

Gridlock

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There weren't any clouds to block the sunlight, and it gleamed off the shiny exteriors of all the cars standing stolid, bumper to bumper as far ahead as could be seen. The pavement was dark with moisture in spots like maybe it'd rained a little in the morning, and the air was heavy and humid and weighed down sticky against skin. The air conditioner was on, but it was old and sputtered and the air only came out of it a little cooler, not enough to make anyone much more comfortable. His fingers thumped a little rhythm into the wheel as they idled and waited to go.

"It sure is warm today." she said.

"Yeah. I thought after last week it had cooled down for good for the fall, but it's hot again."

She glanced at her makeup in the mirror of the visor, to see how it was holding up in the heat. After a moment the car in front moved twenty or so feet, and they eased up behind it.

"When's the flight again? Three?" he asked.

"Ten after, yeah. It's just one now."

"We've got time." Then he added, "crazy that there's so much traffic. I wonder if there's an accident or something."

"Mmhm."

A wasp landed on the outside of the windshield and wagged its antennae around for a minute. There wasn't anything of interest on the glass and it flew off.

"You looking forward to it?" he asked.

"I don't know. It's something. It's probably for the best in the long run."

"You probably get a say in it, if they can move you in a year or two, right?"

"That's what the lady said. I think the only reason I couldn't be here right now is because their operations aren't big enough here yet, but she said they're working on it, so it'll depend on that." Her eyes were fixed gazing out of the window, to the horizon. Her lips were stretched thin. "I

mean, it sounded like I could probably move again in a year if I wanted to but it'll depend, how easy it is to come back here. We'll have to see."

"Damn. I hope they get bigger here and start moving more people here."

"Yeah. That'd definitely be easier." she said. "Worst-case scenario, I can always apply to things back here after a little while, and I'll get better offers after doing this."

"Anyway," he put in, "it's like a kind of consulting, isn't it? You'll be traveling a good amount anyway and maybe you'll get to travel here for some things."

"It's management consulting, I don't even know exactly what they'll have me doing. But yeah, I think junior associates travel more so I'll probably be traveling for a few weeks every couple months."

"That's cool, you probably get to meet a lot of people!" He looked at her with a smile. The car was still, and he took one hand off the steering wheel to grasp hers and hold it gently for a moment.

"Yeah, maybe it's more interesting than sitting behind a desk."

He brushed his hand along her leg before pulling it back up onto the wheel and looking out over the road again. "I'm sure you'll meet some good people."

She sat for a moment, then rolled her head back against the seat and glared at the roof. "Ughhh. It's just annoying to restart everything. I already know people here, and you're here."

"It'll be fine. It could be good to - I don't know. Space can be a good thing sometimes. It's just for a while, anyway. I'll still be here and I still love you."

"Damn, I don't know why we didn't bring any water for the road. It's so hot." She lifted her shirt up to her belly button and fanned it up and down two or three times.

"Yeah, if we were going faster we could roll the windows down but that wouldn't do anything for us right now."

"I wonder if there's a spot we can stop off to get water not too far off the highway."

"I bet. We probably have time."

She reclined her seat back as far as it would go, which wasn't very far, and shielded the sun from her eyes with a hand.

For a moment he turned his face to her body stretched over the seat. With a deep breath he asked, "So, you think any more about what I said the other night?"

With closed eyes, she said, "Oh... a little. I don't know."

"I'm just worried we'll both feel lonely while we're apart. Maybe it's best to make the most of it if we have to be apart."

"I just... I don't want things to change too much. I think we were doing fine the way things were." she sighed.

"Nobody's making you go."

"I know. And I do want to. If I don't make more money nothing can change, and I guess I want things to change eventually. I mean, I want to be able to settle down at some point. It's just... I feel like I'm going to miss out on so much. I can't stand the thought of life moving on here without me."

"Yeah. It's tough that it's been so hard to find anything here."

"Like, what if I come back in two years and everyone moved or got married or whatever and I basically have to find new friends all over again?"

"I don't think that would happen. People don't disappear if they get married. Everyone will still be here for you."

She didn't respond. She twirled her hair in between her fingers tensely and closed her eyes tight.

After a minute, he looked back at her. "Just because we're together and you know people here doesn't mean you can't meet new people there. You don't think it'd get sad just thinking about each other all the time if we can't be physically together?"

"But then what? Are we even together anymore at that point?"

"Well, yeah. Of course, baby. I still love you. I just want to make the distance less hard on us."

"What makes it any different than if we just decided to move on?"

"I hope you would want to come back."

She sighed and put both hands over her face, rubbing her eyes. "God. I just like things the way they are. I wish things didn't have to change."

"They won't change, not really. I'll still be here and when you come home we'll still love each other like nothing happened."

"I don't know... maybe that's true. How could we be sure though? It's just hard. One or two years is like exactly the wrong amount of time."

"Yeah."

Outside, the dark green trees lining the expressway sagged in the sun. Flies buzzed around something on the shoulder of the road, just outside the passenger window. After a little silence she stretched and sat up again and her eyes wandered out of the window, but she didn't spend very long looking to see what the flies were excited about. "God, this heat is giving me such a headache."

"I'm sorry," he said with a concerned glance. "We'll stop off at an exit and get some water."

"Thanks... so are you doing anything else the rest of today?"

"I didn't have any plans. The Pacers game is on later, maybe I'll see if anyone else is watching it. You do have something you have to do tonight, right?"

"Yeah. My new manager wanted to get dinner tonight but I don't actually start until Wednesday. I'm just gonna go straight to the hotel first though, and I probably should start looking for apartments tomorrow."

"Hmm, well I hope your manager's nice! Let me know how it goes!"

"Thanks. I'll probably call you around ten."

"Okay, that's fine."

The lane started moving again gradually. They rolled along past one milepost before slowing to a standstill again.

"Don't you think you'll want to meet new people there anyway? You won't want to be alone for that long. I'm sure you'll make friends at least."

"I won't be alone! I'd still have you and everyone back here. And maybe I can come and visit a lot of weekends."

"That'd be nice. It will be nice to see you whenever I can. Maybe I can even come up sometimes too... it just seems tough. But it could be fun, I'll be curious to see your new life there."

"It just might be harder than you think to meet new people. People are like getting married and having kids by now. It's about the time that people get tied down. Stuff gets harder as you get older."

"I guess. I still think it'd be possible."

"I just don't know why. I don't really want to, and I don't think I'm going to want to. We have each other."

"We do. Of course we do. And I love you. But that doesn't mean we have to be sad sacks sitting alone in our empty apartments for who knows how long. Like... I don't want you to miss out on interesting people there because you're stuck thinking about all of us here."

"I won't! I'll try to make friends. But isn't this different?"

"Yeah, you might be right. I don't know. I think maybe we should try but we don't have to."

"I can't even think about it right now. Why can't we just figure it out in a little while? Moving is already too much right now."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Maybe the only thing is for you to get there and we'll see how it is. We'll talk all the time and you'll tell me how it is. And hopefully you can come back and visit soon."

"I just want to feel sure that if I want to just keep things how they've been that you'll want to, too."

"I will! I want whatever's going to make us both happy."

"Okay. It just sounds like you don't totally like the idea."

He was silent for a minute and looked up at the sky. The air was cooling a little. Slowly, he said, "I don't want you to think I'm glad there's space between us. If it were up to me you'd be here with me. It's not like I'd be looking forward to it. I'm not even thinking about what I would do. I'm just trying to think of what makes sense."

She was looking out the window. "I don't know. I'm just going to get there first. Let's talk about it a different time."

The cars had started rolling again by then. In the distance ahead, in the thick, wet air, a dark mat of clouds had formed.

"Okay."

They drove for a while without saying anything, and after a few minutes there were raindrops on the windshield, first a few, and then a heavy downpour.