

PETRIFIED

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OUR THERAPIST SUGGESTED THAT ELAINE AND I, INSTEAD OF GETTING A divorce, should try taking a vacation first. While it would certainly be cheaper, I wasn't completely sure that it would end up being any more pleasant. Not considering the company we'd each be stuck with.

Someone once said that Hell was other people. Well, marriage is other people, too. Put those two thoughts together and I guess you could say that marriage is *also* Hell, right?

And after a disastrous three years with Elaine, I wasn't looking forward to a vacation from Hell on top of that as well.

But Futter kept playing up the potential benefits, preaching in our therapy sessions how our time spent alone could perform miracles, telling us how it would save the sinking ship of our relationship, dazzling us with his endless psychobabble ... and what can I say, he eventually wore us both down. I don't think Elaine wanted to be here any more than I did, no, really, but we tried to pretend that this thing we had was worth one more shot.

Who can be sure, though? If not for the frequent-flier miles, we might not have bothered.

Things went bad right from the beginning. And believe me, if you'd ever seen the two of us in action before, you could have predicted that.

I'd wanted to spend our week away camping in the mountains, rising early on crisp mornings for hiking and fishing. Elaine wanted to spend our time together at the beach with mojitos in hand, baking in the sun. We split the difference, which meant that we ended up with a plan to spend seven days together driving through a desert.

How stupid was that?

I don't care what Futter says, how many times he tried to indoctrinate us that meeting in the middle was the only way to go. Compromise is *never* the way to go. Whenever the two of us would try, neither of us ended up happy, both of us ended up resentful. So what's the point? We already knew how to achieve misery on our own *without* his advice.

As we drove straight from the airport toward Petrified Forest National Park our first day in Arizona, I looked sourly at the endless blinding nothing that surrounded us. Our rental car's air conditioning sputtered fitfully as I sped through the badlands. Red sand split in two by an endless ribbon of black road. Nondescript mesas to the left, mind-numbing buttes to the right. Or was it the other way around? I glanced from the vista framed by the windshield to the smaller one displayed in the rear view mirror. Where we were heading didn't seem so different from what we had left behind.

"Would have been nice to have seen something green," I grumbled.

"Would have been nicer to have sat by something wet," she whined.

Grumbles and whines, those were our usual methods of communication. We were a thousand miles from home, and yet it was as if we'd never left. That wasn't quite the result Futter promised when he proselytized about the power of compromise. Compromise was one of those touchy feely tools of his that was supposed to pull us back from the brink. It sure didn't feel that way so far. Instead, it looked like it might just push us both over the edge.

"Can we make it one day without sniping at each other?" I said. "Can we make it one just goddamned day? Do you think you could do me that favor, Elaine? I'm trying my best here, I'm really trying."

Elaine tilted her head to look at me over her sunglasses, which were all I'd seen of her since boarding the plane. She peered at me over the lenses. I couldn't make out any trace in those eyes of what I had once long ago made out, whatever it was that had first brought us together, a quality I could barely remember. She snorted, sliding the sunglasses back up her nose to hide her eyes from me again. She turned away to the window and toward the endless wasteland outside.

"One day," she said in a voice drained of compassion. "Give *you* one day? I doubt you could even make it to the goddamned visitors center."

I'd show her. But I knew of only one way that we could possibly do that.

In silence.

WITH THE WELCOME CENTER FAR BEHIND US AND A STACK OF PAMPHLETS on the car seat between us, I figured it was safe to start up the conversation again. But I was wrong. With Elaine, there's no such thing as safe.

"So, how was that?" I said, pleased with myself, and trying hard to suppress a smile. We'd gotten in and out of the place without a scene, and for us, that was something.

"You don't get credit for your good deeds if you crow about them," she said.

As I drove, Elaine sat pressed up against the passenger-side door, staying as far away from me as she could get considering the circumstances. Her sour expression let me know that she wished she could retreat a heck of a lot further. I was glad I couldn't make out the eyes beneath her sunglasses right then, because her look might have burned me.

"If I didn't, I wouldn't get credit either, and what's the point of that?" I said. "I figured I might as well go ahead and say it myself."

"Whatever," she said. "Considering your track record, taking credit is something you won't get much opportunity to do in the future anyway."

"Give me a break, will you?" I said. I slammed my palm against a wheezing air conditioning vent. "It's too damned hot to argue. I'm here, aren't I?"

"So you're here," she said. "Whoop-de-frickin'-do."

"Hey, this whole thing was your idea," I said. "Aren't you going to at least try? *I'm* trying."

"Oh, no," she said. "No way. You're not going to put the blame on me. This wasn't my idea."

Damn you, Dr. Futter. Maybe this vacation exercise worked for your other clients, but if it did, it only meant that they were probably amateurs at this kind of thing. Elaine and me, we're rotted meat. We're too far gone to be made palatable again.

"I wasn't blaming you, Elaine," I said. "I was just saying—"

"Sure sounded like that's what you were doing," she said. "You used that tone of yours again."

"I keep telling you," I said. "I don't have a tone."

"Don't give me that," she said. "There it was again."

How can you tell when Elaine and me are fighting? Our lips are moving.

"Look, should we just turn back?" I said. "Clearly, this isn't going to work. If I floor it, maybe we can make it back to the airport in time to get flights home tonight. And if we're *really* lucky, maybe they can be separate flights."

"Don't you dare," she said. "You're not going to get the satisfaction of pinning this one on me. I'm sticking with this thing all the way to the bitter end, so when we tell Futter it didn't work out, it'll all be on you."

"Like that makes much sense," I said.

"As much sense as anything else you've done during the past three years," she said.

I suddenly noticed a sign retreating in the rearview mirror and realized that Elaine and I had been going at each other with such determination that we'd missed the entrance to the first trail site. Wouldn't be the first thing we'd missed that way, but this time, instead of keeping on keeping on, I squealed to a stop and shifted the car into reverse.

"This would be a Hell of a lot safer if you just turned around," she said.

"Let me do this my way," I said, backing up the quarter of a mile, and even managing to stay on the road most of the time.

"Maybe that's been your problem all along," she said. "Maybe you've always been doing things your way, only your way is ass backwards."

I hit the brake sharply, and it didn't bother me one bit when her head banged back against the seat. Her can of soda flew out of the dashboard drink holder, but she managed to catch it before it could spill all over her lap.

"You're a jerk, you know that?" she said.

"Yeah, I know that," I said. "You've told me that one often enough."

I stepped out of the car, instantly regretting it. So it turned out that the groaning air conditioning had been working after all. Looked like that was the only thing that day that was working. Elaine joined me, pamphlets in one hand, her soda in the other.

"So what are we doing here?" I said.

Elaine glared at me. I knew that look. She could accuse me all she wanted of having tones, well, she had looks, and they were all variations of "Go to Hell, you moron."

"That isn't what I meant and you know it," I said. "I meant, what are we doing *here*?"

Elaine unfolded one of the pamphlets and spread it across the hood of the car. She leaned forward to hold down two of the corners and put the soda can at a third to keep the warm breeze from snatching it away.

"According to what it says here, we're standing in the middle of what once was a tropical forest," she said. "That's what this whole area was like. There were rivers once, lined by 200-foot tall trees."

"How long ago was 'once'?" I said.

"More than 200 million years ago," she said.

"Doesn't look like it was worth waiting for," I said. "Might have been something to have seen back then, though. Let's get it over with."

I took off down the path, not looking to see whether Elaine would follow after. I already knew that she would. She could bitch all she wanted about what a bastard I was, but I knew that she couldn't keep away.

I didn't have to go far before I came across the first fallen log. Only it wasn't a fallen log. Something looked off about it, as if it had been replaced with a jeweled replica. It looked manufactured now somehow. Parts of it appeared to glisten in the sun, like that opal ring I'd given Elaine for our first anniversary.

The ring that she'd later that same day ripped from her finger and flushed down the toilet. She'd been laughing at the time. It was a laugh I had heard many times, and had long since memorized.

"It's beautiful," Elaine said.

"So what happened?" I said.

"I don't know," she said, scanning the pamphlet, frowning while she tried to comprehend. "I'm no scientist. Water ... water mixed with the wood to become quartz, I guess. The trees, they got crystallized. They were once alive, but then

they absorbed chemicals and became brittle."

"And beautiful, you said."

"Yes," she said.

I had an idea. I continued down the winding path, gazing left and right while trying to see the world as Elaine saw it. Which could be a dangerous thing, but I thought I'd give it a shot anyway. I eventually spotted a short, stout log a dozen feet off the path, one end seeming to flicker as I moved. I stepped off the path and circled it, studied it, pausing by its widest end. Elaine was right. It was beautiful. I knelt and slid the car keys from my pocket.

"What do you think you're doing?" she called out from where she'd remained on the path. Elaine had never been comfortable breaking those kinds of arbitrary boundaries, no matter how I'd egg her on.

"You should have a piece to take home," I said, figuring that was one way to make her happy. Figuring I owed her a compliment as well. "It's beautiful. You're beautiful. You belong together."

I pressed the point of one of the keys against a narrow groove running vertically through the log.

"Stop it!" she said. "You're not supposed to do that!"

"Why not?" I said. "Other chunks are missing. See? It's pockmarked. We're not the first visitors who wanted to take a souvenir. What difference will one more piece make?"

"You're not being funny," she said. "You *know* you shouldn't do that. You *always* know you shouldn't do what you do."

"Who's it going to hurt?" I said. "Besides, we're alone out here. No one will ever know."

"I'd know," she said. "And besides, they'll search us on the way out. That's what the pamphlet says."

"I'd figure out a way," I said. "It wouldn't be the first time I snuck something past a guy in uniform."

"Enough," she said, stamping a foot. "If you ever loved me, don't you dare."

"Sure, sure, whatever you say," I said. I stood up, opening my arms wide to show her my empty hands.

"I'm heading back to the car," she said. "Jerk."

Once she had turned away, I bent over quickly, pried away a small fragment of petrified wood, and shoved it in my pocket. Later, when we got home, she'd thank me. I was sure that she would.

Who knows? Maybe someday, I'd thought, we'd both look back on that moment and realize that it had been the turning point for us. I suddenly felt hope after all.

By the time I reached the car, Elaine was already inside. Her arms were folded tightly against her chest, telegraphing to me just how pissed she was. Somehow, with that chunk of crystal in my pocket, I was anything but.

Whistling, I pulled back out onto the road.

"I DON'T SEE WHAT YOU HAVE TO BE SO HAPPY ABOUT," SHE SAID. "AND IF you have to whistle, would you find yourself another damned song? I'm sick of that one."

I stopped whistling. Might as well contain myself. The surprise could come later. I'd recognize the right moment. I rested my hand over my pocket, which contained the ragged piece of petrified wood.

"I never could fake happiness the way you do, you know," she said. "It could all end here. Do you realize that? This could be it for us."

"If it works out that way, well, it'll be your damned fault," I said. "You've always been too negative. Even on our wedding day. You refuse to look on the bright side. Hell, you refuse to even admit that there is a bright side."

"You want a bright side?" she said. "Here's a bright side for you. At least we never had any children, so our divorce won't screw them up. Oh, and another bright side? I'm still young enough so that when I get remarried, I can still have children with someone who actually cares about his life."

"I care," I said. "I came. I'm here, aren't I? I'm right beside you driving the

damned car.”

“Here in body, maybe,” she said. “I’m not so sure you’ve ever really been here in spirit.”

“Screw you,” I said.

The desert stretched on, doing little more than remind me of the desert inside the heart of the woman who sat next to me. The woman I had chosen. Now why had I done that again? Someone please remind me.

“I could have split plenty of times,” I said. “I didn’t.”

“And can you really say that we were better off for that?” she said.

I spotted the next trail site coming up. Good thing. Because if I were trapped next to Elaine any longer, I’d be tempted to test the airbags. I pulled to the side of the road, but was too riled up to get out of the car just then. So I sat there, flexing my fingers on the steering wheel, feeling the sweat trickle down my back.

“Boy,” I said. “If it all ends here, we sure picked a good place for it.”

“What do you mean?” she said.

“We haven’t seen another car all day,” I said. “We’re the only people stupid enough to want to be here. That sure says something, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, we don’t have to be here,” she said. “We don’t have to be anywhere. You were right. A week was too much, too long for us to try to hack it alone. A day was all we needed to find out that we’re dead.”

Elaine got out of the car and slammed the door. She then leaned back in the window, but all I noticed of her face then was my own face, two of them in fact, staring back at me from out of the lenses of those damned sunglasses.

“Whatever we had,” she said, “it’s gone. I admit defeat. So let’s just take one last look at this place and head back to the airport.”

I couldn’t seem to muster the energy to follow her. I continued sitting there, watching as she vanished down the path. I took the chunk of wood from my pocket and balanced it on one knee. I’d thought the silly thing was going to be a reminder of the time and place we came back together. Instead, it would only come to symbolize the day we fell completely apart.

Our love had been a lush forest, too, once. I could pretend all I wanted to that it had never been so, because somehow, when I was able to do that, it hurt a little less, but I had to admit that, yes, it had been. Only that was a long, long time before. Now we had turned brittle ourselves, and we didn’t have the beauty to make up for it. Well, maybe Elaine still did.

Then there she was, rapping at my window. I quickly placed one hand over the fragment and rolled down the window with the other.

“What do you want?” I said wearily. I still just sat there. There didn’t seem to be much point in seeing one more grove of dead trees. I got it. You seen one, you’ve seen them all.

“Something weird is going on,” she said. “Come. You’ve got to see this.”

Now she was using *her* voice, the serious one. The one that said, “I’m not playing around this time.” I got out of the car and looked off the road into the patch of desert beyond the mouth of the path.

“So what am I supposed to be seeing?” I asked.

“Just keep walking,” she said. “You’ll know.”

I meandered along as the path weaved around logs that weren’t even actually logs any more. Some forest. The whole thing seemed like false advertising to me. How many other couples had come here expecting something more, something greater? Something to save their lives? And then to get ... *this*? I kept thinking that maybe the mountains could have turned it all around.

But really, even I knew it was far too late for that.

“So?” I said. “I still don’t get it.”

“Oh, come on,” she said. I knew I was frustrating her, but then, I was used to that. Only this time, I promise, it wasn’t intentional. “How can you not see it? Doesn’t it feel a little too familiar?”

“It *all* looks a little too familiar,” I said. “It’s all looked a little too familiar all day. Sand, sand, and more sand. Some rocks. Occasionally some dead trees. What am I supposed to say? Shoot me, okay? I can’t see what you want me to see. It wouldn’t be the first time. Are you happy now?”

“You can’t be that blind, damn it!” she said, kicking up a cloud of sand. “Not even you. This is just like the place we left behind. No, more than ‘just like.’ It’s the same. *Exactly* the same.”

Once she mentioned it, I could see what she was talking about. The path followed the same arc, with logs strewn around in the same places. But she was getting worked up over what had to be a coincidence.

“So what?” I said. “This doesn’t mean anything. You think these paths just grew this way? People made them. Maybe some desert geek figured out an optimal design for this sort of display, and then they just dragged the logs into position. You’re getting stirred up over nothing. There are probably look-alikes all along this road. Get a grip.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she said. “But I still don’t like it. Let’s get out of here.”

“That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said to me all day,” I said.

She headed quickly back to the car. I took my time, measuring each step, matching every bend in the path to the earlier path in my memory until I could see a large log just like the one from which I’d swiped my sample. When I knelt, I could see this one also had a fresh gouge. I took the souvenir from my pocket and held it against the open wound.

It seemed as if it would fit perfectly.

“Damn,” I whispered.

I ran to the car in a straight line, ignoring the winding of the path, outpacing Elaine, who continued playing by the rules. Probably just to show me up, which is why she usually did it. I’d started the engine before she’d even made it to the road. I honked the horn and tapped the gas so that the engine roared.

“What’s gotten into you?” she said. “Did you pop something when I wasn’t looking? Should I be letting you drive?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Just get in the damned car.”

But would she? No, the faster I wanted her to move, the slower she got. Same as it ever was. She stood there, making a show of sipping slowly at her drink. She made a horrible squeaking sound as she sucked up the dregs through her straw.

“Don’t rush me,” she said, turning her back on me. “I’m taking one last look.”

“Get *in*!” I shouted.

“When I’m ready,” she said. “I want to remember this.”

I swiveled away from the steering wheel, stretched out my legs, and kicked the passenger-side door open. It hit her in the ass and made her drop the can. She spun, leaned into the car, and started screaming at me.

“What the Hell was that?” she said. “What do you think you’re doing? You could have—”

“Get in!”

There was only one way to make her listen. I reached over, grabbed her by a wrist, and pulled her into the car. Her sunglasses flew off and hit the sand. She yelped as a shoulder hit the seat. I knew that I’d probably bruised her wrist, even though I’d promised never to do that sort of thing any more. But she’d left me no choice. She never leaves me any choices.

I floored it out of there, which made the door slam shut on its own. As we drove, the only sound was Elaine weeping. I turned up the air conditioning in an attempt to mask it out, but it didn’t help.

“You’d better be heading for the goddamned airport,” she finally said through gritted teeth once her sobbing had stopped.

“I am,” I said. “Believe me. I want nothing less.”

But it was starting to dawn on me that it was no longer a certainty that I could make it there.

“OH, NO,” I SAID, AS ANOTHER TRAIL SITE CAME INTO VIEW AHEAD. I slowed the car, but I wasn’t sure that I could bear to bring it to a stop. “This isn’t happening.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling myself for the past three years,” she said. “What are you slowing down for? I don’t want to do this with you again. This is not my idea of fun any more.”

"Like it was fun before?" I said.

I shut the engine about a dozen yards short of where the trail began.

"Look at that," I said softly, pointing through the windshield at a bit of flattened metal glinting in the sun.

"So?" she said. "Someone left their trash. What do you expect me to do about it?"

"Not just someone," I said. "Us. That's *your* can out there. I crushed it as we drove away. I left it behind us, and now ... now it's ahead of us. We're back, Elaine. Back in the same goddamned place. And what do you think that is next to it? Those are your sunglasses, for God's sake!"

Elaine looked from the things we'd left behind over to me and then back again. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

"You're just screwing with me, aren't you?" she said.

She flung the door open and leapt from the car. By the time I'd caught up with her, she was on her knees, turning the can over and over in her hands. I could see traces of lipstick on the crushed metal.

Elaine's lipstick.

She reached over to pick up the nearby sunglasses and wiped them clear of sand. They fit perfectly.

"What's happened to us?" she whispered, a look of horror and confusion coming to her face. I would have enjoyed seeing that look had I not been feeling those same emotions myself.

She turned her back on me and staggered away leadenly. I followed a few steps behind her as she stumbled down the trail. I could sense what was coming, knew what I would have to say, and did not want to be within her reach when I did so. Her jaw hung slack as she surveyed the slabs of wood that surrounded us. This time, she ignored the marked path, wandering as if dazed.

"We're back," she said. "Back where we began. So I was right the last time. It's all the same. This is the third time we've been here. We're ... trapped. What the Hell is going on?"

"I think I know," I said quietly, almost hoping that she wouldn't hear me, but knowing that she must. I took the chunk of petrified wood from my pocket and held it out so that she could see it.

"Is that what I think it is?" she said. "What did you do?"

"I was only trying to help," I said. "But I guess I must have ... I don't know ..."

I knelt by the same log again, and fit the piece snugly back into place. It stayed there when I pulled my fingers away.

"See?" I said. I held my hands out, palms up, as if that would make it all better.

"What did you do?" she said. "What did you do? Didn't I tell you that you shouldn't take anything? Didn't I? Are you insane? You've trapped us in a nightmare. This is all your fault!"

She ran at me then and leapt onto my back. As she began to beat me about the head, I stood and shook and flung her to one side.

"I only did it for you," I said. "I thought that it would help us."

"You always do it for me," she said, backing away while throwing handfuls of sand at me. "All the pain you inflict, it's always for me. If it's for me, then why does it hurt so much? Nothing is ever your fault. All the fights, all the cheating, all the lies, all the bruises—"

"You gave as good as you got, babe."

"— it's always someone else's fault. Always! Well, I'm sick of it. Go do things for somebody else from now on."

She jumped up and ran away, and watching her back, I figured, let her go. She'll calm down. She'll get over it. But I could see, as she neared the car, that there was a sudden flash of sun in her right hand, and I realized what it had to be—the car keys, snatched from my pocket during our struggle. I took off after her, but unfortunately, she had too long a lead. The door had already slammed and the engine had roared to life before I could reach the car. I could only stand in the middle of the road and watch as she vanished in the distance.

I didn't bother running after her. I knew she wasn't going to stop, and all the

sight of me in the rear view mirror would have done was amuse her. I didn't want to leave her with that as a parting gift.

I shielded my eyes from the blistering sun, but it didn't help me see any farther down the road. She was gone. Gone for good. I looked down at the crushed can that was all the remained of Elaine, and my memories of her drinking all morning suddenly made my tongue thick in my mouth.

Based on the traffic we'd seen so far, another ride wasn't going to come along anytime soon to rescue me. I might be there for a while. I tried to remember all of those nature films I'd been forced to sit through as a kid. Could a person really eat a cactus? Would that be enough to let you survive?

I prayed for the sun to set, so perhaps I'd have a shot at making it through the night to see another day, but who was I kidding? The damned thing wasn't going to move. Once I thought about it, I realized that it hadn't seemed to move the entire day. It taunted me now as it taunted me then.

I was screwed. Screwed with Elaine and screwed without her.

But then the silence was broken by the sound of an engine growing louder behind me. I turned away from the direction toward which Elaine had escaped, abandoning me, and saw, in the distance, back from where we had come, a speck that was surely a car. I burst out laughing. Rescue was at hand, and a miraculously quick rescue at that. I danced on the center line of the road, waving my arms high over my head so that the driver would see me and have to stop, whether he'd meant to take a break at this particular stand of fossils or not. Only as the car drew nearer, behind the wheel, I could see ...

Elaine.

She slowed to a crawl, and lifted up those sunglasses. Our eyes locked. She looked away, and stopped the car. She unlocked the passenger door without bothering to turn to me.

I got in, grateful for the shade. I had a feeling that it would be a long time before I'd ever get to feel grateful for anything else again.

"I thought I left you behind me," she began, pointing back over her shoulder. She closed her eyes, refusing to look at me, refusing to look at anything. "I thought I'd escaped you."

"I don't think you can," I said. "I don't think I can either."

I leaned back against the headrest and closed my eyes, too. We sat there, silently, waiting for the sun to set.

But it never did.