

A desert landscape at sunset. The sky is filled with soft, golden light from the setting sun, which is partially obscured by clouds. In the foreground, there is a field of green and yellow wildflowers. A single saguaro cactus stands prominently on the right side. In the background, a range of rugged, dark mountains is silhouetted against the bright sky. The overall mood is serene and natural.

EFICTION

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A CALL FROM PARIS

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“Do you remember when we used to talk about renting a one-bedroom apartment, and saving all our money to travel the world?” she asked him.

“Yes, I do,” he answered, his voice quiet on the phone.

“Do you remember when backpacking across Latin America sounded fun?”

His voice grew even quieter, now. “I do.”

“Why can’t we think like that, anymore?”

He sat there, pondering, the cold phone pushed against his ear. He didn’t know. He didn’t know what happened, or how.

“Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

They were 35 and 39. Married for five years, together for ten. And this Tuesday night, summer rain tapping against their four bedrooms’ towering windows, they spoke countries apart. A business trip ... yet again.

She often wondered why she took them—Money, that’s right.—

And he sat alone, in the dark. Just another routine weeknight. Just another routine.

“Why didn’t we do it?” she continued, her voice broken by static from the long distance phone call.

“Do what?”

“Save and travel.”

“Your mother,” he reminded her. “My school loans.”

She sighed. And maybe wept. He couldn't be sure, because of that damn static. People who traveled lived in a bubble, he reminded himself. They lived on trust funds or skirted responsibility.

“Do you ever wish we could give it all up?” Her voice sounded serious, and for a moment, his heart jumped. He felt a tingle again, a spark of excitement.

“Give what up?”

“Everything.”

He began to say yes, but something stopped him. And he sunk lower into his chair, the beginnings of a grin fading from his face.

“What about the house?”

“We can rent it.”

“What about our jobs? We may not find work after we come back.”

“Fuck my job.”

He could hear her pacing on the other side now. He knew his wife well enough to detect when the anxiety started.

“Do you remember what it felt like?” Her voice pleaded with him, begged, like a hungry man desperate for a bite of bread.

“We have responsibilities now,” he reminded her, and wondered why he didn't feel heated. They'd argued like this before, and the rage always began crawling up his neck to pound at the doors of his head. But this time, it didn't. Instead he just felt ... *numb*.

“We don't have kids.”

“We have cats.”

“They can stay with my sister for six months.”

“She’s allergic.”

He listened as she took a deep breath, her voice shuddering as she exhaled. “I guess you’re right.”

The world stopped with her words, with her surrender to his rationale. Someone was gripping his windpipe and squeezing. Cutting off the life. Why did she always have to give up on him, on them?

“How’s Paris?” he asked, desperate to change the subject.

“The same as every other place.”

“How can Paris possibly be the same?”

“Same room service, same limos. Same conference centers.”

“You should go and visit Versailles, while you’re there.”

“With what free time?” Her voice snapped this time, revealing a new edge—something he’d not heard before.

“I just thought☒”

“You just thought what? That even if I had free time, I’d want to go alone?”

The pit in his stomach returned. He stood from his chair and wandered to the kitchen, lights dimmed around him, rain now pounding harder outside. In the distance, thunder rolled across the valleys and quick, flashing lights illuminated the stove. He swung open the nearest cabinet and grabbed the bottle of Scotch.

“I thought you liked traveling for work,” he said.

“It’s not the same.” Her voice was hard, and she absently played with delicate stockings and high heels. She could still recall the feeling of hiking boots and boulders under her feet.

He poured a glass full of Scotch.

“What are you doing?”

He took a large gulp, wincing as the liquor burned down his throat. “Nothing,” he said. “Just drinking some water.”

“Do you remember when we used to wake up at two in the morning?”

He stopped drinking for a moment.

“And photograph the meteor showers?”

“Yes.”

“When was the last time we did that?”

December 14, 2010. Almost two years ago. He would never forget that night, when they made love in the back seat of their car—dynamite exploding inside of her ... jeans pushed around his ankles ... laced panties wedged into the dashboard’s corner. She left for New York the next day.

“I can’t remember,” he said.

“Oh.”

He cringed at the hurt in her voice and took another swig of Scotch, forcing it down. “When are you flying back?”

“Thursday night. Just two more days.”

“And then where are you going?”

She sighed. “I don’t know.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but she began speaking first. “I love you, Jason.”

He hadn’t heard those words in a month. The Scotch burned in his stomach and smacked him upside the head. “I – I love you too.”

“You’re drinking your Scotch again.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Aren’t you?”

He slammed the glass down and heard her breathe into the phone. The static returned, reminding him just how far away she remained.

“I was thinking,” she started, “maybe after I come back, I’ll quit.”

“You don’t want to quit.” He cursed himself for speaking before thinking.

“Stop acting like you know what I want.”

“What will you do?”

“Let’s rent out the house. We’ll move into a small apartment and save.”

“We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

“Fuck the why!”

She broke down into tears now. “I’m tired of the ‘why.’ Everything is ‘why this’ and ‘why that.’”

“We’re not trust fund babies, Renee.”

The tears flowed freely now, spilling like water down a flooded river. She convulsed on the other line, squeezing delicate stockings until they ripped, staring at the flat screen television propped neatly above exquisite wood-carved drawers. White walls ... beige ceilings ... a single framed painting of a flower field.

She’d seen that same painting downstairs in the lobby. A copy.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked her, growing more

desperate by the minute. He didn't want her to cry. He *hated* when she cried.

"I want 'us' back."

He shoved the Scotch aside. Was she serious?

"Take the leap with me," she begged.

"Renee?"

He looked around the house. Four bedrooms, three bathrooms. His own office and gym. Those damn school loans. Everything looked so empty in the darkness.

"Do you remember when we used to talk about renting a one-bedroom apartment, and saving all our money to travel the world?" she asked again, her voice quiet and tiny, almost scared.

He nodded in silence, and she continued. "Do you remember when backpacking across Latin America sounded fun?"

It still sounded fun, he told himself. But people who traveled lived in a bubble.

"I lied," he said.

"About what?"

"I do remember our last meteor shower together."

Even though his words slurred together from the booze, he heard her smile, if such a thing was possible. And then, she opened the door to something bigger.

"Let's do it, Jason."

It was getting late, and he had work early the next morning. The wind picked up outside, ferocious, vibrating their home's windows. And the thunder's gentle rolling now turned to crackling violence above their house.

He had to get to sleep. His school loan payment was due. So was the mortgage. But all he could think about was loading a backpack and running away to Thailand or Eastern Europe. With her.

“I don’t know.”

“Just say yes.”

“I need to get to sleep.”

She sighed, and he felt the hopelessness return to her voice. God, he needed a drink.

“OK,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He heard the phone pull away from her ear. And with it, his life sunk away. A stabbing despair sliced through him then, and he suddenly called out.

“Renee!”

But she didn’t hear, and the phone spit back only silence. Forcing down another gulp of Scotch, he said aloud, “I was going to tell you ‘maybe.’”