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I didn't know it, but today was set to trigger a catastrophe I couldn't foresee, a pivotal moment spiralling us towards disaster. It was bad enough I was lost, although in fairness I'd been lost for months, psychically, emotionally—my recently deceased wife the pitiful reason for such a sorry state of affairs. I no longer knew where I was going or what I was doing, the idea of finding a small, isolated town in Midwest America, seemingly impossible. A crumpled piece of scented paper sat in my hand, inconsequential directions scribbled hurriedly, my wife's handwriting fading rapidly. I needed to relax. After all, nothing good ever came from stress.

I glanced to my right, exasperated by my daughter's continued huffing and head shaking, my inability to keep us en-route ensuring I was unable to think straight. It didn't matter. To my sulky adolescent daughter, the details of today's journey were irrelevant. She'd already deduced with confirmed defiance and folded arms that, at *some* point, we would get to our destination. How I achieved that end was entirely *my* problem. The poor kid didn't need to know I lived every day on a knife-edge, my existence questionable, and I didn't want her to look at me with sympathies she couldn't sustain. Georgina was suffering enough, her grief ensuring she'd be stuck in limbo for the rest of her life, the

drunk driver responsible for sideswiping our existence, wholly unaware what his actions had started. It was unfortunate a lack of direction had now rendered me obsolete in the eyes of my young charge, *my* grief making everything worse, this day threatening to join the chaos that had become my life. I hoped she would one day forgive me for losing her mum, losing my way something I couldn't have helped.

Of course, today's task sounded simpler in theory than it was in reality to achieve. The steering wheel of this rental vehicle was on the wrong side of the car, the wrong side of the *road* alien to my thinking. I was stuck in this blisteringly hot, confined space with a hormonal twelve-year-old and I didn't assume things could get much worse. The continued grunted sighs emanating from my right ensured no matter what I did, this day was never going to end well.

'Where *are* we?' Georgina was staring out of the window, her headphones over her ears, her innocent question incapable of reclaiming any logic I assumed I possessed.

'Somewhere.' I was convinced I could retrace my steps, eventually, go back a few miles, take a different route. *Oh, the irony.* Of course, if the sat nav continued to misbehave, I didn't stand a chance. I doubted the thing knew *where* to direct me, the image on the screen oddly placing us in the middle of a field. It didn't matter. It was my fault we were lost—a bad workman and all that.

'Somewhere?'

'Yes. *Somewhere.* We always have to be somewhere, Georgie, it's the law of physics.' I was stressed, failing to dislodge my irritation, my daughter failing to distract this moment with anything of value. The map I'd earlier purchased wasn't helping, these roads unfamiliar, navigation left to a young girl who could barely read them. It might have been funny had my stress levels been less

heightened. Yet, my child innocently believed the shapes printed on the oversized, awkwardly folded paper in her possession were nothing more than haphazard doodles she couldn't understand the logic of. She couldn't appreciate how *anyone* could make sense of directions drawn on a flat surface, her inability to transfer what she was looking at on paper into the real world frustrating us both.

It didn't help that the monotone electronic voice in the background barely contributed. I couldn't turn it off. We'd be driving *forever* if I did. I didn't mean to snap at the poor kid. I was supposed to be the grown-up, the one in control. I wasn't about to share my failing emotions with my daughter, of course, *control* something I hadn't experienced for some time. Besides, we'd never travelled this far beyond familiarity before. Arguments were inevitable.

'Sorry,' I breathed, reaching a free hand across the central console to rub my daughter's exasperated shoulder blade. 'I'm just hot.' I wanted to bring our moment back on track, apologise, offer a smile she might appreciate, any meaningful words of no real relevance right then. She'd kept me functioning more than she could comprehend, the last few months leaving me a fragment of the man I once was. It was a shame she didn't know.

'Oh, and I'm *not*?' Georgina sighed sarcastically, tugging her headphones around her neck, allowing the muted noise she classed as music to filter into the car.

Her long dark hair was pulled into a high ponytail, her torn, baggy trousers and skull-laden vest top failing miserably to showcase the bright personality my young charge usually possessed. I assumed her continually changing appearance was a coping mechanism—an attempt to protect her identity in a world where she could be anyone, do anything. She needed to find her voice, her way. I knew how she felt. I glanced at my flush-cheeked girl, today's outfit an eclectic blend of two styles she couldn't

decide upon. Was it Goth or Punk? PunkGoth, Poth? Gunk?

'What?' Georgina had turned her attention to me, the passing farmland of no interest, brow furrowed, her deep blue eyes piercing the side of my flustered head. I was grinning. I couldn't help it. It was unfortunate my expression had no real emotion attached to it aside from temporary amusement I couldn't subdue.

'Your mum would have been proud of the young woman you're becoming,' I chided, nudging her playfully on the arm, trying to concentrate on the road and failing. I almost burst into tears with the magnitude of my own words, a sudden sting behind my sinuses forcing me to take a lungful of air.

'Come on, Dad. Stop it.'

'Stop what?'

'You don't have to do that.'

'Do *what*?' I hoped she couldn't see the tears perched in my incessantly saddened eyes, the wobble in my throat undeniable. I didn't want her to assume me weak, and I couldn't afford to break down in front of her. But it was true. Anna *would* have been proud to see her little girl experimenting with new styles, growing up—the make-up and clothing she'd taken from her mother's wardrobe keeping her busy. Anna wouldn't have minded, and I wasn't planning on clearing out her belongings any time soon. They still smelled of the woman we missed more than either of us had yet accepted, the scented paper in my hand testimony to a painful realisation that we'd be clinging to our memories forever.

'You don't have to bring Mum into every conversation we have. I'm hardly about to forget who she was.' Her map-reading attempts were now forgotten, ruffled paper discarded on the dashboard.

Georgina may have been right, but I couldn't help it. She was twelve, forced to grow up without the mum who

adored every hair on her head, every freckle on her cheeks memorized in detail. I was trying to keep Anna's memory alive and ensure Georgina never forgot how loved she was. How loved she will *always* be. I took a breath, swallowing thoughts I couldn't afford to share.

'Sorry.'

'And stop saying *sorry*. It's hardly *your* fault.' Georgina pulled her headphones over her ears again, irritated by words I couldn't help expressing, slumping deep into the passenger seat. She folded her arms across her chest, tantrum in full swing.

I took a breath and held it. It wasn't my fault but I couldn't help feeling guilty. It wasn't fair that her mum had died unexpectedly, leaving her young child to placate *me* in the process, *her* emotions left out in the cold. It wasn't fair neither of us knew how to deal with our pain, my hormonal child having far more excuses for unchecked agitation than I did. I had no genuine idea how to deal with this. It was embarrassing. I was still coming to terms with the fact I'd never see my wife again—our lives cut painfully short by an event no one saw coming. And now, to make matters worse, we were travelling across America, attempting to locate the town where Anna was born, a place we'd talked about visiting for years. *Nothing* about this was right.

'I *do* wish Mum was here, though,' Georgina muttered, willing at least to share some of my emotions, some of my burden. My child didn't look at me. She didn't need to. I patted her arm with a sigh of my own before turning my attention to a journey I never expected we would take without Anna. Still, we were here now, nothing to be done about that.

'I do, too,' I found myself replying, more to myself than to Georgina. I couldn't allow her to see my true emotions, my head in a murky place I was scarcely able to acknowledge. It wasn't something I'd anticipated sharing

with anyone, especially my twelve-year-old. She didn't need to know how I dealt with my grief when the silence of the night became too much, nothing to do but battle hidden demons that lingered in the shadows of a once loving home. Anna hadn't yet been dead six months, our entire world slipping into slow motion without her infectious laughter—that fateful day one I will *never* forget.

I glanced to my right. Georgina had either fallen asleep or was ignoring me, avoiding having to deal with her deluded dad who barely found the time in his day to breathe let alone provide his growing girl with the support she desperately needed. I could do nothing about that, unfortunately. I was trying my best. Yet, it seemed my best wasn't good enough, my lapse in parental ability creating havoc I didn't know where to place, my lack of navigational skills ensuring I'd been driving for two hours in the *wrong* direction. I had no concept of nearby towns or how I would ever find my way back from the private isolation I'd unavoidably slipped into. I could understand my child's annoyance. She deserved better.

It would have been apparent to any onlooker that I wasn't coping with my grief, yet I wholly believed myself incapable of raising a child alone. What the hell did I know of such things? It was unfortunate I had no one on which to unload my suffering, no one to share my pain, so was left to my own devices, left to deal with whatever my brain cast into the ether. I couldn't burden Georgina with that shit. She had enough of her own to deal with. The truth was, I wasn't ready for a life without Anna, wasn't willing to accept a reality no one could change. I was bordering sanity, skirting the abyss, this day just another in a long, drawn-out battle with a ticking clock and abandoned promises. I despised the fact my time with Anna was nothing now but a terrifyingly brief moment in my tainted life, memories that would fade over time, lost to the confinement of ageing photographs.

I tapped the sat nav, no longer convinced the thing worked. Where *were* we? I didn't have a clue what I was doing, that truth becoming my life now, today no exception. I was driving along a U.S. highway, everything a hazy blur, my allocated map reader bored by the concept of watching for road signs and clues to our destination, my exhausted child far happier absorbed in music unfit for human consumption than observing me.

Darkridge Hollow was located somewhere between Cincinnati and Columbus, yet beyond that, I knew nothing. The old town had long succumbed to troublesome times, according to Anna, with most of its residents moving away decades ago. Many horror films were filmed here, apparently, many a true-life horror story to be told. Or so my wife had said. She often regaled me with tales of ghost towns and forgotten locations peppering the state of Ohio, the concept oddly mocking my decision to come here. I couldn't tell Georgina. I didn't need the taunted sarcasm or sideways glances. I was out of my depth, out of my mind to believe I could board a plane on a whim and see where we ended up, my vulnerable child lagging behind an apparent adventure I claimed we'd have; emotions I had no genuine idea how to appease left to their sorry devices.

'Are we *still* lost?' Georgina's query came from nowhere. She hadn't bothered opening her eyes, the idea of acknowledging her poor old dad unimportant, her metaphoric question of no real relevance to anything.

'We're not *lost*, just slightly diverted.' Who was I kidding? The roads stretched on for miles, no end in sight, one horizon extending to the next, few bends or turns to keep me alert. Junctions crept up on me without warning, veering off towards isolated farms that dotted the landscape. The entire place was beautiful yet alien to my brain, the wrong side of the road indifferent to my driving. My map was telling me one thing but logic was telling me

something else.

'Remind me again *why* we came here, Dad?' Georgina sighed, shuffling in her seat. I felt sorry for her. At that precise moment, I assumed *anything* would have been better than my company, the last six months testimony to the fact I was barely present, barely functioning—just a terrible dad in the making. Poor kid.

'Your mum would have wanted us to see her hometown and track down her family.' It was true, I'm sure. Anna spoke fondly of her beloved Ohio and a childhood that sounded idyllic, yet I was troubled to admit she rarely spoke of her family. I didn't need to share that with Georgina. Was I right in assuming my wife would appreciate me telling them she was no longer with us? I presumed they would *want* to know.

'Yeah, Christmas and birthdays have been *great fun*,' my daughter scoffed, peering sarcastically through a fringe of thick, ruffled hair.

'Less of the sarcasm please, young lady.' Georgina was right, of course, but I couldn't confirm it. Although my wife shared many compelling stories of her life in America, it was troubling that we *never* heard from her family, never spoke of them, never spoke *to* them. Georgina never received Christmas or birthday cards, the occasional phone call or text message seemingly too much to ask. They didn't even know Anna and I were married, hadn't been told of our pending nuptials, had *not* been invited. Whenever I mentioned them, Anna would become moody and uncooperative and I learned not to push it. I always believed she would talk to me in her own time. It was unfortunate she could never now do that, something in the back of my mind nagging me. I couldn't tell what. It didn't matter. It was too late now anyway.

'I'm hot.' Georgina released an exaggerated sigh that threatened to take the air out of this car once and for all,

removing us both from a world that had become impossibly strange and stark. Maybe she would be doing us a favour? She'd certainly be doing *me* one.

'There's a drink in the cooler on the back seat. I guess you Americans call it *soda*?' I adopted the strongest U.S. accent I could muster. I could *do* American when the moment called for it. I wanted to impress.

'Actually, in Ohio, it's called pop.' Georgina rolled her eyes again, nothing more to say about that.

'Pop? The same as in England.' Who knew? Apparently, I was way overthinking *that*. I smiled anyway. She was sounding more like her mother every day.

'I want an ice cream.'

I glanced at my child, cheeks flush, hair glued to her forehead in places where she'd leant sideways against the headrest for too long, flustered, bored. Despite attempting to act grown-up when the occasion called for it, times like these reminded me she was still just a child, still my baby girl. It *was* hot in here. She was right about that, the air-conditioning yet another thing in this annoying vehicle that didn't work.

'See if you can find a petrol station on that map.' I nodded towards the hastily folded sheet now lying mockingly across the dashboard.

'It's called a *gas* station, Dad.'

'Gas. Petrol. Whatever. Are we anywhere near one?' I resisted the urge to scoff, half expecting her to adopt the accent permanently, her mother's influence complete. Anna would no doubt be chuckling somewhere, watching her every move, watching *mine*.

'How am I supposed to know *where* we are?' Georgina sat upright, tugging her headphones around her neck again, raising exasperated hands towards passing fields and farmland, everything beyond the windows blurred, nothing of interest to placate my preoccupied pre-teen.

'I think we just passed mile 142, according to that blue sign.' I glanced in my rearview mirror, no time to double-check.

'What blue sign?'

'Does *anything* on the map look like mile 142?' I was flustered, my backside numb, my bones aching with continued stress.

'No.'

We both sighed at the same time.

It didn't matter. This was the United States of America. We would find salvation eventually, my body numbed by a continued sedentary position that should never be thrust upon anyone. This car was slowly entombing us, sending us sprawling towards something we couldn't have appreciated. It was probably just as well I couldn't see the future. Nothing good ever came from overthinking that shit.