

A Driving Night

Tap. Tap. Sophie groaned and rolled over, tossing her blanket over her head. Maybe if she ignored it, the sound would go away. But yet it continued. *Tap. Tap.* A not-quite-steady rhythm, quiet but insistent. She sat up in her bed, glancing at the clock before looking around her room, trying to find the source of the noise. Three a.m. Sophie scanned the room, her eyes squinting in the dark, before noticing her moon-lit window, and the steady barrage of small rocks bouncing off of it. With a sigh, she stumbled out of bed and over to the window. Cracking it open, the dusty, cool smell of desert night air wafted in. She stuck her head out the window, her eyes adjusting to the darkness to see who was below.

Standing there, slouching slightly, was Alex, with moonlit hair and a sly grin.

“Come on down! It’s the end of the world! Very last sunrise!”

“Alex, what are you doing? It’s three in the morning. I’m sleeping.”

“Just come down! I’ve got the Jeep, we’re going out.”

Sophie sighed, pushing her bangs out of her face. Even though she didn’t particularly feel like going on some wild goose chase, she never could say no to Alex. Besides, they hadn’t seen each other in a while. Her friend tended to disappear for weeks at a time from Sophie’s life, completely ignoring her (and sometimes not even showing up at school at all), but she didn’t really mind. The fact that Alex paid attention to her at all was somewhat of a miracle. *Most people would jump at the chance to ride around in the middle of the night*, she reminded herself. At school, Alex was sort of an enigma, constantly surrounded by an aura of mystery and awe.

Sophie wasn't immune to it, either; she had to admit that the mystery intrigued her, like a puzzle that everyone was trying to constantly solve. One thing was for certain; when Alex shows up under your window at three in the morning, you go. No questions asked.

"Fine, I'm coming down," Sophie called down, hoping this wasn't a mistake. She drew her head back in and closed the window. She pulled her t-shirt over her head and tossed it on the floor before pulling on some jeans and a sweatshirt. Not bothering to find shoes, she pulled the hood over her head and opened the window. Her room was on the second floor, but there was a drain pipe that ran down to the ground that Sophie quickly shimmied down, gripping the cool metal with her bare feet.

Sophie jumped down the last few feet and hit the dusty ground with a dull thud. Turning around, she saw that Alex had already gotten into the Jeep and was sitting there, staring at her. Sophie nervously pushed her bangs out of her face and ran over, jumping into the passenger's seat. Without a word from either of them, they sped off into the night, heading out of town into the desert.

After a few minutes of silence, Sophie spoke up.

"Alex, where are we going? What's going on?"

"I told you, it's the end of the world tomorrow. We're going to see the very last sunrise."

Sophie smiled. "You're so full of it, you know that? Come on, why did you really come and get me?"

Alex's expression remained blank. "It's true. I'm telling you, the world is ending. So I just wanted to see the damn sunrise with you, okay?"

"Okay, fine!" Sophie sighed. Alex wasn't always the most agreeable person, but was

definitely the most interesting. A mystery to be solved. So she went along with it. “And how, may I ask, is the world ending?”

“It’s going to rain. Like rain so much that we all drown and the earth floods and Moses has to take two of every animal and I know damn well for sure it’s not going to be you and me representing the human race.”

“Noah,” Sophie corrected. “Moses was the baby in the basket.”

“Whatever. What matters is that we’ve got to see one last sunrise.”

Sophie glanced at the dashboard clock. 3:45 a.m.; they had been driving for half an hour already. Sunrise wouldn’t come for nearly another hour and a half. She spoke again.

“How long do you plan on driving out into the middle of nowhere?”

“As long as it takes.”

Knowing she wasn’t going to get more out of Alex, Sophie leaned back in her seat, swinging her legs up to rest her feet on the dashboard. Feeling the blowing night air sweeping over her toes, she slowly closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

A few minutes later, a bump in the road jerked her awake. Away from the light pollution of her tiny hometown, Sophie could see the stars shining brightly on them. The cool, dry air seemed to fill her lungs with starlight, and she couldn’t even remember why she resisted coming along.

Sophie was so transfixed by the stars that she almost didn’t notice when Alex slowed down, eventually bringing the Jeep to a stop. Sophie sat up, looking around. They had halted at an apparently random spot on the side of the road.

“Wake up,” Alex said, “we’re here.”

Sophie rubbed her eyes. “I was already awake. What now?”

“I told you, we’re gonna see the sunrise before the rains come.”

“Okay.”

Alex unbuckled and hopped out of the Jeep, walking a few feet before flopping down into the dust. Sophie timidly followed. Once she got near, Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her down sharply onto the ground, so they were both sitting in the dust, looking up at the stars.

They both were silent for a long time, before Alex quietly spoke up.

“Sophie, are you afraid to die?”

Sophie blinked, a little startled about the question. “I- I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Oh, come on. Everyone’s thought about it. Are you afraid to die?”

“I guess. I mean, I think so. I think most people are afraid to die, don’t you?”

“I’m not. I figure that yeah, maybe dying sucks, but once I’m dead I won’t be around to care, right? So why worry about it? Dying’s the last thing on my mind.”

Sophie smiled, glancing at her friend. “Right, sure. That’s why you keep going on about this morbid end-of-the-world stuff, right?”

Alex didn’t return her smile. “It’s not morbid, it’s just the facts. The world doesn’t end in fire or in ice. It’s like most things, it’s somewhere in the middle and not as exciting as we hope it will be. It just is.”

Sophie sighed. “You’re impossible, you know? I can’t ever figure you out.”

Alex looked over, meeting her eyes. “You never figure me out, Soph. That’s the point of me. That’s all I’m here for. To be a puzzle. That’s all. There’s nothing there once you solve

it.”

“I doubt that’s true. There’s more to you than that. I know it. I know you.” Sophie tried to sound confident, but she had her doubts. How much did she really know about Alex? She looked over, and Alex was crying a little, obviously not buying it.

“You don’t know me. Nobody knows me. Like Sophie, do you know what my greatest fear is? Do you even know that much?”

Sophie’s voice got even quieter. “Mine is that I’ll be forgotten after I die.”

Alex let out a humorless laugh. “I don’t care if I’m remembered or not. I’m just afraid that I’ll be remembered as the person everyone imagined me to be, rather than who I am. I’m so alone, Sophie. Even you, you let me disappear for weeks at a time and you don’t even question it. Any other friend, a real friend, you would ask them where they were. Get mad at them for ignoring you for so long. But with me, everyone just goes ‘Oh, that’s just Alex.’ But no one knows who I am. And no one understands that.”

Sophie moved closer and put a hand on Alex’s shoulder. She wasn’t sure what to say. Alex always seemed so put together, always the all-knowing one who was just... more than most people. Sophie had never seen her friend cry. She doubted anyone had. Finally, she spoke, her voice shaking a little.

“Tell me who you are then. Who are you? I want to remember you for who you are.”

Alex looked at Sophie, almost trying to memorize her face. Without warning, Alex leaned in and kissed Sophie on the lips, so lightly that she almost thought she imagined it. She pulled back, and for the first time Sophie really saw her. No longer was she the mysterious, charismatic girl that Sophie assumed she knew. Alex was just a person, just like her, scared of

the future and unsure of everything. Sophie didn't know how she didn't see that before, how she let herself build up this image of Alex in her mind as this great mystery. People aren't meant to be mysteries.

Alex wiped a few tears away from her eyes, her hand shaking a bit. "That's who I am," she said. Sophie nodded.

"Okay. I- okay." There was a long silence before Sophie spoke again. "Alex?"

"Yes?"

"What was all that end-of-the-world stuff about?"

Alex smiled sheepishly. "That's kinda what it feels like, doesn't it? Besides, I had to think of something that would make you want to come with me."

Sophie shrugged. "It doesn't really feel like the end of the world. It just feels... different."

"Good different or bad different?"

"I don't know. I think it will be okay."

Suddenly, Alex looked up, towards the horizon. The sky was just beginning to lighten, announcing the coming sunrise. She smiled and pulled her knees up to her chest, her eyes fixed on the horizon. Sophie moved closer, putting her arm around Alex, leaning her head on her shoulder.

As they watched the sun bring a tentative glow to the horizon, a few drops of rain began to fall upon their heads.