed deeply.

“It’ll be at just above half a charge before we leave though. It’s only going to add one more stop.”

Mia sighed again, “Okay.”

Isaac started into the living room to turn the heater on when Mia murmured:

“Guess you shouldn’t have drunk so much.”

Isaac tried not to react to her passive-aggressive comment. Nonetheless, it did cause a split-second delay in his stride. Mia probably noticed. As long as Isaac didn’t respond it shouldn’t be an issue. He knelt next to the heater and turned it on. The holographic fire leapt to life. It took longer for the machine to generate heat. It was a cold fire.

“Breakfast is ready.”

“Do you want to eat it by the heater?”

Isaac thought it was an innocent question. Mia’s expression told him differently. If they ate breakfast at the table, it would mean that Isaac would go to Mia. If they ate it by the heater, it would mean that Mia would bring breakfast to him. Isaac wasn’t sure why, but where they ate had become a battle of wills.

Mia shrugged, another passive-aggressive gesture, “Can you grab my coffee?”

Isaac nodded and walked into the kitchen, passing Mia on the way. He picked up her mug, turned around, and walked back to the heater. Mia was on edge and he wasn’t sure why. Was she really angry that he had drunk too much the night before? It *was* an anti-climactic way to spend the last night of their vacation. He wasn’t particularly happy with himself either. He knelt next to her.

“After breakfast do you want to go up to the hot tub?”

They were almost completely packed and there was still plenty of time before they had to check out. The only reason for Mia to say no would be if she didn’t want to. Maybe this was why she said yes. Or maybe she really wanted to. Isaac couldn’t get a read on her mood.

After breakfast Isaac washed the dishes while Mia packed the few remaining food items to take back. Once their morning chores were finished, they made their way upstairs. Light poured in through the roof. It was a sunny day, relatively speaking. Mia disrobed as Isaac turned the jets on to their preferred setting. She climbed into the hot tub, shivering, as Isaac undressed. He glanced around and realized they hadn’t brought the bathrobes up with them. He ran naked downstairs and returned with the robes. He was freezing by the time he reached the hot tub. In his hurry to climb in he slipped and

nearly fell on top of Mia. She was not pleased. Isaac apologized and sat down on the opposite side of the tub. They studied each other for a moment.

“What are you going to do afterward?”

Isaac swallowed, “What do you mean?”

“Just... have you thought about what you’re going to do after the appointment?”

There was a long pause.

“I’ve been trying not to think about it honestly.”

Mia nodded, “Well, I know it’s sentimental but... I’d like you to sprinkle my ashes, or some of them at least, on my mother’s grave.”

Isaac cleared his throat, trying to quell the strange mix of panic and sorrow that was quickly overwhelming him. He choked on his words:

“I can do that. Do you... do you want any on your father’s?”

“I don’t care. You can do whatever you want with the rest of them. And I don’t really care what you do with my stuff but... I think Elise would like to look at my wardrobe. And I’m sure Tommy would want that antique record player in the closet. The rest of the stuff goes to you obviously.”

Isaac hadn’t talked to Elise or Tommy in years. He wasn’t sure if Mia had either.

“Do they know?”

“About the appointment?”

Isaac nodded.

“I haven’t told them anything.”

Isaac faltered, “Should it come from you? I mean you are their sister I’m not sure if...”

“I’ll text them tomorrow.”

Isaac nodded and turned away. It suddenly occurred to him that he should call his dad. He couldn’t recall the last time they had spoken.

Isaac pressed his hand up against one of the water jets. Mia ran her fingers across the frothy surface of the water. They both looked up at the roof.

“It’s not quite the same during the day, is it?”

Isaac murmured agreement, “Yeah, it’s still nice but... There’s something about sitting up here at night.”

He turned to her. He studied her for a long time. She stared into the water.

“Have you been happy? With me?”

Mia finally looked up. She smiled weakly.

“Of course.”

Isaac was not convinced, but he didn't press the matter.

Mia, changing the subject, “Well if we're going to. We should probably go ahead.”

She drew close to him, her hand searching the water. It found his knee and followed it upward. When he was ready, she turned around, making herself accessible. He took his place behind her, dumbly, like a brute acting purely on instinct. It was the most loveless encounter he'd ever had with her. He faltered for a moment, losing his drive. He assumed it was over. He was disgusted with the whole situation. He'd never wanted to be with her like that. She was fulfilling a perfunctory, “wifely” duty, with no interest, no love. Here she was leaving him, forever, approaching him with a “let's get it over with” attitude, no concern for his feelings, no concern for him whatsoever. And the entire worthless society bearing down on them from all sides was applauding her decision. Not her decision to let him screw her in the tub, of course; her decision to end it all. She was “brave.” Making the tough, but right decision. The entire sick, twisted world wanted her dead and she had had given in. Strangely enough, his anger gave him new life. As his blood began to boil he became more forceful. Despite herself, she started to enjoy it. Isaac allowed instinct to take over. He allowed his anger to propel him forward, both disgusted and electrified. Maybe there was always an element of shame and debasement to the act. Maybe trying to deny that fact was what made it unsatisfying. It didn't matter. Fuck the world. Fuck Agent Frankl. Fuck Trevor. But most of all fuck the world. Let it burn in hell forever and ever. And fuck Mia too. She came. She couldn't hide it. A moment later, he did too.

They pulled apart. Isaac's heart was pounding. Mia drifted back to her side of the tub. Her face was flushed. Something in her eyes told him she was impressed. He had to become an animal for her to respect him. That wasn't true though. Was it? Isaac looked away. He leaned back and stared up at the ceiling, drained.

They didn't linger in the hot tub for much longer. They wordlessly climbed out, donned their bathrobes, and headed downstairs for a shower. After they showered, they packed up the rest of their items and loaded them in the car. Isaac checked the car's battery and saw that it was sufficiently charged to get them to their first stop. They decided they might as well head out early. Isaac prepared Pip's litter box in the backseat floorboard while Mia gathered him up in the travel carrier. They loaded Pip in the car and performed a final check of the cabin, upstairs and downstairs. Everything was accounted for. Isaac and Mia climbed into the car and drove away.

Mia turned in her seat and looked back at the cabin until it was out of sight. She turned around and took in the road ahead. Her eyes were watery, but she was refusing to cry. Isaac glanced at her. What was going through her mind? What was it like to know that death was fast approaching, and not by accident, but by choice. Was she really at peace with her decision?

“What are you thinking?”

Mia didn't respond. They sat in silence for a long time before Mia finally murmured:

“Always winter. But never Christmas.”

“What?”

“You remember that book?”

“Yeah. I remember it. I read that one. I didn’t read any of the others, but I read that one.”

“I think about that line a lot. Always winter, but never Christmas.”

Isaac nodded.

Mia continued, “It’s the only good thing that happens in the winter.”

“What about New Year?”

Mia shrugged, “It’s a day off at least.”

They barely spoke for the first leg of the trip. Mia tinkered with her Holo-Jam. She cuddled Pip. Isaac liked to her see being so affectionate with their adopted street urchin. Her strange coldness from the morning had vanished. Isaac’s embarrassment at his behavior in the hot tub had faded. Although neither of them were talking, the mood was unusually light.

They arrived at their first stop. A near derelict charging station with one vending machine and a shack which served as the bathroom. Mia reluctantly used the facilities. Isaac, reliving his childhood, wrote his name in the snow. There was a house on a nearby hill with one light on. A shadow passed a window at regular intervals. The shadow was apparently the station attendant. Isaac took Pip out and set him in the snow, to the very loud protestations of the kitten. Isaac very quickly relented and gently tucked Pip into his coat, prompting him to remember the night he found the little cat. Back when the animal was just a stranger, before he and the little fellow had become friends. Isaac turned and saw Mia watching him. She found his behavior with the cat endearing. Isaac climbed back into the car. They waited until the computer indicated they had enough of a charge to continue, and then drove on.

Snow began to fall shortly after they left the first station, making the roads more treacherous. Isaac reluctantly slowed down. The snow had brought more cloud coverage, burying the sun in several more layers of white cotton, which turned the world gray in short order. They passed a seemingly abandoned car on the side of the road. It looked as though it had skidded in the snow and wound up in the ditch. It couldn’t be abandoned though. There was nowhere for the driver to go. Isaac wondered for a moment if they should stop. It wasn’t necessary. The car’s computer would’ve called for help the moment the driver had lost control. Besides, Isaac would just be a hindrance once help did show up. He glanced at Mia. She had fallen asleep. He sighed and turned back to the road, gripping the wheel with both hands.

Isaac watched the battery gauge warily. It was colder than usual, sapping the battery of power quicker than normal. If that was how it worked. He didn’t really know. Regardless, the battery was being drained faster than anticipated. He checked the distance to the next station. They were still within range, but if it got any colder, they might end up stranded on the side of the road. Fear began to creep in. Isaac glanced at Mia. Still asleep. He prayed she stayed that way until the station. If they made it that far.

The snow grew heavier. The flakes were thicker. Isaac had to slow down even more. He told himself not to check the gauge. Regardless of what he told himself he still checked it every two minutes, give or take. He didn’t need to worry. The car’s computer would issue a series of warnings as the power dropped. The first warning would be a friendly admonition to charge the car at his earliest convenience.

The second warning would be more or less the same as the first. The third would be the one to really pay attention to. At that point he would be dropping below a state regulated threshold. The department of transportation recommended that while on the road, every motorist should preserve a reservoir of power to run the heat in case the motorist was stranded for a while. "A while" was never defined in either the regulation or the resulting safety protocols. After the third warning would come the fourth. The fifth would be the dying gasp of the car. It would use its last bit of energy to send a message to the nearest transportation office for roadside assistance. Isaac wondered what the protocol was when the remaining distance to the next charging station could be covered by the recommended "reservoir." If it came to it, he'd rather risk continuing the drive than sit on the side of the road waiting for a transportation bureaucrat to show up.

The car issued its first warning, waking Mia up in the process. Isaac checked the distance to the station. Still well within range.

"Everything okay?"

Isaac turned to her, "Yeah, we're still good. The car's just losing power a little faster than normal. I think it's the cold but I'm not sure."

"It's always cold."

It would have been a harmless statement except for the vaguely patronizing tone.

Isaac, trying to mask his annoyance, "Yeah, but it's a little colder than usual."

There was a brief pause. Then Isaac continued.

"Unfortunately, we're going to have to stay at the charging station for longer than anticipated. The recommended charge to get to the next station is half a charge and since the battery's draining faster than normal, I think we should get it to at least three-quarters."

"How long will that take?"

"... It depends."

Mia sighed and shook her head, "All this could've been avoided if you'd plugged the car in last night."

Isaac chose not to respond. It wouldn't do any good. He hadn't noticed, but at some point, the snow had lessened. He leaned on the gas pedal. Just a little. The road was still on the dangerous side. He wondered to himself why they still called it the gas pedal. Which prompted him to wonder what the last model of gas-powered cars was. He'd have to look it up later.

The second warning came about fifteen minutes after the first one. Isaac again checked how much further it was to the station. Warning notwithstanding, there was no cause for alarm. He glanced at Mia. She was upset.

"Is there anywhere closer to stop?"

"Unfortunately, no. This station is the first one since the last one."

“Great way to end our vacation.”

Isaac turned sharply to her. Her eyes widened a bit. His sudden movement and the obvious anger in his eyes had startled her. It wasn't her acid tone or the sarcasm. It was the fact that they were returning home for her to kill herself by lethal injection, which to Isaac was a much worse way to end a vacation. Furthermore, he was angry that she was upset over a minor inconvenience when she was damning him to a life of loneliness. She turned her flushed cheeks away. He wondered if she guessed the meaning of his anger or if she just assumed he was annoyed at her snarkiness.

The third warning went off as they were pulling into the charging station. Mia breathed an audible sigh of relief. She didn't say anything for which Isaac was grateful. Ever since the second warning he had been wondering why he was in such a hurry to get back home. He should have been driving her as far away from home as possible.

The station was busier than the last one. There were two other cars charging there. Mia made the first bathroom run while Isaac watched the car. He stared down at the computer interface, barely aware of the slowly rising gauge. Mia returned. Isaac wordlessly stepped out of the car and made his way to the bathroom.

It was almost as cold inside as it was outside. Apparently, management kept it just warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing. Isaac stood at the urinal for a long time before he even unzipped his pants. The door to the bathroom opened and someone stepped inside, prompting him to move. He concluded his business as quickly as he could and then made his way to the sink. He turned the handle labeled hot and held his fingers under the water, waiting for it to get warm.

He studied his reflection. Time was running out. This was the last day anything could be done to save her. Soon they would be home again, and although they had one more day before the appointment Isaac knew the moment they stepped across their threshold it was all over. Nothing could be done. “Abandon Hope...” He didn't finish the thought. He couldn't honestly say that he'd had any hope since the night she had told him. This last stretch of road was his last chance. His chance to do what?

The other motorist walked past, shaking Isaac from his reverie. It was then he noticed the sign on the mirror upon which was written “No Hot Water.” He washed his hands and then shut the water off with his elbow. He held his hands under the motion-sensor air dryer. Evidently it was broken. He sighed deeply, thinking about how cold his hands were going to be on the walk to the car, where he had of course left his gloves.

He hurried through the snow back to the waiting car. It had locked automatically so Mia had to unlock it for him. Once it was unlocked, he climbed inside, turned on the heat, and stuck his hands next to the vents.

Mia, quietly protesting, “Won't that make it take longer to charge the car?”

“Yeah, I'll shut it off in just a second.”

Once feeling had returned to the tips of his fingers Isaac shut off the heat. He looked at the gauge. It was charging faster than expected, but he didn't trust the computer's diagnostics. He needed to make sure they had enough power to make it to the next, and hopefully final, stop. He had lost all desire to go home, but he also had no interest in being stranded on the side of the road.

They sat in silence for a long time. Mia held Pip in her lap, scratching him behind the ears. The only sound in the car was the tiny cat's purring. Isaac glanced at Mia. She was staring into space, wearing an inscrutable expression. Isaac began to feel the panic take over. She would be gone soon. Gone forever.

"I don't want you to do it," he blurted out.

Mia blinked and turned to him, her expression changing into one he recognized all too well.

Mia, exasperated and angry, "We've been over this a thousand times."

"I know but there's a way out."

"I don't want a 'way out' Isaac."

"I have a connection with the separatists," he lied.

Mia puzzled, "What?"

"We can escape. We can live out there with them. It won't be easy but..."

Mia, scoffing, "Live with the separatists? Even if I wanted to do that it's only a matter of time before the Feds crack down on them. Once their population grows to the point where they can't be ignored, they're going to be relocated to the cities just like before."

"But it could still buy us some time. To just be away from it all. Like we are now."

"That's the thing, Isaac. I don't want more time."

Isaac knew this would be her response. But it still crushed him.

Mia sighed, murmuring, "I just wanted to have a nice vacation."

Isaac shook his head. He turned away from her and looked out the driver's side window. The snow was picking up again and along with it the wind. Snowflakes were forming tiny whirlpools in the air. He wanted to leave Mia and the car and walk out into the wilderness. He wanted to disappear into the snow. He gripped the door handle. It sent a thrill through him, similar to when he had held the knife. He was one tiny step closer to doing something reckless. The computer dinged and informed him that it had achieved the necessary charge for the next leg of the trip.

"Can we head out now?"

Isaac loosened his grip on the door handle.

"Not yet. I want to charge it some more. Just to be safe."

Mia fell asleep a half hour outside of Stockburg. She was still asleep when Isaac drove into the city. He glanced at her as they approached their apartment, then drove past it. There was nowhere in particular he wanted to go; he just didn't want to go home.

The roads on the public transit routes were regularly cleared so he stuck to them. Driving in the city on relatively clear roads was much better than driving on the highway. It was almost fun. He passed

his office, the library, the City East Branch of the Bureau, where he had met the odious Trevor. Merely seeing the Bureau's office made him angry so he cut down a street less traveled then turned on to 8th street, a few blocks away from church.

The light turned red a few intersections from the cathedral. Isaac gently pressed down on the brakes, but the car still skidded slightly on the icy road. He successfully stopped at the empty intersection. He had considered just sliding through, but he didn't need a traffic ticket on top of everything else. The skid and the stop woke Mia up. She looked around, confused.

"Where are we?"

"On 8th street."

"Was a road closed or something?"

"No, I just didn't feel like going home just yet. You were asleep so I just kept driving."

The light turned green. Isaac gingerly pressed down on the gas pedal. The car fishtailed a little but finally picked up enough traction to push forward. Mia and Isaac both looked up at the church as they passed it.

"That where you've been going?"

Isaac nodded, "Yes."

"Pretty building."

"Yes, it is. Do you want to go with me tomorrow?"

"You're still going tomorrow?"

"I figured I would. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. You're not really gone that long."

For some reason, Mia's comment made Isaac feel hopeful. At least she wanted him to be near her the day before.

"Why don't you come with me?"

"I don't want to."

Isaac nodded, "They have an evening service. I think I might go to that instead of the morning one. So I don't have to get up early tomorrow."

"That's fine."

"Then we can stay up tonight."

"Sounds good."

Neither of them spoke again until Isaac pulled into their apartment's parking lot, and it was just Mia saying "home again home again jiggety jig." It was something her grandfather used to say. Mia carried Pip and a small bag to their apartment, leaving Isaac to plug the car in. Isaac pulled two of the

larger bags out of the car and carried them upstairs. He passed his neighbor on the way. They smiled and nodded, internally noting how tired the other looked. Inside Mia had shut Pip inside the laundry room. She slipped past Isaac in the doorway and jogged down the stairs. Isaac dropped the bags in the living room, propped their front door open, and headed back to the car. Mia took the box of foodstuff up to the apartment and started the process of unpacking, leaving Isaac to finish unloading. He gathered the remaining bags and locked the car. He stood for a moment staring at it. He wondered how far it would take him on a single charge. He turned and looked up at his shuttered bedroom window. Maybe he could drug Mia. Kidnap her and take her out into the country. He wondered if the Bureau would chase down a client if they were abducted. He moved on to wondering when he was going to take the car back to storage. He wasn't going to take it back that day obviously. The next day the only place he wanted to go was Church. He wondered if he should skip it. He didn't want to be away from Mia for too long, but Church would make him feel better, a little at least. Something told him the hope they talked about was unfounded, but it was still nice to think about. The day after tomorrow was the appointment. A wave of nausea swept over him at the thought of it. He pushed it out of his mind. Maybe he could take the car back the day after that.

Back in the apartment, Mia was boiling water. She asked him if he wanted a hot toddy to which he replied yes. Isaac walked into the laundry room to check on Pip. He picked up the cat, leaned back against the dryer, and stared into space. He didn't move. He wasn't even petting Pip. He was just holding the cat by its forelegs, letting the animal dangle, confused. At long last it began to struggle, at which point Isaac absent-mindedly dropped it. Pip meandered into the living room, seeking attention from Mia. Isaac stayed in the laundry room, staring.

His mind was swimming, as though he were drunk. Impossible hopes kept emerging from the torpor of his thoughts. Maybe the contract had been lost and the Bureau wouldn't show up. Maybe they'd discover that she wasn't eligible for an ETC and cancel at the last minute. Maybe the Bureau would suddenly be dissolved. Maybe every employee of the Bureau would spontaneously die, instantly making the world a better place. Maybe it was just a test to see if he still loved her. Maybe it was all just a nightmare, and he would wake to discover that Mia was happy and that she would never in a million years consider signing an ETC. Maybe angels would come down from heaven and take them to a better place with warm weather and rolling meadows of green grass.

He shook his head. It was stupid to hope. And not just because the only hopes he had left were daydreams. Hope in a world like theirs was futile. Hope was cruel. Isaac's eyes finally focused. He turned and looked into the living room. Mia was standing at the island, measuring out whiskey for the hot toddies. He turned his attention to the floor. He wondered if he could disappear until it was all over. Escape to the country for a few days. Drive back and forth between charging stations. Come home to an empty apartment. Pretend his marriage and its tragic end had only been a strange dream. He didn't have to be so sad. None of it was real. Mia wasn't real. Thank God he had never married. Getting married was dangerous. It was safer to be alone. An old song lyric popped into his head, driving him out of his bizarre daydreams into reality: "When you have no one. No one can hurt you."

Mia called to him, letting him know that his drink was ready. He floated into the living room and collected his glass. He took it to the couch and sat down. Mia sat down next to him and asked if he wanted to watch something. He said yes. She asked him what. He said surprise me.

Isaac studied himself, confused. There was space between his physical body and himself. His body was moving, speaking, interacting with Mia, but it wasn't him. He drifted between the two realities, between that of mind and body. He'd finally gone insane. Although, if this was insanity, it really wasn't so bad.

The afternoon passed into the evening. Isaac slowly coalesced. He assumed his mind had adopted some kind of defense mechanism. But the timing seemed strange. The real trauma hadn't even begun.

When it came time for bed Isaac was so drained that he stripped down to his underwear and crawled beneath the covers without brushing his teeth or washing his face. His teeth could rot and his pores could clog. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He was asleep before Mia came to bed.

Morning. The last day. Isaac sat up. He checked to see if Mia was still there and then dashed into the bathroom. He had skipped the buildup of dread and gone straight into panic. He was having difficulty breathing. His chest was hurting. His head was throbbing. For a brief moment he wondered if it was real. That is, if he was having a heart attack or a stroke, or both at the same time. He told himself that was nonsense. It was all psychosomatic. It was the fear. It was panic.

He stepped into the tub and twisted the shower handle. The freezing spray of water sent a jolt through him that oddly helped calm him down. He stood beneath the water until it started to warm and then shut the water off. He dressed and walked out into the bedroom. Mia was sitting up in bed. She looked up at him, concerned.

"You okay?"

He nodded, "Yeah, I'm going to get the coffee started."

Isaac walked through the living room towards the kitchen counter. The panic was fading, replaced by a crushing numbness. He was reverting back to auto pilot. He mechanically prepared the coffee and then mechanically began preparing breakfast. It was the last day. There was nothing he could do. There never had been. He had to let her go. Accept it. He had known it was going to happen, but he hadn't really accepted it. It was time. Make peace with it.

He walked around the island and sat down on the couch, listening to the coffee percolating. He kept telling himself to accept it. To let it go. To let her go. A rift began to form in his head. It felt like a wedge was being slowly driven through his brain, cutting off a piece of it. He had to let that go as well.

A moment later Mia joined him on the couch. She curled up next to him and threw a blanket over both of them. When the coffee and breakfast were ready, she pushed the blanket off and walked to the island. She sat down on the bar stool and pulled her feet up underneath her. Isaac wordlessly joined her.

"What do you want to do today?"

Mia turned to him, shrugging, "Nothing really. Just want to do some post-vacation relaxing."

"Want to go for a walk?"

“It’s too cold to go for a walk. Unless you’ve got some beautiful scenery there’s no point.”

“I think the park is pretty nice.”

“Maybe later.”

After breakfast Mia laid down on the couch while Isaac cleaned the kitchen. Once the dishes were finished, he walked into the living room, rounding the couch, preparing to ask her about the walk. She was asleep. He stared down at her. She looked so peaceful. He didn’t know how she could sleep. It seemed far too early for a nap, and they had just woken up. Not to mention her appointment was the following day. Even if she were looking forward to it he would’ve thought she’d be nervous. Too nervous to sleep so easily. Isaac was terrified of death, usually. In the past month there were a few moments where it seemed attractive. Even if he were to take the plunge, he knew he’d be afraid right up until it was over. Fear of death was a normal human emotion. Yet there she slept, seemingly unafraid.

Not knowing what else to do he sat down on the floor next to the couch. He stared up at the clock on the wall, watching the seconds tick by. He looked back at Mia. He wanted to wake her. It was their last day together. They needed to do something. He didn’t know what. Something. He didn’t wake her. He let her sleep, hating himself for being so accommodating. He should be more selfish. He should demand her time. Ironically that would probably make her respect him more. Maybe. He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything. He stood and walked into the kitchen.

He poured the rest of the coffee into his mug. He walked to the window and looked out into the snowy world, slowly draining his cup. He tried to empty his mind. If he thought about anything his mind would immediately drift to the appointment. Tomorrow hung like a pall over him. He looked back at Mia. Still asleep. He could take it no more. He walked into the kitchen, filled the sink with soapy water, and washed his mug, being careful to loudly drop it in the other sink. He heard Mia stirring. He apologized for the noise. Mia sat up on the couch, stretching. Isaac washed and dried the mug and then joined his wife.

She wanted to watch something. This would at least involve cuddling, probably, so that was okay with him. He turned on the TV and they searched through their various apps. Mia offered a few suggestions. Isaac said he would leave it up to her. She chose a comedy. That worked for him. He could do with a laugh. She drew close to him. He put his arm around her and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

The movie was fine. Isaac couldn’t concentrate on it. He was feeling restless. There had to be a better way to spend their time. When the movie was over Mia wanted to play cards. They played canasta. It was a game she used to play with her grandmother. Her grandmother had played it with her grandmother. Mia wouldn’t have any grandchildren. Mia concentrated on her hand with singular focus. Isaac studied her. Time was closing in on them. The end of their time. The panic slowly gripped him. A flood of unfulfilled dreams poured in, consuming him. He thought of all the places they had never gone. All the things they had never done. He thought of a thousand different things he should’ve told her. A thousand different things he wanted to tell her. He wanted to tell her how much she meant to him. She knew that though. Surely, she knew that. If he told her that now she’d just think he was trying to guilt her into not going through with it. He had to tell her. He had to make sure she knew how much he loved her. How much he needed her. She finished her hand and looked up, smiling.

“Your turn.”

The rest of the day passed in a haze. Time stopped behaving as it should. It was moving unnaturally fast. He was talking with Mia, spending time with her, but he didn't know what he was saying or what they were doing. All the while he kept thinking it was their last day. It was all coming to an end. Slipping like sand through his fingers. Melting like snow in his palm. Just the other day they had a whole month. How had this happened? How had it come to this so soon? He drifted. Ignoring the clock. Ignoring the shadows lengthening outside. He imagined they were in a tiny cell and that it was the entire world and that if he were to open the window he could reach out and touch the walls of a movie set painted to look like an early evening sky miles away and that he could poke a hole through it and on the other side would be nothing but space. No world beyond theirs. No outside forces encroaching on their little patch of universe. Nothing outside of them to make them unhappy.

Somehow it was 5:30 and Mia told him he should probably get ready if he was still going to church. He couldn't understand how it was already time to go when they had just eaten lunch. Then he remembered all the random inconsequential things they had said and done in the interim, none of which were worthy of her last full day on earth. He wondered if he should go to church or not. He knew it would make him feel better; so he dressed and headed out the door, remembering his gloves for once.

The moment he stepped outside he wanted to run back in. A strange sort of panic gripped him. He couldn't be apart from her. He might miss something. He forced himself to keep moving. He was convinced he needed to go to church. A full block into the walk he realized he hadn't pulled his hood up. Snow was collecting in his hair. It didn't matter. When he arrived at the church he paused outside. He felt guilty for leaving her alone. He should go back home. He walked inside. He needed a reprieve. He needed a distraction.

The service was good but just like the afternoon it was unnaturally short. He spoke to Father Andrew afterward. About nothing in particular. He was fairly certain he appeared to be composed, even though he felt like he was on the verge of imploding. Father Andrew asked him about Mia. Isaac replied that it was almost time. Father Andrew nodded sadly, and mentioned again that he was praying for them. He asked Isaac if Isaac would like him to come tomorrow. Isaac thanked him but declined his offer. Isaac left shortly after. He made his way back to his apartment, but instead of going in he continued on to the park. When he had left for church earlier, he had felt an overwhelming desire to return home. Now that he was home, he wanted to stay out for as long as possible. Panic had gripped him leaving home. Now panic gripped him at the thought of returning.

There was a trail at the park that wove around a frozen pond. He walked it, over and over. He could walk it until sunrise. Until after the appointment was over. Then he wouldn't have to go back and face Mia. If he could just put some distance between himself and the event itself then it couldn't become real. If it couldn't become real, it would never happen. That had been the solution all along. She couldn't die if he wasn't there. She could live on outside of his consciousness. He just had to disappear. Start a new life. Put it behind him. He shook his head, stepped off the trail, and began walking across the pond. He didn't know if the ice was thick enough to hold him.

What an awful day. What a stupid day. What utter bullshit. Her last day on earth and what had they done? Sat around the apartment wasting time. He crossed the pond and walked up the embankment back on to the trail. He should go back. But he couldn't. The thought of walking through the door and seeing her filled him with dread. He couldn't be around her. It hurt too much. He was losing control. Something was breaking in him. He shook his head and checked the time. Hours had passed

since church. That was impossible. How had it gotten so late? He started back home. He walked up the stairs. He nodded to his neighbor's door as though she were watching him through the peephole. He walked into the apartment. The Holo-Jam was on. It was playing "Pur Tu Miro." Tears welled up in his eyes. He collapsed to his knees. He looked up at the ceiling. A couple was dancing slowly to the music. Through the blur of his tears, they looked just like Isaac and Mia. He looked towards the bedroom. Mia was already curled up in bed, facing away from him. He stood and walked into the bedroom. He crawled beneath the cool sheets without undressing. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her as close to him as he could, and then he pulled her in tighter. His tears slid down his face and into her hair. He tried to speak but choked on the words. He whispered with a shaky voice:

"You can't go."