

Ch. 1

Opinions

They regarded each other.

He sat in the chair beside her bed, and she lay upon it, draped in a white expanse of sheet, a skeleton blanketed in funeral wrap. Machines beeped, and their tethers to her snaked across the bedrails from multiple directions. Her diminishment was plain, a return to the day they'd left the boat all those years ago, but her eyes were bright and aware, and full of knowledge. She knew his intent, and her opposition to it glittered in her gaze, despite the evidence of life leaking out of her by the minute.

He was well familiar with her body now. He knew it like he knew his own. Better, in fact, because marriage scribed familiarity in a cumulative fashion upon those involved, at least down-stream. It truth-told about a partner in a way that was untainted by the lies that a person could tell oneself. It was clear that she was near done, and that if he was going to do what he planned to do, now was the time.

The only thing that checked him was her resistance. He weighed his words, seeking after the truth. It had always been the thing that she had responded to in their time together. Now would be no different, because this was a conversation that

they'd already bludgeoned to death, and this was his last chance. His first foray was a loss-leader.

"Babe. Please."

She flipped one hand sideways in negation, conserving energy while maintaining her resolve. Her desire for surcease was written all over the gesture. She was intent on waiting for it to take her, and she knew it was imminent.

He hurt for her, and the idea of prolonging her pain twisted within him. He was now quite exquisitely aware of the science of her affliction. Multiple doctors had made sure to communicate the physics of it in ways that he could understand and fully internalize.

In unguarded moments, he had wondered whether she viewed this hell through the same distance-lens of her previous one. Was she able to retract herself from this in the way she had before?

He didn't think so. He'd seen the feral animal in the arroyo. This wasn't her. He could see it. She had always been present to him, first in the good years, and then in the painful years beyond. Only in the last six months had she embraced her own exit, and only then because her body had illustrated how badly it had betrayed her.

He refused it, and contemplated the next move. It came with no delay, and it made sense. His reluctance to act fell away,

because the acknowledgement of her condition and the imminence of her departure became the pivot point. It would happen, unless he could confront it.

"Sophia."

He could see her debate whether to respond. It played out in the marriage short-hand, and he knew that *she* knew he would see the answer whether she decided to mask it or not. She opted to nod.

He played the card, and had no idea whether it would work. It was the last thing to do, and he knew that her choice would define whatever came after this moment.

"I'm taking you back. Whatever happens, I'm taking you back while I still can. I don't care how you feel about it. If this is the end of the road, then it's the end for both of us."

He expected the negation, the largest shake of the head that her compromised health would allow, because it had all happened before, many times. But she seemed to shudder then, and the shake didn't arrive. She looked at him with a form of troubled vacuity for a few seconds, as if she wasn't all the way here. It was like the arroyo, but not at the same time. Then she solidified, and her resistance seemed to drop away, and her gesture this time seemed to acquiesce. It wasn't an embrace of the decision, but an acknowledgement that she could not stand in

his way this time. He could see it all in her eyes. She was too far gone to hold onto her own resolve any longer.

He didn't hesitate, because if her resistance was gone, it really did mean she was at the threshold. He stood and carefully disconnected her from the machines keeping her alive. She shivered each time a cord connecting her to the bank of blinking sentinels that monitored and prolonged was removed and their alarms began to chime, but she seemed to grow back and steady as he lifted her from the hospital bed, and carried her from the room where she had come to die.

He had imagined and planned this moment for many months now. He knew how long it would take the nurses to respond, and exactly how long it would take them to turn the corner down the hall, once they were alerted by the patient monitors at the nurses' station half a floor away. He knew that he could make the turn toward the stair-well before they could see him, and he had spiked the stair-well door earlier that evening. He could be through, and ease the door shut, and then it would be only one flight down. It was a short descent similar to their long ascent through that dead hotel only in the stakes at the end of each.

She was light, and easy enough for him to carry, and he'd already practiced the moves. He had drilled on them over and over as she lay in her mechanical bed, she drifting down the

path to her end even as he had explored the path to carry her away from it.

He pushed backward through the door to the outside, carefully navigating the transition through as to not jostle her any more than necessary. Her breathing was ragged and strained, so much like that other time, too.

The evening air was cool and moist, and his car shone with glints from a nearby light pole, one of many illuminating the parking lot. It waited in the closest possible parking space to the door. It was where he always parked whenever it was available, because his intention had never been far away.

He made his way to it, and gently deposited her into the front seat after getting the passenger door open with a backwards grope. He had practiced this as well. He paused only long enough to belt her in, and their eyes met as he did. The partial vacuity was back, and maybe that was good. Maybe there was less pain when she stepped back. He hurried to the driver's side, and soon the black BMW was fleeing the parking lot with a squeal of tires.

A short time after that, they arrived at the marina, because that was also part of the plan.

He would never fully remember the journey from the gravel lot to the dock, nor onto the strange boat again. The pennies had been in his pocket every day of their life together after

leaving it for what they had both assumed was the last time, so maybe he'd never really believed that, anyway. He remembered only the heat in his pocket, and pushing the door open, because beyond that there was only her. He was only conscious of her, and whatever he did, it was for his wife.

They crossed the threshold together, and that which was nearly lost was found again as he sank down to his knees, and their past life expired behind them.

He heard her take in the first deep breath in many months, and he knew that her life had been given back to her in the way that only this place could. He felt her pull in the oxygen she'd been denied for so long, breath after slow deep breath, but also knew that they'd crossed back into a place that didn't care if she breathed or not. It granted this boon, but beyond that, it didn't care about them at all. It only held itself sacred.

But it didn't matter. He released her as she pushed herself to her feet for the first time in two months, but he didn't follow, remaining on his knees. The smell of dust and concrete permeated the open space before them, dimly shrouded in evening twilight, and the memories threatened to over-take him.

But she was alive. She stood before him now, having turned back towards him. Her breathing was even, and he looked up into her down-turned face. Her expression was hard to read in the gloom, but he didn't care what was coming. Even if she was mad,

he knew he'd have done this the same way no matter what. He waited to see what she would say.

"You decided for both of us again."

He nodded slightly.

"But this time we can't go back."

It was a statement without any emotional inflection. He decided that to be honest was the only response. It had been de facto in their marriage, and couldn't be any different now. He shrugged before he responded.

"I'm not done with you. I can't be. This was the only option, and I know I pushed, but I did ask. Maybe ad nauseum, but I asked to the end."

She sighed, and he saw what might have been a small smile touch her lips. She knelt down, and put her hands on his face. The feel of them was like sunshine through a break in the clouds during a nearly perpetual season of rain. Her words were laced with uncertainty.

"I could barely see you, you know. Like all the pain was stacked on top, and you were at the bottom. It was time to go. I could feel it. This was never an option for me somehow, and I knew it. I think like you know it was the only one for you."

He waited, not sure if she was done. She wasn't.

"I don't know if this is true, because I don't feel like I know anything, especially now, but I think I was infected by

this place. Or if not this place, then that place he took us to. I don't know if it made me sick, but I think it made sure that I stayed sick."

She shook her head, dropping one hand from his face to fumble for his hand, grasping it even as she continued. Her eyes glittered in the low light, her glasses rendered meaningless and cast aside after corrective surgery not long after they'd left this place.

"No, that's not right. Whether it was the seed, or the water and sunlight, or all of them together, that wasn't the master stroke. Making sure I couldn't see past any of it, *that* was it.

It was like the flower."

He nodded after a few moments, but not because his affirmation made it true. It was only punctuation before moving on. She seemed to know it, too, and her expression said as much. Even though she seemed to be making a declaratory statement, everything in her posture spoke toward expectation. She was waiting for him to point forward.

He knew this wasn't because she thought it was his job or anything. He'd had to fight for his side when the inevitable disagreements had reared up during their time together. Sophia had been much more combative than Rachael had ever been, and

he'd lost a number of battles solely because she cared more than he did, and had the youthful strength to outlast him.

His sense of it was that she had been so near death that she wasn't quite sure how to go on living. This galvanized him in a way that was undeniable.

He grabbed her around the waist, pivoting to the right. He rolled onto his back on the concrete floor of the short hallway, and carried her laughing on top of him. She was slight, but he relished what weight of her there was, and her laughter added movement to the gravitational pressure between them.

He could see in her eyes the promise of fulfillment of the longing that materialized instantly between them, but also knew that it was not going to be now. It didn't matter, because some time in the future was fine.

Because there was a future now, and they both knew it. After a long season of contradictory evidence, they both could see a way forward where their steps together did not diverge, or stop. He seized her, grasping both of her cheeks with his hands, and kissed her with an urgency born from all the time they'd been robbed of.

It was at once a full articulation of what they needed from each other, and also a definition of the empty space that the uncertain future demanded. The uncertainty was lost to him

though as she buried her head below his chin, squeezing him fiercely.

"What now, then?"

He responded out of love, regained time, and ignorance.

"Whatever we want, if we're smart about it. This place is all about choices, remember?"

But he was wrong. He was pretty much as wrong as you could be.