About To Run

“Damn. It’s hot. How can it be this hot in October?” Toni grumbles as she and her wife, Willow, exit the Phoenix, Arizona airport, pulling their luggage to wait for their driver to whisk them to the Waldorf Astoria, where Toni is counting on a Bloody Mary to soothe her nerves. Only one layover in Atlanta to fly from Ohio to Arizona without any glitches, yet Toni is a nervous traveler. And she has no interest in the two shows at the Orpheum Theater other than seeing Jennifer Hartswick on stage, the lure Willow dangled to hook Toni, and it worked.

“We’ve never been to the desert, honey. It’s on my bucket list. Don’t you want to see the mountains? And listen to this. You love Frank Lloyd Wright. He has two hundred houses there. we can go on a tour to see them,” Willow said, looking over her laptop one evening in August when the show tickets were announced. “And it’s not Phish. It’s Trey Anastasio Band. Big difference. Horns section. Women singers. We’ll stay at a posh resort where there aren’t any hippies and lounge at the pool. I promise. You’ll love it.”

Toni was exhausted from a long day packed with one desperate client after the other. Being a therapist was both inspiring and draining, and she had yet to unpack the groceries, begin dinner, and feed the dogs when her wife overwhelmed her with this plan to fly across the country, but when she saw that familiar glimmer in Willow’s eyes, there was little choice but to agree. Anything to keep Willow happy. Toni grimaced, remembering the one client she privately despised who, just today, said, “Happy wife/happy life,” causing Toni to bend her head down, pretending to take notes so she could arrange the contempt in her face to counsel the idiot. When Willow wrapped her arms around Toni and placed her head between Toni’s shoulder blades, it worked the magic it always does. Consequently, Toni willingly abandoned the autumnal glory that is Youngstown, Ohio in October for the blazing sun in the desert. All for love.

“You’re lucky to have come when you did,” the driver says. “The heat just broke. It’s beautiful now.”

“It’s ninety-eight degrees,” Toni says.

“Right. Perfect, yes?”

Toni pulls her sunglasses from the top of her head and shields her eyes, looking out the window instead of answering the delusional man. How he thinks this is cool weather is obviously evidence he has never been a fifty-year-old menopausal woman. Whatever. She remains silent, letting Willow do the small talk for which Toni has no patience.

When they arrive at the resort, the grip of anxiety, impatience, and irritation melt away. It is as beautiful as promised from the website, and the research Toni did to learn the ambiguous history of whether Frank Lloyd Wright built the resort, contributed to the design, or was all built as a tribute to the man. Fascinating. Toni spends hours following research wormholes for fun, something Willow knows, using that to entice her to the desert. It wasn’t necessary. Toni has followed Willow wherever she goes for over twenty years. From the moment Toni saw the beautiful hippie selling her textile creations at the art fair at Coney Island, she was mesmerized. Some call them an opposite couple, but Toni likes to think they are a complementary couple and is secretly glad she and her wife don’t seem to match, mirroring each other like so many lesbian couples they know. How boring to be with someone exactly like yourself. When Willow is in an emotionally and psychologically good place, she says, “I bring you fun to your life and a deeper sense of spirituality, and in return, you provide the foundation and security I need as an artist to thrive.” When Willow goes dark and twisty into the depths of despair, she laments, “You have all the power in our marriage. I have nothing. Compared to you, I’m a failure. You’re better at everything. You earn more money than I will ever see. You’re morally stronger, and you always do the right thing. I don’t even know why you stay with me.”

No matter how often Toni reassures Willow that she married her for who she is and not for what she does, the same fight cycles and even gained intensity during quarantine from the global pandemic. Now that Toni can return to her office every day, she hopes their marriage will steady. Too much time together wreaked havoc on many marriages. Toni knows. At least six of her clients are going through a divorce, which Toni is desperate to avoid. If her sweet wife wants to fly to a desert to see her favorite band, Toni books the flights and reserves a suite at the resort that proves to be beyond Toni’s expectations. Its balcony overlooks a garden created in rectangles lined in red clay pathways, filled with white pansies and green manicured bushes proudly displaying the Sprite statues, mesmerizing Toni. She cannot believe the view of the purple mountain to the east where the sun will rise beyond it tomorrow. She can easily imagine models from Ralph Lauren ads walking their dogs across the green lawns below, exactly how the resort images appeared on the internet.

She and her wife change into swimsuits and walk to one of the restaurants in the resort for lunch and that necessary Bloody Mary.

“Isn’t this nice to have the afternoon together and tomorrow before the shows?” Willow asks after they place their orders. It may be three o’clock in the afternoon in Ohio, but it is only noon in Arizona, which feels like a bonus of sorts to Toni. Like stolen time.

“We can go for a hike tomorrow morning if you like. Or schedule the history tour of the resort,” Willow continues. “Or lounge at the pool or sleep in. Whatever you want, honey.”

Toni smiles. Whenever Willow knows Toni is indulging her, Willow goes into overdrive to please Toni in return. Twenty years ago, it was a dynamic Toni tried to break. Now, she accepts her wife’s contrition because Willow is like a whirling dervish when she is in the middle of a weaving project, despondent when she is rejected from being included in a festival or show, or worse, accepted but doesn’t sell a single piece. Toni reminds herself how boring her life would be without Willow, even though her mercurial nature can be exhausting. Artists need more reassurance than other people, in Toni’s experience, so she digs deeply to find grace and forgiveness because ordinary people don’t depend their income on what Willow calls her heart and soul, her art. Toni acknowledges the risk of vulnerability it takes to be an artist, and what’s more? She admires her wife’s talent, so devoting her life to supporting and encouraging an artist feels satisfying to Toni.

Toni ignores Willow’s excitement about the enormous waterslide at the family pool and bypasses it without comment to the adult pool, which reveals itself to be a paradise, barely populated on this quiet Sunday afternoon. Under an umbrella, they settle on chaise lounges. Toni hands Willow her digital reader and sunblock and unearths a copy of *The Lincoln Highway*.

“I can’t believe you’d rather lug around a book the size of *War and Peace* instead of a skinny little reader,” Willow says.

When Toni doesn’t respond, Willow abandons her reader for the pool. As she floats on one of the many inflatables available, something Toni has never seen at a resort and is impressed; she turns her attention back to Amor Towles’ brilliant book. An avid reader, there are only two other authors whose writing is so stunning it causes Toni to stop reading to marvel at the craft. Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood. And now this Amor guy. The story is so engrossing; Toni barely noticed the four-hour flight, and she is delighted the book will probably last until their return flight because, after two hours at the pool, Toni entices Willow back to the room to make love. Reading can wait.

The following day after a run along the canal and breakfast, Toni and Willow return to the pool, first stopping to marvel at The Wise One named Lloyd, a seven-thousand-pound, thirty-three-foot cactus planted in 1882. Toni is disappointed the promised historical tour of the resort is only offered on the weekends, but Willow is so excited for the show her exuberance compensates for this minor glitch in planning, especially when, in their room, dressing for dinner and the show, Willow offers a gift she hid in their suitcase.

“These are the shoes Jennifer Hartswick wore on stage for the Beacon shows,” Willow says, holding up the white sequined sneakers. Jill is delighted. The shoes match perfectly with her T-shirt that reads, “Girl, Woman, Goddess, Shit” in blue glitter letters she dons with wide yoga pants that split down the middle of each leg, like air conditioning a menopausal woman appreciates when it’s ninety degrees in Arizona.

Because the women have never been to Phoenix, they choose to dine at the resort’s Mexican restaurant, an excellent and efficient choice. They order smoked Wagyu beef brisket with roasted peppers Toni pairs with a Malbec as the waiter offers tortilla chips, guacamole, and three different salsas to start. Toni smiles when Willow excuses herself to use the restroom because, dressed in a silk patchwork open-back dress exposing sun-kissed skin, Willow turns every head in the restaurant. To kill time, Toni scrolls social media, a decision she will regret. Maybe Willow is right. If Toni had a slim digital reader, she would not have opened her phone. As soon as they return to Ohio, Toni will purchase one.

“What is it?” Willow says when she returns to the table. One glance, and she knows. Toni hesitates. Willow has been ebullient all day in anticipation of the shows. It’s not just the sun that makes her wife glow. And they have second-row seats tonight. How can Toni share what she saw with Willow? How can she not? Stalling, Toni sips her wine.

“Honey, I’m not sure I should tell you this because it’s bad news. But how can I not tell you? You already sense something,” Toni says. “I mean, even if I chose not to tell you, you would know something was wrong. I’m going to buy a digital reader.”

“What?” Willow says, confused. “A digital reader is bad news? Damn. You scared the shit out of me.”

Willow dips a chip into the guacamole and smiles as she chews. Just as Toni opens her mouth to correct her wife, the waiter arrives with the entrée with the flourish a Wagyu brisket that has been smoked for twelve hours deserves. Toni waits patiently as the waiter explains the intensity of each pepper's heat and which sauce to pair as they heap slices of the succulent meat onto soft blue tortillas. Toni can’t taste the first bite which rests like sawdust on her tongue, her grief so thick.

“Honey, Melinda died,” Toni says. “Olivia posted it just now, and I saw it, and I don’t know whether I should have told you, but how can I not tell you? I’m so sorry.”

Willow tilts her head like she does when she is confused, but when she meets Toni’s eyes, her eyes fill with tears. Willow retrieves her phone. “It’s on Olivia’s wall? You know I don’t follow her.”

Toni pushes her plate aside and finishes her wine as Willow scrolls.

“Did you see this?” Willow says, offering the phone to Toni, who accepts it to study the image Melinda posted as a banner on her page, a haunting sepia-toned image of ghosts hanging from trees on the right and a realistic silhouette of a witch flying on a broom.

Before Toni can say what they both know, Willow grabs the phone back and says, “I’m going to text Olivia.”

Toni signals for the waiter to box their food and to request their check, explaining they just received news a friend died. Not only did the staff swiftly respond, a confection of méringue caramel dessert arrives, “A small sweet to offer our condolences.”

When the women return to their room to refrigerate the dinner they didn’t eat, Toni asks, “Do you still want to go to the show? What did Olivia say, honey?”

“She thanked me for reaching out and said Melinda went in to take a nap and never woke up. That she had suffered from Grave’s disease and bi-polar depression and that she died in her sleep. I think I’m in shock. I know I’m in shock. I’m stunned.”

Toni sits next to her wife on the edge of the bed and puts her arm around her because there is nothing else to do. Of course, Willow is in shock. One of the reasons Toni agreed to this vacation was to celebrate the seventh anniversary, what Willow calls her Rebirthday, from when Willow purposefully overdosed to commit suicide only to be rescued by Toni. Willow suffered a harrowing week in the hospital and then devoted seven years in therapy to recover, a milestone Toni respects. She worries how Willow will respond to this blow today, of all days, two days before Willow’s Rebirthday, when her wife suddenly stands up and snaps, “Of course, we’re still going to the show. Melinda would want us to go to the show. You know how many Grateful Dead shows she and I saw together. We did not come all the way out here to not go to the shows. This is ridiculous. I’m devastated. Of course, I am. But I’m alive, goddammit. I’m alive. Let’s go.”

Knowing better than to argue with her wife when she gets into these moods, Toni nods and follows.

Their driver says, “You know the Orpheum Theater is haunted, yes?”

“Of course, it is. We know all about ghosts,” Willow says, then turns to Toni, offering a mushroom, saying, “Want to eat just a little bit with me?”

“Are you sure, Willow?” Toni says, accepting the cap as she watches her wife gulp water to wash down the handful she swallows. It’s too late to say, *maybe not so much*.

In the theater, Willow asks Toni to take pictures of her in front of the gold-painted columns of the theater. Their second-row seats are on the aisle next to the wall of the theater, which is wonderful because Willow is a wild dancer who likes a lot of room, and nobody will pass by them like they would, seated in the center aisle. Meanwhile, Toni is content to sit in a seat, especially as the first wave of dreaminess the mushrooms evoke as the trip begins.

The crowd roars as the band take the stage and launch the show with a quick *Mozambique*, energizing dancing before segueing into *Everything’s Right*. Toni watches Willow as she dances with her arms over her head, stomping her feet, singing along with gusto through *Alive Again*. Toni wipes away a tear, grateful her wife is joyously alive again, until the band plays *Ghost*, *Sweet Dreams Melinda*, and *Olivia*. How the fuck can this be? Is Toni hallucinating this far? She follows as Willow breaks away during *Olivia*, and walks downstairs to the women’s room, one of those old-fashioned restrooms found in country clubs, featuring a parlor with velvet settees and chairs separate from the space of mirrors and sinks, separate from the lavatories.

Toni spies a woman offering candy to console Willow, who is crying in front of the sinks. “No, thank you,” Willow says. “I don’t need candy. My friend died. I’m just sad. But thank you.”

Toni smiles reassuringly at the woman before she asks her wife, “Are you okay, honey?” She directs Willow to sit with her on the velvet settee.

“These mushrooms are really powerful,” Willow says. “I keep feeling like there’s someone over my right shoulder. It’s weird. I keep turning around, but there’s no one there. Do you think it’s the ghost or the mushrooms? You don’t think it’s Melinda, do you? And how can the band have known to play these songs? I’m freaking out a little bit.”

“Okay, but they also played *Alive Again*. That means something, too,” Toni says. “Take a deep breath, and let’s practice our mantra, shall we? Seven years. The human body sheds skin cells which means—”

Willow picks up, “Every seven years, we have a whole new body of skin, and this skin, this skin on my body that swam in a pool under an Arizona sky today, is new. This skin didn’t die. This skin is alive. I’m alive.”

“That’s right. How do you feel?” Toni says, looking into Willow’s eyes, whose pupils are dilated from the psychedelics. When Willow breaks into a smile, she jumps up, offers her hand to her wife, and says, “Better. Let’s go. I don’t want to miss the end of first set.”

Toni chooses to dance in the aisle with her wife instead of taking her seat in the row; she’s so relieved, even though she’s still worried. They are only halfway through the show.

Second set soothes Toni with one of her favorite songs, *Drifting,* and she is delighted to hear *Curlew’s Call*. This older song floats her back to their early days of marriage, cooking spaghetti in the kitchen, drinking red wine out of Mason jars, and dancing barefoot. Toni’s revelry is jolted when Trey wails, *About to Run*. She watches Willow dance, tears streaming down her face. *Sand* is redemption, but to end the encore with *Life Beyond a Dream* is healing. Toni wraps her arms around Willow’s waist as they sway and sing along with the band, and everyone connected in the audience under this magical spell.

As soon as the band takes their final bows, Willow grabs Toni’s hand and makes a beeline outside, saying, “Call for a car now, please,” bypassing the general post-show merriment. Fortunately, a car arrives within minutes, driving them to the resort in silence. Instead of her usual banter, Willow stares out the window as Toni holds her hand.

Once they enter their room, Willow takes a shower while Toni pours herself a glass of wine. Although she only microdosed, she needs help coming down from the energy psychedelics provide. Changing into a caftan, she opens her phone, slipping on her reading glasses to look at the day's pictures. She stops scrolling and zooms to get a closer look at the picture of Willow in front of the gold-painted columns. Cast in a vivid purple light, a shadow of what looks like a woman with bent arms, mimicking angel wings, floats on top of Willow as if superimposed. The shadow is not behind Willow, and the shadow is not a reflection of Toni, whose hair was pulled into a bun for the show. The shadow’s hair is to her shoulders, shorter than Willow’s. What exactly is she seeing?

“This is going to sound weird,” Willow says, exiting the bathroom in a robe, her hair wound in a towel turban. “But I think Melinda’s ghost entered me.”

“What do you mean, entered you?” Toni asks, turning her phone face.

“You know how I said I kept thinking there was somebody behind me? I kept feeling a presence over my right shoulder,” Willow says. “I couldn’t shake it. Even after we chanted the mantra in the restroom, I still felt it, so when Trey sang *About to Run*, I lifted my arms and said, ‘Okay, Melinda. I will let you enter me for this one show. You may dance through me tonight, but only tonight. I will share this with you. But you are dead, and I’m alive, and I plan to stay that way.’ Suddenly, I felt free. I don’t know how to explain it, but I honestly feel like she entered me, and offering her that gift reinforces my goal to stay alive. Toni, I want to live. I want to live.”

Willow begins to sob. Toni pours a glass of water, retrieves a box of tissues, and returns to the bed. “Would you also like some wine?”

“No wine, thank you. I’m sorry. I know I’ve said it before, but you have no idea the guilt I carry. I’m sorry, Toni,” Willow says, accepting the water. “I hate that I put you through that nightmare. I love you.”

“Willow, I love you, honey. I forgive you. I’m just glad you’re alive. I need you, my dear one. You are the love of my life. The dream of my dreams. My end-all, be-all. Now try to get some sleep. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

Toni watches as her wife drifts to sleep. She doesn’t need to examine the picture again. Her wife told her everything she needs to know and maybe doesn’t need to know what she knows, and sometimes that is love.