

West to East

Right now I am not really sure where home is.

Since for this trip I am to be the passenger and navigator, I am hoping there won't be much to navigate. Once we get on Route 90 and head east it will be clear sailing. Route 90 will take us all the way to where we want to go.

The tricky part is getting to Route 90 and the real tricky part is getting out of L.A.

Everything I own has been carefully packed into boxes and stacked in the back of this rental truck my father is driving. My father flew out to L.A. from Massachusetts a week ago to help me move back east or to *relocate* as my mother says. To my mother, relocate means moving back home. But to me right now I'm not sure what relocating means, I'm not sure where home is.

I just know that right now we are on the 10 Freeway, moving along with the traffic. I tell my father which lane to get into, which lane to stay in. Soon we pass downtown L.A. and then we are out of L.A. County. The landscape changes. We are in the desert.

I am beginning to feel homesick, and we are still in California.

Meeting Will's Wife

Before I met Will I met his wife. And before I met Will's wife I met Ian.

My friend was visiting from Boston and she wanted to see the Central Coast of California—the San Luis Obispo Mission, the Hearst Castle, Morro Rock. One Saturday night in a bar between Harmony and San Simeon we met Ian. One thing led to another.

Ian said Will was his best friend and he wanted me to meet him. We arranged to meet Will and his wife in a pub in downtown San Luis Obispo. Will was late, but his wife was right on time.

Will's wife, Ian and I waited for Will to arrive. We drank beer and ate nachos. When Ian left our table to get us another round, I asked Will's wife how long she and Will had been married.

"A year," she said. She took a long sip of her beer and added, "I want to leave him."

She began to tell me how every week she put money away into a bank account Will did not know about. "It's a secret account," she said. "I'm saving up to leave."

This is what I keep about Will. This is what I keep returning to again and again. Will was married, but his wife wanted to leave him. She was saving so she could leave. These are the words that seem to justify everything, seem to justify my own behavior, my own desires, my own inability to say no and never see Will ever again. Since Will's wife wanted to leave him, it didn't really matter that I slept with him.

Will's wife finished what was left in her beer mug. "But last month I hit a deer with my car. I had to use all the money I had saved to fix the front end."

Before I could say anything Ian appeared at the table with our beer. “What are you girls talking about?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Will’s wife said as she looked at me. “I’m just telling Nora about how that deer jumped in front of my car.”

“Those pesky deer,” Ian said as he sat down next to me.

I always kept Will's wife's secret and never betrayed her trust. I never told Will what his wife told me that night while we waited for him to show up. I never told him about the secret bank account; although there were moments I wanted to.

I have always wondered what compelled Will’s wife to tell me, a stranger, her secret. And later I wondered if this was her secret at all. She never left. She never got into her car and drove away, taking her secret money and leaving Will behind. Did she never save enough to leave?

And now here on the river—many miles and years later—I am left to wonder: How much is enough? How much does it take to leave Will and to leave Will for good?

Utah Calling

It is late in the afternoon and my phone rings. I answer it and it is Will. "I'm in Utah," he says. He is shouting to make himself heard over the sounds of the interstate.

He continues to shout, "I'm headed east, to Ohio. I thought you could meet me halfway."

I wonder where halfway is. I wonder how long it will take me to get there.

"Halfway?" I shout trying to make myself heard over the interstate in Utah.

"Like Buffalo or Niagara Falls," he shouts back.

"Niagara Falls?" A horse has just gone by the front of my house and Denali is running to every window, barking. I raise my voice even louder. "Isn't that where people go for their honeymoons?"

Right before the operator breaks in to cut off our call, Will shouts, "Nora, think about it. I'll call you in a couple of days."

And then the line goes dead.

The Whiteness of Salt

I find myself dreaming of California. A California I have never known. A California of wild flowers always in bloom, of long beaches, of mountains, of cattle by the ocean, of desert springtime, of calmness. The California I knew was this, but not this. It was this and other things, of things mixed up with the beaches, the mountains, the desert, and the wild flowers.

I dream of this anyway, of this California; and I dream of it often.

I dream of the pier, of standing at its edge, watching the otters in the kelp beds directly ahead. I dream of Will and I dream of the desire to touch him and of my fear of doing so. I dream of a bell ringing and of a servant girl coming in every day stretching her small, gloved hand. I dream of driving through the fields, through the small towns, through the salt flats.

It is the salt flats that strike me—the vast expanse of white. I have seen whiteness like this before. I have seen it my whole life in New England where I was born and lived until I left. But that had always been snow and the whiteness of salt is different. It is different to be moving 80 miles an hour in a sixteen-foot rented truck.

The asphalt lies before me, stretching out like it always has. And then the image of the servant girl comes before me, the image of her gloved hand moving carefully, methodically over the counter, over the window sills, over the furniture.

Past Languages, Ancient Regrets

There was a time when I thought Will and I spoke the same language, an ancient language, a language of close contact, a language of connection. I believed Will and I were connected.

But of course I was mistaken.

"Any regrets?" he asks. I have not spoken to Will in over a year and this is what he says, "Any regrets?"

I have a list of regrets and of course some of them include Will.

I am wondering why Will is calling now, right now after a year has gone by. But of course he doesn't say.

"I thought I better give you a call before too much time went by," he says before he hangs up.

And I am left to wonder how much time is too much time? When can I assume that I have become a part of Will's past? When, I wonder, are we the past?

Shadows of Truth

I am sitting in Will's kitchen and he is cooking dinner. His wife is out of town and I have come up for the weekend. It is late fall and early evening. We have been to the beach for a walk. We walked for a long time along the shore among the rocks. I am always amazed by the coast line here—the green pastures leading down to the beach, the mountains in the distance. There is a chill in the air.

"Who would have thought," Will says, " all of this would have come from that one night."

Will is referring to us, our being together, and to the night I met Ian. I don't like to think back to that night or to think back to Ian. I wish I had never met Ian, wish I had never become involved with him. But then I remember Will and then I realize that wishing is complicated.

I like to think it was Will I was supposed to meet that night. It would explain things and it would give meaning to my time with Ian. Then there would have been a reason why I was attracted to Ian, why I felt compelled to pursue him in a manner I had never done before.

I tell Will this.

"I think it was you I was supposed to meet that night."

Will laughs.

"Ian was pretending to be you," I continue.

"An imposter," Will laughs again as he fills a pot up with water.

"He said he was a glassblower. He said he lived here in this little house in the hills. He said he was a college graduate."

"Well," Will says as he stirs the spaghetti sauce. "Those things are almost true."

There seems to be a shadow of truth in everything. Nothing is ever completely untrue. Not even lies. Ian was a version of Will, a shadow of him. Ian was almost everything Will was—a glassblower, a college graduate, the owner of a studio. The signs were there and I realize now all the signs were there that should have told me to leave a one-night stand alone. But I didn't. Something compelled me to call Ian afterwards, to take the initiative to see him again.

And now here I am.