

Freedom
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A strange emotion broke my sleep.

It's time...time to go get her.

That's ridiculous! Why now...after so long?

Because it's time.

No, I don't think so.

My once steady world tilted back and forth as though their influence sat on my shoulders, weighting me down with their judgment. Their voices blurred. I strained to listen.

There's no reason not to now... You have everything you ever wanted; a family, a home, a comfortable living, friends. You have all that matters... Go get her now!

How can I do that? How would I get there?

Get in your car and drive. You'll get there

You're right. I'm strong now.

No you're not.

Should I take my husband and kids?

No, you need to do this without them.

Okay, I'll go, I'll do it!

Don't do it!

I'm ready, I'm going to get her!

Something familiar washed over me — an old emptiness, nothing at all. I drew a deep breath, closed my eyes, opened them wide and embarked on the journey.

The rough road interrupted the comfortable ride, as the smooth pavement ended. My heart beat harder as though on cue, with the loud knocking of rocks and pebbles under the car. The constant clatter drowned out my favorite song playing on the radio. I reached over and clicked it off. I glanced in my rearview mirror to see clouds of dust erupting and engulfing the road behind me. Turning back was not an option.

Memories of kneeling on the back seat watching the dust monster devour the road from the rear window spun around me.

I swerved to the left to miss a pothole and cranked the wheel back to the right.

As I neared the property, my body tingled, before losing all sensation.

I flipped the lever up and the bright green arrow flashed from the dashboard, pointing right.

Why would you signal? Who would see it way out here?

The thunderous rattle ceased, as I turned and pulled onto the dirt driveway. The sought-after silence gave way to the loud thumping of my heart.

Are you certain you want to do this?

I have to...she's in there... That's where I left her...I have to get her now.

I forced a breath in and out.

The springs on the car stressed bumping up the rutted lane to the house. I sat in the vehicle, the tingling sensation returned and roamed my body. The lump in my throat expanded. I stared first at the old gray Chevy that rested on flattened tires. A rat's long tail slithered behind it, into the wheel well. My gaze shifted and roamed from a radiator, thick with corrosion, to a twisted drive shaft and over tarnished tire rims scattered in the yard. My scanning halted, and stuck on a faded tricycle that leaned on rusted spokes missing the rubber. A red rusted out wagon with two absent tires blocked the trodden path in the hard dirt that wove its way through tall weeds up to the door. A few curled shingles still clung to the roof of the slanting shack. Beams of light snuck through the wide cracks of the weather-beaten boards.

You're not seriously going in!

Yes, I am going in... She is in there... I'm going to get her.

You'll never come back.

I stepped out of the car and pulled in an agitated breath of air filled with the pungent aroma of animal feed mixed with the sweet scent of clover. The hot sun rested on my shoulders and calmed my shivering.

Go! Just walk in.

I can't just walk in! There is a family happening in there.

I wrapped my fingers around the cold doorknob. All emotion evacuated my being.

You feel nothing, absolutely nothing.

Fear escalated and stirred amongst sadness and loneliness.

Ha! I knew you couldn't do it!

Rage pulsed in my body, and then went numb on the inside. I twisted the knob and shoved the door open, slamming it against the inside wall. Cold musty air slapped my face and a stale stench of smoke, and rodent rushed into my nostrils and settled in my stomach. My body weakened. I slid down the doorframe to the filth on the splintered floor. I dropped my face in my hands, I jerked with each sob – my heart breaking...

Or unbreaking?

I reached for the sticky doorknob with both hands and pulled myself to my feet. Thick dust absorbed the moisture in my eyes and throat, leaving both itchy. Memories swirled around me, as my eyes ambled around the dim home. Stillness clung in the thick air. Silence echoed in my eardrums. I slid my opened palm along the jagged wall.

What are you doing? You know there is no electricity here!

I dropped my hand and squinted until my eyes adjusted to the lack of light. I focused on his chair. It sat sideways at the old timber table next to the door. Faded papers, rusty tools and dirty dishes owned the table. Thick dust adhered to the ripped plastic that covered the paneless window. Hundreds of bees and insects lay exhausted or dead, clumped on the ledge. An occasional buzz broke the silence, as one would make its last attempt to escape, slam into the plastic and drop amongst the lifeless.

A cluster of flies hummed around a stack of fallen dishes crusted with dried gravy on the tiny counter. A wood-burning stove melted with soot and ash stood solid against the wall. Greasy pots and pans scattered the top. I lurched back when I spotted the corpse of a bloated mouse floating amongst the mold in the slop pail, full to the brim with liquid waste. An odor of rot rushed into my nostrils I blinked fast, but the stinging in my eyes lingered. My acidic stomach hurled to my throat, leaving a pathway of raw flesh. I clenched my lips tight and willed it back. My heart thrashed in an attempt to escape my chest cavity.

Are you ok?

No.

You can leave.

No.

I turned, took two steps and entered the living room. I lifted my feet over a partially assembled car engine, a mixture of dust and oil solidified over the contraption. Three wrenches lay next to it. A heap of soiled clothing, a ripped cardboard box and discolored newspapers cluttered the floorboards. A ragged couch and dilapidated armchair cowered against the wall. A wobbly wooden bench hosted four grimy cushions.

This place is disgusting!

Shut up! You don't understand!

Excuse me? How could I not understand?

I stared at the torn curtain that served as a door into the bedroom.

You're not going in there?

...She might be in there.

Oh my god, why are you doing this?

I willed my body towards the curtain. My screams sliced through the silence when my foot bumped a box, squeaking mice scampered in every direction, scurrying under the clothing and papers.

See I told you, you can't do this!

A large tomcat in the corner lifted his head and stretched his spotted paws before curling back into a ball, wrapping his long furry tail around his mangy body and dropping his lids over his eyes.

You don't have to do this.

Yes I do.

With quaking hands, I pushed the curtain aside, and gazed at a double bed. The missing sheets and crumbled blanket revealed the stained and tattered mattress.

Who picked at the mattress like that – kids or mice?

Shut up!

I ambled over to another frayed curtain hanging as a door, careful not to step on or bump anything. I slid the curtain out of the way, just enough to peek inside. Two moth eaten blankets draped the bare stained double mattress. Another torn cover lay amid the piles of dirty clothing on the floor. I turned back to the living room.

How could you have left her here?

...What was I suppose to do...?

The room tilted and spun around me. Suffocation seemed like a better option than allowing the stench that plagued my senses.

Breathe in, breathe out.

I stretched my shirt over my nose, drew a deep breath and released the warm air against my bare chest.

You don't have to do this!

Yes I do, I'm not leaving without her this time!

The room stilled.

I forced myself over to the ladder that made its way up the wall into the attic.

I tried to steady my body, to no avail, as I climbed the ladder one rung at a time. I stuck my head into the hole. Goose bumps multiplied across my flesh. I stared at two single threadbare mattresses on the floor – each with a tattered stained blanket and no sheets or pillowcases.

I climbed down the ladder. I stood quivering and looked around the shack.

No bathroom, no running water and no electricity!

You knew that before you came.

My stomach jolted alive, unknotted and heaved towards my throat.

I'm not staying...I can't...I have to get out of here, now!

I stumbled to the door and froze. Muffled voices came from outside.

I don't want to see them!

In a daze, my eyes shot from one corner of the home to the next.

It's too late.

All nine of them rushed into the house.

Breathe in, now breathe out

I drew a shallow breath. I stood and watched in silence, observing them for the first time. They screamed profanities, shoved and punched amongst themselves. The loud slap echoed as one smacked the other on the bare back leaving a red replica of his hand on the pale skin. The small children cried. Two adolescents stripped their coats, dropped them on the floor and ran behind the curtain. One boy squatted next to a pail of milk he carried in, plucked a dead mouse by the tail from it and flung the wet fur at one of the girls. Milk splattered after the spiraling rodent before it slammed against the girls forehead. Her shrieks resonated over his loud laughter.

I darted to the door.

No! Wait! You have come this far, don't turn back now!

No, I can't stay! I have to go!

I pulled on the cold door handle. It was stuck. I yanked it hard and it swung open –

“What about me?” The tone of her tiny voice immobilized me. I stared out into the clear blue sky. Fresh air...

Go! Run!

I forced myself to turn around. There on the cushions, she curled up in a fetal position. Her feet tucked under her ragged dress. Panic surged through me. Fear gripped my heart. Vomit rushed up my throat. I swallowed.

She sat up. Her dull eyes locked into mine, puncturing my soul with her judgment.

My legs and eyes defied me. I stood frozen returning her stare. Her thin arms reached out.

Oh isn't this special! snorted a family member.

Don't listen to them. Go to her.

I walked over, sat next to her and lifted her weightless body into my arms. She curled up on my lap. We clung to each other sobbing as though we were one. The rest of the family became insignificant and melted away as I sat rocking the child.

It's all right now sweet heart. I'm here to take you home. I love you; I love you so very much. Everything is okay. It's all over now. I sat for a long time hugging and rocking her, stroking her hair. Everything is ok now. We have it all, we really have it all, I cried. Wait till you meet our boys. They are going to love you and you're already crazy about them.

I stood up. I wiped my tears away. I took *me* by the hand and walked back into the present with the desire to never return to the past again.