

Two Bullets

That rough and potholed road that I set upon was perhaps the perfect analogy for such a journey.

Long, dark, and littered with craters that urged my old car to stop, that forested path offered nothing

but bad ideas and forsaken memories. I hadn't seen another car in hours. No stars lit the sky tonight.

Not even the moon dared to peek out from behind the thick clouds. This old car's gleaming headlights were my only source of light, and they lit the path that I had set out for myself.

How long had I been driving? My eyes flicked over to the gas meter. Half empty. How much further did I have left? Eyes still on the road, I reached my hand over to the passenger seat next to me. My fingertips brushed the cold metal of Marshall's revolver, and I trembled before finding purchase on the map that laid next to it. I felt my heartbeat quicken, beating like the drums of war in my chest. My hands felt cold and clammy on the steering wheel, and I gripped onto it tighter to compensate.

Calm down. Relax. I inhaled deeply and pulled over onto the side of the road. Not that it really mattered— no one was on this road besides me anyways. Unfolding the map, I traced my finger along the backroads of North Dakota, marked red with my intent. The end of the red trail was circled boldly. My final destination.

I refolded the map and placed it back down over Marshall's revolver. The seat where he used to sit was now cluttered: scribbles on old sticky notes that he posted on the fridge every morning, old photos, his retired wedding band... his trusty revolver.

I had never shot a gun before, but Marshall had bought one when he moved to the Dakotas from New York. “I’d rather be safe than sorry,” he would always say. Ah, that voice... it still rang in my head even a year later. It haunted my memories and graced my dreams.

Reaching over again, I took one of the polaroids from its resting place on the passenger seat’s cushion. It was the last picture I had taken of him— before *he* was taken from *me*. He was smiling that goofy smile, eyes squinted shut and mouth open in a hearty laugh. The spring breeze was sending his hair into wisps that danced and reached out to the sky. We had gone hiking on the Wind Canyon Trail for the day, and decided to take a celebratory picture when we reached the end of the road.

“This view is almost as beautiful as you,” he had said, nudging me with his elbow.

“So corny,” I scoffed, a smile creeping out from the corners of my lips.

“You love it though,” he said, pulling me in for a big sideways hug, his arm wrapped around my waist.

I giggled. “Yea, I know.” I raised one arm up, camera in hand, and snapped the picture.

I pinched the photo between my fingers. He was gone. No more smiles or laughs, no more corny jokes or pick up lines, no more Marshall.

The drive down from that hiking spot should have been calm and lonely, much like the road that laid before me now. Instead, it became his demise.

I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to recall the events of that night, before pulling back onto the road. The car chugged along, creaking loudly as it rolled over cracks and cavities.

“Don’t worry Marshall,” I said, gripping the steering wheel with force, “I’ll make this right.”

These backroads I traveled down were so like the ones we drove down that night. If only I had been paying more attention... maybe I could have...

No. This wasn't my fault. It was *That Man's*. Yes, he was the only one to blame. He was the reason I didn't get to ever say goodbye to my husband. The reason I cried over his lifeless body in the hospital. The reason I was here now on this journey.

It shouldn't even be my job to seek this justice out. I shouldn't have to do this, but the police forced my hand. No wrongdoing? An accident? An unfortunate circumstance? Their excuses made me sick. *That Man* got out of any consequence because of his prominence in the community. His position. His privilege. Just thinking of it made me grit my teeth and clench my jaw.

"...We find the defendant not guilty." I repeated those words in my head every day. *Not guilty*. He was allowed to go on living his life, meanwhile I was left grappling with reality: the love of my life was gone.

"Mrs. Salinger? I'm so sorry. Your husband, Marshall, didn't recover from the surgery. He died in his sleep." *That Man* had said. "Please let us know if there is anything we can do for you."

Yes, there *was* something they could do. They could have saved him. They could have tried harder. Instead, they let him die on a table, his chest cut open and sewn back up like a piece of patchwork— like some arts and crafts project. And the man driving drunk that struck us head-on? He got to live, too. He was sentenced to time in jail, of course, but he still got to keep his life.

I tried to go about receiving justice the right way— I took *That Man* to court and pleaded my case against him with the best lawyer I could afford— but my efforts were in vain. If I couldn't get justice the legal way, I would do it *my* way. I would—

*Jessie.*

The remnants of his voice stirred my thoughts. Glancing over to the seat on my right was like a reflex, but I was met with only emptiness.

Memories of him illuminated my shrouded thoughts. The day we met... The dates that followed... Meeting his family... Our wedding...

His funeral.

I shook my head. I had to keep going.

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I flexed my fingers on the steering wheel and rolled my shoulders back. My foot released from the gas pedal ever so slightly, slowing my advance. It felt like this damn road stretched on forever, and the ambience of this place was beginning to wear on my mind and return me to that day.

There wasn't much further to go now. Soon, I would bring peace to Marshall– to myself. I tapped my index finger against the steering wheel. Time seemed to move slower here. How long had I been driving? The gas meter showed I was close to empty. Not much further now. I reached for the map beside me once more, shuffling the contents of the seat. I clicked my tongue. Finally gripping the folded map, I once again felt the cold embrace of Marshall's revolver. As I unfurled the map once more, my eyes flitted down to the red pathway I carved out for myself. These damn roads had no location markers. I squinted, analyzing the distance I had traveled since last I checked the map, searching for any crossroads that I should be approaching soon. My eyes flicked back up to the road–

*Shit!* I slammed on the brakes, my foot practically shooting through the floor. The car screeched as it skipped to a halt, sending me forward before jerking me back against the seat. The smell of burnt rubber trailed behind me.

The doe that had crossed my path stared directly back at me— a literal deer in headlights— before leaping across the remainder of the road. My heart pounded in my chest. I rubbed my eyes, tired from the journey and now rattled from my carelessness. That sudden jerking motion of the car... the screeching noise of the tires... that smell of burnt rubber and gasoline... I inhaled to gather my thoughts. My breath caught in my throat, trapping the bitter taste of fear against the roof of my mouth. This was all too familiar.

When I stopped rubbing my eyes, all I could see was the haze that clouded my vision on that very same day. I was dizzy. My ears hummed an unpleasant tune. Moving my head to look around me made the world spin. In my memory, I could see Marshall laying on the concrete next to me. He had one arm outstretched, reaching towards me. His skin was cut with glass and pieces of the road. His shirt and torso had been sliced by something— later I learned it was a metal fragment from our car's door. The yellow glare from the car headlights were quickly replaced with red and blue.

I didn't remember much from the ride to the hospital. I just remember waking up confused and disoriented. The doctors said I suffered a mild concussion and had broken a few bones. They said I was lucky to have such minor injuries. Still disoriented, I struggled to grasp what they were saying. Car crash. Concussion. Broken bones. Marshall.

*Marshall!* Where was he? Was he ok? Why did the doctors scrunch their faces when I mentioned my husband? I started to panic.

“Your husband suffered more traumatic injuries. We’re preparing him for surgery,” one of the nurses told me. “Don’t worry, we’re taking very good care of him.”

“Don’t worry,” she had said. “Don’t worry.” But that’s all I did. The entire time I sat in that hospital bed, I worried. My heart skipped a beat every time an alarm blared. It skipped whenever doctors rushed past my room in a hurry. It skipped when, hours later, *That Man* came to me to inform me of the surgery’s success.

Initially I had released a sigh of relief. Tears of joy followed: my worries were for nothing. It was just like the nurse had said, they were taking very good care of him. I asked when I could see him.

“He’s recovering at the moment, but when he wakes up, you’ll be the first to know.”

Marshall never woke up.

*That Man* had lied to me. The surgery was not a success. Something clearly went wrong. Later I learned that an infection within Marshall’s liver is what took his life. He had survived the crash. He had survived the surgery. But, in his vulnerable state, sepsis took hold.

How could they miss it? How did they not see the infection during his surgery? I didn’t understand. I couldn’t. *That Man* was supposed to be the best surgeon in the state. He let Marshall die.

I took him to court. Medical malpractice. Neglect. He had to have done something to allow this to happen. But the courts disagreed.

Why did this happen? Why us? Why Marshall? Why not me instead? Why—

The horn of a passing car woke me from my trance. It was the first car I had seen on the road in hours. I was still stopped in the middle of the road. Once more I had let the memories consume me.

Even a year later, those memories controlled my life. But not for long. I was close. *He* was close. Not much further now. Not much further.

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There it was. *That Man's* massive countryside home, hidden amongst the mountains. I had finally made it. After hours of driving, after months of grief, after the lengthy trial, I had made it to this point at last.

I put the car in park outside the gated driveway. With the headlights now off, all that guided me towards my destination were the chandeliers still shimmering through the windows. I took Marshall's revolver in hand and checked the cylinder. Two bullets were all that was left in the dented ammo box back home. Two bullets was all I had to get the job done. I shut the car door and lifted myself over the low gate.

Each step I took towards the house was filled with purpose. All sense of fear and anger left me as I approached the front door. I was prepared. I was calm. I was ready.

I knocked on the door. Marshall's revolver rested at my hip. Approaching footsteps caught my attention.

*That Man* opened the door.

"Hello, how can I—" he stopped, his face growing pale. "Mrs. Salinger."

I met his gaze with a burning stare. "*Miss* Salinger."

His eyes glanced down to the revolver in my hand. "Ms. Salinger," he gulped, "please—"

“I don’t want to hear you talk,” I barked, raising the gun. “I want you to admit what you did.”

He raised his hands slowly in front of his chest. “Ms. Salinger... Your husband’s death was a tragedy. I did everything I could to save him.”

“Stop,” I hissed. “No more excuses.”

*That Man* squeezed his eyes shut. “There was nothing more I could have done.”

My hands trembled. “You could have saved him!” I gasped, tears clouding my vision. “You could have saved him.” I placed my finger on the trigger. “You killed him.”

He took everything from me. If Marshall couldn’t live, then he didn’t deserve to either. He didn’t deserve this fancy house, or his cushy job, or anything at all. He deserved *nothing*.

The surgeon looked at me with remorse painted on his face. “Ms. Sal– Jessie,” he started, “I’m sorry.”

How long had I been standing there? My eyes scanned over *That Man*. He was trembling. Maybe it was the realization of what he had done finally hitting him head on. How much longer would I wait to do what I had come here for? I gritted my teeth.

It only took one bullet to get the job done.