

Stepping outside the airport, I was expecting my breath to be visible, as it had been every December since I was a babe. It wasn't. The air didn't feel the same as it had before. It lacked the crispness that made every inhale feel like it was the first time you were truly breathing.

I pulled out my phone.

A high of eighteen.

Strange. It felt warmer, as though the ground itself were radiating heat.

I squatted low, reaching down and placing my hand on the pavement. I felt the eyes of a hundred strangers digging into my back.

This is my home, I reminded myself. I wasn't going to let these people make me feel like a foreigner in my own land. I was born here. Raised here. It's where I belonged.

An incoming call eclipsed my forecast.

"Good timing, I just stepped outside..." I answered, looking around, my head on a swivel. "Yeah, I'm at Gate 3. Okay, see you soon."

The wait felt eternal. It always did.

Eventually, a white pickup pulled up to the curb in front of me, a familiar man waiting in the cab.

This is new.

I waited for Dad to exit the truck and hug me.

I waited for a minute, but no one greeted me.

That's okay, I tried reassuring myself. *I'm grown, anyway.*

I tossed my carry-on in the bed of the truck and opened up the passenger door, stepping inside with my backpack.

The hot air blasted out of the vents, causing me to sweat. I shut them almost immediately.

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“How are you doing, Son?” Dad asked, a grin peeking through his neatly trimmed beard.

“Great, Dad.”

I leaned across the cab, hugging him.

Despite his new muscle, I was taken aback by how frail he felt.

He was no longer the larger-than-life man I remembered. Somewhere along the way, he had traded his nighttime sweets for a set of weights, though the change had not made him look stronger. His eyes had sunk deeper into their sockets, and his cheeks had become hollowed.

Perhaps he had changed. Perhaps I had. Or perhaps he had only seemed larger because I had been smaller then.

He was familiar, but the familiarity belonged to another life.

“You must be thirsty,” he said. “I brought you a drink.”

He shook a Styrofoam cup filled with ice before sticking it back in the drink holder.

I didn’t recognize the red liquid that splashed against the lid.

“I’m good, thank you,” I replied, pulling out a bottle of water from the side pocket of my backpack.

Dad shrugged, picking up the drink for himself and downing it in a few gulps.

It was a long, two-hour drive back from the airport. Conversation didn’t flow as it once had. Something unseen had strangled our connection.

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“Hello, Son,” Mom said, wrapping me up in a hug. She pulled me close. I had forgotten how much I missed it. She looked me up and down. “You’re looking good.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I pulled her into another hug. “So do you.”

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Her body felt cold from a lack of nutrients, but I knew that wasn't what she wanted to hear, so I just held her.

"You must be tired," she said as I yawned.

The constant darkness of the Alaskan winter beat me down. It was only 8 PM, but my day of travel had sucked the energy from my body.

"Yeah," I admitted. "Do you guys mind if I hit the hay?"

"Not at all," they answered in unison.

I gave them each another hug, not wanting to squander my limited time home, before heading up the stairs.

I walked down the hallway I had crossed a thousand times, passing the empty rooms of siblings who had followed me out into the world. Only then did I realize how empty the house had become, like a nest abandoned after all its young had flown.

I entered my room, only to find it was no longer mine. My bed had been replaced with a table covered in crafting supplies. An air mattress lay deflated on the floor, so I plugged it in, watching it slowly inflate.

Searching the room, I looked for signs of my past life. The only clue I found was a dent in the wall, where I had taken a knee to the drywall in a fit of prepubescent anger. I rested my leg against the wall, measuring the height I had grown.

I opened my closet, curious if any of me remained in this room. My hands traced along the top of my closet, looking for a box I had tucked away before I left. I was surprised to find the box still there, and I pulled it down, opening it up.

The box held everything I had once been unable to leave behind: photographs of people I no longer loved, soccer trophies from games I could barely remember, and trinkets that had once

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seemed too important to throw away. At the bottom lay the shirt I had worn for my senior photos. I remembered choosing it carefully, certain it showed the world exactly who I was.

Now it looked as though it belonged to a stranger—someone with my face, my memories, and a life I could no longer recognize as mine. He had been more handsome then, perhaps, but the sight of him still disgusted me. I did not like the man who had worn that shirt. He was someone I had spent years trying to leave behind, yet the thought of him still left a bitter taste in my mouth.

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“I miss you, too,” I whispered into my phone. “Sleep tight, my love.”

I hung up the phone.

2 AM.

I hadn’t realized how late it had gotten. Guilt washed over me. I had only just come home, yet I had already withdrawn for the night, spending most of my time on the phone with my wife back in Seattle.

What’s wrong with me?

My back slowly sank to the floor as the last of the air seeped from the mattress. My stomach growled, reminding me of the dinner I had skipped. With sleep out of reach, I grabbed my phone to use as a flashlight and headed downstairs in search of something to eat.

Careful not to wake anyone, I crept down the stairs, gently placing each foot to keep the floorboards from squeaking. Then, from the kitchen, came the sharp crinkle of a plastic bottle, breaking the stillness of the house.

I followed the sound and stopped in the doorway. My parents stood before the open refrigerator, each clutching a red bottle and gulping down its contents.

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“Mom? Dad?” I asked, trying to get their attention.

No reply. They gasped for air as they finished their bottles, immediately grabbing another. They drank, letting their cheeks drip red.

“Mom? Dad?” I asked again, gripping them by the shoulders and shaking them.

The bottle slipped from Dad’s hand and hit the floor, spilling its contents across the light-tan tile. Both of them lurched after it. They dropped to their hands and knees and began slurping the liquid from the floor, desperate not to let a single drop go to waste.

Slowly, I backed up. One foot after the other, I retreated into my room.

I locked my door.

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The next morning, they took me out to breakfast at my favorite diner. I tried asking about what I had witnessed last night, but they just laughed it off as middle-of-the-night cottonmouth.

I knew that wasn’t true, but I didn’t press. With so little time with them, I didn’t want to spend it fighting. Not again, like last time.

When the waitress got around to our table, I ordered a large combo of chicken-fried steak and eggs with a glass of orange juice. I was starving. My parents ordered two over-easy eggs to split.

“Aren’t you guys hungry?” I asked, watching them nibble on their eggs.

“Not anymore,” Dad answered, moaning and sitting back in satisfaction.

They watched me as I ate. They tried to hide the disgust on their faces, but it leaked through like water down a drain.

I picked up my orange juice, putting it to my lips, but hesitated before downing it. The orange nectar had been tainted a dark red. I flagged the waitress over.

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“I’m sorry, but there’s something wrong with my orange juice,” I said, showing her my glass. “Could I get another glass?”

The waitress picked up my glass, inspecting it.

“I don’t see anything wrong,” she said, setting it down. She turned to my parents. “Do you?”

“We don’t,” they answered in unison.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “This is clearly red.”

“Isn’t orange juice always red?” the waitress asked in mock-obliviousness.

My parents nodded, like it was obvious.

“What? No, it isn’t.” I looked at all three of them in disbelief. “It’s called *orange* juice.”

Defeated, I ran my hand over my face. “Can I just get a glass of water?”

Overhearing the conversation, another waitress approached our table. “The orange juice is actually really good. You just have to give it a try.”

“Look, ma’am, I just...” I couldn’t believe I didn’t immediately recognize this woman. “Darlah?”

“How’s it going?” she asked, leaning on the diner booth. “Long time, no see.”

“You look...” I didn’t know how to finish that sentence, but luckily she finished it for me.

“Great, I know!” She stood tall, showing off her body.

My mom snickered with excitement. Darlah had always been her favorite of my girlfriends—the one who wanted to stay in our small town forever, settle down, and raise a litter of children.

I didn’t expect her to still be working here.

Ambrosia

But upon closer examination, this wasn't the woman I was once so madly in love with. The curves on her body had been sanded down to flat edges, and the firm flesh I had once held tight had loosened over a frame that seemed too weak to carry her.

Something inside of me snapped.

Somewhere along the way, this town had traded strength for thinness and youth, and called it health.

"Just drink your Ambrosia," my mom urged.

"My what?"

"Your Ambrosia," the entire restaurant answered in unison.

I had been too preoccupied with my ex to notice every head turning toward me, the same insincere smile plastered across every face.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked, searching my parents' faces for some trace of the people I remembered.

"What's wrong with us?" Dad turned to Mom, almost amused. "Nothing I can see. But you..."

"You're fat," Darlah said.

"A pig," the waitress added.

Then another voice rose from somewhere behind me.

"Plus-sized."

"Glutton."

"Addict."

One by one, the rest of the restaurant joined in until the words came from every direction.

"Piece of lard."

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I shot to my feet, slamming both hands against the table. The room went still. My glass of orange juice trembled from the impact, splashing a little across the table. In a flash, the waitress snatched up the glass and bent to lick the spilled juice from the table before setting it back down.

I recoiled. “What’s wrong with you all?”

I felt my breath becoming constricted. All eyes on me, I picked at the front of my shirt, feeling self-conscious as it touched my skin.

Maybe just one sip...

I felt the smiles around me stretch wider as their promises wormed their way into my mind. I closed my eyes and thought of the woman waiting for me back home.

The woman who loved *every* inch of me as I was.

I couldn’t strip myself away until nothing remained but a memory. I couldn’t lose myself the way my parents had.

I grabbed the glass.

“Drink. Drink. Drink,” the room chanted.

I smashed the glass against the floor, sending Ambrosia splashing across the already-sticky tiles.

Everyone in the diner reacted like piranhas to a freshly filleted corpse. They dove on the ground, suckling to get even an ounce. I grabbed the keys to Dad’s pickup, stepping over his body as I walked out of the diner.

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I didn’t know where to run. My parents’ house felt unfamiliar now, and the people I had once known here weren’t the same. Maybe they were. Maybe it was just me who had changed.

Ambrosia

I drove toward the mountains, following the empty roads that wound through the Pass. The higher I climbed, the narrower the roads became, two lanes merging into one. Then I turned off the pavement and onto a gravel trail.

The pickup bounced over the gravel, its engine roaring as though it had spent its whole life waiting to leave the pavement behind.

Eventually, I spotted the trailhead to Summit Lake, once my private refuge whenever I needed to think. I pulled the truck over, jumped out, and took off running up the steep trail toward the lake hidden near the mountaintop.

After twenty minutes, I stood at the top, hunched over and panting in the thin air. I hadn't run like that in years. My legs weak, I wandered over to the lake, dropping to my knees. Snow fell onto my shoulders.

Red.

My once pristine lake had been tainted—filled to the brim with Ambrosia. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't find the tears. Sorrow had been replaced with a sense of dread and defeat.

You don't need to suffer; a voice called out to me from within the lake. You could belong here again. They could look at you the way they used to.

I pushed myself to my feet and stepped into the water. From inside the lake came the voices of my parents and old friends, calling my name as though they had been waiting for me.

One step at a time, I waded deeper, breaking through the crust of ice along the surface. When the bottom fell away beneath my feet, I began to swim. The cold sank through my skin and into my bones, numbing me as I reached the center.

I stopped fighting the weight of my body and let myself sink.

At the bottom of the lake, curled against the silt, was a fetus.

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I recognized his face.

He was me.

All you need to do is consume me, the voice offered. Give yourself to me, and you'll belong here again.

I wrapped my hands around him.

For a moment, I saw myself emerging from the lake twenty years younger. My parents stood waiting on the shore, pride shining in their eyes. Behind them were all the people I had once known, smiling as though I had never left.

As though nothing between us had ever changed.

But I didn't want to be young again. I didn't want to become the man I hated seeing in old photographs. He wasn't me anymore. He was someone I had already left behind.

My hands tightened like a vise.

The fetus collapsed beneath my grip, dissolving into the silt between my fingers. Relief surged through me, and my body began rising toward the surface.

My head broke through the water. Cold air stung my face as I gasped and dragged myself toward shore.

I collapsed onto my back, staring into the flurry of snowflakes settling against my skin.

When I finally looked toward the lake, the red was already fading. It thinned through the water until its depths once again resembled the clear lake I remembered.

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I didn't return to my parents' house after that. I left my bags there, a memento of my return. I drove the truck back to the airport, leaving the keys in the center console for them to pick up later.

Ambrosia

Stepping outside the airport, I let the rain wash over me. I had not expected to miss it so much, but now it felt all too familiar, cleansing me better than a warm shower.

She was right. The rain does smell different over here.

Eventually, a red sedan pulled up to the curb in front of me. A woman bolted out of the car as soon as it pulled to a stop, running up to me and jumping into my arms. I dug my face into the cradle of her neck, letting myself find comfort in her hug.

This hug felt different. Better than even our first, and more reassuring than our last.

I struggled to swallow, feeling a lump in my throat.

She kissed me, and I lost myself in the touch of her lips.

Cars blared their horns behind us.

“Come on, let’s go home,” she said, squeezing my hands.

She grabbed my carry-on, tossing it into the trunk.

After a long day of travel, I sank into the passenger seat.

We drove away, sitting in a comfortable silence as she navigated her way out of the busy city traffic.

“So, how was the trip?” she asked as she merged onto the highway.

I went to speak, but found myself at a loss for words. I knew what I wanted to say, but saying it would make the loss real.

She drove in silence, waiting for me to answer without ever pressing me to hurry.

“I thought it would still feel like home,” I whispered between hitching breaths, fighting back tears I could no longer hold in. “I should have known better.”