

GUADALUPE

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It would have been colder than this when my husband set out on the eight mile hike up to the top of Guadalupe Peak. There was very little actual climbing, just some scabbling over rocks and trudging up stone-stepped switchbacks to get to the highest point in Texas. On the morning that he did the climb, a cold front swept in, leaving a damp chill in the air and a low cloud bank that obscured the peak. Once he was up there, he may not have even been able to see the view, which was supposed to be gorgeous, like a promise.

They said my husband disappeared, though I can't say that I believed them, at least not in the way they meant it. He was officially a missing person, but he felt more like a ghost, like the idea of himself.

I knew only that Mark came here on the last leg of the road trip he was on before he was supposed to head home. That was four months ago. I stood looking at the range, my hand shielding my eyes from the sun hung low over the mountains, unsure of which peak was actually highest, which I would end up on top of. It didn't much matter. It's nice, though, to know where you're going. A destination is better than a plan. I only wanted to follow him up there and back down again.

My sister, Gwen, had said it was a bad idea. She was two years older and thought this about everything.

"At least don't climb it alone, Shelly," she'd said.

"What about mountain lions?" she'd said.

"National parks are where transients sleep," she'd said.

On and on.

In my childhood, which ended on or near this mountain when my husband vanished without explanation, she was hard to ignore. Now that he was gone and I was left to sort through the mess, the tragedy of me as the person who was not missing, ignoring her was simpler.

I imagined he stood where I was, campsite seven, and looked over what he would climb in the morning. There was a message on his phone from me, but the reception was probably bad, and there would surely be a kind of desperation in my voice that kept him from wanting to listen to it. I'd supported him going on the trip alone. I thought it would be good for us. But his calls had grown more infrequent the further west he got, and they stopped altogether when he started heading back, trickling to the occasional picture or text. The last one was from here.

I have taken to picturing all of what he did, then doing it too. It's why I came. So: he closed his eyes and pointed himself into the breeze. I did the same, and tried to think what he was thinking. It felt to him for a second like he didn't exist, or: for a second, he didn't exist. He was practicing the act. There were children running behind him in the distance, the kind of kids you would expect at a minor national park like this—bored, overeager, but otherwise basically capital "G" Good Kids. Nothing like those shits at Carlsbad Caverns that we each had run across the day before, kids who couldn't even sit still to watch the bats.

When we opened our eyes, he and I, the sun was nearly gone between the two main peaks. I stretched my arms out as wide as I could and felt the muscles in my back tense. I thought of him fumbling around in his backpack and taking a swig from the bottle of whiskey he'd bought in a grocery store in New Mexico. The plastic bottle reminded him of mouthwash. They don't sell them that way in Houston, where we live, where the liquor laws are strict and Jesus still holds a pretty strong political sway. I thought of the sign a homeless man had held in Santa Fe that said, "Jesus wasn't black, but Judas, that's fine." My husband slugged down more whiskey. It had been in the sun, so it went down hot and stuck around.

There was something inside of my husband in all the time I knew him. It was the same thing that sent him out on a trip by himself, and it may

have been what caused him never to return. A nameless, twisting-from-the-light type of thing he didn't much like to articulate. Sometimes I would see him sitting in a darkened room, or staring out a window. When we were dating, I would ask him what was wrong, and he would say, of course, that nothing was wrong. But one time he said that language creates the thing it names, and so it was sometimes best to not say anything of what you were thinking. That's when I knew that he had a thing inside him, a thing I might have in me too. A thing I shouldn't name. Maybe all of us do.

I loved him anyhow. I loved him through the three years of our marriage, even as he got quieter, and spent more time inside of himself, and slept beside me less and less at night, choosing instead to stay up and read what he referred to as nothing on the Internet. He would say as much the next day, if I asked: *I was reading nothing. Like on purpose. I wanted to read something that didn't mean anything at all.*

I wasn't a fool. I knew I was being shut out of his inner life, and the silence that settled over us burned in me like held breath. I wanted to shake him awake, but I was afraid that I would find that he was awake, that this was who he was going to be from now on, and so I kept still and waited for him to come around.

The trip was a pilgrimage of sorts. He wanted to go out west, just for the sake of seeing it. I let him go because of the spark of determination in his voice when he talked about it, and because I liked the thought of him heading back to me. Then, of course, he never did.

I stood on top of the picnic table of campsite seven to watch the sun throw its pink across the sky, up over the ridgeline. In my mind, Mark did the same, pulling the hood of his old gray sweatshirt up over his head as he drank his whiskey and looked and looked. The wind bit at his knuckles and he bunched his sleeves over them. I was in shorts, a tank top, an old pair of running shoes, a bandana of his I'd found in a closet back home. It was the same red bandana everyone had.

Gwen called.

"Are you staying in a hotel tonight?" she said, not bothering to say hello. I'd only stayed in a hotel every few nights to save money. The rest of the trip I'd stayed at various campgrounds in a little two-person tent.

"No. Tomorrow I'm making the climb."

"Oh. Well, be careful."

"I will."

There was a pause. "Still nobody real on the sublet."

"It'll work out." I shuffled my feet and waited for the next thing.

"Shel."

"What?"

"You can come live with me. You don't have to do this. I'm on the other side of Houston, different highways, different stores, different restaurants—it's a whole different place."

"You're a good sister, Gwen. 'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

I hung up without hearing her say okay back, because I knew she wouldn't. She didn't like me moving to Las Cruces by myself to do the same job I didn't like in a town I didn't know. My husband clung to himself in the cold.

We each ate dinner out of the trunk of the car, separated by the months that had passed. He had chips and salsa, some trail mix he'd bought at the Buckee's, the hot stuff with the wasabi peas, a string cheese, an apple, a something, a something else. I had a peanut butter and honey sandwich I'd made. I sat on the bumper and chewed, nodded at a father and his young daughter who walked past to the bathrooms. It was a weekday, so the campgrounds were only lightly populated. The tent pads around number seven were all empty, but there were a few cars in the parking lot. I wondered if school had started up again yet in this part of Texas. This far into August it seemed likely.

In the very last bit of daylight, my husband took the picture and sent it to me along with the words, "Cell phone sucks. Still out here. Tomorrow I'll be somewhere up there." I didn't send a response. He probably assumed I thought he was lying about the reception, and in his mind that's what my response would have been if I had sent one. We had both been guilty on more occasions than can be counted of putting more stock into what we might have said than what we actually did say.

I held up my phone now and looked at his picture and my own view of the ridgeline. It was gorgeous. It was worth sharing. I could have said so.

Back in the tent, I turned on my little lantern. My husband would have set his tent up later, in full darkness—he was always a loose planner, he had a tendency to be caught unaware of a lack of daylight, a sudden cold front. It never seemed to bother him, but it made me feel too rigid, too easily annoyed. There was a flashlight at his feet as he tried to stomp a tent peg into the hard-packed dirt. He took a certain pleasure in swearing under his breath, but he smiled when the thing was done.

My sleep was fitful and broken by real and imagined coyotes. I think I had a dream of the bridge that crosses the Rio Grande Gorge north of Taos, or else I was just remembering two days before when I'd stood beside it eating a snow cone I bought out of a converted school bus. I had a picture from Mark with the caption *long way down*. He'd taken it not on the bridge, but below it. He'd crossed the fence line with the government warnings about rock slides and loose footing to take the picture. It was of his feet on the edge of a rock precipice that looked out onto the river hundreds of feet below.

In the dream I stood on the right side of the fence, watching nervously as he crossed the rocks. I called out to him about dropping his phone, but he just turned and smiled. If I were out there, I might feel an urge to jump. I wished for him not to feel the same. I wished he would sit down, would scoot away from the rock's edge, or even army crawl away, as low to the ground as possible. He stood there and waved and braced his lower back with his hands and stretched it out like he had been driving too long.

My waking thoughts of him in that moment would have been the same, more or less, except for the smile. When I kicked my way out of the sleeping bag and sat up in the tent, I didn't know which it was, dream or conscious imagination, which side of fitful sleep it had happened on. Mark slept like a child when he wanted to, a talent he'd gained in college when he spent a semester living in his Isuzu Trooper. I thought of what his dreams might have been. Playing fetch with a coyote, its tongue lolling while it stood and watched the stick in Mark's hand, tensed for the throw. A dream so sun-strewn and joyous that waking up might even hurt a little bit.

I went to the car at sunrise and emptied out the old backpack I'd been living out of into the trunk. I refilled it with bottled water, some sunscreen,

energy bars, and an emergency medical kit I'd bought that also held some weed, double-bagged in case I ran across a border checkpoint, which were creeping further into the Texas interior all the time. I checked the sun. Mark would be up by now, ready to go. I set out after him.

This early on a Wednesday, the campground felt empty and still, and the trail was lonely enough. Mark jumped up and down a few times in his hiking boots against the cold and exhaled hard to see his breath. I took off and re-tied the bandana around my forehead.

The first half mile or so was level, tromping through scrub and walking over the occasional ant pile or mound of rabbit pellets. A lot of the cacti looked stepped on or rotten. Some of them seemed burned. Getting the majesty of a place like this required a little distance. Still, it was nice. I felt a little closer to him, and he felt a little further away from that weight that had been pushing against his ribs, and we both got to let go of ourselves a little.

Of course I didn't know how he felt, but I thought I'd earned the right to speak for him in the silence he'd left me on the other side of.

Once the switchbacks began, things got tougher. The stones that had been set down as makeshift steps were poor footing, and a bit slick, and the old running shoes I'd put on weren't quite up to it. After twenty minutes or so of trudging up the steps, I had to take a break. The steps were a little much for how short my legs are. Mark called me Pocket Woman whenever I needed him to get the flour off the top shelf. He liked to pick me up from behind and yell too loud in my ear that he'd got me, too, the way people have been doing my whole life. You could say that I let him, that I ignored the cliché of it, and the memory of other lovers doing the same, and how it spoke to a language that was not ours but that belonged to a more universal experience and therefore one that maybe wasn't *real or authentic* in the way he liked to think we were. But the truth is none of that occurred to me until it had to. I didn't think of any of it until I had to start making sense of what had happened.

I thought of the wording of that. Making sense. It implied a kind of creation. I sat against a rock and ate some nuts out of my bag. If I found answers to what had happened, would they be found, or made? The

question was upsetting.

These switchbacks don't fuck around, Mark said. Or, *Can you imagine the motherfucker who placed all these rocks? Or, Why are we doing this shit again?* Some statement with a swear word in it that hinted at his own tiredness without admitting it. I drank my water and kept silent, looked at where I'd been. The sun was in the valley, and the cars were gleaming in it. The view of the parking lot from up here made me a little sad. It made me feel like a tourist. I was on the wrong side to view El Capitan—the most famous peak, but not the tallest. Seeing it might make me feel better, like one of the pioneers that used it as a marker.

We kept on. When he was happy, or trying to be happy, Mark would say things out loud that he liked. Here, he said *ponderosa pine*, a word he had read in the brochure. There were none around, though maybe the trees I could see further up the mountain were them. Here it was just pale limestone rocks, some scrub brush, an ocotillo poking out from a rock. I said “ocotillo” to no one.

Once this had all been underwater. Another fact found in a brochure. Mark would say, *That raises all kind of knotty philosophical problems. Like when did it become a mountain instead of an island? Like how can you tell? Like if it were underwater would it still be the highest point in Texas? And what would Texas be if it weren't Texas? If Houston were underwater, would it still be Houston? Or would it just be more Gulf of Mexico?* He was this kind of man.

The switchbacks were unkind and steep, and occasionally there would be a moment where the trail became unclear among the rocks. This was almost always when the trail bent around on itself to continue up. At one point I continued past it for a few dozen feet before coming to a sharp dropoff that ended twenty feet below, where the ground met the rock face but continued steeply down. I heard the bones in my leg snap, looking down there. I felt the dust kick up as I slipped and rolled, or Mark did, or the both of us at once. The trail cut into the face of the mountain hid this kind of fact from everyone. It gave the thrill without the pain, the wilderness stripped of its wild.

Here, then, was one possible explanation. Bad footing, a long fall,

rolling too far from the trail to be seen or helped. Mark used to chide me for always thinking the worst, even as he had to admit that sometimes there was good reason. For every unanswered text a car crash, an affair, a noose in the garage. He chides me still. I poured some water over the edge to hear it slap the ground before I turned and found where the trail picked up.

After another half hour or so, the trail crossed over the ridgeline and changed all at once, giving way to the pines and their shade and an earthy wet forest floor. It was easily ten degrees cooler or more, an alpine forest tucked away into the desert, just a little up and away. The trail leveled out into a gentle rise here. I took a picture, knowing it didn't capture anything of the feeling, but wanting to just the same. Mark didn't stop to photograph anything but was similarly struck by the strangeness of the change.

I said, almost reflexively, not knowing what I meant, "You are here." The stillness of me and of the air around me let me hear for the first time someone coming up the trail. I turned and waited.

It was a man in his late-fifties, wearing a yellow shirt and cargo shorts, walking the trail at a brisk pace with the help of aluminum climbing poles. I didn't like the idea of meeting someone else out here, but the look of him put me at ease. He had the body of a dad with grown children trying his best to be fit. He must have been gaining on me all morning. I held up a hand, gave a little bit of a wave. He nodded.

When he got closer to me, he said, "You're halfway."

"Looks like you're gonna beat me."

He stopped and tamped the ground with one of the poles, "Probably. But then I imagine I've done it more than you. I'm up this mountain most weekends."

"It's not the weekend." I thought of this man meeting Mark like this. Halfway.

"True. Thought I'd take a day off and come up when it's not so crowded. You meet a lot of good people, but sometimes you want the place to yourself."

I looked around. "Sorry."

He held up his hand, which was still looped through the hiking pole's strap. It swung free. "Don't be. This your first time?"

“Yeah.”

“It’s a good day for it. You’ll see.” He plucked a water bottle from his slim backpack and drank from it in one motion. His limbs were like stiff rope, but he was soft in the middle. The strap of his backpack ran under his belly. I decided I liked him.

He looked at me with a kind of expert’s concern. “You set for water? I always bring a little extra in case. It’ll be hot once you’re above the tree line.”

I jiggled my pack. “All good. Got water, and food, too, and sunscreen, and first aid, and a map, and a melon baller just in case.”

He laughed and started past me up the trail. “If I find a melon, I’ll leave it for you.”

“Thanks,” I called after him. After he was far enough that I felt alone, I started out again.

A little further up the mountain, Mark had to pee. He looked down the trail behind him and saw that there was no one, so he stepped off the path, hidden by a low-slung tree. Of course, before he finished someone walked by and caught him, and he suddenly felt exposed and stupid and crass.

Who was the person? It was a woman. Or it was a man. It was a person to serve as witness.

If it was a woman, she was a bit younger than him, with a goofy sun hat and hair drawn back in a ponytail, and he apologized sheepishly as he turned from her, and she laughed. If it was a woman he thought of me, and then he did not think of me, and the story tells itself from there. If it was a man it was that man, booking it on his hiking poles, and my husband laughed loudly and said *I thought I had a pretty good lead* and the man smiled and said *Nope* and then *I’ll see you at the top* and pressed on.

It was nicer to think it was the man, so it must have been. The trees were thinning out the further up the trail I got, and I could see down into the valley below, which was more wooded and lush than the desert surrounding it. After a time, I was above the treeline, and the sun beat down on me like the man said. I came to a bridge that crossed a deep, green-gray wound in the mountain. Below, some trees had collapsed, either from rain

or drought or something else.

On the other side of the bridge a little off the trail was a rock about the size of a volleyball that was swarming with ladybugs. Hundreds of them, teeming and moving over each other. I sent a picture of it to Gwen with the caption: *Don't worry, I found what I was looking for!*

I squatted down to watch the ladybugs for a minute. I thought Gwen might text back. She probably found it annoying, my being glib again. When I didn't know what to say, I went with the joke, because at least a joke means something, which is to say that it means nothing, and by admitting that it means nothing it stands in place of something real. Gwen hated this about me, if only because Gwen didn't think of her life as a thing to be survived.

I know better, so I've been telling and laughing at jokes all summer. I've been practicing for when someone asks me where Mark is. I'll be ready to take it for what it is. I'll laugh in their faces and say, *Oh, how clever.*

We were close to the top, and the trail turned to switchbacks again, steeper this time and less defined. Mark looked out into the valley as low-slung clouds rolled into it. It's always so strange how solid clouds look, and then when you're in them they're the same as fog. The sun was burning my neck. I poured water over the bandana and put it back on.

The trail disappeared entirely a few hundred feet from the top, but it didn't matter. There was nowhere else to go. At one point I had to bend over and put my hands on the hot rock to get the rest of the way.

The peak appeared without ceremony. The man in yellow was sitting on some rocks a few yards away. He looked up and smiled at me. At the tallest point, a brushed metal obelisk jutted up out of the ground. I walked over to it and saw that it was brought to me by American Airlines. Mark hated this. Everyone hated this.

"There's a book to sign in that box by your feet," the man said. He was chewing on something. "But I mean, you should really take a look."

I did. In one direction, Texas sprawled out for miles and miles, cut into sections by freeway. A ridgeline far away had what looked like windmills. They were too far away to see if they were spinning or not. I thought of their red lights, if they were visible from here at night, blinking out of sync

with each other, seeming for all the world like they had something they were trying to say. In the other direction were mountains piled up next to each other. It was something to see.

I sat down with my back leaning against the hot metal.

"What do you think?" he said.

"It's nice."

"Yeah. Sometimes God gets it pretty right."

"I guess so."

We sat in silence a minute before he said, "What do you do?"

"Right now nothing. I start a teaching job next week in Las Cruces."

"High school?"

"College."

He smiled. "A professor. Do you like it?"

"It's a job," I said. I was stuck between being kind and wanting to be alone. Being up here with him felt a little like a performance. I added, "A good job, though. Rewarding, I guess."

He nodded. Mark was standing on the edge away from where I was. The clouds were hiding the valley below. I wanted to be there with him, not seeing.

The man took a long drink of water. "Are you gonna sign the book?" he said.

I shook my head. "No, not yet." He shrugged.

I thought of the weed in my bag. It felt like a cop out, so I left it alone. I knew that the edge that Mark stood on led back down the mountain. To jump would be to turn an ankle or scrape your hands and shins on the rock. Still, I was afraid for him. He had come this far. I was sure. Then the story kind of ended. And here I was, waiting for something else to happen. I thought of his name in the book and stood up.

It was an old metal box that latched, rusted and olive green. It was lighter than I thought it would be. I carried it over near to where the man was and sat down. He smiled at me.

Inside the box was a plain perfect-bound notebook and a pen. I ran my hand along the faux leather face of it. The pages were crinkled and weather-whipped. I flipped through them and saw the signatures and little

messages of strangers. If I were alone I would have cried holding it against me. Instead I let it sit in my lap and flipped to the first blank page. People put their names in this book, and sometimes they stayed. Meaning the names. Sometimes the name was all that was left. Sometimes the name was an answer, and all you had to do was flip back through to the day that the question was asked and see for yourself, but it could be a long walk down with that knowledge in your pocket, and a longer one if you came looking for it and it wasn't there after all.

I closed the book, but kept my page with a finger. I said, "Do you ever think about the word true?"

The man swallowed the last of his granola bar. "How do you mean?"

"Like, it can be a verb. You can true something. It means to make something the right shape. Or, like, something that rings true. It's not about it being right, it's just about beauty."

He smiled. "I can't say that I've ever thought of it that way. I'm an electrician." He said it like it explained everything.

"My husband climbed this mountain once." I felt out of breath from the saying, like I'd betrayed myself. I felt empty.

"Is that so?"

"No," I said. The windmills were moving. I could see that they were. "I don't know. But it's true."

He thought about this for a minute. "What do you mean?" he said. "Which is it?"

"You tell me. Or, actually, don't." I ran my fingernail up the side of the book's pages, felt the buzz of passing days, signatures.

He stared at me like I might be crazy. Finally he said, "Hey, you wanna see something?"

"Sure." He got up, and I followed, still holding the book in my hands. We walked a few dozen feet to a large flat rock near the edge facing the mountains.

"Look," he said, and pointed at our feet. I bent down. There was a spiral indentation in the rock, a little thing that started out as a tight loop before widening out. It was maybe three inches wide. I ran a finger over it.

"That's a fossil," he said. "Been here millions of years, back when this was a Permian reef. Neat, huh?"

It was. Such a small thing, and here it was, immutable. I looked away, out into Texas. I didn't care if he saw me cry, but I didn't want to be crying, either. After a minute, I wiped at my face, stood up, and looked at him square on.

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks for showing me that."

I waited for him to respond or ask if I was okay, but he didn't. He nodded and looked back toward his pack. He knew better than I did that some things can't be solved. I wanted to tell him then that my husband had disappeared, that there was no explanation, that he had climbed up this mountain and just kept climbing, that somehow that was what he needed, and he found it, and it was enough.

I didn't say any of that, though. I stuck out my hand. He took it, and I thanked him again, and he walked back to his gear and shouldered it. I raised my hand in a wave. He did the same, and I smiled the kind of smile that means a person did their absolute best to help.

When he was gone, I sat down, opened the book, and signed my name and then Mark's, so that in my mind he was not on the edge of something again. In my mind he did it, whatever it was he needed to do, and he's doing it still, and he carries on ahead of me. For a minute I could even believe it.

I put the book back in its box and carried it over to where it was. I knew I should start back, but I wanted to stay here for a bit longer and think about how I'd accomplished something instead of how I was only halfway. There was still the descent. There was still pain shooting up from my jellied muscles, there was still growing tired, too tired. There was still continuing mostly out of sheer momentum, out of not wanting to be where I was any more. There was still taking too long, longer than it took to get here. There was still the sunburn that would set in, there was still the picking, the rolling of the dead skin between fingertips while staring at boxes in my new living room. There was those boxes still being there at Thanksgiving, there was Gwen coming to visit, there was her opening the boxes and finding a place for everything. There was her placing one thing on the coffee table, one thing on a shelf, looking to me for approval, me not nodding, then me nodding, me not wanting to but nodding, me starting to feel a little okay.