

THE QUARRY

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Liminality

This road feels familiar.

The girl walks with her backpack slung low. She's forgotten how long she's been walking. Orange streaks across the sky as the sun sinks towards the horizon, the low angle stabbing into the girl's eyes. She brushes her hand across her brow, wondering where her sunshades have gone. Her hand stops, and she stares at it. There are several bands tattooed between the joints of her dark fingers. Her smallest finger has, four, the next finger six, she stares at her middle finger counting and re-counting. Seven. Seven. Every time she recounts she wants to stop at six, but the seventh ring contradicts her. Seven. She shakes out her fingers and digs them through the tight

curls of her hair. *There must have been a tattoo parlour in the last town, she thinks, it'll come back to me soon.*

A nearby sign proclaims the presence of a rest-stop: Ama's Resting Place — 500m. The prairie slowly turns into scrub which then thickens into sparse forest. The turn-off lane shifts to gravel and curves around to meet a parking bay. A small cottage is set behind wooden picnic tables that fan out from the parking bay. The stones of the cottage might have once been a rich brown but the sun has softened the colour to an ashy grey. The windows are small and dirty. Its wooden door is propped open, the surrounding buttonbush creeping up and inside.

The girl walks in and is surprised. It is much more spacious than she had expected. There are several cases, some full of books, others half-filled with knickknacks and spare car parts. Racks of clothes and blankets, sagging armchairs, spinning displays of hats and mugs. There is an old refrigerator beside a large wooden bench that appears to be the paying counter. Perched behind the counter is a small Native American lady. She looks up from her book when the girl walks in. Her name-tag says 'Ama'.

'You lookin' for anything in particular, girl?'

The girl doesn't reply. She stares at the rotating mug rack in front of her, an empty space blooming in her mind. Green plastic mugs flash names at her; Alice, Amelia, Brooke, Catherine, Chloe...

'We ain't got yours?'

She shakes her head absently, staring, seeking, seeking. *I should know this*, she worries, *why don't I remember this?* Taylor, Tiffany, Tina, Tracey...

'No...I don't think so.' She tugs on the straps of her backpack, thinking hard, shifting letters around in her head. Tiah, Teha, Teia, Theia.

Theia.

'I'm Theia,' she announces, swinging the display back to the beginning of the alphabet. 'Do you have a map? I think I lost mine.'

The cottage-keeper, Ama, dog-ears her page and slips off her stool. She pulls a woven basket of maps from the far end of the counter. As Ama rifles, Theia drops her backpack to her feet undoing the straps and extracting her wallet. She flips it open and

catches sight of her ID card. The smaller version of herself, blue-tipped mass of curls, full eyebrows, dark gold eyes, peers up at her. Theia hesitates then pushes the card further into her wallet and goes to fish out a twenty dollar bill. She hears a soft exclamation of victory and looks up to see Ama holding a dirty and slightly creased map. Across the counter, Ama hands her the map but doesn't let go, instead she looks up into Theia's golden eyes. Ama's curiously colourless eyes bore into Theia. Her lower belly quivers and she feels as if the surrounds of her mind are warming and melting away.

A small pocket of memory opens. She's been here before. She has stood in this place seventeen times before. Has walked this road seventeen times. Taken this task seventeen times. Failed seventeen times. Every time remembering a little less. She began with such determination, she thinks. When had she begun forgetting why she journeyed? The tattoo artist had stopped asking what she wanted done. She loses the map every time. Ama always looks at her the same. The hopelessness had crept in sometime around the ninth time and never left. She feels ill after every time she remembers. Familiar rage and frustration rises in Theia, the echo of the past seventeen times over.

Ama releases the map and her eyes. Theia blinks. Forgets.

She looks at the map in her hands. Her stomach roils.

'Where's the bathroom?'

'Next to the postcards and the golf clubs.'

Theia barely makes it to the old-fashioned toilet but as soon as she braces herself above the bowl, the sickness abates. She tosses the map aside and waits, sure that the nausea will return. When it doesn't she pulls herself up to the sink, tapping the faucet to wet her fingers. She digs her fingers into her eyes and rubs. Stars burst behind her eyelids and she sighs. *It'll all make sense*, she tries to reassure herself, *I'll know where I'm going soon*. Her clothes are dusty and dirty, her grey shirt turned nearly as brown as her skin. The cuffs of her jeans are wearing away. Her boots are becoming lost under the thick grime. As she turns to leave she spies the map on the floor. Vertigo pulls her down to the cool tiles. Her head throbs and her stomach lurches. She feels like a dormant volcano trying desperately to reawaken. She presses her palms into her eyes, blocking everything out. She sits quietly. Breathing.

There's a knock at the bathroom door.

'You alive in there, girl?' Ama's voice crackles through the wood and urges Theia to her feet.

'My name is Theia.' She picks up the map and shoves it in the back pocket of her jeans. Ama is standing outside the door when she comes out. She hands Theia an unopened bottle of water and goes back to the counter.

Theia wanders about the racks and tables, taking tiny sips of water. A green notebook catches her attention on one of the bookshelves. She wonders what happened to her old one. She picks it up and goes over to where she left her backpack. Her snack supply is dwindling and she doesn't have any mittens. The evenings are going to get colder. As she browses she finds a bunch of muesli bars and fingerless mittens; pale blue, yellow, some green. *Why aren't there any with fingers?* There are several empty spaces next to the yellow ones. She takes the pale blue mittens and goes over to the paying counter.

'Could I have two more bottles of water as well, please?' Ama fetches them from the fridge while Theia retrieves her wallet. She spies a small cosmetic section and impulsively picks out a tube of purple lipstick. Ama rings it all up for her and Theia passes over a bill. Theia pulls out the creased map and spreads it over the counter.

'Where about are we on here? Also could you point me towards...' she trails off and looks away frowning. Ama peers at her intently, wondering whether the girl will remember this time. Rules dictate that no one must interfere. Even cottage-keepers.

'Never mind.' Theia's voice is small, her eyes remain downcast.

Ama sighs and spins the map around. This time like so many others. She tracks down her cottage, a tiny dot along one of the lesser travelled highways. She plants an 'X' next to it in red pencil. While Ama puts the pencil away and picks her book up, Theia picks idly at a small tear over west Nebraska, feeling hopeless. She looks up to thank Ama but the cottage-keeper avoids her eyes and turns the page of her book.

Theia gathers up her purchases and takes them and her backpack out to one of the picnic tables. She refolds all of her clothes and jams them into the bottom of the pack. She pulls on her sweater. It has a hole in the shoulder. The fingerless mittens she ends up putting on instead of having to later dig around and mess up her system.

Apples that are slightly withered but still good go on top of the muesli bars and the beef jerky, next to her flashlight and bandanas. Her wallet slips into the front section so it's easier to extract next time. She rolls up her blanket and straps it to the top of the pack. The two unopened water bottles go into the side nets. Finally she stares at the sheathed hunting knife that she still feels wary and confused about. She doesn't remember where she got it or what it's for. She hasn't unsheathed it. She ends up sliding it into the rolled-up blanket, not knowing where else to put it. She's left the green notebook and a pen out. Flipping it the notebook open, she writes her name in the front cover and the name of the rest-stop underneath. She closes it again and sticks it and the pen into her empty pocket. She stretches and looks back over to the cottage. *Maybe I'll come back one day. After I've finished. Finished...*

Theia hoists the backpack onto her shoulders. The gravel crackles under her boots as she walks away from Ama's Resting Place.

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Ama watches out the open door as Theia walks away from the cottage for the eighteenth time. She wonders how many more times she will see her come through, yet again asking for a map and gloves. Ama turns the page of her book. Her Resting Place. Her resting place for travellers. They would pull out their maps, she would strike an 'X', on they'd go. Then she'd see others again, twice, three times, five times. Never more.

She wonders if much will change if Theia makes it to the next town. Eighteen times. Her journey is not like the journeys of others before her. Ama thinks of the locked drawer at the base of the counter. *Interfering is forbidden*, she reminds herself. She turns the page of her book. Flips to the next chapter. The other travellers eventually made it. Why not Theia? *Never so many repetitions. Eighteen. Perhaps this time*, a small part of her mind whispers. She tugs on a small key hidden among the many necklaces around her neck.

Ama eyes the small locked draw at the base of the counter.

She closes her book.

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Theia looks back at Ama's Resting Place as the gravel turns back into bitumen. The cottage stands in the desolation of the prairie, the sparse forest surrounding it softening the harshness. She has the most peculiar feeling that she's been there before today, the buttonbush that's creeping inside, the picnic tables, Ama. It feels the strangest kind of familiar. She looks at her mittens, the pale blue contrasting against her hands. *I thought I had some red ones with fingers*, she stares for a moment longer, *or were they orange*. Theia shakes her head and continues walking, following the road north. It feels like the right way to be walking. She knows there is somewhere she is meant to be going but there must be something broken in her br—

Broken.

Her temples throb.

Broken Bow.

She gasps and rips the notebook and pen out, writing on the first page she lands. She drops to the ground, scrabbles for her map and searches, searches. Ama's red X. Her finger follows the road north.

Broken Bow.

The prairie wind whips up and pulls at the map under her hands. She holds onto a corner desperately but the wind catches a tear and tugs. Half of the map tumbles away. Theia stumbles to her feet and runs. The wind whips the paper higher and higher. From behind her a truck horn blares. It swerves, headlights blinding her and she lurches to the side, falling into a buttonbush. The wind drops and the truck fades away into the distance.

Theia picks herself up. The prairie is quiet. She walks forward and hears the crinkle of paper under her boot. It's half of a map. The southern half of Nebraska. Theia looks around the prairie, wondering if the other half is close by. She shrugs and folds the half up and shoves in into her bag. She pats her jeans down and frowns, she thought she had a pen tucked away somewhere. Perhaps not.

Theia dusts herself off, hikes her backpack higher, and begins to walk into the darkening dusk.

This road feels familiar.