

The birds find their way either way. Swooping low for end game fruits and decayed carcass as they search for next evenings gain. A large black mass circling a pale white sky, an endless white, one bringing ruin to Mother Nature, may she rest and someday find this rest eternal. The birds know the day well.

It is another day, like any other.

The wind feels it too. There is a jitter as it decides to grace the earth with its presence. The ice stings the face and fills the lungs with a thick fog. Kids will remove their gloves to run hands through the dense sleet forming on grass. Soon the snow will fall and blanket the earth in a new canvas. A canvas to paint another day onto. The wind knows this day well.

Like any other day it comes.

There is but one road to enter this town. It runs straight through to its exit. You might miss this quaint space on your way through. People often aim for places beyond this small settlement. However, always stop at the gas station. Pop inside. Say hello. The attendant knows the day well. He sees the bus pull up across the street. The white of the fluorescent lights lining the market ceiling is rivaled only by the dense mounds of snowfall accumulating outside the dank, cramped walls of the lowly establishment. The attendant looks out of the window. His eyes dull over and he looks away. Another bus to drop of no one and pick up no one. Then leave once more to begin the cycle anew. But the bus knows the day well. It has a delivery this time around.

Jack was back in town.

...

A slender, pointed figure slowly lowered his feet down the steps of the bus that pulls up slowly to the side of the road. It squealed to a spine quivering halt, tight and comfortably next to the bus stop sign, the metal plate hanging off its bottom nail. The man exiting stomped down with every step. His rhythmic stomps were stifled by the smothering sound of snow beneath boots. The man, although from his outward appearance it would feel more appropriate to call him a boy, with his short stature and baggy padded jacket, a black beanie clasped to his head,

stood at the foot of the bus's entrance for a moment, looking out at the vast field of snow to his left. He took in a deep breath and smiled. He let the air out, and it arrived as a flowing mist from his lungs. The boy was holding his flip phone up to his ear with his left hand, and he turned and waved the driver goodbye before adjusting the straps of his backpack. The doors hissed close and the bus's hydraulics lifted it slowly half a foot higher than before, and, with a yawn, the bus was gone.

The boy followed the bus with his eyes as it disappeared into the distance. He turned slowly, stopping when his eyes fell upon the gas station. His right hand moved to his stomach. From the other side of his phone call he heard a voice.

"So you made it then? Back home, one piece?" the voice asked.

"Yeah Stanley I'm back. Feels weird as hell but I'm back," The boy replied, looking down the road at the increasingly dense array of buildings downtown.

"Nice, nice. Give the ol' rag tag place a good middle finger for me, would ya Jack?" Stanley exclaimed with vigorous emphasis.

"Come on, it's not that bad. Even if we have seen better. I got a soft spot for this place," Jack muttered through his chuckles.

"Sure, sure. So what's first on the to do list? Gonna go see the family?"

"No, actually. I'm, uh... Well I was thinking about, uh..."

"You're gonna go see Jessie first aren't you?"

"Yeah I'm gonna go see Jessie first."

The two laughed to themselves for a moment. Stanley sighed on the other side, his voice coming in gravely with the reception. "Geeze man maybe don't make that the first thing, yeah? I know you've been hung up on this girl but you don't have to make it so obvious"

"I just... I dunno I haven't spoken to her in a... a while. I just want her to know I'm back," Jack said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"And you're horny as hell," Stanley replied abruptly.

"*And* because I'm horny as hell," said Jack, tersely.

They laughed again. Jack ran a hand over his face, letting out an exhausted sigh.

"You're a douche, Stan," Jack spat.

"Yep" Stanley agreed.

"And no it's not like that. It's just..." A slight pause followed.

"*Yeah?*"

"Ever since we left, all year I've been thinking about her, you know. Like... man there was always something about her. She had this look in her eyes that just... It went straight through you. It-it was just this sort of knowing look. Like an understanding. Always told me everything was all right. I dunno, I just feel like I should've taken her with us when I thought about it," Jack said the speed of his words steadily increasing.

"Alright, alright. I gotcha man. Go get her. Now's your chance," Stanley laughed.

"Douche- bag, Stanley. Talk to you later"

"See ya, lover"

Jack turned towards the town, but his hand darted to his stomach once more. He turned towards the gas station. It was time to say hello to the attendant.

...

It was dark and damp that night, a year prior. The snow had just finished falling, and the town wouldn't see more until the following week. The weather was unpredictable. It was a few days into spring and the snow had never looked thicker. The old married couple down Tribute ave would have another fight about why the tarp wasn't on the roof to prevent the melting snow from leaking through the panels. Tiny Tomson Pricardi, about 4 years of age, wouldn't see his pure white cat, Dalson, for another month, and by then he would've convinced his parents to get another one. Can't say no to those eyes. The snow would fall again, no matter how many

times the Jensen's would pray for it to clear in time for their flight to Kansas to see the in-laws. Snow would fall, people would adapt.

And Jack would be gone by sunrise.

He was walking down the street, moving dead center of it. Walking through the dampened paved roads, orange streams of light shimmering off the asphalt. The white snow shimmered over lawns, standing tall and indifferent. Jack made his way down and turned at a small, cot-like house sandwiched between two others that were made to look behemoth next to it. He hopped up the grey, desaturated steps, his boots stabbing through snow and making the old steps creak under his weight. He stood in front of the door, the window lit up from the other side. Jack's hand made to knock, but he hesitated. He breathed slowly, turning his head slightly side to side, taking in his surroundings. He looked down, and quickly wiped off his jacket, straightening it out. He tapped his feet on the ground to remove any snow encased from the walk. He looked to the door once more, nodding his head rhythmically. Jack knocked.

And then he waited.

From the other side two muffled voices could be heard. There were some taps and slams. A high pitched squeal, joy perhaps, sounded off followed by a plain response. The voices grew. Suddenly dim silhouettes could be seen against the drapes behind the door window. The door opened wide. And like that, there she was.

Jessie stood there, the blackest hair imaginable, with streaks of an almost maroon shade in the right light. Her eyes were green swirled into hazel. She had prominent cheekbones and a dimple on her left cheek side that would tear your heart out. She had a light brown parka and bright yellow boots over her black pants. Jessie was everything you could imagine she would be for an 18 year old boy. Jack was trying to find a breath to stand on.

"Hey," Jessie said with a half smile.

"Hi," Jack replied quietly.

Jessie turned to her right and leaned back. She smiled and laughed.

“Mom, come on, back up,” Jessie said.

Jack looked over in time to see a figure move away from the window left of the door, the draps slowly settling back to a static pose. He could hear giggling from inside.

“She’s such a dork,” Jessie chuckled, beginning to step out.

Jack took a long step back as Jessie began to move towards him.

“She’s nice,” Jack responded.

Jessie shut the door behind her and turned to Jack. Her eyes never seemed to leave his.

“So, what’s the game plan?” She said, her smile grew to show a bit more teeth.

“Uh well, my funds aren’t the looking too hot at the moment, and I can’t use the car cause me and Stanley need all the gas we can get,” Jack's voice trailed off as he looked down at his feet, avoiding her eyes.

“Ah, you really know how to treat a lady, Mr. Jackson,” Jessie, throwing her head back and smiling as she moved past Jack and walked down the steps. “I’ll cover dinner, if you want.”

“Uh, you most certainly will not,” Jack exclaimed, jumping off the porch and landing right next to Jessie. “I am going to be chivalrous as hell tonight. I got enough for dinner trust me. You’ll get only the finest McDonald’s from me, m’lady.”

The two of them laughed a bit as they made their way through the snow on the sidewalk and into the center of the street.

“Honestly, sounds perfect,” Jessie said, her eyes closing slightly as she took in a deep breath. “And after that?”

“I thought we could just take a walk. Talk, like usual,” Jack said, smiling.

“Perfect,” Jessie said under her breathe. “oh Jack?”

“Yeah”

“You look nice, today”

...

Jack walked inside the gas station, his clothes disheveled. He breathed out heavily and shuffled his shoulders to loosen the strain of his backpack. He looked the store over, the flickering grey lights giving the room a jitter. Jack walked over to one of the shelves and grabbed a package of crumb donuts. He turned towards the front counter and saw the gas attendant's eyes light up. The gas station attendant raised a finger and pointed at Jack, cracking a smile.

"Is that....Jack? Jack Kihl? I'll be damned it's a been a minute," The attendant beamed at Jack.

Jack approached the counter and put down his donuts. "My God, Danny? How've been man? Still holding down the fort I see"

Danny scoffed at that. "Yeah, guess someone had too. Don't got much else goin' on to be honest. Well hey, where've you been man?"

"Oh me and Stanley booked it as soon as we could. Had to go see the world, you know?" Jack said, pulling out his wallet.

"Suppose so, yeah. Well it's nice you didn't forget about this place. Or my name for that matter. People usually greet me with an awkward 'oh hey....you'," Danny pulled the bag of donuts and flipped it around in his hand, punching in keys on the register with the other.

"Aw course. Couldn't forget you. Star quarterback right here"

"Go Bulldogs," Danny said halfheartedly.

Jack and Danny let out a weak laugh and followed it with a sigh. They stood silent for a moment, wrapped up in a nostalgia's aura, quiet and thoughtful. Jack's head propped up suddenly, and a smile crossed his face as he turned to Danny again.

"Oh hey, how's Reggy doing? You two were pretty tight. Never saw him without you around," Jack said, holding out a couple of dollars.

“Aw yeah. Was the guys self titled bodyguard. Reggy is uh.... Reggy’s not around,” Danny said. His smile had faded almost entirely.

“Oh what? He go out to college. Wouldn’t be surprised, he had a good head on his shoulders. I never really ended up talking to him, though.”

“No he uh... well some things came out. You know?”

“Oh? You mean...”

“You know like, Reggy was obviously a bit different. Everyone could see that. At least the kids at school could. I didn’t care, you know, he was pretty chill, did right by me. But uh... Well it finally came out. To everyone”

“Oh gosh really? Geeze, poor Reggy,” Jack had his head down, his eyes looking for something that wasn’t there.

“Yeah. Next thing you know the whole town knows. Suddenly, he’s not just getting dirty looks at school, but on the way to school. From school. When he goes to the market to grab a drink. I couldn’t cover him twenty-four seven,” Danny sighed, placing his hands on the back of his head. “Not to mention his family knew too at that point. And you know how his father was.”

“Front row, church house, every Sunday. Double sermons,” Jack said, shaking his head.

“Bingo. People started spray painting his house too. Things like ‘faggot’ and ‘queer’. One night they even burnt something out on his lawn. Whole family got ran out of town,” Danny said, moving the donuts towards Jack. “Reggy with them”

“I...just... Poor Reggy,” Jack slowly pushed the donuts into his jacket pocket.

“Haven't heard from him since. That was, uh... about a year ago. But I can only imagine, with his family the way they are, with him the way he was. I can only imagine,” Danny picked a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and put it in his mouth.

The two boys stood there, silently embracing this moment. It felt as if they were toasting their old friend. Danny took the cigarette out of his mouth. Jack looked at him.

“Gonna go on brake, have a smoke. You want one?” Danny said.

“Nah I’m gonna keep making the rounds,” Jack said, feigning a smile.

“Alrighty. I’m sure I’ll see you around, Jack,” Danny said, moving towards the back door and propping it open. Jack opened his mouth to say something, but the words had left. He stood for a moment, and then turned, shoving his hands into his pockets and pushing through the front door.

...

Jack and Jessie walked down the neighborhood street. The clouds were parting in the sky, the dark getting pierced by banners of white moonlight. The pair made their ways to the edge of the neighborhood. There was a warm air about them.

“So ok, I’m gonna be off being poor with Stanley, but what about you? What’re your plans?” Jack said, his feet scraping the ground as he walked.

“Oh gee. Haven't really thought about it, you know? Maybe I’ll just take the year off like you. Figure out what I feel like the next step is,” Jessie said, moving her mouth to one cheek in contemplation.

“Oh come on, we both know you’d just spend the year taking pictures of everything that moves. And everything that doesn’t for that matter,” Jack said, pushing against her as they walked and grinning.

Jessie smiled and pushed back. “Oh you caught me. You know me much too well.”

“ You’ll have to show me when I get back. I’m sure you’ll have entire albums by then” Jack replied, bouncing off of her.

“Aw nothing worth seeing I’m sure,” Jessie said, blushing and lowering her head.

“No honestly, you’re good. You just make everything look... I dunno, different. Like it’s all just this grand thing. Even if it’s just a pile of leaves. It’s just... I dunno. Amazing. I wanna say amazing-” Jack was cut short as Jessie wrapped her arms around his and pressed firmly against

him. His steps staggered momentarily before leveling out. His breathing became unsteady. He looked towards her, then forward.

The last house they passed was plain white with a large front stoop and a massive red pick-up parked in front. Jack glanced over.

“Oh hey, it’s Reggy’s house. Wonder what he’s planning now that school’s out. Hopefully he gets out of here. It’d be better for him,” Jack said, slowing a bit.

“How’s that? Do you mean...?” Jessie replied.

“Yeah well, you know. He’s a bit awkward and the guys at school just... I dunno I’ve always thought that I should go up to him, tell him I got his back. Cause you know, I do, “ Jack said, turning away. Jessie and him continued down towards the open road. In the distance was a dimly lit church house with a large black gate around it.

“You should. I’m sure he’d feel better knowing that someone’s standing with him,” Jessie said, pushing her head against Jack’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m sure he would,” Jack said. He looked away from the house.

...

Jack tossed the last donut into his mouth. The sounds of crackling plastic could be heard as he shoved the wrapper into his jacket pocket. He poofed out his jacket a bit and picked up the pace, wiping his mouth with one hand. His fingers ran through some small stubble that had now formed on his chin. He looked onward.

Ahead of him he could see wide open road, the vast fields on either side of him a vacant, faceless white. The dark outline of a church house could be seen ahead. Jack had just

gotten out of the large cluster of shops from town. Ahead of him was just empty, decayed fields and tree clusters against a blinding white sky. As he approached the church house, he could make out singing. A deep voiced bellowed, sending increasingly more powerful notes along the wind. Jack approached the opening in the gate and peered in. He saw a man wearing a black gown shoveling the front path of the churchhouse. He was a larger man, with a grey beard and grey hair above either ear. His face was wrinkled, cheeks sagging slightly. He was letting loose a gospel that was likely to split the earth in two if given but a few more moments. About the light in the sky and the people who touch it. About birds in the trees, and the dark shadows at night, and weeds along dirt roads. Jack knew this song well.

“Still haven't found a new person to clear this out for you, Mr. Sawyer?” Jack said, chuckling at the sight of this man bellowing as he lifted small tufts of snow from one pile to another. The man stopped mid scoop, turning slowly to meet Jack’s eyes. Mr.Sawyer’s eyes had a sincerity matched only by the angels depicted in the steeple glass. He stabbed the shovel into the snow, leaning against it as he beamed with two blinding rows full of teeth.

“Well hello there, my son. You’re looking quite well,” Mr. Sawyer said with a softness that countered his earlier bellows. His tone was wrapped in an air of purity. He reached out a hand and Jack met it with his own. The pastor motioned toward the front steps and the two made their way over and sat down.

“How have you been, my son?” Mr. Sawyer leaned back against the steps, letting out heavy breathes.

“Good. Very good sir. I’ve seen a bit more of the world then before, so definitely better off, I’d say,” Jack said, his eyes squinting as he looked out into the white of the sky.

“Good, good. And how’s Stanley?”

“Oh he’s fine. Still a douche-” Jack covered his mouth, laughing. “Sorry, Pastor. Slipped out”

“Oh, nevermind that, I’m a strong supporter of honesty. Rarely see it nowadays,” Mr. Sawyer said, chuckling. “So, have you been enjoying seeing the town again?”

“Yeah for sure,” Jack said, sighing. “Not much has changed, for sure.”

“Have you visited the family yet?”

“Oh not yet. They are definitely on the list.”

“Please make sure you do, you know you’re parents worried greatly about your plan. I hope you at least wrote them,” the Pastor said, placing a hand on Jack’s shoulder.

“Maybe a few times. Me and Stanley really went with no contact. Shut off the phones and everything. We were adamant about really pushing forward, no looking back. Experiencing what’s out there, you know?” Jack stated, rocking a bit with his words.

“Oh yes I suppose I can. Believe it or not, I understand what it’s like to be a young man such as yourself. I went on plenty of soul searches. Yet, they all led me back to here. And here I remain,” Mr. Sawyer smiled, motioning his arms out towards the snow covering the front of his steeple.

“Still shoveling the same snow year after year,” Jack laughed.

“Well *you* slowly stopped as you grew, and once you were gone the help was gone entirely. Seems my one dollar paychecks aren’t very enticing to anyone around here,” Sawyer said, scratching his chin.

“ Well I hear the minimum wage did go up,” Jack responded. The two chuckled at that.

Mr. Sawyer sighed and looked up. “The snow always looks the same, that much is true. But it always shifts. Little by little each year. It looks the same on the surface, sure, but oh the things it has seen. That’s the true beauty of nature, you see Jack. It always shifts. Changing with time”

The two sat there, enveloped in a sudden silence. Jack watched as a few specks of white floated gracefully down to his feet. He smile.

Jack placed his hands on his knees and stood up.

“Well, I’m gonna keep going, I think. Got a goal in mind,” Jack said.

Mr. Sawyer reached out a hand, and Jack helped him to a stand. Mr. Sawyer held onto Jacks hand for a moment.

“Shall I pray for you on your travels, for old time’s sake?” Mr. Sawyer said.

“Oh gosh I dunno I’m not really into... you know I haven't done this sort of thing in a while,” Jack said, awkwardly shifting away. Mr. Sawyer held on.

“Ey, kid, I’m find few joys at my age. Humor an old soul, will you?” Mr. Sawyer said, his soft voice suddenly very candid. Jack laughed and nodded in compliance. The prayer lasted for only a few seconds. Jack hardly heard the language used in the prayer, but the feeling was clear. It was warm and simple. Honest. The old pastor’s voice seemed to grow with each word, into something bigger than the two of them.

...

“Watch out, big puddle,” Jack exclaims. He puts his arm around Jessie and lifts her, stomping through the puddle, sending water up the sides of his pants.

“Hey! Hello?! Put me down you ass!” Jessie’s words were shuffled under her laughter.

“I’m protecting you from nature! You should be thanking me!” Jack laughed. He put her down and the two of them held each other and laughed for a moment.

“You’re an idiot,” Jessie said, turning away from him, smiling.

“For you, always,” Jack replied. They were walking back towards the neighborhood, having eaten their weight in dollar menu cheeseburgers. They were passing the church house. Jack looked over and saw the large piles of snow creeping up the front of the steeple.

“Pastor Sawyer just can’t keep up with the weather,” Jessie said, peering into the snow.

“Not without me he can’t. Too bad for him I grew up and found out that a dollar for 3 feet of snow was not as much as I thought it was. I stopped doing it for him ages ago,” Jack said, stepping into the large piles of snow.

“He’s only getting older too. I dunno how much longer he’s gonna be able to keep this up,” Jessie said. She plopped into a snow pile and sunk a few inches into it.

“Bet this would be a great picture in the morning. The old steeple windows with the light, and all this snow around,” Jack said, collapsing down next to Jessie.

“Oh absolutely. Duly noted,” Jessie said. She turned to Jack and brushed off his chest, scooting in close as she did.

The two lied silently for a moment. They listened to each others breathes through the light breeze around them. Tree branches shook in the surrounding area. The sky had cleared considerably, and the stars were out. White specks across a black canvas above the small town. Birds nestled in the nooks and crannies of house roofs and the steeple corners. The gas station remained lit as lights went out all over town, one by one, leaving the town in the glow of orange street lamps and a blazing white moon. Everything in town fell asleep. And there, in front of the massive figure of the church, lay Jack and Jessie, their breathing dissipated in the ambient sounds of wind and brush.

“I uh...” Jack started, but stopped. Jessie waited for a moment for him to continue, but as the silence persisted, she turned slightly towards him.

“What?” Jessie asked.

“Oh, uh.. I was just gonna say, I’m glad I asked you. Asked you out, I mean. I’ve... wanted to for a while,” Jack said. He held his breath upon completion of that sentence.

“I...I really wanted you to ask me,” Jessie said, turning over onto her side to face Jack.

“Really?” Jack asked, turning over to her.

“Well yeah, duh. I mean, I was starting to think I’d have to ask you out,” Jessie rolled her eyes, laughing.

“Oh wow. I really didn’t think... I just didn’t know. If I had I... I would’ve asked you out sooner,” Jack said. He slapped his hand over his face and fell onto his back. “Like maybe not the night before I leave.”

“I’m just glad you did. I mean we’ve been friends for like, what, three years now? Figured you would’ve picked up on this sooner but, better late than never,” Jessie said, moving her head onto Jack’s shoulder.

“Oh come on you should know I have no self confidence. I thought you were just being nice,” Jack said.

They both laughed. They slowly turned to look at one another. Then Jessie leaned up, grabbing Jack’s hand.

“Come on, lover boy, time to take me home,” Jessie said, looking at him slyly and pulling him up.

“Yes ma’am,” Jack said.

...

Jack walked through the neighborhood. Snow began to fall. His pace slowed as he began sifting through the snow on the sidewalk. Black flurries of birds began fluttering around in the sky, splitting and colliding closer together in a dance. Jack slowly lifted his feet one after the other, plowing a path through the snow beneath him. He spotted the small cot in the distance. Sandwiched between two behemoth houses. Jack smiled as he approached.

Jack made his way through the front lawn, and began stomping up the front steps. He approached the door, and suddenly stopped. He had his hand lifted to the door, but stood motionless. The wind picked up for a moment, and Jack shuttered. He let out a deep breath. As he brought his hand down, he swore he felt a shake beneath him. Like his legs were failing him. But his hand came down all the same.

Jack knocked.

Jack was home.

The door slowly creaked open. And from the other side he saw a small woman looking up to him.

“Hey,” said Jessie’s mother.

“Hi,” said Jack.

...

Jack and Jessie walked up the steps of Jessie’s home, hand in hand. They stopped at the front door, holding onto one another.

“Do you...wanna come inside, maybe? Have some tea?,” Jessie said, looking up at Jack.

“Oh man, I think I should actually get home. I haven't even packed my stuff yet,” Jack said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Procrastinating again, Jackson?” Jessie said snidely.

“Hey now! Me? Never,” Jack said, looking away from her.

Jessie shoved him. “Just kidding, dork.”

The two laughed. They looked at each other. Silence fell for a moment until they both chuckled uncomfortably.

“Man I uh. I don’t want to go,” Jack said. He grasped Jessie’s hand tighter

...

“Oh Jack, it’s so good to see you. It’s been a while,” Jessie’s mother said, smiling up at Jack. She was shorter than before, and years were visible on her face in a flurry of lines. There were large bags under her eyes.

“Hi there. It’s good to see you too. I just got back today and thought I’d go around and see how people are doing,” Jack said, looking past Jessie’s mother and around the house. It was dim, with all the blinds shut. It looked considerably messy.

“Oh I’m sure everyone's been happy to see you back in one piece. You see your parents yet?” Jessie’s mom said.

“No not yet. I uh, really wanted to come by here first,” Jack said, his breathing quickening.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I was wondering if Jessie was home?” Jack asked, a smile forming on his face suddenly. Jack hadn’t noticed how much he had been smiling for the past few minutes.

Jessie’s mom looked up at him for a moment, as if suddenly stricken by something. Her eyes softened, and the smile on her face flickered for a moment. She opened the door wider.

“I think you should come inside and have some tea.”

...

“No. No, don’t start that now,” Jessie said, fighting against the smile that was crossing her face.

“Well I mean, we just got to...here you know?” Jack said. He looked at her, and lowered his head against her shoulder.

“I know. But you need to get out. Go have your adventure. It’ll be good, to go and just keep going,” Jessie said, lifting his head up and looking at him in the eyes. Her hands moved down to his cheeks. “Can’t put this off, ok?”

“Yeah I know. I gotta go. Besides, gotta make sure Stanley doesn’t get himself killed,” Jack said with a snicker.

Jack looked away and laughed for a moment, but Jessie continued holding his face in her hands. Suddenly the air around them became stagnant. They were level with each other. Jack

looked into her eyes and saw something entirely new from her, something honest and powerful. Neither of them notice the space between them getting smaller. Their eyes never broke away from each other. Their breathing crossed, and they both locked together at the same time. They kissed one another, and held it for a long time. Jack's hands slide to Jessie's sides, one going to the small of her back and pushing her closer to him. They kissed for an undistinguishable amount of time.

When they finally pulled away, all they could do was look at one another. Jack let a breath out. He smiled, a smile that was new and human. One of relief and release. True happiness.

"I... I've wanted to do that for a very long time," Jack said, looking straight through Jessie's endless green eyes.

"I think... I think I have too," Jessie said.

It took them a long moment to pull away from each other. But when they did, they couldn't hide their smiles. Jack stepped back and watched Jessie push the door open, and he turned away to begin walking down the steps. Jessie called out and stopped him in his tracks.

"What's up?" Jack said.

"You're gonna miss the hell out of me," Jessie said, smirking at him, her eyes glazing over knowingly.

Jack looked into her eyes and saw endless possibilities. He saw all the things he could say, everything he wanted to. But what stood out most of all, was that he saw her, in her entirety. Jack opened his mouth to speak. But he never did. He simply nodded back to her.

Jessie smiled, looking out to him still. She shut the door and disappeared from view.

...

"I don't," Jack sputtered. He was shaking his head with vigor. His eyes darted, puzzled, down into the white cloth cover on the table in front of him. His hands were wrapped around a steaming teacup in front of him. "I don't understand."

“Just take a moment, Jack. I know it’s shocking to just... hear something like that. But that’s the only way to put it,” Jessie’s mom said. “I think it’s better that way.”

“But. No that’s. When? How?” Jack said, lowering his head.

“About a month after you left. Maybe two? I really have trouble remembering these days. Feels like a long time, anyhow,” Jessie's mom said, slowly stirring white swirls of cream into her tea.

“You see,” Jessie’s mom started, reaching a hand out and placing it on Jack's arm. “She had gone out to take pictures. And you know her, she never really announced it, so I didn’t think much of it. She left me a note though. ‘Gonna fill this roll up, you can count on it. Love you mom’. I read it a lot after. Strange girl, she never left notes before, but she did that day. I’ve read it quite a bit. I’m sorry I’m rambling. So, she was on her way home, and she was passing by the Hunfreid’s place a few blocks away. And I’m sure you remember how they had those big oak trees, right? They used to leave piles of leaves right in the street, and it was so hard to clean up. Well they had finally hired some people to cut the branches a bit. And well-”

Jessie’s mom stopped for a moment, clearing her throat. She breathed in deeply and swallowed.

She continued, “Jessie was passing under the tree that was getting trimmed. And she wasn’t paying attention, and they didn’t notice her walk by. They cut a huge branch off, a really tall thick one. And it fell on her. Landed right on her-” she paused, choking on her words for a moment. Jack’s hand on her own revived her. “She uh... she passed before they got her to a hospital.”

Jack looked up at the mother. Jessie’s mom's eyes were dampened and red. Jack was trying to read her face, and her mouth. He couldn’t find what he was looking for. His eyes drifted around, empty. A strange lump had formed in his gut.

“She... wouldn’t have... Not like that, you know?” Jack said, letting a weak laugh out. “I mean a... tree branch? She was... She was too good for-” He cut himself off.

“Jessie was a little spitfire, Jack. I know how you feel. But she’s been dead for quite a while now. And I understand, I couldn’t comprehend it either. I was waiting for her to pop her head in for a week after. Wasn’t really until the funeral when it hit me,” Jessie’s mom shuttered. Jack snapped up in his chair.

“I am... I am so, so sorry. I can’t even begin to...I’m just sorry,” Jack said, reaching out to grab the mother’s hand.

Jessie’s mother smiled. “I am too Jack. I am too. And I’m sorry you had to come back to find out like this. I’ve made my peace. Had to, living out here alone. Go to church a lot more now... not sure that’s how you’re supposed to do it but it makes me feel better...”

They both sat back in their chairs. They quietly sipped their tea. Every so often Jack’s face and eyes seemed like they were still searching. But they kept coming up short. Jessie’s mother stood up suddenly, clearing her throat.

“Well now, enough of that. I know her well enough to know that she wouldn’t want us sitting here whining about it,” the mother said, moving to a counter.

“She’d probably call us dorks, seein’ us like this,” Jack said. They both laughed heartily with one another. Jessie’s mom sighed and, with a brief moment of realization, grabbed something off of the counter.

“Well, since you’re here, I think you should have this,” Jessie’s mother said, smiling at Jack as she placed the camera roll in front of him.

Jack slowly lifted it up, eyeing it. He looked up at the mother.

“No I couldn’t have this, you should keep these. She loved her pictures,” Jack said, looking in disbelief.

“She also loved showing you her pictures,” Jessie’s mother said with a knowing smile. “Get that developed, see what she chose to fill it with. I’m sure there’s some great stuff.”

...

Jack walked down the glimmering street once more. He had an energy in his steps that gave him a bounce as he moved. The sky was just becoming illuminated by the oncoming sunrise off into the distance. You could make out the daunting silhouettes of the clouds passing by in the orange hue of it all.

Jack smiled and swung his fists through the air. He felt as though, in that moment, the world was his.

...

Jack kept his head down as he made his way down the blazing white snow. The snowfall had stopped, and the air was still. The only sound that could be heard was Jack as he pushed his way through the flurry of snow in front of him.

Each step felt heavier than the last.

...

Jack had never been happier than he was that night. The last night he would see that town for a while.

...

Jack was heavy as he moved across the countryside. He looked up and around. There was nothing. No birds. No cars. No people.

Jack was alone. Claspng the camera roll in his hand.

And then suddenly, he heard it. Bellowing off in the distance. He looked ahead and saw the gated steeple standing in front of him. Jack began to move once again.

Jack lifted each step and shuffled his way to the front of the churchouse. There he saw Mr. Sawyer, still shoveling away at the snow, bellowing his gospel into the wind. Sawyer was smiling. Jack put the camera roll into his pocket and sighed. He stood for a moment with his hand in his pockets, and then moved towards Mr. Sawyer.

Mr. Sawyer looked up and smiled at him. Jack asked for the shovel. Mr. Sawyer beamed and handed it over, blessing the young boy. The old pastor made his way into the church house, leaving, Jack standing alone in the vast white. He looked around himself for a moment.

Then Jack began to shovel. He stuck it into the ground, lifted the pile of snow, and then put it aside.

And he did this again.

And again.

And once more after that.

...

The end