

# Homecoming

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There is no prison sentence harder to stomach than having to move back in with your parents at twenty-nine. But isn't that the point of prison? To punish, to be quarantined from the rest of decent society while you learn your lesson? Maybe it's what she deserves – after all, she chose to try and outrun this place, it would make sense that her punishment for fucking up her fresh start would be to return to square one.

Still, it's unfair to call her homecoming a prison sentence, even if that's how it feels. There are reasons she's back – filing for divorce and your father's cancer becoming terminal in the same week would be enough to drive anyone back home. And so she's come back, with her head hung low over the steering wheel and tail between her legs.

The tiny main street almost looks like the backwater hick town Kit remembers – bright storefronts that have been molding since the 60s, vandalism on the stop signs, unattended kids walking down the middle of the street. She doesn't recognize any of the kids though, and doesn't know who's driving which car, and the snow lands a little differently on the curb now. Still, it's the same kind of cold judgment in the air as when she left, the same harsh Indiana winter, the same chill deep in her bones.

She goes to the new grocery store in town – a big chain with giant block lettering, cluttered aisles, and a proper produce section. She weaves up and down the aisles, grabbing canned food and packaged dinners to cover up the appalling amount of liquor in her cart. A raincloud follows her around the store as she shops – disapproving glares from strangers burn holes in the back of her head as she moves, winter hat pulled down low. The kid at the counter rings her up with huge eyes, almost like he's seeing a ghost, and he may as well have.

The phantom glares follow her through the parking lot, bolstered by whispers as she weaves through the cars. Something is intoxicating about the anonymity of a new city where no one knows who she really is, where it doesn't matter, where the name *Kit Graves* fades into the background and ceases to exist to everyone around her. But here, it feels like quitting that freedom cold turkey. The older people remember her, the ones her age look right through her. They all know why she's back, all taken part in flinging rumors of her personal failure around behind her back. She can practically picture the church luncheons, the late Fridays down at the Thirsty Cow, the snickers and endless choruses of *bless her heart* from her former classmates. If he was here, Jack would shake his head and insist she was just hyper-aware, that sometimes a marriage just *fails*, that none of them judge her for putting off the visits to her dying father, and the most infuriating part of that is that he'd be *right* and it wouldn't change a damn thing about how she feels.

The parking lot goes eerily silent as freezing rain starts falling and she hurriedly loads her trunk. Cars zoom past on the street, pushing muddy slush into the dead grass just beyond the curb. She slams the trunk closed, flakes of rust falling to her feet, and is turning around to push the cart back to the corral when she sees him.

He's old now, which is the first thing she notices. Old might be a harsh word for it – maybe he isn't old, maybe he's just thirty. He's got faint crow's feet, traces of a life spent smiling without her. His hair, now salt-and-pepper, falls into his eyes the way it always has. He's wearing a blue button-up with a dark red tie. She's sure that if she gets close enough, she'll find his hands covered in papercuts and ink stains – no doubt with a wedding ring around his finger.

Even from across the lot, he looks happy.

“Ben!” She calls, her mouth faster than her mind. She's glued to the cement as he whips around and squints at her. His face is a mask of confusion for long enough for her mind to realize what she just did, and then his eyes open wide with realization.

“Kit?”

He says her name like a slur, his squint sharp as a knife. She internally groans, cursing her mouth for betraying her. They start the awkward walk toward each other, shuffling feet and heads bent against the rain. They meet in the middle, both of them all awkward hugs and forced laughs as they take in the effect the years have had on their faces. She wonders vaguely how she looks to him now, with her college hoodie and already graying hair. Proof of a life lived without him.

“You're old!” She giggles like a teenager, overwhelmed with the sight of him, the smell of him, the way his chest is still so broad, the way seeing him feels like going home and being locked in a cell all at once.

“You are too!” He laughs, absentmindedly brushing her hair from her face. “Miss Big Scientist, why on earth are you back here?”

“Just back for the holidays, I only got in last night, I wasn't expecting to see you so soon,” she lies, intoxicated with the friendly ignorance of old friends. It almost feels like they've spoken at some point since she skipped town – they haven't.

Oh *Jesus*, they're just old friends now, aren't they? But then, is it possible to still be friends? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call him a partner in crime after all is said and done, but then, usually, you *like* your partner in crime.

“How long are you in town? Christ, it's been *ages*. You still at the old house on 17?” He's still shocked, face as pale as the kid at the register. She realizes she

hasn't touched him since the night of the accident, and hasn't heard his voice in a decade.

"Yeah, you know how my folks are, too stubborn to admit they need help looking after the house and yard – the basement flooded last Spring and dad's been too sick to clean and fix it properly, so, you know, I have my work cut out for me –"

She can't stop herself from rambling, but Ben looks like he's clinging to every word. His eyes are hungry, pushing and pulling her away all at once. She wonders if he's also looking at her through rose-colored glasses right now, wonders how long until they come off and he looks at her with the hatred she deserves.

"And how's he doing, by the way? Warren, I mean, he hasn't been coming to church or anything lately."

She feels her face flicker at that and curses the way her body starts chewing on the inside of her cheek, completely ignorant of her brain's instructions. Grant, her brother, called her with the first diagnosis about six months ago. *Stage three, staying hopeful*. And then the fatigue and treatments started and now...well, the man's a shell. A ghost, waiting to die.

"He's fine. Doing freelance repairs in the meantime."

She cringes as she says it. *In the meantime* is such a crude way to say *while he's waiting to die of brain cancer*. Ben nods sympathetically, though, and they fall silent, standing a few feet apart. For a second her heart leaps into her throat with nostalgia. Her mind floods with memories of him driving too fast down country roads, awkward silence drowning them both in the car as they stumble through conversations that feel way too grown-up for them to be having.

"What have you been up to?" She asks quickly before he can turn away. He closes the trunk of the car and lets his hands rest on his hips as he leans against it, looking at his feet. He runs a hand through his hair as he talks.

"Just busy ending up like my parents, you know how it is for us townies."

She nods, eyes still fixed on the ring on his finger. Her runaway mouth starts moving before she can stop it.

"You're married?" She manages to ask without her voice breaking, a feat she'd deemed impossible years ago. When Grant called her with the news, she spent hours crying over it, sick to her stomach with disappointment and fighting the urge to drive back to Hythe and apologize to him, sobbing on the moldy couch in her apartment while Jack fussed over her, absolutely clueless and unable to understand why it hurt.

"What are you so upset about?" Grant had asked over the phone, voice gentle.

“You weren’t going to come back for him. You know that.”

But in the parking lot, the stupid, entitled teenage part of her mind starts nagging at her. *You came back, see? You came back. Why is he still married? You came back!*

Ben looks at his hand as if he’d forgotten he has a ring on, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Yeah, back in ‘91. God, that sounds like forever ago, doesn’t it?”

She shrugs, doing her best to smile at him. Some of it’s genuine, most of it is, *she swears*, and logically she knows she has absolutely no claim to him, but she can’t help the small sinking feeling in her chest.

“That’s good, I’m really happy for you. You deserve to be happy.”

She doesn’t realize she’s quoting herself until his face flickers slightly, but only for a fraction of a second. He brushes it off, though, so quickly she wonders if she made it up.

“What about you?” His eyes narrow. “Anyone managed to tame you, yet?”

She shivers slightly, either from the January wind or from his implication that she is and always was some kind of wild animal.

“Briefly,” she breathes. “Didn’t work out. You know me.”

It’s not the rehearsed statement they’d agreed on when Jack told her he was done. It’s not even close, it leaves out the endless fighting, lying for no reason, and silent treatments. Nobody wants to hear about all of that, though, and Ben would probably just hate her more for her handling of it, anyway. She can practically hear his voice, somewhere between sad and cruel, *he was too good for you anyway*.

They stand for a few more minutes, parking lot slush seeping into her tennis shoes. She fiddles with the pack of cigarettes in her pocket and wonders if Ben still smokes. He used to, fat clouds pouring from his lips and calloused fingers twirling joints and cigarettes as if they were drumsticks in Tommy Lee’s hands. A voice in the back of her brain pipes up, *Jack hates it when you smoke, you know you should quit*. She brushes it off and desperately searches for something to talk about. Ben fiddles with his ring, looking absentminded. A small, spiteful part of Kit hopes he’s just as lost as she is.

They stand in uncomfortable silence until a woman gets into the car next to Ben’s – she stares at them, blinking confusedly. Kit doesn’t recognize her, but Ben gives her a small smile. It feels a bit like being stabbed to see him be polite, like the butterflies she used to feel suddenly grew razor blades for wings.

Ben looks away from her as the mystery woman backs out of her spot. Kit can't breathe.

"I should go," he's saying, digging his keys from his pocket. The metallic jingle echoes around the parking lot, the loudest sound in her ears. "It was nice to see you, though. I missed you."

"Missed you too, Ben." She sighs, turning away. She can picture him in her head, opening and closing his mouth as though he has something else to say. She wants him to have no choice but to leave without a word to anyone, without her forgiveness. She wants to haunt him exactly as he's haunted her all these years. Wants him to jump at strangers in gas stations, dial her number and hang up, and drive past her house on the way home from work.

Before she can even register what she's doing, she's in her car again. David Bowie plays over the broken radio, static buzzing with his voice and speakers shuttering with the bass. Again, she finds herself driving away from him, confused and stupid.

She turns left out of the lot and starts the familiar route back to the blue house on 17, finally returning home with just as much hurt and regret as she had when she left.