

*"During the Rain" by Nicole Hebel
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During the Rain

by Nicole Hebel

Rain is different now, than it had been just a year ago.

A year ago, rain was never just rain. It was the rush of cars splashing through puddles, the shrieks of children dancing beneath the droplets, the accompanying soundtrack to the steady march of a thousand people walking to work, crammed beneath black umbrellas.

In the forest, it is different.

In the forest, rain is just rain. The sound of endless falling water upon the leaves of the ashes and the oaks, the hickories and the maples. Leaves that should've been fat and lush from the constant downpour, but are instead grey and drooping, dying from a lack of sunlight.

It's the middle of summer, but the sun has yet to make an appearance.

Instead, it rains. The water pounds against the malformed leaves, the swampy forest ground, the swollen streams. It pounds against the roof of the cabin, day and night, until even my dreams are colored with the sound of rain.

This is my quiet now.

I spend my days sitting beside the kitchen window, looking out through the water-streaked glass, remembering. Remembering the before. Trying to forget the forest and the rain and the emptiness inside when I look at this life that has been built for me, gifted to me, by one I no longer feel anything for.

I drown in my memories. I drown in the endless rain. I drown beneath the love of the man who lives beside me.

I drown.

* * * * *

They broke the news to the general public in October, almost two years ago. At that point, Sam and I were living together in downtown Seattle in a tiny, one bedroom apartment. He was uncomfortable in the city—he once claimed that he could feel all seven hundred thousand other people at once, shifting and breathing and moving at all hours of the day like cockroaches twitching beneath the paneling. He'd never say it outright, but I knew how much he missed the isolation of the mountains, where one could wander for days without seeing another human being. But I was born and raised in the city, and the remoteness of the Rockies had always made me uneasy. After six exhausting months of a failing, long distance relationship, Sam eventually agreed to give up his job as a park ranger in Yellowstone and move to Seattle. With his

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weathered flannels, worn hiking boots, and shredded jeans, he was as out-of-place in the city as a skyscraper in a forest, but he claimed he was happy, so long as he could be with me.

So there we were, me with my dream job as a journalist for *The Seattle Times* and Sam working on his teaching degree, appearing at colleges giving talks on forestry to make a little extra income for the both of us. Money was tight, but we were managing, which is all we could ask for.

Then the news broke—a flood of facts and numbers and data that crashed through our cellphones and computers and television screens like a wall of water, catching us unaware and sending our bodies spiraling out of the lives we'd so meticulously constructed for ourselves, into the unknown. By the time we surfaced, sputtering and gasping as we dragged ourselves onto some distant shore, we were faced with only uncertainty. *What will we do? How will we survive?*

Will we survive?

I remember the way we sat in mute shock, staring at the television screen, trying to make sense of it all and failing. Every day it was the same information, reported by different sources, different ways of explaining Earth's final retribution for centuries of mistreatment.

It would start with the rain. Noah's forty days and nights would have nothing on the torrent that would instigate humanity's demise. Areas of the world suffering from drought would celebrate at first, but that would cease once they realized that food would not grow in constant rain. Eventually the already-existing plants would begin to die—those that did not drown would starve from lack of sunlight. Finally, the rest of life on earth would starve.

The scientists estimated approximately a year, maybe a little longer, before the rain started. There was no word on when it would stop.

Sam and I took the news at polar extremes. While I curled up in a nest of blankets on the couch, hypnotized by the blue glow of the television screen in our dark living room, Sam began drawing up plans for our survival. Organization and planning had always been his thing—it took him less than a week to throw back the living room curtains, turn off the television, and pull me into an upright sitting position on the couch. He pushed a cup of coffee into my hands and told me that we would live.

"There's an old ranger's cabin up on a bluff back in Yellowstone, a couple hours hike into the forest. It'll be perfect; it's not on any of the maps—I only know about it 'cuz I was working trail maintenance once and got off the grid—" he saw my eyes beginning to glaze over and hastily got back on track. "Anyways, it's a great place to hole up for a while, until this all blows over. I've been stocking up on food—" ah, so that explained the armada of canned goods spilling over every counter in the kitchen—"and with a few repairs, the cabin can be ready to go in a few months—" he suddenly broke off, his brown eyes filled with concern. "Cassie, honey, what's wrong? Don't cry, we're gonna be okay. I'm gonna keep you safe."

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I shook my head frantically, lank strands of blonde hair sticking to the wetness on my cheeks. "I don't want to go," I whimpered, no longer caring that I sounded like a child. "I don't want to leave—this is my home!"

"Cass..."

My panic sought an outlet, and I sensed the exact moment that it morphed into a kind of fury.

"This was your whole plan, wasn't it?" I accused, standing up so suddenly that my head swooped and I staggered. Sam instinctively reached out to steady me, but I stumbled out of his reach, searching for my keys and shoes. "You always hated it here. I bet you're glad this is happening, aren't you? Well fuck that!" I found my things and stood defiantly by the door.

"Cassie, the riots have started, don't be an idiot—"

"Fuck. That."

I grabbed my phone off the stand by the door and swept out into the hallway, leaving the sound of footsteps and a slammed door in my wake.

* * * * *

It's July, or maybe August. I don't keep track anymore, even though it would be as easy as looking at the calendar that he keeps hanging on the wooden wall near the door of our cabin. But I don't go near the door—I haven't left the cabin in weeks; ever since our battery-powered radio stopped broadcasting a signal. But I've been outside before, and there's nothing out there except rain and mud and the sense that I should do something, go somewhere, be productive. But for what? There's no reason in any of that anymore. What's the point in living when we've been doomed from the start?

He doesn't understand. He's perfectly happy to throw on his boots and stomp out into the rain to chop wood to dry by the fire for tomorrow, or to make sure that his water-runoff system around the cabin is still functional, or whatever the hell it is he does out there. Sometimes I hear him hammering away at the roof and singing, as though this is some kind of adventure to him, playing survival in the middle of nowhere. I hate him for his pleasantries, the way he says *Good morning, Good afternoon, Good evening, Good night* to me every godforsaken day. Sometimes I want to scream at him until my voice gives out, but I never do.

I hate him, but he's all I've got.

So instead I stay quiet. I let him heat me cans of soup, and I let him hold me in his arms while he sleeps, even as I lie wide awake, deafened by silence and rain.

For him, I pretend to be some semblance of happy, even as I waste away.

* * * * *

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After the fight, I ended up in Willow and Gracie's apartment, two flights up from Sam and me. Gracie was at work, but Willow was there, and five minutes after arriving had me sitting beside her on the floor at the base of the couch, a glass of wine clutched in one hand, the other hand buried in Tenner's ruff. Tenner was Willow and Gracie's enormous St. Bernard, who had been the cause of great strife between the women and their landlord for the past four months.

"Who does he think he is?" I said disgustedly, scratching hard behind Tenner's ears. "He knows I hate the outdoors and the country and nature and—"

"Anything that's not Seattle," Willow finished dryly. She took a sip of her wine and rolled her eyes at me. "We know."

Willow was my best friend; had been from the day I started my job at the paper. First we shared a cubicle wall, then an article, a few beers, and eventually our secrets. She'd grown up in Portland but had been kicked out after her first year of college, once her parents found out she was gay. At the time, Gracie was just her college girlfriend living in Seattle, so with nowhere else to go, Willow moved in. Five years down the road found Willow working a job she loved, married to the love of her life, living in a cozy apartment with their St. Bernard and shopping the outdoor market on Saturday's. Essentially, she'd become every gay runaway's pipe dream.

"You don't deserve him, you know that, right?"

I knew that. I'd always known that. Sam was the type of guy who sent flowers to my work for no reason, and remembered every anniversary, while I was the kind of girl who'd sleep with her boyfriend's best friend and then lie about it (true story, by the way. Not with Sam, but with the guy before).

We'd met though work—he'd been flown out by his managers to speak at an elementary school in Seattle, and I'd been assigned the story for my paper. I'll admit to having been less than thrilled to be covering Park Ranger Samson Ford. It was an article destined to be buried beneath the far-more-appealing trash written by my coworkers.

It was his looks that first drew me in—with his unkempt hair, tanned skin, and coarse hands, he was a far cry from the polished, suit-wearing city boys I'd interacted with for my entire dating life. Then there was his voice, honest and low, and the light in those brown eyes when he spoke of the mountains and his life in them. He was the most down-to-earth person I'd ever met. I got him alone by asking whether I could interview him privately for my paper, and then in the middle of questioning I'd asked him to grab a drink with me that evening. He'd flushed a brilliant scarlet before mumbling a gruff sort of yes.

I think I entranced him with my sparkling, glittering city life. There were always parties to grace, illustrious people to interview, extravagant banquets to attend. I asked him once what about me had gotten him into my bed that night, and then the next and next, pushing back his flight again and again to see me one more time. His answer was charisma.

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When I invited him out to dinner for the first time with Willow and Gracie, Willow had interacted with him for all of five minutes before excusing herself and pulling me into the bathroom with her, barely waiting until the door was shut before speaking.

"What's gotten into you, Cass?" she'd asked, staring at me incredulously. "You guys are completely different species."

"I think he's sweet," I'd replied absentmindedly, leaning closer to the mirror to brush an eyelash from my cheek.

Willow had snorted. "He is sweet. He's also too good for you, Cassie. After what you did to Kevin? You're going to eat this one alive."

It was harsh, but part of me had known she was right. But also I'd also known that I had no intention of breaking things off with him, despite our differences, the distance, and Willow's warning. He was fresh and different and like nothing I'd ever seen before.

And so, sitting on Willow and Gracie's rug, over two and a half years after that night, I was reaching the same conclusion, even as every other part of me writhed at the idea of packing up and leaving Seattle to strike out into the unknown.

"He's doing this for you," Willow told me, leaning down and kissing Tenner's brow, causing the dog to huff as his tail thumped against the carpeting. "He'd do anything for you."

"I know."

"I'll miss you, Cass," she said firmly, taking the empty glass of wine out of my hand. "But there's nothing good for any of us in Seattle in the future, and I love you too much to let you stay here when you've got another option."

She loved me too much, but wasn't that just the theme of my life? I asked her that, but she only shook her head once.

"Go back to Sam. Go home."

* * * * *

Time passes. Rain continues to fall, and has started taking with it the shriveled, yellow leaves on the trees, which never had the chance to reach their lush, green potential. The sameness of each day causes them to bleed together in my memory, as though I'd painted a watercolor and then left it outside. With every passing hour I find myself more and more incapable of hiding the anger that squeezes at the organs just beneath my ribcage, choking the life out of me.

At the end of one otherwise unremarkable day, we're lying side-by-side in bed when suddenly, I realize why I've been unable to get comfortable for the past hour.

"Sam," I say quietly into the darkness, trusting that he is as awake as I am. "The sheets are damp."

"No they're not, Cassie."

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"They *are*." I leap out of bed, grabbing for the flashlight on the nightstand, which I'd promised him I'd use only in emergencies. The intensity of the bright, electric beam shocks me for a moment, but I quickly get over my surprise and turn the circle of light onto the bed, where there is indeed a wet spot at the foot of my side of the bed. I shine the light upwards, and see a few droplets glinting against the shiny, polished wooden beams.

"The roof is leaking!"

Sam is silent, and for one incredulous moment I think that he has fallen asleep.

"Sam!"

"I hear you, Cassie," he says tightly. "I'll take care of it in the morning."

I stare at him, wide-eyed. "The bed is *wet!*"

Sam sits up so suddenly that it startles me, and I take a step back from what is the closest thing to anger I've ever seen from him. "What do you want me to do about it right now, huh? Go outside and fix it? It's the middle of the night!"

"Where am I supposed to sleep?"

Sam flops back down, covering his eyes with an arm. "The couch. The mat in front of the fireplace." He snorts. "Outside, for all I care."

I laugh a little hysterically. "Oh, outside for all you care? You should care! Because you were the one who dragged me out into the middle of this swamp of a woods, and for what? For survival? We're just dying more slowly than everyone else—that's not the same thing!"

Sam's sitting up again, eyes flashing. "What do you want from me? Tell me what you want. I don't know how to talk to you anymore—I don't know who you are anymore. You wanna go back to Seattle? Is that it? What do I have to do?"

I don't have the answer to any of his questions. Not even to the one in his eyes; the one that has been there for a while now, but that he'd never ask. *Do you even love me anymore? I don't know.*

But that answer would hurt him; a far deeper wound than I've ever inflicted upon anyone before, and despite everything, I care for him too much to hurt him like that.

So instead I spin about and leave the room, storming into the living room and grabbing my hardly-used raincoat off of the hook on the wall beside the door. I fling open the door with all the intent of storming out into the rain, when suddenly, I stop.

I just

stop.

Because the smell of the rain has just hit me, heavy and uncontaminated by the aroma of freshly cut wood which still perfumes the inside of our cabin. Suddenly I can feel it—the cold mist, spattering against my skin, more real and imminent than it ever had been on the other side of the kitchen window. Even the sound of it is different on this side of the cabin walls—less of a drumming and more of a roar.

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Still standing in the doorway, I first drop the flashlight, which winks and goes out, and then I drop to my knees, speechless.

This is real. Not something to be watched from a screen or from behind a window, which is really just one more plate of glass that has been separating me from what's really going on.

It's real.

"Cassie!"

I hear Sam calling my name frantically, and then feel his hands pulling at my arms, dragging me away from the open doorway. The door slams, cutting off the chill of the rain, but still I shiver, clinging to the outer nylon of the raincoat I'd hastily thrown about my shoulders.

"Come here, get warm—"

He's picking me up, bringing me over to the ever-burning fire.

"You idiot, were you going to go out into the rain? It's the middle of the night—what if you fell into the stream? Or off a damn cliff?"

I wonder whether he's joking, then decide I don't care. The cold has faded from my outer extremities by now—I wasn't exposed to it for more than a few seconds—but deep, deep within my core I feel it claiming its place, contaminating my body with its icy fingers.

"It's real," I whisper, knowing even as I do so that he won't understand what I mean.

"Shh, Cassie, it's okay. I've got you. I'm sorry for yelling at you, honey. I shouldn't have done that. I'll sleep on the couch, you can sleep on my side of the bed tonight okay? It's nice and dry there, I'll put a pan under the leak..."

He goes on and on, talking to me, fussing over me, and eventually I move my limbs, come back to life, just to get him to stop. At one point I even wrap my arms around his neck, kiss him and apologize for making such a deal over the damp sheets.

"It's okay," he whispers as he's closing the door to the bedroom. "I love you, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes," I reply to the empty room. "I know."

He is gone, but I do not close my eyes, because I feel that icy chill, creeping its way through my veins.

I begin to shiver again, and this time, I don't stop.

* * * * *

I went home, like Willow told me to, and found Sam sitting on the couch, shoulders slumped, head buried in his hands. When he heard me come through the door, he straightened, and his face flooded with relief. The sight of him sitting there, waiting for me to come home did something to me, and suddenly I couldn't imagine a life without him. Without a word, I walked right into his waiting arms, which wrapped around me in that familiar embrace.

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"I'm sorry for what I said," I whispered into his broad chest, feeling the low, steady *thump-thump* of his heart beneath my cheek. "And for making you worry."

He didn't have to say he forgave me. He always did.

"We don't have to go, if you're that much against it," he promised me. "We can stay."

"You wouldn't leave without me?" I knew the answer, but I needed to hear it.

"Never. I'll never leave you."

So I told him I'd thought it over, and that I wanted to go. I told him that I wouldn't mind living in Yellowstone, in the mountains, and that I thought there was a certain romance in the idea of living together in a cabin at the end of the world. Lies, maybe, but in that moment they felt like the truth, especially when I saw the way he glowed when I finished.

"I've got it all planned out," he promised. "My friend from the university says he knows someone in food distribution who can still sell us food now that everyone's started stocking up. And as long as you're careful, you can even stay in Seattle while I'm rebuilding and refurnishing the cabin. Even traveling back and forth, it'll be ready in less than ten months."

I nodded, imagining the place he'd build for me—a cozy cabin, in the middle of the woods. A fireplace, a big, warm bed. Really, what else would I need, so long as Sam was there to take care of me?

"We're going to be just fine," he promised, and I believed him.

* * * * *

Weeks go by, and all the while I feel the ice spreading through my veins. We've reached autumn now, and Sam spends much of his days outside, chopping firewood for the upcoming winter. He has grown obsessive about it, spending hour after hour in the rain, heaving the axe over his head and bringing it down in a series of steady thuds, which I can hear from inside the house. He's stopped making me meals, and instead only comes back into the house when it's become too dark to work, exhausted, stiff, and shivering. Dinner is a silent affair, during which he eats as though he'll never find food again before excusing himself and heading to bed. Most nights, he's already breathing deeply by the time I join him.

At first I assume that it's just concern over our second winter, but after day after day of this I begin to suspect it's something more. Maybe it's the distance in his eyes when he looks at me, or the way he's stopped touching me, but his words from that night with the rain play over and over in my head.

I don't know how to talk to you anymore—I don't know who you are anymore.

I get it into my head that his love has died, and I feel the final, thin thread between my mind and my sanity snap.

While Sam grows obsessive over chopping firewood, fixing the cabin, and being everywhere and anywhere except around me, I become obsessed with the rain. It calls to that ice

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within me, and I spend entire days on one of the wooden lounge chairs beneath the awning of the porch, just watching the water-saturated forest. I'll bundle up and sit there, feeling my cheeks grow pink and then red with cold as the mist catches and tickles at the tiny hairs on my face. What used to terrify me has become fascinating—the idea that these minute droplets of water splatting against the ground will be the death of nearly all life on earth.

As I grow more and more used to the chill, I find I need fewer layers, and they fall away like the final leaves on the trees about us. Eventually I'm down to a tee shirt and jeans, but still I fantasize about going further. I imagine losing these last pieces of fabric between myself and the outer world, and embracing the icy droplets against my stomach, my breasts, and my legs. I imagine the way that goosebumps will prickle delightfully as I walk barefoot along the path that leads away from the porch, cold mud squishing up between my toes with every step forward I take.

I would walk through the forest, step after step, all the way down the bluff until I reach the swollen stream that Sam has told me about. I imagine stepping into the water, feeling leaves and twigs bump up against my bare shins as they continue downstream. The water will rise to my knees, my hips, my shoulders, and lastly, with a final exhale, my head will vanish beneath the murky water.

Just like that, I'd vanish without a trace, swallowed whole by a world I'd despised, and a life I'd never asked for.

* * * * *

One of the hardest things to bear quickly became Sam's absences. He'd leave me alone for weeks at a time to fix up the cabin and transport food, during which I'd take Willow and Gracie up on their offer for me to crash on their couch while he was away. Unable to fall asleep, I'd lie there in the darkness, one arm dangling over the edge of the couch where I could run my fingers through Tenner's fur as he slept at the base of what was usually his bed.

The thick curtains of Willow and Gracie's front window did a good job of blocking out the city lights, but did nothing to muffle the sound of the riots. Night after night I'd clamp a pillow over my ears, hiding from the outcry of seven million people, raging against the inevitable with bricks and crowbars, gunfire and flames. I knew we were relatively safe in the upper stories of our well-to-do apartment, but an unfamiliar terror still gnawed at me, growing and growing with every passing night.

The first time he left was the worst, because I didn't understand the fear yet. It was only when I heard the knock at Willow and Gracie's front door, then opened it to find Sam standing there, smiling and unharmed, that I realized. In that wild crash of delighted relief, I understood. All those nights I'd spent wide awake, listening to the mangled symphony of voices screaming and windows breaking and gun barrels exploding, I hadn't been afraid for myself.

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I'd been afraid for Sam.

Realizing this in no way made his long absences easier, but I found that the nights became the tiniest bit quieter if the sound of my thoughts could drown out the uproar just outside my window. What worked best was thinking about Sam.

Meeting him. Our first date. Every time he'd flown out to see me, or I'd flown out to see him when we were still hundreds of miles apart. The day he'd moved to Seattle to be with me, and I'd tried to cook him dinner but had burned everything so horribly that we'd ordered pizza instead.

Every night, a different memory lulled me to sleep. My worries were silenced, if only for a few hours before I'd wake up and remember that I was alone.

But in the end, Sam would always, always come back to me.

* * * * *

"We're sinking."

Sam rarely speaks anymore, so when he does, I take notice. We're having dinner during this particular instance, which consists of a half-can of split-pea soup for each of us. The plan had been to be eating our own produce by now, grown under the ultraviolet lights that Sam had bought, but something had gone wrong. Perhaps we'd bought the wrong kind of lights or were using the wrong kind of soil, but everything that sprouted grew grey and thin, unable or unwilling to bear any kind of produce. I don't know what will happen once the canned food runs out, and I don't dare to check the kitchen cabinets to see how much we have left.

"What do you mean?" I ask, and Sam looks up at me through hooded eyes. He's let his facial hair grow out, but through it I can see the gauntness of his cheeks and the pallor of his skin. It suddenly strikes me that I do not recognize the person sitting in front of me in the slightest.

"Just what I said," Sam says lowly. Even his voice has changed. "We're sinking. The cabin is sinking. Into the mud. The ground has too much water."

The way he speaks, the cadence, the rhythm is all unfamiliar, and I find myself thinking about that rather than the situation he is trying to convey. I try to focus.

We're sinking.

The cabin is built on top of a bluff, saving us from the flooding of the stream, which runs a bit lower, but it seems that hasn't been enough. I suppose eventually the bottom of the cabin will hit rock, but until then...

"What do we do?"

A year ago, Sam would've had an answer. He'd whip out some blueprints and be outside tomorrow, shovel in hand and a tune on his lips. He'd look at me now, and tell me not to worry, because he would take care of it.

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But that Sam is long gone.

“Nothing,” the man sitting in front of me says, and his dark eyes drop back to his bowl of cold, half-finished soup. “We can’t do anything.”

* * * * *

The day before we left, my mother called.

It was a coincidence—one of those twists in fate that makes you wonder about whether there really is some higher power keeping all of us in its design. I hadn’t spoken to her since everything first happened, when I’d called to see how she was taking the news.

I’ll be just fine, she’d said then. I know how to take care of myself.

Her words had felt pointed, and I’d been angry enough to hang up the phone. We’d always been a little on the fritz. I’d grown up never knowing my father, and every time I turned to her with some boy problem, she’d blame it on a lack of a male figure around the house. Eventually I stopped going to her altogether.

Now, though, when she called, we pretended that the distance between us was only a physical thing. She eventually asked me about Sam, and I knew the time had come to tell her.

“We’re going away together,” I told her brightly. “He’s built me a cabin in the wilderness. It’ll be nice, I think.”

Unexpectedly, my mother laughed, shrill through the receiver. “*You’re* going to play house in the middle of the woods? That’s rich, Cassie.”

Hurt, I’d insisted upon it, and once it was clear that I wasn’t making some kind of joke, my mother’s tone changed.

“You can’t. You won’t make it,” she spoke with an urgency I rarely heard from her. “Sam might, but not you, Cass. You weren’t made for that. Come east with me instead. They’re building public shelters—we can get a place if we go now.”

“Ma,” I said as placatingly as I could. “No. I’m going with Sam. He’ll take care of me—I know it.”

“You won’t make it, Cassie,” my mother repeated harshly. “Especially not with him. He loves you too damn much and you don’t love him enough. That worked in the city, but living together in some secluded cabin, no escape? He’s going to figure you out. And the moment he stops loving you, you’re gonna want to leave. But you’ll be stuck there, wasting away like—” I hung up the phone. Just in time too, because Sam walked into the room and almost saw the expression on my face.

“Who was that?” he asked, and I smiled pleasantly, shrugged a shoulder.

“Wrong number.”

* * * * *

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It's November, and I know because I finally looked at that calendar hanging by our front door. We've officially been living in this cabin for a year. I flip through the past dates, watching the red X's all blur together, and vaguely wonder what I'd been doing on June fourteenth, or March twelfth. I have no chance of remembering—the last actual date I recall was my birthday, which we'd celebrated two or three months after our arrival as snow had blanketed the ground. Sam's had quietly slipped by just over a month ago.

A year. A full year. I wonder about Willow and Gracie, and everyone I'd left behind. I wonder whether they're still alive, and quickly decide that I'd rather not know.

That night, lying beside Sam, I speak to him, the first time either of us has spoken to the other in days. My throat is clogged with rain, and my tongue is rusted and stiff with disuse.

"It's been a year."

When Sam speaks, I hardly recognize his voice. "Yes."

"Is this what you imagined?"

"No."

Another silence, one heavy enough to stretch seconds into minutes, minutes into hours.

"What do you think has happened to the rest of the world?"

His answer comes slowly, as though he is sleep-talking though I know he must still be awake. "I think they're gone."

"Gone? Like they're dead?"

"No, Cassie," he murmurs, and the bed creaks on its springs as he rolls away from me. "I think we are."

The thought is so disturbing, so repulsive, that I physically shudder. The ice that has been steadily filling up my veins since the night with the rain cracks, and the sound is a gunshot in my ears.

I think we are.

He's wrong. He's lost his mind after a year spent slowly drowning in this cabin. Because if he hasn't, then all of this misery will have been for nothing. I left behind my entire life, my friends, my apartment, my dreams. My cheeks have sunken in and my hair hangs lank about my face, but that is all bearable because we are alive.

But how can I prove it?

The answer comes easily, as though it had been waiting for me to realize what it all meant—those weeks of daydreaming about the sensation of the rain against my bare flesh.

"We're not dead," I whisper, crawling out of bed. "I'll show you. You'll see."

I no longer feel the chill of the bedroom as the clothes on my body fall to the floor with hardly a whisper. One glance back at Sam's sleeping form—that's all I allow myself before crossing the room and slipping through the door into the living room. I feel the rough grain of the

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wood beneath my bare feet, and it seems to be telling me to go faster, because the slick, smooth mud is now less than a few yards away.

Our front door opens easily, and I marvel at how well Sam has kept the cabin in perfect condition. He'd done it for me, all of it. And this final act of mine will be my gift to him. The greatest one I've ever given him—proof that he is alive.

"I love you," I say quietly, and for the first time in a long time, I think I mean it.

I close my eyes, and I step out into the rain.

* * * * *

The drive from Seattle to Yellowstone National Park took us over twelve hours, because Sam wanted to drive the backroads to stay away from the people who would want to take our car, or the last haul of over a years-worth of food we had packed away. The repairs had taken longer than he'd anticipated, leaving us in November, rather than August, and Sam was eager to get settled in our cabin before the rain began.

We stowed the vehicle deep into the forest, along a trail that Sam promised me had been all but forgotten, and then covered it with brush just in case. Arms laden with boxes, we hiked for what felt like ages before Sam finally told me that we were close. My limbs ached and sweat trickled into my eyes and down my back, but still I was strangely excited, eager to see the home I'd been promised.

We broke into a clearing moments before I was about to complain, and then there it was—a cabin, nestled in the autumn leaves, more perfect than anything I'd been imagining. The fresh-cut wood was reddish in tint, and there was a porch with matching chairs and an awning. Two little windows faced what was the front yard, and I noted the stone chimney towards the back.

"Oh," I breathed, and the box of non-perishables thumped at my feet.

"What do you think, honey?" Sam asked, setting his own box onto the ground and stretching his back. "You like it?"

I laughed, throwing my arms around his shoulders and kissing him hard on the mouth. "I love it. It's perfect." And it was. I could picture us living there so clearly it hurt—hiking the woods during the day, curling up in front of the fireplace at night. Just me, and Sam, and maybe one day we'd have kids and I'd be able to tell them about the glamorous, silicone world of the city they'd just missed out on.

"You love it?" Sam asked, grinning, and when I kissed him again, I felt every fiber of my being respond to that beautiful smile, repeating over and over the only thing I knew to be true.

I love you.