

# *Middle of Nowhere*

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I followed the road's dotted line through early mornings, dry afternoons, and solemn nights as big rigs flew by and only static came out of the radio. Three and a half days of straight driving and eating at fast-food joints left me with a hunger to win at the chile pepper competition I'd heard about in Middle of Nowhere, Texas. There was no way I'd be leaving empty handed. At this point in my life, I had nowhere else to go.

After passing Amarillo, there was nothing except for a horizon so vast and blue it was like driving into an ocean. Every few miles I'd see a silo or a cattle farm. Mostly, it was just stretches of yellow fields ravaged by mud storms. I'd left behind the buzz of moderately sized towns, and the sputter of my motor became the only audible presence.

My foot was falling asleep so I eased up on the gas and pulled over. While stretching, I looked at prairie lands colored in rusty hues. The road seemed to curve off the face of the Earth. Before stepping back inside, I snacked on a Santaka pepper to calm my nerves, an Asian variety used in slurry. It was enough to pique my

taste buds, but I had to limit my pepper intake so I wouldn't cause any unnecessary damage to my tongue before the competition. A car roared by every once in a while that broke through the eerie calm. I finished the Santaka and then continued driving. Pastures of withering orange and yellow cottonwoods raised their knotted arms. From the open windows, a red dust caked my view and hung like wet film in my teeth. Since the land was unchanging for miles, the road's dotted line was my only focus.

The scenery finally changed when I passed a house on fire, reminding me of when I fell asleep with a burning cigarette a few days ago in Encino. I was too passed out to notice the smoke seeping under my doorjamb until the fire department busted inside. Much like it had done to my condo, the fire tore this house apart. I could see it disintegrating through the rearview until it was no bigger than a cinder. I wondered if the owners would soon be homeless like me.

After a few more miles of nothing, I finally reached a small settlement where a bar/restaurant had been stranded among empty storefronts and closed offices, a couple of civic buildings, and a boarded up wedding dress outlet. I parked the car and went inside.

The place smelled of rotted history, slick with grime. The warped floor had one too many coats of wax and sticky trails of sawdust footprints. A grumbling jukebox in the corner shuffled country records, and skulls of small animals lined the walls. In the far corner, an older mixed-race man in a seersucker suit tore into a large piece of pie. Stumbling out of the bathroom was a young guy in a red trucker's cap, his face pallid and nondescript. Both could be Chile Heads since I couldn't imagine why anyone else would be in this town, but then I saw two ladies who fit the mold the best. Their eyes gave it away.

The look of someone living on the fringes of society.

The yearning.

They were drinking Mexican beers a few stools down at the bar. One was enormous, the other significantly smaller, but still pretty robust. I could've sworn I saw the smaller one take out a silver snuffbox and place a chilipequin pod in her mouth; but maybe I'd just been thinking about chilies so much that I was hoping to see something like that.

Behind the bar, a shriveled up toothless woman smoked a pipe.

She wore a dusty muumuu and had a plastic daisy barrette hanging in her hair. She welcomed me with a belch of smoke while cleaning a glass with a dirty washcloth.

“What can I get ya?” she asked, all gums and just a few teeth.

“Is this Middle of Nowhere?” I asked. The two ladies sitting at the end of the counter glanced over with curious eyes.

“I’d be mighty lost if it ain’t,” she snorted, and then started coughing uncontrollably before composing herself. “How ’bout chicken fried steak? We make a good chicken fried steak.”

I nodded and she coughed herself away.

The two women slid down. The doughy, red-faced one was an easy three hundred pounds and breathed so loud it sounded like she was speaking. The other was stocky, but a model in comparison. Acid-washed jeans hugged her thighs, and she had enough make-up on to see an orange line separating her face from her neck. A plaid shirt was tied below her breasts and the knot seemed to hold them for safekeeping.

“I’m Sea and that’s Brandine,” she said.

Brandine nodded, all three of her chins bouncing up and down.

“We’re the welcoming committee ’round here. What they call you?”

“Cooper,” I said.

“What you drinking, Cooper?” Sea asked, twisting a fried strand of hair around her finger.

“Whatever you want.”

Brandine chuckled like the dumb oaf in a fairytale, and Sea had a jiggle of a laugh that tossed the skin around her bones. Sea leaned forward and ordered a round of Tecates from Toothless Muumuu. I pulled out my wallet and flipped through my remaining twenties as their eyes lit up.

“It’s on me, ladies.”

“You sure don’t look like you’re from anywhere around here,” Sea said, snapping at her gum. “Can’t say we get too many tourists. Can’t say they’d have much reason to come. You gotta reason, Sailor?”

It was the way she said sailor, the sizzle of the “s”, and the long, slow “lorrrrrrrr,” that caused a rumbling in my gut, made me think of uncharted territories, gave me an uncanny feeling that she could be an oracle.

“I’m looking for a chile pepper competition,” I flat-out said. “Know anything about that?”

She picked at the label on her beer until the foil was embedded in her nails. The musty heat made her sweat orange. Her upper lip was dotted with perspiration, and she chewed on her left cheek as if it held all the answers to how she should respond. From one seat over, Brandine looked worried. She was sweating more than before and gnawing the hell out of her bottom lip. Brandine then seemed like she was about to jump in with a lie, but Sea spoke first.

“What if I said the competition pulls in tomorrow?” she said.

“Then I’d say I have good timing.”

“What if I said it already happened?”

“Then I’d say I’m fucked.”

My chicken fried steak arrived disguised as a brick dripping with brown gravy. Brandine made a moaning noise as I picked up my knife and fork.

“How’d you hear ’bout Middle of Nowhere?” Brandine piped up, eyeing my plate like it was about to propose. She had a slow drawl like she had to fish for each word from her mouth.

“Online. The Blaze,” I said, so they would know that they were dealing with someone serious.

Sea’s gum snapping slowed down to a methodical closed-mouth chew. Her eyes flickered between flirting and concern. I chewed on a bite of chicken fried steak. It tasted like wallpaper, so I asked Toothless Muumuu for some hot sauce. The old thing gave me a cautious glare as she passed me a bottle from under the counter. Throughout the bar, the patrons seemed to have one eye on their drinks and the other on me, as if they were deciding if I was enough of a Chile Head to be welcomed into Nowhere’s competition. So to prove to them I was here for a reason, I poured hot sauce all over my meal until the meat swam in a pool of orange.

“Not hot enough for ya?” Sea asked.

“Rarely is.”

She leaned against the bar and let her breasts flop by my face. They bounced on cue, timed perfectly to capture my attention. She breathed through her mouth, beer-laced exhales with a strawberry tinge from her lip-gloss.

“See we got ourselves a serious boy here. Where you from?”

“California,” I said, and choked on a swill of beer but managed

to raise one cocky eyebrow.

“Cali-fornia, huh, baby?” she said with a forced laugh. “You probably think of us down here as backwards.”

“Well, it’s gotten dull out West and I thought I’d check it out here before I head to some comps overseas,” I lied, and then shoved a piece of red-hot beef into my grin. Little did these women know that I was pretty green to the chile pepper world, having only been to a few local comps before and not even coming close to winning any of them.

A string of surprised drool ran from the Tecate to Sea’s lips. She watched me as if she was trying to figure out if I was hiding something.

“But a place like this has something to offer,” I said to her and Brandine, my captivated audience. “There’s nothing better than practice.”

“You’re a smug fuck,” she shouted, and jostled me playfully. Brandine laughed again and stuck a thick finger into my pool of hot sauce. “You won much from competitions before?”

“Let’s just say it’s not about the money.”

I slid my plate away from Brandine.

“Must be a real rich motherfucker then,” Sea said, her gold-digger eyes sparkling. She dabbed the Tecate against her neck until cool sweat traveled into her cleavage. Her snaggletooth slipped over her bottom lip and she purred.

“I do all right,” I replied.

“Well, even though I haven’t seen much, I ain’t someone to laugh at neither.”

She had a faint trace of a Spanish accent that appeared at the end of her warbled sentences. At times, her Middle of Nowhere twang disappeared completely. I assumed it was because she wanted to lose her bumpkin traits and replace them with whatever sounded exotic.

“I’d never laugh at you,” I said. “Don’t mistake this smile for anything other than genuine.”

She puffed out her chest with a drunken snarl and downed the rest of her beer. Toothless Muumuu was ready with a fresh one and I let them keep coming for myself as well. By the end of the night, I’d make sure Sea would tell me all I needed to know. She’d drop every pretense once my fingers would slide into her. I knew I had her good

once she let an ear hover by my lips – small and disproportionate to the rest of her head, child-like with an emanating honeyed scent.

“How about we lose your bodyguard?” I whispered, soft enough so Brandine wouldn’t hear. Sea swallowed hard and nodded her orange cheek against mine.

“Don’t worry ’bout Brandine,” she whispered back. “Let’s play some darts.”

We created more sticky footprints in the sawdust as we made our way toward the back. Brandine remained at the bar, singing along to some song that skipped on the jukebox and watching the two of us. The lean guy in the trucker’s cap kicked up his boots on the table and angled his chair so his face remained in the shadows. I looked for his eyes, waited to see if they’d poke through the shade his cap offered; wondered if he was here – if they were all here – for similar reasons: for a new voyage, for a chance to finally feel worthwhile.

Sea slipped a dart between my fingers and held on with her clammy palms.

“Nother round?” she asked, and then let go to catch Toothless Muumuu’s attention.

When the beers arrived, she licked at the edge of a Tecate with one eye closed while sizing up the perfect shot with her dart. Each time she’d hit just off the bulls-eye with a coy smile like she meant to. There was a silence between us except for the cutting “thunks” of the darts. Our finished beers were lined up like bowling pins on the table behind us; she didn’t fool around. She put the darts down to roll up her sleeve and show me a tattoo of a habanero pepper, red and vivid against the grimy beige of her arm.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked.

“Me and my daddy got ’em together a long time ago before he disappeared.”

“I’m sorry he’s gone,” I said, thinking of my own father, except I’d been the one who disappeared at fifteen and refused to look back.

“I just wanna show ’em all I ain’t nothing,” she murmured.

She turned toward the lean guy who maintained his perfect shadowed stare. She let out a gasp and started to drunkenly fall into my arms. Our lips crossed paths but we didn’t kiss, just breathed in each other’s solitude. It was nice to ingest her sadness. I liked the

fact that if I let go, she would collapse to the floor and there'd be no one else but me to pick up her pieces.

Toothless Muumuu coughed by and left two fresh Tecates on the table behind us. We stumbled over to the brews to take a rest from the darts. Sea popped hers open against the edge of the table and previewed her ass for me, bigger than it should have been and shaped like a heart. She then opened my beer with a grunt and pulled a stool over to the table. Her corked high heel slid off and then a bare foot snaked up my ankle.

"I don't think I should have anymore," I said.

"Life's all about finding little pockets of fun, Coop. Let's spend the night in a deep one."

As her toe circled toward my crotch, the muscles in my inner thighs tensed. The icy beer met my lips, and I waited to see what her traveling toe would do.

"Ever had a Black Samba Queen Habanero?"

She spiced up the words with that hidden Spanish accent as her toe hit the bulls-eye.

"Matter of a fact, I have," I said, even though I had not. I pressed the Tecate to my lips and gulped.

The jukebox played a countrified version of "Goodnight, Sweetheart," and Sea gave Brandine a quick glance. Brandine danced as much as she possibly could from her stool, nodded slowly, and mouthed the words of the song.

"Fearnot," Sea told me. She said it as if she anticipated a response.

"Oh yeah? What shouldn't I fear?"

"Right, right...you don't know about Fearnot. Whole world's just a joke and half to a rich boy like you. Ain't that right, hon?"

And then she laughed, not dim like before, not girlish and sweet, but vindictive and brash. These laughs cut through the thick and hazy air and killed my confidence.

"We're not so different," I said.

"Yeah, sure," she replied. "What's a broke girl like me got to joke about?"

A deep hatred reverberated in the undertone of her words; she thought I was an example of something she'd never become. Little did she know I'd blown through all the money I'd stolen from my parents' savings when I split. I had nothing left except for what

existed in my wallet.

“We all have parts of our pasts that we want to lose,” I said, as I kissed her neck with my hand on her breast. I could feel her shivering.

“Maybe I’ll pretend I have a chance in life like you,” she whispered to me and to herself, “that I ain’t from Nowhere, that this competition ain’t all I got. Or maybe you’ll just be that warm body for me tonight and that’ll be enough.”

She escaped back into her Tecate, licked those last drops till she was completely demolished and all I could do was wait for her to fall.

“...Nothing to fear,” she added. She licked her lips and the curl of her tongue moved like a snake. “Finish up your brew, Sailor. It’s time to move this party somewhere else.”

2

Night had fallen by the time I followed Sea and Brandine in my car to their trailer lot. As I parked with much drunken difficulty, I smelled a mixture of beef and diesel. The circle of five aluminum trailers looked like giant lunchboxes. A couple of folks were huddled around a barbeque, and as we walked closer, the air filled with a chile pepper spice – sharp against the beefy diesel – that sobered my drunken steps. Brandine lumbered off toward the source of the scent. Sea was a few steps ahead, far enough for me to get a good glimpse; shaking that heart-shaped ass with her jeans tucked in her tall cowboy boots.

Her trailer was silvery steel and quasi-futuristic with bubbled windows and an antenna piercing the sky. When we reached it, she swung open its front door with a shrug of her shoulders and a wobble. Either she was still obliterated or just playing drunk so I’d take advantage. I was cool with that because I was horny.

Inside, the light was orange from sheer scarves placed over her lamps. A messy kitchen with flowered tiles and countertops faced the door. Food-crusting dishes overflowed from her sink. Jutting from the kitchen, little chile pepper princess figurines were arranged throughout the shelves on the wall. They were all porcelain, pig-tailed, and curtsying for my benefit. A dusty couch, shag carpet,

and small television with a dial made up her living room. I moved aside a pile of magazines and sunk down into her couch.

She put on a CD, some country singer warbling about coming home to Texas. With a jug of wine like a baby in her arms and two tiny glasses, she joined me on the couch. She tossed her corked high heels to the floor, rested her feet in my lap, and passed a glass of muddy wine my way that tasted like dirt. Then she started to sing along with the country crooner, her voice riddled with a lifetime of cigarette smoke and hard liquor.

“And when I’ll finally come back, I’ll knooooow where I’m at.”

I put my glass down and kissed her on the side of her mouth. She repeated the chorus as a hot whisper in my ear. We shifted on the couch until she was sitting in my lap. Her thick thighs squeezed against my own as she started grinding on top of me. I sank further into the couch. Her plaid shirt fell to the floor, and her breasts blocked my vision.

“You ever think you could stick around in a place like this?” she asked.

Her breasts seemed to sigh as I released them from the bra. They were stretched and droopy, but I imagined them beautiful in the tangerine glow of the trailer. I put a nipple between my lips and sucked to avoid her question.

“We’ll see what happens,” I murmured.

“Sneaky city sonovabitch,” she replied, and yanked her breast away. She ground her knee into my balls as she slid off my lap, then lit a Marlboro Red from a pack on the side table and smoked with a scowl.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You just want me ’cause I know what’s goin’ on ’round here.”

“We’re having fun. Aren’t we having fun?”

She let out a laugh that sounded like a hack. The muddy wine stained her lips purple. I went in for another sloppy kiss but she only gave me her cheek.

“Bullshit,” she said. “You’re in and out of here.”

She pushed me away with her elbow and stood up half-naked to refill her wine glass. She ripped into her cigarette with little concern that ash was landing on her breasts.

I took a deep breath through my nose then got up and wrapped my arms around her waist, rocking her back and forth. We stayed

like that for a bit, dancing along as if nothing was hidden between us, as if I was actually interested in her and not just her secrets.

"I'm down here for a while," I replied. "I need a break from where I live, and I don't have a home anymore. It's not just about the competition, honest. I like you."

"They all say the same thing when they come 'round once a year. And then they all wind up leaving for better things."

She turned around in my arms and her eyes were puffy. In the faint light, she looked older, more troubled; crow's feet and deep frown lines; desperate enough to tell me everything if I held her long enough. I had to keep holding on because Middle of Nowhere needed to lead me to whatever competition waited for me next. So when her cigarette breath spilled all over me, I kissed back with a forced passion.

"You're an amazing woman," I said with my mouth over her throat. She leaped into my arms and wrapped her legs around my waist. We spun into the kitchen, knocking into her sink as chile pepper princess figurines crashed to the floor. I used all of my strength to hold her up.

"Tell me you're satisfied with right now," she said.

We backed up into her bedroom and fell on her bed. She pulled off my shirt and pinned my arms down.

"Tell me you're not thinking about what else there might be," she hummed. She unbuttoned her jeans to let her stomach breathe.

But I was already thinking about the road and Middle of Nowhere in my rear-view: A trophy in hand, some extra cash won, a burned tongue, and a memory of a good fuck as a bonus.

"I'm thinking about you," is what I said.

And she smiled with a sexy curl of her lip. I tickled her ribs now to elicit any information. Her wheezing laugh echoed in that spare bedroom. I knew she had no idea about the man I was trying to become: duplicitous, cunning, and heartless. A guy without friends, only adversaries. Running away at fifteen and flitting across the California coast already didn't allow much room for trust. Anyone primed to make a living off of chile pepper comps like I did had to remain cold and indifferent. So I told myself that I wouldn't just make love to Sea that night; I'd mine her for everything she knew about this crazy world that had consumed my young adult life.

And so I did, and we messed up her sheets even more until they

were soaked and smelling of her honeyed perfume. I never fought for control throughout the night; I relinquished it all to Sea. Let her swim right through me. Traced the freckles down her neck. Played mirror with her hands until our fingers were meshed together and I couldn't tell whose were whose. But when the sun finally flickered through the lopsided blinds, I'd had enough.

Morning and my beating hangover had soiled her pathetic room with reality. It was a shit box with taped-up pictures peeling from her ceiling, a decade-old computer on her desk, and a pair of boots and jeans draped across her chair like a melted person.

"When's the competition?" I asked the ceiling.

It sounded like a croak because neither one of us had formed actual words for hours. She swallowed hard and lay in silence. I looked hard into her eyes, and we fought to see who would blink first. She finally did with an answer.

"It's later tonight," she said. "I'll let you know where when I find out for myself. They often wait until the last minute to reveal its location. Get what you wanted now?"

Even though the air in her room was hot and stuffy, she was shivering from a breeze that found its way in. But I wasn't cold at all. I let her shake and closed my eyes satisfied. Her chattering teeth, her quaking sighs, her defeat in my arms. I was as close to a win as I'd ever been so I closed my eyes for a quick nap. And though I didn't quite know what I'd be winning, I knew I was on the verge of something more than what I could imagine; a new landscape to seek...out there, far away from it all, far away from who I was.

3

Burnt eggs suffocated the air in the trailer as I woke up twisted in Sea's sheets. In her little kitchen she was scraping some blackened breakfast out of a pan and had a cigarette with a long coil of ash jammed between her lips. With a loosely tied pink nightgown, fuzzy slippers, and her hot mess of makeup, she was far away from any of the lovely California girls I'd been with as of late, but I still needed the location from her so I had to fake interest.

"Mornin'," she hummed, sliding the flaky eggs onto a plastic plate. Her pink Press-On nails ran through my hair. "I mean afternoon."

“Thanks.”

She moved toward the window like she was in water and rolled up the blinds. I felt all sour and hung-over. The pillow was a magnet calling me back to my dreams.

“I’m all out of chilies,” she said, and stared at the sun through her dirty window. “I was going out to get more. You gonna be here when I get back?”

She asked as if she was afraid I’d say no.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said, and even took a bite of her egg abomination. I waited for her to smile and join me to make the mattress sigh, but an awkwardness hung in the air.

“Gotta get dressed,” she said. I watched as her nightgown slid to the floor. “Don’t watch.”

She covered her breasts with her arm as I covered my eyes with my fingers. But I still looked through the space between the middle and index finger of my right hand as she shimmied on a pair of jeans and threw on her sweaty plaid shirt from last night. A cigarette still glowed from her lips. She sucked it down to the filter before stubbing it out and leaning into me. Her lips eased between the groove of my middle and index finger. A smoke-filled kiss smacked against my eye.

“Hope I didn’t blind you, Sailor,” she said.

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Once she had gone, I tossed the eggs out of the window so she wouldn’t find them in the trash, threw on some jeans and went to rummage through her desk to see if I could find anything about the competition. On the wall she had smatterings of pictures tacked up onto a corkboard: Sea and Brandine in front of an inflatable pool in bathing suits; Sea dancing on a stage in a poofy red dress with castanets and her hair slicked back; and Sea as a gap-toothed little girl with a safari hat in the lap of a Spanish man with mini Mexican flag as a bandanna. She and the man were squinting into the camera with a jungle as their backdrop – her eyes alive and her smile wide; his smile non-existent and his eyes spooked as if the camera caught an expression he never wanted to share.

Something caused me to look at her wall of pictures again, as if I knew I had missed something. Between the one of the girls in

bathing suits and of Sea in the jungle, I saw a 5x7 I hadn't noticed before of a sign on the side of the road banked by a row of massive trees. I took the picture off the corkboard to look closer, then closer. The sign said: Welcome to Fearnot, pop. 1200.

"Fearnot?" I said, remembering when Sea had mentioned that word before.

I turned on Sea's ancient computer to check for a town called Fearnot. She had a dial-up modem that whirred and took forever, connected through some patch-up job to a nearby phone line, but eventually it came on. To my surprise, there was nothing I could find about a town called Fearnot.

From the other room, "Goodnight, Sweetheart" started playing from a stereo. The picture of the Fearnot sign spiraled from my hands to the floor. The song became louder. I figured Sea had probably returned. I got up and followed the music.

In the main room, I saw that all the lamps had been left on. The daylight and their orange shimmer made the skin tone of my arms look sickly. Instead of Sea at the door, Big Brandine stood by the stereo singing along to the song like she was reading an eye chart. A rim of sweat hung around her red neck and created a stripe down the back of her T-shirt. One of her catcher's mitt hands was lowering the music; the other held a Red Savina Mexican chile.

"Where's Sea?" I asked, but could suddenly care less; my taste buds were salivating because I hadn't eaten a chile in a while.

Brandine stopped singing.

"Oh, she went to the store and all. I thought I'd bring you somethin' in the meantime."

She started singing again, loud and in an off-key until I couldn't hear the song from the stereo any longer. The Red Savina Mexican began to melt into the perspiration of her palm. My stomach churned and I became dizzy. I was starving for a bite. The room spun until I stepped forward and took the chile from her palm. Its blood red color smeared across my hand. I placed it on my tongue and Brandine stopped singing.

"Sea needs to win this competition," she said. "She's been trying for near fifteen years. We had to do this."

"Do what?" I said in a hazy mumble. Brandine's lips were moving, and I thought she was still telling me something, but it'd only been the sound of her breath. The taste of the Red Savina had

been different than I remembered – sour, unrefined, and coated in a type of wax. My head suddenly felt like it was filled with water. All surrounding sounds became muted as if I had seashells on my ears. The tinny breath of a distant wave rollicked against my mind. Brandine seemed so far away as she gestured toward me with a dance of her fingers. It wasn't dark yet, but it was getting there as my eyes longed to close.

Before I reached my dreams, a feeling like flying spun through my body. I'd been thrown over Brandine's shoulder and marched into the bedroom while her whisper of a song drummed in my ear.

I could still faintly hear the stereo playing, "Goodnight, Sweetheart" before everything became dark.

4

I woke up in a sweat and saw it was nighttime. My stomach groaned because I hadn't eaten all day. The Red Savina chile had dissolved some but still remained in my mouth. Somehow my tongue remained active during that drug-induced state and prevented me from swallowing the poison. My arm, however, felt completely dead.

It took a moment to figure out that my arm was dead because Brandine was fast asleep on it. Gnats and corn chips resided in the sheets amongst us. The soggy mattress rose and sunk with her snores. I leaned on the good arm I had left to push myself up to an almost sitting position. The wild demons in my brain thrashed around. What was I drugged with? Had I missed the competition?

I worked my moist arm from under her monstrous body and puked on the carpet, loud enough to wake the dead. I wiped my mouth on her pillow and then gathered up my clothes. The floor creaked under my feet; she stirred with a belch. When I took another step, one sweaty eye of hers shot open. Without hesitation, I bolted from the bedroom. I threw on my shirt as I ran out of the trailer and fumbled with my boots. Once outside, I could see her spaceship-sized body stomping in front of the trailer's grainy window. I flung open my car door, found the keys in my jeans, and sped away.

No other car was on the highway as I drove in the blackness toward the center of town. Barely a fleck of moon lit the sky. My

head still pounded. It was hard to concentrate on the yellow line, and I kept swerving to the side. The steering wheel spun too loosely through my fingers, and I began to drift from the highway past the shoulder. The car started going faster, bouncing now down the rocky off-road into the darkness. I'd left with a broken speedometer, and it was hard to tell how fast I was going. The fleck of moon disappeared, and my headlights pointed to nothing and more nothing. I flew on for a while, the wind whipping by my ears, the night full of my exhaust, and then WHAM!

I'd slammed into something hard enough to whip me forward. I found myself in an embrace with the steering wheel. My left cheekbone throbbed. I licked a bruise on the inside of my cheek and kept the headlights on as I stepped out of the car. Two long streams of light poured down into the obscure expanse.

My car itself looked okay, just a little banged up. I turned around to see what had caused the accident. Thrown about twenty feet from the bumper, an object moved around.

"Someone out there?" I yelled, my voice echoing into the prairie.

The object spread its arms wide, darker than the dark surroundings. A hissing noise passed through the wind that didn't sound like actual words but could've been. I thought to turn back toward the car and drive away, but then I'd always wonder who I had hit and whether or not they were okay.

As I moved closer, the hissing became an inhuman cry. What I thought were arms appeared to be wings. I'd hit a vulture that stumbled toward me like it had one too many at a bar. One eye hung from its socket and watched me. Its talons scraped at the dirt as it hopped my way. Long, dark wings swept through the air for momentum, its beak widened open with a scream.

Since I was a little kid, I'd been afraid of vultures. My parents once took me on a trip to Peru and we went to a market that was full of vultures. I wanted to pet one but my father warned me that it would peck my eyes out. He said that vultures feasted on the dead and the weak, or even animals when they were sleeping, so for weeks I had a nightmare of one coming into my hotel room and eating my eyes.

I was trembling as I got back into my car. The vulture still blocked the road with its wings spread. Part of me wanted to just

turn around and give up, to head back to Cali and sleep on the beach until some girl would take pity and let me stay with her for a while. This was exactly what happened at every other competition I'd been to. Some obstacle would get in my way, and I'd take off before I had the chance to actually lose.

But then I thought of the time I almost drowned as a kid. I was ten years old at San Poche beach in Orange County; my mother was crisping under the sun with a gin cocktail in her hand. Dad was off at a conference in some far-off land, and the nanny was sick that day. The silvery foam tides were languid by the shore, but deafening in the distance where sea met sky. I waded out until my mother was just a drunken dot and the water became a tumultuous violet blue. A stir of waves collided with me as their target; soon I was sucked under and couldn't breathe. Water began to spill down my throat. White curls like intense soapsuds covered the surface, stung my eyes. Sinking down into a cold mist that intended to suck the life out of me, I struggled to find a meditative moment of sweet calm. I knew I couldn't rely on anything else. My mother would be in too much of a sun-drunken bliss to notice my struggle. And then, the wind rustling the waves settled magically; dark midnight-blue hues became an opaque green. Sunlight smoothed over the surface. I thought if I could press against the pull of tides and break through, I'd grab onto that sun and let it carry me to shore. So I kicked out my legs until the ocean's surface was in my reach.

When I emerged on the shore the color purple and wrapped in seaweed, I lay on my back and gasped at the sky for answers, asked why it'd chosen to test me and then allowed me to go on. There was something waiting for me out there, some cosmic reason for me to survive. It wasn't until years later that I connected my destiny to hot chile peppers. I believed that some competition out there would finally lead me to that cosmic reason and I'd understand why I'd been put on this Earth, why I had been chosen.

So I turned back on the ignition and plowed right through that vulture. Whooping and hollering at the wind, I left feathers and guts on my front bumper. The vulture wouldn't stop me. Sea wouldn't stop me. Nothing would stop me.

About a half a mile later, I had traveled far away from the heart of town. It was just my headlights on an empty road until I heard the hiss of a crowd and wondered if Nowhere had become

somewhere overnight. There wasn't a major highway in sight, but rows and rows of double-parked cars created a path toward a stage. Driving closer, I saw strobe lights illuminating three people. I left my car and stepped into the crowd of cheering faces in ten-gallon hats, teased hair, and denim. The attendees all had flasks of alcohol in one hand and chile cheese dogs or oily funnel cakes stuffed in the other. Burly men wore red dusted overalls and clueless stares. Women's faces were leathery and sunburnt. Little children with sticky hands hung to their parents' waists. Some folks wore ratty T-shirts with peppers on them, others looked transplanted from the Dust Bowl era: grubby, twitching, their necks a hot pink.

Sea stood battling it out with two others on that stage. They all had a cut chile on their tongues, but she looked the most determined. Her face was pink with sweat; wet curls of hair spiraled in front of her eyes. She stood perfectly still; jaw locked, tongue in the air; creating a focal point in the distance to become lost in. To her right was the older guy in a seersucker suit, his eyes syrupy with the faintest trace of sky blue. A wet circle had formed around his crotch. There were no bathroom breaks during competitions. To his left, I recognized the lean guy from the bar earlier wearing a different trucker's cap. Nothing about the comp seemed different than any other I'd encountered; the last one with the chile on their tongue appeared to be the winner.

I wormed my way closer to the front of the stage because I wanted Sea to see that I'd shown up after all. But it was hard to watch them compete since I didn't stand a chance in winning. Finally, a stir came from the guy in the seersucker suit. His face turned an unimaginable red.

"Ever lovin' shit," he cried, as the chile wobbled off his tongue. He tried to grab it, but it fell to the stage. At first, he stared as if he couldn't believe it lay in a pool of his saliva, but then his eyes started dripping milky tears and his body convulsed in defeat. Some of the crowd gave him unenthusiastic applause and others said, "Hey, that's all right," or, "Get 'em next year, padre."

He was wobbling around from standing up for so long. I felt bad for him because he looked really upset and he was an old guy who seemed like he had cataracts. Two men in cowboy hats came on stage and grabbed him by his arms to escort him off.

Sea placed a hand on her hip, ready to make a night out of it. A

thin layer of swirled dust had encrusted her chile. The lean guy next to her was calm and cool through it all, too. I could see a relaxed grin on his face, even with his tongue sticking out. Hours passed with neither losing focus. The crowd had dwindled some; those that remained were becoming restless. Children sat on the dirt and hugged their parents' ankles now. Lack of sleep had quieted the chatter, but a cheer every now and again burst forth. I imagined the people here had spent the whole year looking forward to this competition because they were located on the edge of the world and there wasn't much else to focus on.

Nothing happened on stage for a while, but then every vein in the lean guy's red neck became fat and purple as the chile began to wobble around. He tried to maintain, to regain control, but the pepper fell to his feet all wet and shriveled in a glassy pool of loss. The Roofie Queen, Sea, had won.

She hadn't even noticed. Her mind had transcended to better places than we were all in. It wasn't until the crowd hollered and half-eaten chiledogs spun through the air that she became aware of her accomplishment. The lean guy kicked his chile into the crowd, hating everyone, hating himself, but she paid him no mind. She blinked away from whatever spiritual ride she was on, swallowed the pepper, and finally noticed me.

A wide smile enveloped the rest of her face, so consuming that it seemed to keep on growing; bigger and bigger till all she'd be were lips and teeth and a glowing satisfaction. A warm sensation pricked the back of my skull like when I was a child and got hit in the head with a swing. And like that swing, her smile rammed into me, back and forth, taking away more and more of my self-worth with each blow. Anger bubbled to the tips of my fingers. I was jealous of the journey Sea had been on all night with the pepper on her tongue. She was chasing after enlightenment just like me (what the hell else was I hoping to achieve from standing for hours with a hot chile on my tongue), and it pissed me off to think that she might've reached it before I did.

Some guy in a suit presented her a trophy and an envelope with a thousand dollars in cash, but through it all, she kept her eyes on me, concerned but cool, not letting herself wonder about what I'd do, content to light a cigarette and wait till I approached her. She put the cash in her purse and displayed the trophy in her arms. I

could only remain staring as the people in the crowd congratulated her. Cigarette after cigarette was discarded as she signed autographs and posed for pictures through the night. The crowd soon dwindled, and the stage had to be dismantled. After its collapse and the last throngs of her fans had departed, I stepped past piles of lipsticked butts without knowing how I'd react once she'd be close enough to grab. And then we were standing a breath apart, Sea's snaggletooth nibbling at her bottom lip and me at a loss.

"What are you gonna do to me?" she asked, because everyone had gone and she could tell it'd feel good to make her suffer. Her Spanish accent was in full force and all traces of twang had disintegrated.

"Why'd you do it, Sea?"

She curled her lips around her cigarette and gave a drag that crackled with fury. Either she tried to stifle a laugh, or created one to mock me. She exhaled the smoke right into my eyes.

"I've had guys like you before. Fuck a thick girl like me, tell her she's pretty, and she'll confess everything she knows about this world. Well, fuck you. Look what I've got."

She shook the trophy as if I didn't understand what she was referring to.

"I did you a favor," she continued. "I kept you wondering. What if she hadn't...? What if I just...? I let you live with the idea that you could've won. You should kiss my damn toes."

The hand that held her cigarette shook, and she had to fight to guide it toward her lips. But her eyes gave it away. They were spooked.

"I would've smoked you in this competition," I yelled, the blood rushing to my face. "I would've stayed up there for days."

She recoiled, her body shrinking. The last breath of her cigarette was blown into the wind. She gripped her trophy with one hand and the strap of her purse with the other.

"I'm not threatened by you or any of them," she said, but there was a crack in her voice. I stepped closer, then closer until I could hear her shallow breathing.

"Then why'd you drug me?"

"I had to get you before you got me," she said. "You were trying to play me, Cooper...if that's even your real name. Talking sweet to me, coming into my bed. For fifteen years I've been trying to win in

Nowhere, and then some big shot city boy blows into town trying to get my prize. Nuh-uh. Besides it seems like you've had a ton of other wins, what do you need with a small comp like this one anyway?"

"I was lying," I mumbled. She narrowed her eyes, as if she didn't hear what I said so I repeated it again. "I've never won a competition before. Middle of Nowhere is the biggest one I've even seen so far. I'm a fraud."

She cackled again, loud enough for me to want to snatch the trophy and cash from her grubby palms.

"I should've known," she said, shaking her head. "Well, it looks like it doesn't matter much anyway. Adios, Sailor."

She began to walk away but watched me out of the corner of her eye, as if she was afraid I'd still come after her.

"I want to know about Fearnot," I said, pleading, my voice cracking as tears lodged in my throat. I needed her to tell me about somewhere else I could go, anywhere but here.

She kept on walking away. I was afraid she'd just disappear into the night, but then she turned around.

"You really know nothing about Fearnot?" she asked.

"I think you owe it to me to give me something—"

"I don't owe you shit," she said, but her eye began to twitch as if I'd uncovered her closest secret. "What will you do to me if I don't tell you anything?"

"I'm not sure what I'm capable of," I gulped.

It was true. Since no one was around, I could very well just try and take her trophy and the cash. I could lie to myself that I had won and roam from place to place looking for Fearnot.

"You ever hear of the Scorching Enigma Pepper?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"That's what all the real Heads are looking for, a pepper so hot that whoever masters it will reach a state of enlightenment, true enlightenment, answers to every question anyone has ever had."

"This pepper is in Fearnot?"

"No, no, Sailor. But the rumor is that the winner of that comp will learn about the pepper's location, get a chance for a taste of its sweet, sweet spice."

She stroked the tattoo of the habanero pepper on her arm.

"That's what my daddy, Hernando, has been after his whole life," she said. "It's why he's disappeared. And now I've finally got

the cash to get all the way to Fearnot so don't even think about trying to take it."

She clutched her purse tighter and puffed out her cheeks, her face turning red with rage.

"For years and years people have been coming to my Nowhere and winning the prize that I have deserved. Well, now I'm someone to watch out for, too. So you just stay away from me, Cooper, ya hear? You just get back and let me go."

I stepped closer as she continued to back up.

"Wait, Sea, just...wait!"

I grabbed her arm and she let out a yelp. I could tell from the way she squirmed that she'd been hurt by others before. She practically trembled in my grasp, hugging the trophy and her purse close to her chest.

"Let go of me," she hissed.

"I'm not going to do anything to you."

"I don't believe you."

"I just want a chance. That's all. Please tell me where Fearnot is."

Her spooked eyes shot back and forth. I couldn't read what she was thinking, but I could tell she was genuinely afraid. She didn't want anything ruining her chances of reaching her dreams.

"If I let you...follow my car there, will you let go of me?" she finally said.

"Yes, yes, of course."

She weaseled out of my grasp and we headed to the parking lot. We didn't say anything more to each other. Our cars were parked near one another. She rolled down her window once we both got inside.

"Just follow my taillights," she said, and rolled her window up.

We pulled out of the lot. She shot out of Nowhere like she couldn't wait to leave. I floored the gas to stay close behind. We flew by the rows and rows of cottonwoods that had welcomed me here over a day ago. We reached the farms and the occasional silo on the outskirts. The moon slipped behind unruly clouds and the night became pitch black. The only light that existed beamed from our cars. No one else was on the road. I followed her taillights as if my life depended on it. I had rumbling in my belly as I imagined entering the competition in Fearnot. I could hear all the glorious

cheers and cries once I'd beat out my competitors with a mind-blowing chile on my tongue. And then the secret of the Scorching Enigma Pepper would be whispered in my ear, my true journey about to begin.

Just as I felt more hopeful than I had in a long time, Sea's taillights went out. I blinked just in case I had imagined this, but she was gone, the faint putter of her engine slipping away. She had pulled a fast one on me again. I turned up my brights in an attempt to locate her, but the road had reached a fork and she could've headed down any path.

A trio of vultures flew above me, picked at the clouds and then glided away, their cries muted by the wind. A fat glob of a tear landed on the steering wheel. Soon I was crying so hard I couldn't catch my breath. I opened the car door to get some air, collapsing into the dirt, a shivering, wilted mess. Seeing the nothingness that spread out before me, it felt like I was the last person remaining on Earth.

I stayed there for what seemed like forever and tossed around the idea of giving up being a Chile Head for good until a glimmer of sun flicked across the countryside, a shining savior, a warm caressing hand. Once the darkness became swallowed up, I let it swallow up all of my anger and any hesitation I had as well. I swore that I'd never let myself be duped again. I'd become more like the man I'd been trying to be, someone who only had one focus – hot chile peppers. Someone who wouldn't fall for a hick girl's tricks, or anyone else's. In whatever competition I'd come across next, whether it'd be in a place called Fearnot or another town that held my wildest dreams, I'd be ready. I'd be less naïve, cold like a killer. For Chile Heads were more cutthroat than I'd imagined, and I'd make it my business to be the most cutthroat of them all.

Then one day, I'd be the spoiler, a true winner with that Scorching Enigma on my tongue. And then what? Would I be enlightened, would I end my long-overdue roam and return home to parents who were too busy counting their money to notice their only son had been missing for years? Would I finally give up this quest that had consumed my teenage years while other peers went on to colleges and were preparing to graduate and become viable members of society? Or would I always live on the fringes, searching for an even hotter spice, never to be satisfied with anything less?

Of course I would.

The prospects of that ultimate spice were enough to keep me going. Besides, it wasn't like I had any other options. I'd already traveled too far down the road of madness to turn back now.

So I got in my car, blasted off into the rising sun, and watched as Middle of Nowhere fizzled away in my rearview.

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