

*Mom*

*Sonoran Desert Region, AZ*

*9am the following morning*

She drives along a needle-straight back road through the deserts of southern Arizona. The sky above is a clear blue dome, the surrounding land a flat brown disc, peppered here and there with clumps of red rock, saltbush and prickly pear. It's a mild winter's day so she has the window down an inch – her long brown hair dancing in the breeze to the Joni Mitchell tunes she has on for company.

She screws up her nose at the map as she drives, pretending not to be lost. GPS doesn't work out here. But she's not worried. The interviews she has planned in the next community – the final data for her PhD – aren't scheduled till tomorrow, so she's got all day to get there. For now, traversing the wide-open country under that big empty sky, it's as if time doesn't matter. And for her that's unusual, so she tries to enjoy it.

Abandoning the map, she turns up the volume and drums on the wheel. To look at, she's a picture of peace, but her mind never really slows down. Even now, somewhere in that overactive brain of hers she's stitching together more fancy words for her thesis, working up her latest notes into yet another chapter. It's a habit she's not even aware of. For over three years her study's been her life – her son's life too, in many ways. If anyone knows how the thing has consumed her, he does. Many the night he's given up reading the thoughts that worry her brow when she sits at her desk and types. Night after night, week after week, from one school term to the next, vacations included – it's been that way for years.

But the end is in sight. Or so she keeps saying. Just one more trip away. Only a few more chapters to go. A month of revision in the New Year and the damned thing will finally

be ready for submission. Then at last, come summer, she'll graduate. Assuming her thesis makes the grade – *knock on wood*. And then...

After two hours at the wheel, the horizon remains worryingly empty – nothing to suggest the mountainous country she's headed for. Deciding she must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, she pulls over to study the map again. Apart from the roads, the only clue on the map is a lowly mountain which, by her reckoning, should be visible close by to her right. If she's where she thinks she is. Glancing around, however, she notices the only feature even remotely resembling a mountain lies several miles behind and to the left.

She can see where she is on the map now and traces the road with a finger back to the junction she somehow missed, maybe twenty miles ago. It'll mean some minor backtracking – a wasted hour or so. No big deal. But she's been on the road since dawn, and as she needs to pull over anyway to turn around, she decides to stretch her legs.

This far south the winter sun is still warm. She drinks it in with her eyes closed, arching her back against the side of the car. It doesn't seem possible it's the same sun that barely puts in an appearance four months of the year in the wilds of Alaska. The same sun that, even now in that part of the world, is only just beginning to creep across the south horizon. It's a weird thought all right, but not half as strange as the fact that she knows all this by memory – recollected fragments of a place she once knew as home, and the dream she once tried to share with a man she used to love. How is it, she wonders, that life can change so drastically?

Moving to Alaska had been her idea. Something she suggested in the hope of getting the family out of a rut. There was even a chance the adventure might bring them all closer together. But from the outset, Jim seized upon the idea as a kind of personal crusade against the world of big business that had let him down once too often. Not to mention the small-town ambitions on which he'd been raised, which had started to seem like a fool's hope. Of

course, when the sawmill closed and Jim lost his job – with no severance pay or other prospects – they both started to see things that way. Then Jim’s father died. Mesothelioma – cancer brought on by years of inhaling asbestos at the steelworks where he’d slaved a lifetime. And as the company and its lawyers banded to evade any responsibility, without even a hint of remorse for their part in the agonizing death of a former employee, the injustice of it hit Jim hard. Suddenly, saying *to hell with the world* and heading to the hills became as much a personal vendetta as it was a chance to start over with his family.

And so they fled north.

From day one she sensed the change in him, felt him looking at her and his boy in a new way – as a potential liability. And her niggling doubts about his decision to start from scratch, with a new house, a new business, seemed only to harden his suspicion. So too her habit of writing home, of calling her mother twice a week, or anything that threatened to keep them connected to their old life in Ohio – it aggravated him beyond all reason.

Having a family makes you dependent on others and vulnerable to powers beyond your control. Pitfalls Jim had come to associate with all the small-town losers they’d left behind, setting themselves up for a lifetime of disappointment. In his mind, Alaska stood for a chance at true self-reliance and the need for a purer, more primitive, kind of resourcefulness. So, any pining for their old life or suggestion by Mem that they scale back their ambitions, he took for a sign of her selling out on what they’d both agreed was most important. In effect, as selling out on their marriage.

With his mind so bent, her protests fell on deaf ears.

Maybe they’d rushed in too quick, she tried to suggest. A little time to save and do things right later on would be a small price to pay for their peace of mind. She and Isaac were

going stir-crazy, housebound and living out of boxes. If they were going to make this work, they'd all have to compromise a little.

But it couldn't be that way, he insisted. Compromise now – what would be the point of that? *Compromise will get you killed on the trail*, he took to saying. And as if to take a stand and pledge his allegiance to the dream anew, he gave himself over – deliberately, she believed – to the *drink more–think less* fraternity of the Headersville front bar. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Sometimes she wishes she'd tried harder to remonstrate. Mostly she's sorry she stuck around as long as she did. She thinks of her son there now, in Headersville – wonders what he's up to and how he's getting on. She thinks about the boy's father, too, and prays the note of sanity in his recent emails means she won't regret giving him a chance to redeem himself. All such hope aside, a feeling of guilt she's been suppressing for weeks unexpectedly starts to surface.

The truth is, her son's only in Alaska now so that she can be here, finishing her research. However she tries to justify it to herself, to her mother and even to Zac, deep down she knows that if it weren't for the deadline looming with her PhD, she never would have sent Zac to Alaska. Handing him over like that, without condition, to her ex-husband. The admission stings, but her emotions remain mixed. She lifts a hand to her cheek, nursing a wound time doesn't seem to heal.

Her eyes are heavy with tears, but she can still smile ruefully at the irony of the situation. Her precious boy, three thousand miles away, keeping her connected to a past she'd sooner forget. Sending Zac to Alaska this time might just have been for convenience, but one way or another it was always going to happen. It was only a matter of time before he struck out on his own to discover for himself the missing pieces of his past.

The tears that have been welling finally slip out, spilling down her cheek and over those long fingers, still nursing the side of her face. She's getting ready to let go again and knows it's going to hurt. And as the inevitability of it hits home, she starts to wonder what's going to happen to her boy. What will become of her son? She can't help wondering – worrying – how he's going to turn out. Smart and sensitive like her? Or more like his father – clever but crude, and stubborn as a pig? Will the way she's tried to bring him up be any match for whatever strange blood of his happens to run in Zac's veins?

*Listen to you! She scolds herself. You're as bad as him sometimes. Judging people. Giving up on people. Putting everyone in boxes.*

She knows it's true – he was never the only control freak. Only she promised herself years ago she wouldn't live in the shadow of the past. Yet here she is, torn between the impulse to cling to everything she's worked to achieve, and the knowledge that the things that matter most are never fully under our control.

It feels like her whole life has been leading to this moment. As if all the choices from her past have somehow worked to bring her to this point – this unexpected moment of grief at the horribly uncertainty of whatever next. Like whatever she thinks or says in this moment will be of some vital importance. Why it is we don't feel that way all the time, she wonders.

A movement in the bushes interrupts her reverie. Blinking away tears she manages to locate the culprit – a dusky coyote trotting away, its tail low to the ground. She watches the animal wend its way to the top of a rocky outcrop where it pauses, finally, to shoot her a backward glance, before slipping out of sight. The empty space it leaves behind fills with the coincidence of the song playing faintly inside the car: *Coyote*. Staring at the place where the animal disappeared, she tunes in to the lyrics...

*There's no comprehending*

*Just how close to the bone and the skin and the eyes*

*And the lips you can get*

*And still feel so alone.*

*And still feel so related*

The bite of the noonday sun on her neck reminds her she's on a schedule. She dries her eyes and wanders around to the driver-side door. It's true, she thinks, nearly laughing – sometimes there is no comprehending. With one last glance at the recently vacated outcrop, she gets into the car, starts the engine, and heads back along the road the way she came.