

the beginning.

I can feel it.

My heart. Threatening to explode in my chest.

You know when you're in a moment, but you can already tell that it's going to be a *moment* that you'll never forget.

That's what this felt like.

Like there was no going back.

Like I was actively being defined by my choices.

It seemed funny to me that a split-second decision was going to define the rest of my life.

But there I was. Standing in the space of the moment after the split-second.

My body is coursing with adrenaline; my hands, a ball of nerves in my lap.

As neighborhood stop-signs familiar only to me stretch into the miles of the forest that line the highway, the anxiousness in my chest slowly begins to dissipate until it's replaced with something new.

You're sitting in the driver's seat.

An old country song is playing softly from your car's speakers.

The moon is hanging high in the sky, illuminating the Germanic-twinge of green in your hazel eyes.

As your fingers drum an absent beat into the inside of my jean-clad thigh, your hands shake. Only slightly.

You're a picture of calm beside me; eyes blinking slow, breaths even and steady. But your foot is heavy on the clutch every time you clumsily trip into a new gear.

You're nervous, but you're trying to hide it from me.

Hastily thrown into the backseat is an old gym bag that I never had the heart to throw out.

It's like I can feel the heaviness of its weight from where it sits, mocking me.

How do you pack your whole life into twenty-one inches of cheap fabric?

Favorite pair of jeans. *Do I need my toothbrush?* Sweats for the colder nights. *Did I grab my earrings?* T-shirts rolled into a ball to make space. *I can buy new shampoo.* The shoes on my feet. *You barely remembered to put on your coat.*

"I can feel your mind going a mile a minute," you say from beside me. There's a smile on your face, but it doesn't disguise the twinge of something in your tone that I don't recognize.

Funny, I think. Maybe you don't know everything about him after all.

I smile back at you, but it shakes. "Just feel like I'm forgetting something."

Actually, I'm thinking I might have just made the biggest mistake of my life.

"It's not too late to turn back," you suggest.
We both glance at the blinking red numbers on your dash.
3:08a.m.
My mind is a series of snapshots.
The viscous intent of my mother's voice.
The look of disappointment on my father's face.
My own pathetic voice, ringing in my ears.
Eyes blurry with tears, blindly shoving clothes in the bag.
Dialing a number that I've committed to memory for quite some time now.
Leaving my beat-up, white Mazda behind; keys abandoned on the kitchen counter.
My heart pangs at this. I *loved* that car.
The further away your car's vibrations carry us from the moment, the less sure I feel.
"I'm not going back," I say firmly.
Very different from *I can't go back*, which is also true.
You nod, pensive.
There is days-old stubble growing in along your chin and I resist the urge to reach out and scratch my fingers against it.
Your eyes are sharp and dissonant against the glow of oncoming headlights. It's one of the first time that I can't pinpoint exactly what you're thinking.
"Do you want me to?" I ask, my voice cutting through the silence like a knife.
Because it's you, you hear the silent insecurity in my question, and you make a point of taking your eyes off the road to look at me when you reply. "No," you say vehemently. Your gaze flickers away. "We knew it would come to this."
You're right.
But all night, I wait.
"I feel..." you drift off.
"Relieved?" I ask.
You nod.
Then after a moment, "Which is weird, because if that's the case, then I don't know why it-"
"Hurts so much?" I finish.
You nod again, an ironic smile on your face.
"Have I ever had an original thought?" you joke.
I grin despite myself. "Not with me."
Your hand slides from my leg to cup the side of my cheek. "We're gonna be fine."
I'm not sure if you're convincing me or yourself, but I appreciate the sentiment.
When we check into the hotel, my mind is already running the numbers.
And still, I wait.

To wake up from a lucid dream? To hear a knock on the door and find them on the other side of it? To get dragged out kicking and screaming?

I'm not sure.

I wait as the bags drop on the hotel-room floor. As you lay your hockey sticks against the doorframe, still cold from use only a few hours before. As I set our untouched coffee cups on the table. As I talk myself out of the guilt that I'm not quite sure I feel. As you run the water in the shower, an ad for apartment listings opened on your laptop.

In the middle of the night, as I fitfully try to sleep, engulfed in your arms, I understand what it is that I'm waiting for.

But they never even call.

I am twenty years old - you, nine years my senior. And we just ran away together. What now?