

When Skies Are Gray

Written by
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OVER BLACK

A voicemail BEEPS, ready to receive a message.

A shaky voice cracks over the line.

RHEA (V.O.)
(over phone)
We... I miss you. Please come home. I
love you.

BEEP.

INT. SMALL GAS STATION - DAY

Quiet, empty. The bored and tired CASHIER stares across the counter at the equally stressed and exhausted RHEA: a gender nonconforming woman in her early 20s.

RHEA
Inch and a quarter papers.

The cashier rings up the rolling papers and sets the pack on the counter.

CASHIER
Anything else?

Rhea examines the lighter display, scrutinizing each one without removing them from the block.

She chooses one very deliberately, gives it a test flick that seems to last just a hair too long, and sets it on the counter.

PRE-LAP: Focus shifts from the sounds of the transaction to a phone call as the cashier rings up the items.

MOM (V.O.)
(over phone)
Are you going to make it?

CASHIER
(present)
It's \$5.25.

RHEA (V.O.)
I'm on my way right now.

The backdrop to the conversation continues as Rhea drops a few bills on the counter.

RHEA
(present)
Keep the change.

MOM (V.O.)
(over phone)
How long is the drive here?

The cashier collects the money. Rhea is out of the building with her items before the cashier can even open the register.

EXT. SMALL GAS STATION - CONTINUED

Rhea's car is parked at the pump. In the passenger seat sits her partner NAT.

Rhea crosses the parking lot.

RHEA (V.O.)
Four hours, I think. I don't know.

Rhea opens the driver door and gets in.

INSIDE CAR

Rhea looks at Nat. Nat looks at her. There are no words to fill the space between them; they don't need any.

MOM (V.O.)
You have something nice to wear? Do
you want to stop for dinner with me
before we go?

A backpack sits in the back seat.

PARKING LOT

The car pulls away from the pump, onto the street, and away.

RHEA (V.O.)
I'll see how I feel when I get there.
And I don't know if we'd get there in
time for that.

INT. RHEA'S CAR - A BIT LATER

Rhea is driving and on the phone with her mom. Nat is in the passenger seat.

RHEA
(into phone)
I love you, too, Mom. See you later.

She hangs up and drops her phone in the cupholder.

They drive in silence for a moment.

NAT
How are you feeling?

RHEA
I'm alive.

EXT. RURAL HIGHWAY - DAY

A long stretch of road surrounded by a lot of farmland and little else.

Rhea's car zooms by.

INT. RHEA'S CAR - CONTINUED

Nat's contemplating a word game on her phone. Rhea stares at the road.

NAT
Five letter card game, middle letter
M?

RHEA
Rummy.

She white-knuckles the steering wheel.

INT. DAD'S DINING ROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A YOUNG RHEA sits at the table with her DAD. They are playing rummy.

The adjacent room is hidden behind foggy tarps pinned to the door frame, with all the signs of an ongoing renovation.

YOUNG RHEA
You haven't worked on the bathroom in
a while.

DAD
I know. I just don't have the money
right now.

YOUNG RHEA

Will it have a real door soon at least?

DAD

I don't know.

Young Rhea draws a card from the deck. ASHLIE bursts into the room--Rhea's heavily tattooed stepmom. Ashlie exudes all the energy of the loud Mean Girl who bullied you in high school who doesn't know she's over 35 now, with a sprinkle of Wine Mom who doesn't have kids.

ASHLIE

Oh my God! Drew, check it out.

Ashlie shows off a tattoo, to Drew and to Young Rhea.

ASHLIE

Me and the girls got matching tats in Vegas! It was amazing! I already booked the hotel for next year.

DAD

(confused by the tattoo)
Does it mean anything?

ASHLIE

Oh, we just saw it in the shop and thought it looked cute! Something to remember the trip forever!

Young Rhea stays quiet. She glances at the unfinished bathroom and then at her Dad with uneasy sadness.

INT. PUBLIC BATHROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

Toilet flushes. Rhea washes her hands. She stares at her reflection; the bags under her eyes seem darker and heavier every time she notices them.

EXT. GAS STATION - MOMENTS LATER

Rhea walks out with a bag of drinks and snacks for the road. Nat stands outside the car, waiting for her.

NAT

Want me to drive the rest?

RHEA

No, it's... (beat) yeah, that could be nice.

Nat smiles softly, worriedly.

NAT

Good. You should rest, anyway. Just
chill while I get us there, okay,
baby?

Nat hugs Rhea when she gets to the car.

INSIDE CAR

Nat is in the driver seat. Rhea stares out the passenger window as she's piloted out of the gas station parking lot and back onto the road.

Rhea's gaze travels up to the sky.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. DAD'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Young Rhea stares out the passenger window as Dad drives. Country music plays softly from the radio.

The night sky is clear and the moon shines brightly.

YOUNG RHEA

Why is the moon so orange...

The moon's color and shape change, morphing one into another:

YOUNG RHEA (O.S.)

...yellow?
...red?
...bright?

Cut back to Young Rhea, in a different outfit with her hair styled differently, gleaming at her Dad in the driver seat.

DAD

Well, you see, the path of the sun's
light when it hits the moon...

Different versions of Young Rhea sit in the passenger seat, shifting one to another as her Dad's made up sciencey explanations overlap:

DAD (O.S.)

...through the apex point on the
Earth's rotation...

(MORE)

DAD (O.S.) (CONT'D)
...the angle of the moon reflecting
off the stratosphere...
...and then when that light hits us,
it's orange. That's why the moon's
orange.

Dad's voice is full of exuberant whimsy and flare, and Young Rhea hangs on every goofy word.

INT. MOM'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT (YEARS LATER)

Rhea, a version of herself that teeters on the brink of adulthood, sits at the table.

Her Dad sits across from her.

DAD
So I talked to Ashlie...

The tension between them is palpable.

DAD (CONT'D)
She says if you're not working or
going to school, you can't live with
us. I've tried explaining the
situation, but she doesn't believe in
depression or anxiety. She doesn't
think they're real, and I've tried to
explain...

He trails off. Rhea sits quietly for a moment, fear silencing her anger. There's a look in her Dad's eyes that reflects her own: tired, angry, defeated.

RHEA
But Mom said I can't live *here*...
where am I supposed to go?

DAD
I'll talk to your mom.

RHEA
Dad...

Her Dad stands and quietly leaves the room.

INT. DAD'S DINING ROOM - DAY

Rhea sits with her laptop at the dining table.

She looks stressed and uncomfortable, tapping away at the keyboard in a group chat that pops up on screen as the messages ping.

RHEA: i bent over to get something & the weird old guy tried to slap my ass.

RHEA: he missed but still...

CICI: did you do anything?? im so sorry!!

RHEA: yeah lol i quit.

RHEA: that job gave me so much anxiety 😭

RHEA: i want to move home, to my mom's...

The last message popped an error. Can't send. Connectivity error.

Rhea examines her laptop screen. The wifi symbol shows no connection.

HALLWAY/HOME OFFICE

Rhea knocks on the door to Ashlie's home office.

ASHLIE (O.S.)

Come in, Rhea.

Rhea opens the door and stands in the doorway.

RHEA

I think there's something wrong with the internet.

ASHLIE

Mine's working fine. You sure it's not your computer?

DINING ROOM

Rhea restarts the laptop. No wifi.

She checks her phone. No wifi, and limited cell service.

She tries to send an SMS text to Cici. It buffers for a moment before failing to send.

KITCHEN

Rhea comes across her Dad while she's on her way outside.

DAD

Hey, you okay?

RHEA

My phone and laptop stopped having internet suddenly. I asked Ashlie about it, but she said she doesn't know. I'm going outside to see if I can get cell service out here.

EXT. DAD'S FRONT YARD - CONTINUED

Rhea stands in the front yard, focused on her phone. She tries to send a text to Cici.

RHEA: Wifi cut out

No signal.

She wanders around to the side of the house, searching for signal.

Rhea overhears Ashlie inside the house.

ASHLIE (O.S.)

...she only had that job for three weeks. She has to learn responsibility.

DAD (O.S.)

She's sixteen. And I wish you'd talked to me before doing anything...

Finally, Rhea's message sends, DING.

Immediately, she makes a call.

RHEA

Mom?

EXT. DAD'S FRONT YARD - LATER

Rhea stands in front of the house with a gym bag and backpack, waiting.

Inside, her Mom can be overheard.

MOM (O.S.)

She's sixteen! She's a child. And responsibility is a bullshit excuse because how exactly is she supposed to get another job without the internet? Ashlie just wanted to punish her by cutting her off, and she had no right to.

(MORE)

MOM (O.S.) (CONT'D)
She's not her mother. She isn't even
her *step*-mother. If you want to have
a relationship with your daughter,
you better talk to Ashlie.

Mom storms out of the front door.

MOM (CONT'D)
Let's go home.

Rhea follows her to the car quietly.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. RHEA'S CAR - DAY (PRESENT)

The car comes to a stop. They're in another gas station
parking lot.

NAT
We're almost there. I just gotta pee
real quick! You coming in?

RHEA
No, I'm fine.

NAT
Alright, I'll just leave the car
running then.

Nat gets out of the car and heads into the gas station.

Rhea reaches into the backseat and pulls a backpack off the
floor, bringing it up into her lap.

She pulls out a nice dress to change into. Hesitantly, she
peeks in at the bottom of the bag.

Wrapped in a shirt at the very bottom: a handgun and a clip
of ammo. Her breath shakes.

INT. DAD'S TRUCK - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Rhea, one from only a couple months ago, sits in the
passenger seat as her dad drives. He hides his sadness
behind cracking stoicism.

DAD
Did you start that piece I asked you
to make for Ashlie?

RHEA

No, why?

Hesitation.

DAD

You don't have to make it anymore, if
you don't want to. Ashlie broke up
with me.

RHEA

Oh. I'm... sorry.

Rhea stumbles over her words, caught completely off guard by
the news.

RHEA (CONT'D)

Are you okay?

At a stop sign, he looks at her for a long moment.

DAD

Yeah. I love you, kiddo.

RHEA

I love you, too.

EXT. MOM'S HOUSE - DAY (PRESENT)

Rhea's car pulls up in front of the house. Nat and Rhea,
holding the dress, get out of the car.

They walk up to the door, where Rhea's Mom greets them with
emotional hugs and invites them inside.

INT. FUNERAL HOME - LATER

Rhea, Nat, and family sit in chairs. Ashlie sits in the
crowd, bawling her eyes out.

Rhea stares at the backpack at her feet, wearing the dress
she brought.

PASTOR (O.S.)

We are gathered here today to
celebrate the life and honor the
passing of Andrew David--

The pastor's speech falls into the background.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOMEWHERE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A vision of Rhea getting a tight hug from her Dad that lasts long enough to feel the weight of it, if only for a moment. The unspoken finality.

INT. FUNERAL HOME - DAY (PRESENT)

Rhea shakes in her seat. She glances up; the tears can't be held back, but she seems hardly aware of it. Almost catatonic.

OVER BLACK

A WHISTLE followed by THREE ROUND salute fires off.

'Taps' plays.

THE END.