

Drive

“Wanna go for a drive?” Benji said, peeking into my room and jingling his car keys loudly. On the jumpring were a bunch of brightly colored guitar picks he stole from his bandmate and a little bottle opener shaped like Illinois from when we last visited.

I laughed a little and closed my book. He seemed to be in a good mood, and that was rare. I hopped off my bed and headed towards my bookshelf. “Sure, I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Were you seriously reading in here?! Haha! You’re such a nerd,” He exclaimed. So much for a good mood - Benji was in a perfectly normal mood, which spelled bad news and a migraine for me. He strode out of my room confidently without so much as a second glance and I followed, grabbing my bag from the top of my dresser on the way out.

“Make sure he doesn’t get arrested, Blair,” Dad said as we approached the door. I figured he was joking, but the line between jokes and serious concern was getting pretty thin these days when it came to Benji. “And if you get home late, try to not wake the whole house this time. Alright Benjamin?”

“You got it pops,” Benji replied, swinging the front door open. Dad sighed and opened his book again, reclining in his seat. I think he muttered something to my mom, but I couldn’t make out what. I only heard her reply:

“Let him be. He’s trying,” She said gently. “I know he is.”

We got in the car and Benji cranked the key in the ignition a couple times before it finally gave in and started. The sound of the engine churning its way to a slow but even chug was followed by a dull, metallic, grinding sound that didn’t stop once during our drive. It made a big clanking sound every time he hit the brakes, and poured a dark, thick smog out of the exhaust.

The floor was littered with Marlboro boxes and the stench of stale cigarette smoke was pungent and sickening. That damn car. I hated it. But it ran, and that's all Benji really needed.

Benji slowly pulled out of our big gravel driveway as the hazy August sun reflected onto the windshield and made the wide, sprawling, flat fields of grain nearly glow. "You're so tense these days," He said dismissively, removing both of his hands from the wheel to grab his lighter from his back pocket. I quickly put a hand on it.

"Careful," I said, steering the car down the road. "I just started my senior year. It's just a lot of pressure. I don't mean to come off as tense."

"Damn, you're old. When the Hell did that happen?" Benji replied. "I feel like it was just yesterday we were getting ready for school together and playing pretend and stuff."

I laughed a little and gave control of the steering wheel back to him as he thumbed the small red tab on his lighter, making orange sparks flicker and dance off the metal before a flame finally caught.

He brought a cigarette that he fished out of the center console up to his lips and lit it quickly, puffing a cloud of smoke into the car. He rolled down the window an inch or two, and the cloud slowly streamed out into the breezy, warm air outside. I shuffled in my seat a bit, trying to move away from the thick waft of stench. His shoulders fell a bit as he relaxed into the filthy seat behind him.

"Want one?" He said with a snicker, glancing at me through his dark, jagged, horrifically cut bangs.

I rolled my eyes. He was obviously joking, but I couldn't bring myself to laugh at his new smoking habit.

“Tough crowd,” He chuckled, tucking away the box and lighter away in the center console.

“I don’t get how you like those things,” I said. “They smell so awful. Did you know that the vent in my bedroom still smells like smoke and booze from the last party you had down in the basement? Mom almost killed me when she went in to dust my window screens the other day.”

“Concert, not party,” He reprimanded. “The band’s getting serious now, you know.”

He made a quick turn off the highway and onto the exit that led to the old county road that wove through all the farms outside the city. We’d moved to Wichita from Halifax around 6 or 7 years ago by this point, but the mystique and charm of rural, rolling yellow fields hadn’t yet worn off, and we were both so enamored with the farmland here.

As we kept rolling down the open road, staring at the fields of grain that sprawled out to a far, far horizon, a heavy silence filled the air. The silence was our friend by this point, though; it existed as another familiar passenger in the car. Our childhood inseparability and friendship had all but vanished in these difficult late teen years, our fits of giggling as we played pretend and long, drawn-out conversations about what our rock band would be named someday simply images of the past, transformed into truly unkind yelling fights at 2am and cold shoulders that lasted for weeks.

As we finally made it to the old county road, and as the wide landscape opened up even further, Benji chuckled a bit, completely out of nowhere.

“Hey, remember the time you threw that jar of pickles at me?” He asked.

This sudden, strange question caught me off guard, but I managed to stifle my surprise.

“Right after you shoved me off the kitchen table? That was relish, stupid,” I replied with a chuckle, the incident in question flashing through my mind. “What made you mention that?”

“I dunno. I just remembered it.” Benji took a long drag of his cigarette and laughed again. “I’ve been thinking about that old house a lot these days. We got up to a lot of trouble there.”

“You more so than me,” I replied jokingly, looking out the window. The sun was just about to set, and the warm orange glow was getting dimmer and dimmer by the minute. Soon, the far away farms escaped our view as the light illuminating them slowly snuffed out.

“Don’t you kinda miss it? Y’know, the old house in Halifax? And being a kid, and stuff,” Benji said, glancing over at me with a weirdly eager look on his face.

“Sure,” I replied hesitantly, admittedly unsure as to what he was getting at.

“I think you’re probably supposed to,” He said confidently, despite my reservation.

“Because that’s when life was nicer. *And* we weren’t in Kansas.”

“That’s strangely sentimental of you.” I said.

“Shut up,” He snapped. Then, he paused for a moment, furrowed his brow, and shook his head quickly. “I mean... I guess it is, actually. Sorry.”

I glanced over at him and saw him take another long drag from his cigarette. Too long. He coughed a bit, and took a small sip from the can of God-knows-how-old Red Bull that sat in the cupholder between us. He sighed loudly, and I couldn’t tell if it was out of satisfaction from the sip or out of sadness. It seemed a little bleak. Bleaker than normal, I guess.

“Do you... resent me, a little bit?” Benji asked suddenly, squishing his cigarette on the lime green ashtray he’d clumsily superglued to the dashboard.

I said nothing. My stomach stirred and my hands grew very cold.

“I don’t blame you if you do,” He added, anxiously rapping his fingers on the steering wheel. “I’ve been a real ass to you these past couple years.”

“No, I don’t,” I finally said. The words caught on my throat haphazardly and hung awkwardly in the air as another horribly loud pause filled the air.

“Well, I’m just saying, if you did, I’d get it. That’s all,” He said briskly. He seemed relieved to have gotten it off of his chest as he sighed and released the tension in his stiff shoulders. “But you know I care about you, Blair. You *have* to know that, or I swear, I’ll never forgive myself.”

He stared straight ahead silently, a sad, almost sardonic smile making its way across his lips. His dark, dyed black hair was gently waving with the wind coming in through the window, but the rest of him was completely still. His bright blue eyes caught the last bit of sunlight in the sky, and sparse orange freckles danced across his pallid face as he remained frozen.

I should have said something. I know I should have, but I just couldn’t. So I just sat there, wallowing in my so-called lack of resentment, head pressed against the cool, icy glass of the window.

My forehead grew chilly and I shut my eyes. There, tracing itself on my eyelids was the huge picture window on the front of our house in Halifax, snow slowly falling from the sky and onto the pillowy white snowbanks below, and there was our old dog, Lucky, running through the yard. There, too, was Benji, sitting just beside me, taking a section of my hair and trying desperately to braid it. He was terrible at it. I mean, *really* terrible. My hair tangled and fought his hands as he twisted and pulled at the different sections, trying to make some sense of it. But through his frustration, he continued, because I really wanted my hair braided for school. And right next to him, sitting inconspicuously on our corduroy couch cushion was a “How-To” book

on braiding hair that he'd bought for himself with his own, coveted allowance from the book fair at our elementary school.

I opened my eyes. I looked back at Benji in the car next to me, and saw that little kid again, trying so desperately and yet, still failing. Just outside, the very last of the sun was shining on the fields of yellow grain on our gravel street, leaving a barely perceptible warm glow on the world. The car clumsily barrelled back down our driveway and came to a slow stop right in front of the garage. We'd made it back home before I'd even realized. Benji put a hand on his keys, but I cleared my throat to speak, stopping his movement.

"Hey, can you braid my hair for school tomorrow?" I asked.

He paused, removing his hand from the keys. He looked over at me and offered the first warm, genuine smile I'd seen from him in years.

"It won't be any good," He replied through his grin.

"That's okay, I don't mind," I said. "As long as you try, I'm happy."