

## Paranoia

It was Friday. An ordinary Friday. I woke up at four in the morning. Couldn't sleep. Rehearsed my mental note to call Doctor Clarke about that. I made a pot of coffee in the shadowy gloom of my home, the mortgage letters on the kitchen table screaming at me even in the darkness. I stepped out onto the deck with my cup, the chill fall breeze of dawn wafting my coffee. I flexed my toes in a little arch as I leaned over the railing and sipped. Felt a rip in my right sock. It was my last pair. Grunted to myself about that.

I glanced out at the Warren's home. Something caught my eye. I saw their teenage son lighting up in the backyard, his face illuminated by the lighter he got at some metal concert on the other side of the county. I stared at him as he failed to light the cigarette, and like any paranoid adolescent, he knew when an adult was watching. He whipped his head up and saw my dark form staring down at him. I gave a little wave and I saw him curse as he extinguished the lighter and retreated like a stray raccoon.

In the following darkness, I turned to see the outline of a deer grazing into the backwoods of my home at the end of the line, the inevitable bulldozers being gassed up to tear down the remaining forest to add on to the growing neighborhood. I wondered what spooked the deer, and for some reason, I squinted out into the woods and felt as if something else was gazing back. The feeling subsided.

I went back inside and enjoyed the rest of my coffee with the early news. End of the world as always. The one that got me was a tearjerker interview about some dead girl. I wasn't listening as the reporter turned to it. I instantly changed the channel as they shifted to the dead kid, tuning in to a police procedural I started watching half-heartedly since my sleeping troubles started. Halfway into the episode, I noticed a haze from the window. I stooped on the couch to see fully, and a gray pickup truck reversed on the cul-du-sac outside. I couldn't see in the cabin. I listened to the motor gun as the truck took off with a little backfire at the sudden speed. Just some tourist, lost in the midst of Americana Suburbia. Something about the emptiness of the truck left me wondering, and only when the cat jumped on the coffee table did I push the incident out of my head.

I went to work after catching my show. I got to draw for a living. Architecture, the boring kind of drawing to most. It was more geometry than anything. I set up a canvas and began crafting parallel lines in a fashion that would eventually form a sketch of the courthouse that was undergoing renovation. Most of my jobs were out east, usually to the larger town of Mayweather. It was rare to get a job designing in a town like Greenfield, population 1,209. Out here, the Mayor's secretary always called me direct with the assumed contract. *Draft out a design, then come to town hall to meet the construction crew, Mr. Elliot.* The cat disturbed me and I shoed him off. Daylight was streaming into my little office and I finally stopped when the light vanished from the window. The courthouse was a breathing sketch, the lines standing out with the etch of the varying pencils I used to accentuate the finer points of structure. Something about the tried and true Lady Justice statue I incorporated made me uneasy and I finally tore my eyes

away from my work. I made lunch for me and the cat, then finally stirred into motion as I saw the clock.

At precisely 1:59 PM, I stepped out into the afternoon drizzle, breathing the velvety air. The smell of the Johnson's grill added a lofty charr that always hung over the neighborhood. The Warren's hated that, but then they couldn't smell the Marijuana in their own backyard. I got in my shiny blue Mustang, a hand me down from the old man, some ancient Ford he had loved and maintained. I cruised out of the neighborhood and onto the half a mile strip of cropland before the rest of town. Kept my speed even. Deputy Keller loves to hide under the tree cover of the side roads in a speed trap. The hell was there to hit out here? I suddenly thought back to the truck reversing outside my home. How did you wander all the way into such a remote place?

I drove down the straightaway, passing *Kimble's General Store* and the strip of older buildings off to the side of town before roving down main street with its family run and one-of-a-kind kind of feel before I stopped at the park. It was empty. It always was now. When I was kid, the place was populated with other kids of all sizes. Now they were all a mile down the road, at the AMC movie theater. I got out of the mustang and locked it. I didn't need to do that seeing how sparse the end of main street was, but I did anyway. I threaded down the little sidewalk of the park, taking my accustomed seat on the bench right in front of the swing set. Margaret was there. Excuse me, 'Marcie'. That's what she liked to be called now, too young to appreciate the richness of the name. She liked to be called Maggie last month. She changed the shorthand as readily as I did pencils for my sketches. I used to hate Alexander as a name, so I went by Alex. Now I like my full name, but everyone calls me Alex. Opposites attract.

I sat there and watched Marcie. She played on the swings with the blissful air of a child oblivious to a great many things that surrounded her in the once populated park. I was so entranced by the way she kicked the ground each time she sought to go higher that I didn't notice when her mother sat next to me. She *was* pretty, and I mean that in the past tense, with brown hair twirled around in a bun, the color of mud as it dried against once silky skin. Moist from the rain or a shower. She liked both. She dressed for the weather and had too much makeup on. She watched her daughter with the same look and the same thoughts that I had of her, but with a more outward crack of a smile. That vanished when she refocused and noticed me.

"Alex."

"Lara."

"How are you?"

"Fine, you?"

"The same."

"The same as what? I don't remember."

"Last time."

"Meeting here, or the phone call that Tuesday after?"

"You know, Alex."

"No. I don't."

"You have her for the weekend." Lara got up to leave.

“Bye honey.”

“Fuck you, Alex.”

It’s been three years. I try and talk with her about that every 2:08 on Friday, and she always spits venom in my eye. We were crazy about each other, and now... We didn’t cheat, we didn’t fight, we just woke up one day and... Nothing. That’s not right. That should be reserved for people like Jimmy, my best friend in high school. We were inseparable. Then after we graduated, we never called each other. Last I heard, Jimmy moved out to Mayweather as a plumber. We promised that after we graduated, we’d hit the town every weekend. We never did. At the altar with Lara, we chatted because the Minister was busted in that same speed trap I avoided. Then, me and her said we’d go out every Friday. From roller coasters to walking in the same park I was in now... I don’t need to finish that. People say a lot of things they don’t mean.

Marcie came over, swinging her backpack around as she placed her knees on the bench to hug me as if she were taller than eight years old. She’s got hair with the raggedy consistency of her mother’s, but with the dirty blonde color of sand after sprinkles of crested water to darken it. She had calico eyes to match my shades of Jade, her’s were more bright, like the cat back home. They were big like a playful cat’s as well.

“Daddy!” She exclaimed as she hugged me, reflective teeth made all the brighter by the dark spots of her absent baby molars.

“Hi sweetheart! How was your day?”

“So boring! We had to read an entire chapter of our history books while Mrs. McCready graded our homework! By the time she was finished, she made us read the last chapter again!” Marcie exclaimed with the natural loudness and redundancy of children. I put on a faux smile all the same as we walked back to my car, hand in hand.

“Did I ever tell you that Mrs. McCready was a teacher when I was in grade school?” I asked. I’d already told Marcie about this, but it was two years ago since the teacher in question moved up from 1st grade to the 3rd.

“No way!” She didn’t remember. That made me somewhat sad, as I realized she probably didn’t remember much of her parents together.

“Well, she was, and back then, she’d conk kids on the head with a yardstick if they said or spelt her name wrong.” Marcie laughed at this, a guttural little giggle that, like most vocal tics of kids, was unnecessarily emotional and over-the-top.

“But that was so long ago, and you’re so old!” We laughed again, and now I was being over the top for the sake of hiding my annoyance with what she said. It was just one of those statements from children you had to brush off. They were painfully honest, and I knew the bags under my eyes had only grown darker. At least Lara hid her garbage bags behind the make-up.

We stayed silent after that. Kids are surprisingly perceptive, and I think she caught on to my contained glower. Her mother wore her emotions so openly that she would have been good at reading people. I tried to think of something to say, but couldn’t find anything. We were about to step off of the sidewalk to the uneven pavement of the still-empty parking lot when I stopped suddenly. A gray truck lurched down secluded main street, having just completed a turn from the

local fast food joint off to the side. It was an old and rugged vehicle, a Ford, with chipped paint and mud-stained tires that reminded me of Lara's ugly hairdo. Even in the meek daylight of a dreary day, I couldn't see inside the cabin. The truck seemed to go slower than it needed to as it straightened itself on the road and beamed back into town, out of sight.

"What is it Daddy?" Marcie asked, the bubble of childlike bliss burst as I stood stone-like, watching the truck creep down main street and out of view.

"You're hurting me." She added and only then did I snap out of it and realize how hard I was clutching my daughter's hand.

"Sorry, it's nothing, I just-" I trailed off, not sure how my breath held in my lungs at that moment, or how the neurons of my brain suddenly crossed wires. I made an effort to move on after that, hurried to my car with Marcie, and we bundled in. The warning of a child in the front seat beamed down at me from her unreachable sun visor. I flipped it down as clouds began to roll in. Marcie had a strange look on her face, the developing emotions at odds. Watching her analyticism made me happy, in a morbid way, made me think she'd go on to be a professor or a lawyer. She'd live in Mayweather, forget all about me, and Lara.

We resumed idle chatting, the uneventful, robotic kind that padded the humid air we breathed. I drove to Kimble's, back down main street... Where the truck went... We arrived. It was a mini-mart in a similar strip of older establishments. Kimble's was the size of a moderate pharmacy and with more character in its half-limited selection than the overblown choice in any major outlet. Inside, I went and picked out a bundle of socks, and let Marcie grab a toy. We practically jogged down to the kid's section, a single row of toys, one side pink and fluffy, the other gray and dull. She picked a Barbie.

On the way out of the toy aisle, we ran into the Johnson's and their children, twin girls. We talked with the same familiarity of neighbors, as always, the usual awkward air of the solo parent hanging over us. Carl Johnson was a de-facto friend, and always tried to get me to go along on his fishing trips. Sometimes I did. It wasn't a bad time, and I knew I should go. I also knew I should finish that courthouse drawing. And spend more time with Marcie. Mrs. Johnson kept eyeing me as I talked with her husband. Lara and her were good friends. Marcie looked bored, she didn't like their twins, and I could tell they were the kind of spoiled girls who would go on to be fighting over who would be captain of the cheerleaders. I ended the talk and we took off. Marcie tugged me down a cramped side aisle with renewed excitement, lost as I recognized her plight to find the frozen foods section. Failing at that, she turned to me.

"Can we get ice cream?"

"On the way home, honey." I grunted with more trife annoyance, a salt-laced wound tearing open at my accidental use of the nickname I used for Lara. She was adventurous, always wanting to go out long before my faltered promise to do just that with her drove us apart. My usual response to the change of the wind style of activity that suited her was just what I told my daughter. In my self-deprivation as we advanced to the front of the store, I bumped shoulders with a man rounding the corner to the aisle.

“Sorry, pal.” I mumbled, seeing through the corner of my eye the way the man tensed up as we continued after the bump. He muttered something I didn’t catch and I couldn’t help but glance back as he continued. I saw him split down the halfway point of the aisle, just a lasting wisp of his brown coat skipping over. I had been so lost in the moment that I didn’t see what he looked like, or if I knew him. I paused, then advanced as Marcie pulled me along again, shouting her delight about ice cream.

I paid Mr. Kimble, the old owner of the store, with his wire frame glasses, a kind little laugh showing his soft-spoken demeanor that led him to be the once frontrunner for the Mayor’s seat. I paid for our items and we left.

I drove down the splitting side road away from the bulk of town. Continued for a country mile till we came to the family run parlor down by the older section of town. The nearby cluster of buildings that had been around since Greenfield’s founding in 1844 were all dilapidated and closed, the town center moved that mile away so it was right by the once newly built highway, and even that was being stolen from us. We were waiting in line at the parlor, the only remaining store, and Marcie wanted to talk.

“Can we go to the movies this weekend? Please!” She accelerated the please into multiple syllables, and I couldn’t say no, although I wanted to. There was a new kids film at the cinema down main street, an adventure movie. I didn’t remember the title.

“Sure sweetie, hey I could even teach you how to sneak candy in!” I replied with a jestery smile to try and move past whatever my reasoning was for not wanting to go.

“Mommy already showed me with her purse.” Marcie said. Then her entire face lit up.

“Can she come too?”

“No, sweetie. She wouldn’t like it.” I said weakly, letting her down easy.

“Why do you hate each other?” My daughter asked with innocence. Curiosity.

“We don’t, ‘hate’, we just... Stopped working.” I explained, thinking of the friend’s metaphor again.

“Mrs. McCready talked about her divorce the other day.” Marcie touted. She spoke so simply about it. I envied that. A great lawyer, always speaking her mind.

“What does Mommy say about me?” I asked as Marcie played around with the recliner of her seat, adjusting so her eyes sank below the dash.

“She doesn’t like to talk about it either, but sometimes at night I hear her whispering bad words about you under her breath.” I nodded, not sure what I was expecting. She still spoke plainly, then the curiosity took over again.

“When you get married... Isn’t everything supposed to be happy?” Might as well be a boot to my gut. I started and stopped a few times to show her I was thinking.

“It is. Then somewhere along the way, it gets left behind.” It was the best I had.

“Like my old dolly!” Her toy, which she dropped out the car window on a road trip to Mayweather. She didn’t tell us about it until a few miles later, and by the time we turned around, it was gone. What scared me now, was how uncaring she was when it was lost. We stayed silent until we got our ice cream, then headed home. Her oblivious nature returned while her words left

a wound in me. I wanted to start up again and explain everything to the picture of innocence next to me as I found words of my own, but I knew it was no use.

We went inside my home on the quiet street, and Marcie was instantly at the side of the cat, who in turn propped himself up on his perch to get her ice cream. Lara and I adopted a cat and a dog, meant to be this weak facsimile because Lara wasn't getting pregnant at first. She got to keep the dog. The day flew by after we got home. I helped Marcie with her math homework, having to use the heavy-handedness to motivate my daughter. I was stern, and she pouted, but did her work, and while I didn't let her know, every answer was right. Now I went to work, and she stooped into my office and examined my sketch. She was talking a lot, like kids do, and I shooed her away as I had the cat. I needed to think as I erased and traced. History began to repeat as I was stirred into motion by the absence of light in the window.

I made dinner, some grocery store pizza. I moved out of the kitchen while it baked, and I joined Marcie in front of the TV for twenty minutes of kiddy comedy. The oven went off and I jogged into the kitchen. I readied the pizza while Marcie came in and sat at the table. The pizza was hot, and we didn't talk. The quiet was strange now as the normally provocative child stayed still, something changing. I didn't know what to say again, so I stayed silent and made sure her pizza wasn't too hot before she ate it. Then it was time for bed. I made sure to check the showings at the theater tomorrow, and I already had a plan of the day forming in my mind. I had to make the most of it.

Marcie hopped onto her bed, the little guest room at the back of the first floor converted to her bedroom after the downsizing move. It wasn't anything like her old room, the one Lara and I painted pink ourselves after Marcie was born, the crib I had to enlist my then-alive mother's help to construct. What happened? Marcie was content, and she was never the kind of child that loathed going to bed early. She had that brainy head on her shoulders that told her going to bed early would just let her get up sooner tomorrow. I stooped, and kissed her forehead.

"I love you, Marcie." I said with the bland affection of words that meant more than one could ever understand. Maybe more than I could ever understand.

"I love you too." Marcie yawned and turned over, her words empty as she didn't understand, practically asleep already. I lingered for a moment, then left and journeyed to my own bed upstairs. I was halfway up before I groaned and went back down to refill the cat's water bowl. Headed back up. I crawled under the covers and waited for the heat to kick in. Sleep didn't come easy. Again. Doctor Clarke, got to talk to him. But he knows everyone in town, knows Lara, always talking about her when I go in. I tossed and turned all night and with the strange haze that comes with the clarity of turning over at night, I realized how empty I felt. It wasn't right that I only got to see my daughter three days a week, it wasn't right that the neighbors talked about me behind my back. It wasn't right that I woke up every morning to nothing. What am I going to do tomorrow, except cling to a family already broken? What does it mean, love, hate, why do I think of Lara and wonder what could have been when she's long moved on? Why is it I did everything right, and I still wake up alone, and unfulfilled?

I heard the cough of a muffler in the bleak haze, and I turned over to see the window and a brief reflection outside, but of what my dulled mind could not interpret. Still, just like my breathing had become. I kept silent as I laid on my back for several minutes, whatever it was, gone. But still lingering. Seconds caved to minutes, nothing happening and my own stubbly brain kept me from getting up and looking outside. It might have been the truck. There was a heavy fall like the shattering of glass as the digital clock to my right hit two in the morning. I turned over and pulled the covers up as I settled back in. There's nothing out there.

I think I finally slept that night, if only in between blinks of my spring-operated eyelids. I had a dream when I finally fell asleep. I don't remember what happened in it, aside from me getting out of bed and getting my brother's gun he sent over a long, long time ago. I opened my eyes and found my hands empty, but trembling. It was light out, so I went to make breakfast. Waited for Marcie to slug her way out of her room in the little flower pajamas I'd bought for her. I hadn't noticed that last night. It made me smile.

We went to the movies at noon. Down the road, the same beaten road through main street, past the highway. Beyond the thoroughfare were all the big businesses, slowly constructed building by building since the 1950s when Eisenhower ordered this highway to cut through our land. It had always served as a sort of invisible barrier separating us from them. While we were still in Greenfield, we were far from home. At the end of this corporatized lot was the castle of a cinema. I pulled in, we got out, paid for the tickets, popcorn, candy, soda. I used credit without looking at the total, but still winced when I heard the electronic beep.

It was the first door on the left, the grand screen. I tried to get into the movie, but just ended up blinking in the dark gloom of the theater, that haze clouding over me again like I was tired, which I was, but unable to rest. Now wasn't the time, I jostled after a surprising explosion just a few minutes into the film. I struggled to remember what the rating was. Marcie seemed to enjoy it. She was fawning over the film as we left. I let her talk for fear she'd realize how belittled my focus was. We were walking back to the car when I saw it. The truck. The same gray truck. Definitely gray. Not silver. It was parked maybe three spots diagonal from my mustang. I couldn't see inside.

"Get in the car sweetie." I said to my 8-year-old. The keys were in my hands, unlocking the automobile from afar. I was running on instinct. I wasn't going with her.

"What's wrong?" Marcie asked.

"I just need to check something. Go on, you'll be fine."

"I don't want to be alone." She protested.

"I'll be looking after you. You'll be fine. Just play with the radio until I'm back. OK?"

"OK."

She walked the remainder of the beaten tar parking lot to the car. Hopped in. Locked the doors herself. A great lawyer. Always thinking. I was satisfied she'd be safe, although I realized at the moment she wouldn't be able to use the radio to occupy herself. The keys were in my hand. It would be fine, I just needed a minute. I walked to the truck, my head turned to watch my car while I walked. There was no one in the truck. I waited for a hot minute as I watched my car,

concealing myself along the side of the truck facing the empty parking lot. Then there was a beep as the truck started. I turned as I heard the footsteps around the other side. I wasn't a fighter, but I knew the element of surprise was all that mattered. I sprang around the truck, my heart in my ears as I shot out and grabbed the guy on the other side, jostling him into the side of his truck.

"Ah, what the fuck-!" I heard as my eyes settled on the man in the lean brown coat, the same man I bumped into the other day. The owner of the truck.

"Who are you?" I asked as he shoved back in an equally awkward grip.

"Who the-what? Can't you read, asshole?" He gestured back to the window of his pickup. I glanced and saw a sticker of little hand-drawn figures denoting *Ray's Electric and Gas Co.*

"Why have you been following me?"

"Who the fuck are you?! Look, they called me down from Mayweather to work on the new courthouse. Some dipshit architect messed up his deadline and they had to cancel the day, so I came to see a movie!" The guy shoved me away again as I let go and stepped back. He came forward and straightened his jacket with a scoff like this was just an annoyance to him.

"Sorry." I said as I stepped away, not taking my eyes off the guy as he went his own way, cursing but uncaring. He'd already forgotten me.

I got in the car. Drove back without saying a word. We got back inside the house and I encouraged Marcie to fiddle with the TV while I checked the answering machine. Two messages from city hall, one from last night, another from this morning, denoting my deadline and lack of contact. I'll call them back tonight. Right after the Doctor. I did, and by the end of the weekend I had an appointment and an apology set up. We stayed inside the rest of Saturday and Sunday, playing board games, watching TV. I even taught her how to draw a little. It actually wasn't that bad. My sketch was late, but done. I spent the whole time with Marcie, just goofing off. Uneventful, but we both enjoyed it. Then at 8 P.M. sharp that Sunday, Lara pulled into the cul-du-sac. She didn't bother to get out anymore. I walked Marcie out and stood by the drivers door of Lara's scarlet red sedan until she buzzed her window down. She didn't say anything, didn't look at me. Just waited.

"Do you... Ever get the feeling you're being watched?" I said quietly at last as Marcie packed her things in the back. Organized, a great lawyer.

"Yeah. By you Alex, you stare. The first time I met you, good God, I thought you were a-" She stopped herself short as Marcie started to listen in.

"Well I've been out this weekend, and I kept seeing this guy. Over and over again, and I swear he was following me. But then I confronted him, and he's just some guy." I said in a bit of a trance as my eyes prodded around, looking for an excuse to not look at her.

"It happened again?" Lara asked, more disbelief than concern.

"That guy in the bar was eyeing you, Lara."

"You were right next to me. Where you should've been, instead of dragging me out of there. I never told you, but Irene came to me a week later with concern that you were hitting me. Because of the way you act." Now I was stunned. Irene Johnson. That same neighbor I didn't like too much. She was too nosy.

“I was trying to keep you safe. Keep her safe.” I replied.

“Yeah, and a bear hug can break your back if it’s tight enough.” She mouthed off. We lapsed into silence.

“Look, I think you need to see a doctor.” Lara said after a spell.

“Yeah, I called old Clarke last night and set it up for tomorrow actually.”

“That’s good.” Lara nodded with a strange sense of relief.

“If I need someone to talk to...”

“You can always call. If nothing else, I’ll at least be painfully honest with you.” We both chuckled. Her’s was more awkward.

“Thanks. I’ve been trying to talk with you for a while.” I admitted.

“It won’t change anything, Alex.”

“No. Can’t make anything worse either.”

“Fair enough. Bye Alex. Good luck.” Against all odds, she smiled a little bit.

“Bye daddy! I love you!” Marcie called from the backseat as Lara started to reverse out.

“I love you too!” I shouted back, remaining where I was and waving to them as the sedan drove away. I remained outside for a spell. Took in the air, ignored the stares of my neighbors through their half-closed windows. I went back inside and got to bed. Still had trouble sleeping. Didn’t have any bad thoughts that night. Didn’t hear any weird noises. I drifted off eventually, and didn’t have any dreams. I woke up the next morning, finished up my sketch and loaded it into the car. Got in, drove out of the suburbs and to Doctor Clarke’s family practice. I was tempted to skip the appointment, but thought of all the times I believed I heard or saw something that wasn’t really there. I got out of the car, and went inside. Nobody was following me.