

where
echoes
die

a novel

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1

In Arizona, on the road between nowhere and somewhere, there is a moment where sunrise and sunset look the same.

Or maybe Beck's been driving too long. She's got that twitch in her calves, the kind that scuttles through her legs and begs her to get moving beyond the shift of her foot from the gas pedal to the brakes. She holds a hand up to block the light from her eyes, palm facing the sun, and she feels the last heat of the day die behind the jagged horizon.

Roads in the Southwest aren't like the roads back in Washington, all tunneled with trees so thick you can't see the sky. There's no deer crossing signs, no falling rock warnings—actually, Beck can't think of the last sign she saw on this highway. Deep in the desert, the road is like a weathered conveyor belt, rolling the car through an unchanging backdrop of red dirt and sky. They crossed the California border in Yuma three hours ago, but parked on the sloped shoulder of the highway, it feels like it's been days since she saw another car. The world is all one long horizon, unchanging even as dusk washes the sky pink.

She shouldn't have pulled over, not when they're almost there. The goal was to soar down the coast, tear past LA, and get to Arizona without stopping. But there's something about the sky just now that eats at Beck. The pink's not quite right, too light, watery as a washed wound.

Beck unearths her mother's notes from her backpack and sighs, wipes away the sweat beaded on her nose. She leafs through the loose papers until she finds a plain piece of printer paper with a sketch of a desert sunset. She traces her finger along a shaky pencil line that points at the sharp cliffs. Next to it, her mother has written, *Not here.*

"What does that mean, Mom?" Beck asks under her breath.

If it was her mother here, she would probably take a thousand pictures. She'd snap this horizon from every angle and pin the photos to her office wall. She would stare at them until they untangled for her. Ellery Birsching's greatest talent was looking at a thing until it let her understand it. The sheer force of her will was usually enough to get what she wanted. She'd done it to story subjects, to broken sinks and stuck garage doors, to morning crosswords and jigsaw puzzles littered around their little green house. To Ellery Birsching, everything had an undercurrent of *real* truth; the raw kind most people tried to hide. Every person had a story she could extract like honey from the comb if she just waited long enough.

If her mother was here, Beck imagines she could explain the strangeness of this sunset in minutes. After all, this desert was her favorite subject.

Ellery's old Honda crackles, hot and exhausted, at the side of the highway. Beck pats the car once, gently, on its baking silver hood. This is the first breather she's given the car since they left Sacramento in the morning and it's a miracle it's still chugging along. Beck props

a foot on the hood of the car and stretches her taut hamstring. Her audiobook grumbles from the stereo and Beck realizes she hasn't been paying any attention to any of it since they turned onto this highway. The windshield is smattered with bits of gravel and dirt, a battlefield of bug corpses splattered across the glass. Through the glass, Beck watches Riley.

Riley, Beck's little sister, whose head is lolled back against the headrest, blond bob splayed at her shoulders. Riley, who promised she'd stay awake the whole drive because she knows Beck doesn't like to drive in the quiet. Riley, who's been asleep for the last five hours, who's only fifteen and *can't* drive yet, so she has the luxury of sleeping the whole way down. To Riley, this drive is as simple as closing her eyes outside of LA and waking up in Backravel, Arizona.

Nowhere, then suddenly, somewhere.

Not like Beck, seventeen and the oldest Birsching left. She gets the honor of feeling every miserable moment of this drive. Her eyes are dry from staring out the windshield, watching the horizon, begging civilization to finally appear.

But maybe that's karma. After all, coming to Backravel was Beck's idea. And maybe it's only fair that the person who suggested a twenty-five-hour drive in three days, cooped up in an old Honda almost guaranteed to perish before arrival, be the one to do all the hard work. Beck props her wire-frame glasses at her hairline and presses fingertips into the swollen bulge of her eyelids. She sucks in a deep breath. It's fifteen more miles to Backravel. Fifteen miles until the end of all this in-between. In Backravel, she might be able to turn some of her questions into answers.

She climbs back into the driver's seat as her GPS reminds her, "*Continue on AZ-85 for ten miles, then take the right exit onto Backravel Access Road.*"

“Hey.” Beck shoves Riley’s shoulder. “Did you hear that?”

Riley groans and turns over in her seat. Her eyes open a sliver, irises too glassy to be fully awake. “We’re there?”

“Fifteen more minutes.”

Riley blinks once, twice, and then she’s asleep again. She looks like a fawn when she sleeps like this, too-long limbs all folded into each other, chin tucked against her chest. The thrill of arrival doesn’t electrify Riley like it does Beck. But whatever fears Beck might have about this trip into the unknown—about what they’ll find in Backravel—it’s too late to turn back now. She grips the Honda’s steering wheel, swallows the last of her lukewarm energy drink, and she drives.

She doesn’t think about the letter in the glove box, hidden tenderly under the car’s registration and an expired can of pepper spray. She doesn’t think about the loopy, disjointed handwriting on the envelope, unmistakably written by Ellery Birsching’s shaking hand. She doesn’t think about how her mother wrote a letter from beyond the grave.

Beck Birsching doesn’t think, she just drives.

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The place they pull up to is a squat little house in a cluttered row of squat little houses. SYCAMORE LANE, the sign at the start of the street reads despite the lack of sycamores—or trees in general—in sight. The house is all faded white siding, capped with a slate gray roof missing a handful of tiles. A paint-chipped trellis stands woven with white flowers and scraggly green leaves that seem out of place among the red rock. A bike is tilted against the front porch, red dust caked into the underbelly of its tires. The sky behind the

house is like pool water at dusk, cool and fluid and shimmering in the near-dark.

The whole neighborhood looks like any other neighborhood back in Everett. Beck's not sure what she expected. Something more sinister, maybe. Something clearly diabolical enough to explain her mother's fascination with this town. But this—an entirely ordinary street in a maze of other perfectly ordinary streets—makes too much sense. Ellery Birsching was never interested in the obvious thing.

There's virtually no information on Backravel online. A quick search will tell you that it's an unincorporated community in southwest Arizona, but there isn't a picture in sight. In Ellery Birsching's notes, though, Backravel is documented in aching detail. Essays, sketches, anecdotes describing rusting military infrastructures and great desert mountains, a lonely mansion on a deep red plateau. Maybe Beck expected to see the whole of it the moment she crossed into Backravel, but there's none of that on Sycamore Lane. It's just a handful of houses and the quiet.

Wind tunnels down the black road, gently rocking the Honda. The car hums and hums and then, with an unceremonious yank on the keys, it falls silent. The engine gurgles softly in the quiet, finally allowed to rest, and Beck closes her eyes. She shakes Riley's knee until her sister stirs, pale face washed in tangerine light.

"Okay," Beck says. "We have to call Dad."

Riley presses the heels of her hands against her eyes. Through a yawn, she asks, "Tonight?"

"Tonight."

"Now?"

Beck eyes the front door of the house. "Before we go in, probably. Just in case we're too busy later."

“Ugh.” Riley pops her neck. “You want me to do it?”

This isn’t just a phone call; it’s a diversion. In two weeks, they’re supposed to be arriving in Texas for their permanent stay. They’re supposed to dive headfirst into their father’s world of suburban barbecues and family movie nights and total, complete normalcy. It’ll be an entirely new world, and the idea of it leaves a bitter taste in Beck’s mouth. This was why he left them, after all. Just like everyone else that fluttered in and out of their world, their father got tired of Ellery Birsching’s Backravel obsession. He wanted things to be *normal*. And while, as their new sole guardian, he might be okay with a two-week, supervised trip to Palm Springs before the permanent move, he certainly wouldn’t be okay with a two-week trip to the town that caused all their troubles. If he knew where they were parked right now, he would be on the next flight to Arizona.

They have to get this call just right, have to place this first lie delicately, or this trip will be over before it’s even started.

Beck chews the inside of her cheek. Riley’s offer is kind, but they both know it’ll be Beck making the call. As long as they’ve been alive, it’s been Beck doing the dirty work while Riley provides the emotional support. Riley is straightforward, logical, direct and cool and bright as a Washington morning in the fall. And Beck is the slippery one who knows the right words to say and when to stay quiet. She’s the one who smooths things out like a palm over wet clay. She can explain away parking tickets and detention notes and calls from school about cigarettes in her locker.

Riley offers to help because she’s a good sister who doesn’t want to seem useless, but there’s no question about who will cast the first lie in their big charade.

“I got it,” Beck says. She pulls her phone from the cupholder by the charging cable, catching a bit of sunlight in the cracks of her

screen. She taps out her father's phone number from memory. She should have it saved by now. She turns to Riley. "Just talk when I tell you."

The phone rings for only a second, then static crackles on the other end of the line.

"Touchdown?"

Their father's voice is too light, like he's on the brink of laughter. This is how he's always been, like everything amuses him. Their mother's funeral was the most somber Beck ever saw him, and even then, he was the most content person in the room. Beck swallows and tries her best not to resent him for it.

"Just landed a few minutes ago," Beck says. "LAX is crazy. We can't talk much. Gabby's grandma will be here to pick us up in a second."

"Nice, nice, nice . . ." Their father clears his throat. *"Well, I won't keep you. Put your sister on the phone."*

Riley looks at Beck with the kind of eyes a deer makes seconds before it's roadkill. Beck slides the phone onto Riley's palm and mouths, *Just be cool.*

"Hey, Dad," Riley says, and Beck thanks whatever higher power exists that they aren't on a video call. Riley's put-on smile is skewed so happy she looks manic. Lying to their father might be part of the assignment, but it's clear how deeply Riley hates it. "How's Julie?"

A pause.

"She's just watching the new Bachelor episode. She uh . . . okay, yeah. She wants to know if you already saw it."

"Not yet," Beck cuts in before Riley can fumble her way through another answer. Riley sinks back in her seat, relieved. "We'll catch up when we get to the house. Tell Julie no spoilers."

"Sounds like a plan."

“Oh, Dad, that’s Gabby’s grandma pulling up,” Beck says. She waits a moment, then says, “We gotta go, but we’ll call you later.”

“Alright. Love you girls.”

“Love you, too,” Beck says while Riley gives a half-hearted, “Bye.”

When the call ends, they’re left in the quiet. Beck stares at Riley and Riley stares back. They’re in it, now. They’ve committed to this trip and this lie and there’s no worming their way out of it. It’s just Beck and Riley alone in the middle of the desert. After all their years of treading water to stay afloat, this is what they’ve got left.

Beck reaches into her back pocket and slides her thumbnail over the rubber-banded bills there. Seven hundred dollars, minus the cost of gas in Southern California. Even less once they pay for their room. She tries to swallow the lump of panic in her throat because it’s not just about the money. Now they need pictures of their trip, phone calls to their father, stories from a trip to Palm Springs they never took. Now, Beck has to untangle the massive knot that was Ellery Birsching before this fever dream ends.

Someone knocks on the driver’s side window.

Beck scrambles back in her seat, nearly crushing Riley in the process. A man stands outside the window, stooped low with his hand cupped at his brow so he can see inside. His blue-checkered shirt is tucked into the waist of khaki slacks, fastened in place by a thick brown belt. He looks like he’s stepped directly out of a cubicle, not the middle of an empty highway in an even emptier desert. Beck isn’t sure if she’s more shocked by what he looks like or the fact that he’s the first non-Riley face she’s seen in hours. She adjusts her glasses, forcing her tired eyes to focus.

The man motions for Beck to roll down her window. She does, just a crack, and a stream of dry wind slips through. The man straightens. He pulls his phone from his pocket, checks the screen, and smiles.

“Rebecca Birsching?” he asks.

Beck stares a moment too long. Her full name sounds crooked coming from anyone but family, like the vaguely familiar name of a stranger. The last time she heard it was at the funeral, echoing off white walls punctuated with golden flower-shaped sconces, rickety folding chairs in neat rows, the urn at the end of a too-long aisle. *Rebecca Birsching*, the pastor said tenderly, *would like to speak*.

She bites the inside of her cheek, dragging herself back to the present. She can’t think about the funeral, can’t go back there yet. Not right now.

Beck exhales. “That’s me. And this is Riley, my sister.”

Riley waves.

“Perfect. I’m Greg Sterling.” The man takes a step back and motions to the little white house. “This is our humble abode. I believe you’re staying with us.”

Beck smiles. “Right.”

“Nice to meet you,” Riley chimes. She crawls out of the passenger seat and peels a candy wrapper from the bottom of her pale thigh, flicking it to the floor of the car, which is already layered with fast-food wrappers and trash from the grueling drive. Mr. Sterling notices the mess immediately, scrunching his slightly upturned nose. He quickly stifles his distaste.

Outside the car, the quiet buzzes like bug wings and the air on the blacktop bakes, shimmering in the fading heat. Beck steps out of the Honda and locks it. She rocks forward on the balls of her feet, tries to gauge if she’s been driving too long or if she can really *feel* the road under her sneakers more than usual.

“You girls are right on time for check-in,” Mr. Sterling says. “I’ll walk you through your space, then the night’s all yours. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

"It's so cute," Riley says. "I can't wait to see it."

Mr. Sterling eyes the house, then offers Riley an apologetic smile. "Oh. Well, you girls are welcome to visit with us in the house, but let me show you where you'll be staying."

Riley shoots Beck a concerned look, but says nothing.

Beck opens the trunk of the car and hoists their damp cooler to freedom. It's lighter than she hoped it would be at this point—they have less food for their actual stay than she planned for. She'll have to buy more food. The wad of cash in her pocket burns.

They follow Mr. Sterling around the back of the house, which opens to a lush backyard. Like the front of the house, red dirt is neatly packed to the edge of the yard, bordered with clean stepping stones that lead to a sliding glass door. Neat lines form a garden along the wood fence, filled with bursts of green herbs and white wildflowers. Lavender as tall as Beck shifts in the cool breeze, tips curled like fingers. A net of round-bulb string lights connect the house to another building—a trailer, silver and dim in the low light. The wheels are gone, replaced with wood blocks, but the rest of it is intact. Between the trailer and the house is a fire pit so clean Beck is positive it's never been used.

Riley shoulders past Beck, clutching her backpack tight at her shoulders. Mr. Sterling laughs a little at her eagerness, but he waits for Beck to move before following them to the trailer door. Behind him, the windows of the main house are empty, blinds shut. It's so quiet here Beck wonders if Mr. Sterling lives alone. She wonders if he's the only person living in this whole neighborhood, since she's yet to see any real signs of life.

"We put the trailer on blocks just as a safety measure," Mr. Sterling says. "We used to travel all over in this guy, but since we've

turned it into a rental, we decided to keep it grounded. Didn't want any guests making off with it in the night."

"You guys get a lot of guests out here?" Riley asks.

Mr. Sterling shrugs. "A fair few, I'd say. It helps being the only rental in town."

He fumbles with his keys a moment, then pries open the trailer door. Riley wedges inside and Beck follows. Like a shadow, only half-there, she follows.

The trailer is nicer than she expects. A modern kitchenette with all-black appliances, a chrome-lined red table with cushioned booth seats, a pullout sofa facing a perfectly square TV. At the back of the trailer, there's a bed lofted above a set of cupboards, so close to the ceiling it looks like a coffin. A thought pricks at Beck, quiet and stinging. Mr. Sterling wasn't lying—when she looked for a place to stay in Backravel, this was the only option within an hour of town. With how many times their mother came to Backravel, it's likely she stayed in this exact trailer. It's likely she slept in this casket bed, nose almost touching the ceiling while her thoughts churned. Beck wonders, when she tucks herself under the purple and orange hand-stitched quilt tonight, if she'll still smell her mother's favorite perfume in the fabric.

She drops the cooler in the middle of the room and sucks in a breath.

Mr. Sterling's voice comes into focus.

"I don't know what you two have planned for your vacation, but I hope you'll spend some time in town. We've got tons of neat shops, and there's a great bike trail around the big plateau." He turns on the sink, then turns it off again. "My oldest, Daniel, is about your age. He can take you girls into town tomorrow, if you want."

"Sure," Riley says without hesitation. "That sounds great."

Mr. Sterling offers a curt, slightly awkward smile. When the silence settles, he pats the tiny slab of counter space and turns to leave. It's too quick, and they're missing the most crucial step of this exchange. Beck has half a mind to just let Mr. Sterling forget the payment. She feels for the cash in her pocket and sighs. She motions for Riley to wait and quietly follows Mr. Sterling outside.

At the sound of Beck on the trailer steps, Mr. Sterling pauses. Beck offers a cautious smile. She pinches the zipper of her jacket, tries to gather up what she's going to say before she blurts it out.

"Can I talk to you for a second, Mr. Sterling?"

Mr. Sterling nods. His brow scrunches with concern. "Of course. Is something wrong?"

"My dad was supposed to call you." Beck laughs, uneasy. Her cheeks burn. "It's about the payment. I know your listing said the payment has to be made by someone over eighteen with a card. But . . . my dad was kind of hoping we could do something different?"

"Different how?"

"I was hoping you'd let us pay with cash."

"Cash?"

"I can pay every night," Beck says, "or I can pay the whole thing now. Either way. I just . . . can't pay with a card."

"Cash . . ." Mr. Sterling repeats. He scratches the back of his head. "I don't know. Our setup is already unusual. I'm not even sure it's legal for you two to stay here without a parent or guardian. I had to get special approval from Ricky. I'd rather keep everything else above the table, you know?"

"Ricky?"

Mr. Sterling waves a dismissive hand. "Your dad can't pay with a check? Maybe he could mail it?"

"No," Beck says, too quick. "I'm sorry. It just . . . can't go on his account."

"Okay, okay . . ." Mr. Sterling relents. He considers a moment, lips pressed into a thin line. "You two have never visited before?"

"We haven't."

"Hmm." Mr. Sterling rubs his jaw. "You look so familiar."

"My mom visited a few times," Beck says, casting the understatement of the century. "Maybe you met her?"

"Maybe. Your mom knows you're here?" Mr. Sterling's expression softens. "I'm not trying to extort you girls, but maybe your mom can spot the bill for now? And then you can work out the details later. I'm just trying to brainstorm what would be easiest."

It shouldn't hit Beck the way it does. The mention of her mother shouldn't send her plummeting. Beck closes her eyes, steels herself, fights off the obnoxious wave of ache that swells in her. Immediately, Mr. Sterling seems to understand. His skepticism falters and he unfolds his arms.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"It's okay," Beck says. "She, um. We used to live with her in Washington, but she . . . yeah. She loved Backravel. So we're here now."

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Mr. Sterling says. "This might sound strange, but I'm glad that it brought you here. I think you'll find you've come to exactly the right place."

Beck blinks at that.

"You know, I'm sure we can figure out the payment," Mr. Sterling continues. "Let me figure out the nightly breakdown and we

can do a cash payment. It sounds like you girls have been through enough already.”

It’s a victory, even if it doesn’t feel like one.

“Thank you,” Beck says, but she’s gone.

She’s standing in a hospital room, eyes tracing the neat lines where sterile white walls meet, matching her pulse to chirping machinery. She’s listening to a doctor explain why no treatment will fix this. His voice is muffled like the rumbling of thunder from miles away. She’s slipping her fingers between Riley’s, but her gaze is fixed on the oaks outside the hospital window as they sway and crash. She’s looking anywhere but her mother’s face, skin pale and eyes empty, a streak of gray hair resting soft against the bridge of her nose.

She’s Beck, but she’s gone. She’s been gone for three months now, an insect flitting uselessly in a hospital room-shaped trap. She’s nothing but wires and chemical cleaner and the doctor saying, quietly, *I’m sorry*.

• • •

When Beck steps back into the trailer, Riley sits at the booth table. Her backpack is on the seat next to her, and her suitcase is open at her feet, clothes spilling out on all sides. A leather-bound book is open on the table in front of her. Tenderly, Riley flips to the next page, eyes narrowed, mouth sloped in a cautious frown. Without looking up, she says, “Can you come here?”

Beck pulls off her glasses and cleans them with the hem of her T-shirt. Her chest is still tight the way it’s always tight when she starts to slip into the bad memories. But she takes a deep breath, then another, and she makes her way to the table.

The book is a guest log. Names are written one after the other in

sloppy handwriting. Names, dates, messages. Riley traces each line with her pointer finger, then stops halfway down the page. *Delia Horton. January 2012.*

Beck goes still.

"That name sounds familiar."

"Huh" Beck breathes.

Riley shoots her a questioning look. She turns the guest book to face Beck. In the middle of the page, Beck finds Delia's guest book comment written in neat, tiny handwriting. *Such an interesting town. Will be back soon.*

"Okay?"

Riley holds up a finger. She flips to the next page. Halfway down, another entry with the same name. This one is from March 2013. Beck's breath catches when she reads the comment. *Such an interesting town.* Beck exhales. *Will be back soon.*

"Isn't that weird?" Riley says. "I was looking to see if I could find Mom and I found this lady. I swear I've heard that name before. Maybe in the notes?"

Beck flips to the next page. Delia Horton's name rears its head again, this time in December 2013. *Such an interesting town,* her message reads. *It feels so familiar and welcoming, like I lived here as a kid.*

"How many times is she in here?" Beck asks.

She slides into the booth next to Riley and fishes through her own backpack, shuffling past the opened envelope to grab a pad of sticky notes. She flips through the guest book, sweat beading at her brow, making a tally of each time Delia Horton wrote her name in the guest book. Because Delia Horton isn't just a name. Maybe it's just a coincidence that a name she specifically came here to look for has presented itself to her this quickly. Each time Delia Horton

writes her name, it's like she's arriving in Backravel for the first time. Like she's never seen this trailer. On the tenth time, in August 2016, her message changes slightly. *Such a welcoming town. It feels like home.* An entry in June 2018 reads, *Such a gorgeous little town. I'll bring my girls here soon!*

"She sounds like Mom," Riley says. "Talking about bringing her kids here."

"She does," Beck agrees.

The last entry from Delia Horton, dated April 2019, reads, *Such a strange little town. I think I'll be here again soon.*

"Twenty-three times," Beck whispers. "She came to Backravel twenty-three times."

"Wow." Riley flips back through the pages, counting again. "That might be more than Mom. I wonder why she stopped coming."

"Me, too."

Riley eyes Beck and her expression sobers. The last light of sunset is gone now, and only the pale lightbulb on the trailer awning outside illuminates the kitchen table. A low groan of wind soars over the trailer, but Beck can't move. The inside of her mouth is tangy like iron.

"Hey," Riley says. "Breathe. It's just a weird coincidence, but we don't need to go detective mode. This is a vacation. Just leave it."

"Okay," Beck whispers. "I'll leave it."

It's a lie. Beck stares at the page a little longer. How many times did Ellery stumble back to this town? Was the thing that kept Delia Horton coming back the same thing that drew in their mother? After all her years of wondering what it was about Backravel that drew Ellery Birsching back over and over like a toy train on a track, she's finally in the heart of it. After years of looking at the name Delia Horton in her mother's notes, she's seeing it here in the flesh. All

the pieces of Ellery's greatest story are here in Backravel, waiting for someone to connect the final dots. And maybe Riley doesn't want to finish their mother's investigation, but Beck will. Their mother wanted them to finish her legacy.

One way or another, here in Backravel, Ellery Birsching wants to be found.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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