

2 – Melissa

Melissa could feel the weight on her shoulders now every step of the way. A bag that might have only weighed fifty-something pounds beforehand now felt like it was pushing one hundred. Her body felt sweaty and fatigued.

The scenery was beautiful, however. To their left and their right were leafy green plants and trees. They took refuge away from them, however, sticking to a dirt pathway. For a small stretch of the walk, the trees even congregated overhead, leaning on each other, letting only small breaks of light from the sun peek out from between the cracks. It was a visual so appealing Melissa might even have thought to take a picture of it at a different time, but, right now, all she was thinking about was when she'd be able to take her shoes and socks off, and then, rest.

That didn't deter Shaun from doing so though, him explaining how the visual overhead looked like an open-mouth, as if the forest itself frowned at them with the misshapen and crooked teeth of a meth-head. Shaun talked about how he thought the bright white light appearing overhead could act as an opener for a short film, and that he would insert the title in-between the gaps of the branches. He was collecting stock footage for himself, for lack of a more apt description, and with it, the wheels for his many ideas started to turn. The light would be a metaphor for depression in this drama, with the tree branches representing the darkness creeping in and taking over, and, at the end of the short film, he would have special effects to make it look like the tree's "mouth" opened, letting the light in.

Shaun was serious about filmmaking, which meant they had to have a compromise for the trip that blended what he wanted with what she wanted. He wanted to shoot a few short films to show off to one of his college professors and have him send out the best ones to his "contacts". Melissa wanted a romantic weekend and memories to look back on that didn't involve ruining white shirts with corn-syrup blood (she often played small roles in his short films) or watching him direct other classmates on how to cry properly. Even if it had made for a sight to see. The compromise was to film shots to splice into later films, filming key parts of the mountain for location.

They hadn't seen much sign of life for a little over an hour now, which was discouraging to her, if only because it meant they were no closer to meeting with their friends. That was their stopping mark, the point where they were allowed to sit around and hang out. Their friends had ridden in from Joule's car, a beat-down vehicle from the early nineties she'd bought for less than seven-hundred dollars.

Seth and Mack both accompanied her in the travel, but Shaun and Melissa fought against it. Partly because it seemed like a little bit of a tight fit, cramming all those people into her Ford Taurus like it was some type of clown car. But, also, partly because Joule's vehicle was known to break-down on the way to local gas stations, let alone its survival chances in such a long drive as this.

Joule arrived only a couple hours before they did and agreed to stop when they arrived at the second checkpoint to make camp away from the trail, it was there they'd all be able to meet and call it a day.

3 – Crystal

Crystal boarded the school bus with trepidation and uneasiness, but, more importantly, she had her E-Reader and MP3 player ready to spend the next ten or so hours in an antisocial square of her own making.

Jennifer hugged her when she visited The Diner a final time. She seemed proud of her, even took a photograph and gave her a free meal for her troubles. She said that they'd stay in-touch. Sure enough, one of the first things Crystal saw on her cellphone this morning was a friend request. Crystal smiled to herself, leaning her back against the knock-off leather seats of the school bus. This would hopefully be the last time she ever had to deal with anything school-related again.

From her backpack, Crystal brought out the devilishly cute illustration she'd been working on. Only now starting to really dabble in the hellish colors. She'd brought it with her because, for some reason or another, she'd gotten it in her head she'd be able to spend part of the bus-ride over to the mountain polishing it up, but, sitting there now, it was clear to her that doing so would worsen the motion sickness she was not up to task to deal with.

Instead, she only looked at it for a couple of seconds, critiquing it in her head and thinking about what it might eventually become. Truth is, a lot of her paintings never ended up as they were intended, a lot of them weren't ever finished either. What might have started as one thing could easily become something different entirely, a fair-creature hovering over a rainbow, perhaps?

She wished her best friend had been able to attend, but that was apparently too much to ask of the school. A shame, but she was intent on making the most of the trip and already made plans with a few people. Shaun and Melissa were casual acquaintances at best, and she hardly knew the others at all. It'd be the first real step she'd take out from her normal social group. Intent on making mom's second mortgage on the house mean something, she often refrained from parties or slacking with her schoolwork. The more the merrier, she supposed, leaning back in her seat with earbuds in. It was oddly calming to watch a buss of uppity college kids and hear none of them.

4 - K.J.

Music blared loudly from the stereo, Scott bobbing his head like a careless buffoon in the driver's seat of his cherry-red Subaru, smacking his hands down against the steering wheel in unison with the beat of the song that played. K.J. did her best not to comment on the probability of them getting into a wreck and crashing to their death.

Instead, she pretended she enjoyed the loud, abrasive and repetitive rap music that the rapper mumbled their way through. Her mind was set on portraying the role of the “cool girlfriend,” of going with the flow and enjoying herself, doing things right for a change. Bryan was kind and sweet. She knew that even more with each brush of his hand over the back of her head. She snuggled up against his shoulder, embracing the comfort he made her feel.

In the front seat with Scott was his girlfriend Jessica, someone K.J. knew very little about. They weren't of the same scene anyways. Similar, in a way, to how different Scott and Bryan were, K.J. and Jessica were opposites. K.J. smiled warmly at Jessica when she entered the car, and Jessica at least reciprocated. Nothing else was said between them, however. Not that small talk could be said when the music blared on as loudly as it did.

Scott's car smelled like it had recently been drenched from top to bottom with body spray and she could see the old French fries and trash littering the floorboards.

“Are you excited to see the mountains?” Bryan asked, carrying a polite smile as K.J. peeked her head up from the pillow she had forced his body into becoming.

K.J. nodded, intending to go back to her resting position. After all, it was a certainty Bryan had asked her that question many times already before in the days leading up to the trip. It was something she'd noticed about Bryan. He was quiet, and yet, felt deeply uncomfortable in said silence, repeating questions for no other reason than to fill the air. The more K.J. was around Bryan, the more and more she started to wonder how he maintained a friendship with Scott or the others he was around. Where Scott felt comfortable banging on the steering wheel, improvising lyrics for a rap-song he might not have even heard before now, Bryan needed to engage others like a quota. It was a nervous anxiety that radiated off of him, but it seemed sincere as well, and, for some reason, she found that to be an enticing quality about him. It was a layer that she wanted to pull back, or a wall she wanted to climb over. She appreciated the simple change of pace of someone caring what others think. She smiled back at him.

“What are you most excited for?” Bryan asked next.

“Just hiking, I think it'd be cool to see some wildlife, maybe some deer or raccoon, maybe see what type of plants are out there, and take some pictures. Oh, lots of pictures,” K.J. said, rattling off anything she could think of. “And yourself?”

Bryan started to speak but stopped when the music became noticeably louder. This was Scott's doing, and with that, K.J. could see Bryan clearly tense up for a moment before easing again, “Just being away from things is all.”

The travel went without a hitch. They stopped once for gas station food and twice because Jessica sucked down a large fountain soda and kept needing to stop and use the restroom.

5 - Scott

“You called Bryan your closest friend, what do you like, in-particular about him?” The chubby old man asked, sitting in his chair. Scott tried not to act repulsed by the way his body hair protruded out from over the collar of his buttoned-up baby-blue shirt.

Scott chuckled. The act was a nervous twitch he couldn't define a clear purpose for, “Bryan and I have been friends for as long as I can remember. I can remember when we first met, because our moms were close friends? Aren't cliché phrases strange? How I tell you I can't remember a time without him, and then, immediately recount the time right before I met him? Anyways, I thought he was lame as shit, never a real outside person, always folded in on himself when he was with one too many people.”

“But, unlike so many other people, he was loyal. I was, uh, popular; I mean, I played soccer; but, my Dad, well, I don't really have to tell you about my dad, do I? The guy's the one that pays for all these little tea parties with you and I. Bryan took an interest in me and stuck with it. He didn't ever ask for anything. I wouldn't have even been able to stay on the soccer team through high school if it wasn't for him always helping through all my classes like he did. The guy never asked for anything though. I felt like he was only grateful to have my company.” Scott explained, feeling too much like a movie-star sad sack to lean back in the leather bed like he'd seen people in-therapy do on television.

“It sounds like Bryan's a good friend. It sounds like he really cares about you.” The therapist said, apparently intent on proving that all therapy was a farce.

“Yeah,” Scott said, and then, stopped for a second, as if a hidden meaning the question was only now dawning on him. “He hates me though.” Scott said. The statement was as much as a surprise to himself as it was the therapist staring back at him. “I know he hates me. He has hated me for years now. Didn't always,” Scott laughed nervously at himself. “I remember he used to like me. He used to think I was the coolest guy in the world. He used to make me feel like I could do anything.”

“What changed?”

“Him,” Scott said frankly, then, eased up, and adjusted, “And me, I guess. We went in separate directions. He started buying in that he was this deep intellectual and that I was this womanizing alcoholic that served no other purpose than to provide him entertainment and help him get laid.” Scott could feel the anger start to spurt out of him and rise to the surface, the stuff he was so much more used to pressing down or pretending didn't exist. He could feel his eyes begin to water; an involuntary act he wished he could control. He hated to cry in-front of people.

“And, you disagree with this opinion, the one that you think he has of you?” The therapist leaned forward in his chair, apparently having his interest piqued.

“Oh, it’s more than an opinion,” Scott snapped back. “The guy gets a bit of booze in him and he sings like a canary to anyone that will listen. I told him how well my girlfriend Chelsea and I were doing, told him I loved her, and he told me that I only loved her ‘today,’ like I would toss her to the curb the minute I was bored with her.” Scott laughed, it was a laugh at himself more than anything else, really. That he’d made the therapists’ job as easy as only having to ask a few short questions to wind him up and watch him go.

“It’s nice to know that you and Chelsea are still hitting it off,” The therapist commended. “You know, a study was conducted. It took a whole lifetime to simply gather up all the necessary data. It measured people from all different walks of life. It measured the rich and poor, black and white, clean slates and ones with criminal records. They followed these kids, watched them become men, and then, members of the senior community. They asked them what about their life made them the happiest. And, in their last questionnaire, the answer to that question changed for just about every one of them. The last time they asked, by the time they were all on their death beds, it was found that a majority of them found a happy life was not made through health or wealth, but through the relationships that are kept and nourished. Relationships that were made were deemed to be of the most value.” The man stopped speaking, perhaps meaning to allow for his words to sink in.

The man, whose desk, Scott only now noticed had a plaque that read Dr. Marshall, a fact he’d probably forgotten he noticed already previous time he’d come to his office. Dr. Marshall had all his credentials framed and hung up on the wall behind his desk. The man stared at him, waiting on Scott’s response.

“What are you saying? That I need to kick Bryan to the curb and cut my losses?” Scott asked, a smart-ass inflection to his voice to let him know his pompous, dime-store story had fallen on deaf ears.

Dr. Marshall spread his hands out on the table and provided a ‘why not’ befuddled face. “If you are so bothered by him, does he do nothing but anchor you down?”

Scott chewed on that for a moment. “I think him anchoring me down is what has gotten me this far. He keeps me from flying away. Bryan is the only one I know of that is who he really is, that’s own inhibition, might get in his way and make him hesitant, but never truly sabotages things for himself. Even if it’s for his own gain these days, I like to think one day he’ll save me if I ever fly to close to the sun. If things ever get too hot, he’ll be the one that keeps me from getting burned.” Scott met eyes with Dr. Marshall; his eyes were a watery fury.

It was out there for Dr. Marshall to hear. Scott was digging himself a hole he couldn’t muster the strength to dig himself out of. He dug, and he dug, and the deeper he got, the fainter the light overhead became. It was funny how his mind chose

to operate. Funny like off ones' rocker, and not funny like something that brought anyone laughter. It was funny like someone who held their own hand over a burning fire, crying in agony after their fingers started to blister, knowing they could end the pain by simply moving their hand, but, for some reason, be it self-loathing or a strange kink, they never did.