

Longing

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Sunrise was late.

A woman laid on the hood of her Lincoln, parked beneath the waving arms of a windmill, waiting. Their windmill – marked with charcoal outlines of each other's shadow reflected onto the smooth, grey steel – outlines that stretched and circled around the windmill base as they squandered their time together, as the sun had risen and fallen above them. Wednesday, he'd said, at the windmill, sunrise, wait for me.

She checked her watch again. Pink flickers of sunrise peeked above the cornfields; the woman blinked, only to find the light had rescinded below the horizon, a trick.

She waited.

A little before eight, traffic picked up on Highway 69. People headed to work, as though this day were no different. The rushing wheels turned the still air, and the drivers navigated the road only by pairs of yellow headlights that caught in its glare tiny droplets of fog, hovering above the ground.

She waited.

Around ten, she noticed the slow *whump whump* of the windmills was absent. She squinted through the dark, trying to make out the arms of the surrounding windmills, to see if they too were still. Eerie. Seeing nothing, she turned to the sky and examined the stars. She'd heard of an old lady, at the outskirts of her town, who could read the stars, read tea leaves, press her palm to a person's heart and read their souls. She was only whispered about, about the lines in her face, about the jars that line the shelves and hang from the rafters of her cabin, about the sort of people who visit her, pregnant girls, infertile women, widows, all people quietly, desperately searching for something.

Staring at the stars now, the young woman wondered what the old lady knew from them, and how she learned. She tried to memorize them, the patterns, clusters, where the brightest ones were, hoping that whatever intrinsic knowledge laid in the sky would be revealed to her. Her eyes

drifted closed.

She woke, opened her eyes. The sky seemed different, some of the stars rearranged, but how? A rustling through the cornstalks, many footsteps, and finally the faint beams of flashlights shook her from her thoughts.

The farmers and townsmen of Longing were searching for Slim. The woman realized the harvest was supposed to start, no wonder he had picked today to run away. He said so little sometimes, no wonder he was still a mystery to her.

"S'that Slim out there?" one said as their flashlights illuminated the woman, now perched on the hood of her car, bare feet drawn close to her body beneath the yards of sunny cotton that made up her summer dress. Her arms hugging her knees were long, tan, and goosebumped, although it was not cold.

"No, that's Slim's girlfriend," another said. "Donna, hey Donna, where's Slim?"

She shielded her eyes from the flashlights. She knew these men from barn parties, from church bazaars, from the stories Slim told her, but she couldn't remember their names. They all seemed the same and also just like those from her town, fifteen miles east.

"He'll come," she said.

"When?"

"Sunrise."

"Sunrise? That a joke?" The tallest of the group stepped forward, reaching his hand towards her shoulder, then thought better of it, hooking his thumbs around his belt-loops. "Donna, it's a quarter past two. Sun's not rising today."

Donna drew her head back up to the sky, trying to figure out what had changed in the stars. The man grabbed a stalk, tore a cob from it, ripped the husk back and stuffed the corn under her nose. "Do you see this?" he said. The corn silks were brown, dry, ready. "We have to harvest

now, this is important."

"I don't know where he's at."

"Then why are you here?"

"Buck, let her be," one of the older men spoke up.

"We can't harvest without Slim," Buck replied. So it was. According to legend, Longing's founding father, Hector Griffin, at age one-hundred twenty-eight called a town meeting and prophesied, with eyes still clear blue, that the fields would dry up until a boy was born at sunrise of the summer harvest. Then, choking on a bite of steak, he died. And then, nothing would grow in the fields. With no crops, industry in the town ran dry, many of the families left to find work in cities, but other families stayed on this land their ancestors had homesteaded, the Seavers, the Cobbalds, the Goodloves, and the Redways, subsisting on hope and charity from the surrounding communities. Finally, many years later, Rhonda Cobbald went into labor early, and to the town's joy, birthed a screaming, purple baby Slim. Since then, harvest began and ended with a ceremonial procession in the town square, headed by Slim, the town's deity, and Longing flourished.

"Can't harvest if the sun ain't up anyways." The men turned to leave, and with them, the flashlights. Buck stood in front of Donna, she couldn't make out his face, only the hulking slope of his shoulders, but she knew his eyes were fixed on her, piercing beneath thick sun-bleached eyebrows. He finally turned to leave, she got in her car and realized, as she pushed down the lock on her door, that her hands were shaking.

Donna was alone again.

Watching the stars again, she considered the legend Slim was a part of. When he had first told her of it, she'd laughed and told him she was her town's Pork Queen two summers ago. They'd met in the fall, so she'd never seen the ceremony, and he wouldn't talk about it. He wouldn't talk about himself much in general; he talked about ideas. And he'd draw, always, on the windmills with a Sharpie, in the dirt with a stick, secret sketches in his notebook, sometimes drawings of her. At nineteen, her world was tiny and collapsing until she met him, and then the wide, flat horizon she'd always

known stretched and bended until the very air before her buzzed with possibilities.

Curled in the backseat of her car, she drifted restless asleep, dreaming of the night and the stars, almost hearing the windmill blades churn the air. She dreamed of the cicadas singing, of Slim's mouth open, wet, near hers, of her toes curling into the dirt.

When she woke, it was still dark. A pair of headlights approached her – Rhonda.

Rhonda was a small woman, nearly a foot shorter than Donna. She was a former army medic and now the lead nurse at the clinic in Longing. She was small, yes, and she may have been beautiful if she didn't look so hard, as though her flesh were carved from limestone. Donna never knew much what to say to Rhonda, but felt glad to see her.

"Smoke?" Rhonda said, offering her a cigarette.

"No."

"You gonna tell me I shouldn't?"

"No."

"Good girl." The two sat together on the hood. The smoke rolled past Rhonda's thin lips and crawled up into the sky. "Well this is shit," she said. "Real shit."

"It'll work out," Donna said.

Rhonda sighed. "You know the town's story, I'm guessing." Donna nodded, watching the embers at the end of Rhonda's cigarette dance as she spoke. "Did you know Slim's a bastard child? My boyfriend up and left town as soon as I found out I had a bun in the oven. They leave that part out of the story. They'd leave me out of the story if they could, but Slim had to come from somewhere."

"I never –"

"Don't worry about it. You're a nice girl, I can tell. Just, if you're

having thoughts in your head, well just keep thinking things through." Rhonda flicked her cigarette and made for her pickup.

"Will you stay awhile?" Donna asked.

"No, honey, I can't," she answered. She left a blanket and a plate of casserole. Donna waited, enveloped in a timeless world marked only by the headlights of passing cars. Time passed, maybe a little, maybe a lot, and a van full of women from St. Mary's Catholic Women's Club came with a change of clothes and more casserole.

"Do you need anything, dear?" they asked. She shook her head. Another van full of women pulled up. The United Methodists Women's Group. They too brought casserole, but also pie.

"Oh that's sweet of you, so sweet of you," a matron from St. Mary's said, "but St. Mary's Catholic Women's Club has already pledged to take care of her meals."

A woman from the Methodists Women's Group took a peek at the casserole brought by St. Mary's. "Tuna casserole? How nice," she said, nose scrunched, and then turned to Donna. "Honey, dear, are you a Christian or a Catholic?"

"Is that a joke?" Donna asked.

"Alright, alright." A third set of headlights pulled in. Rhonda. She had Burger King. "St. Mary's, you can bring her food Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. United Methodists, you got Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. I'll be here Sundays."

"Ah, Rhonda, it's been some time since we've seen you on a Sunday," one said, but Rhonda jutted her hip out, sticking her chin upward. The woman all seemed to remember the time she had thrown Bill Seaver through a window during a heated town meeting or how she single-handedly talked down the city council when Longing wanted to demolish her house to make room for a pool. Intimidating, the tiny, fearful woman was.

The women agreed to the terms, packed into their vans and left. And so Donna could tell the days by the groups of women who came. She

looked forward to Sundays with Rhonda.

Sometimes, Donna laid flat on the ground, arms stretched out, trying to recapture an old feeling. She had grown to love Longing and the limitless fields surrounding it, but only because to her, it belonged to Slim. Lying next to him, she could feel gravity's pull, the tilt of the Earth, the magnetic fields, and all of the unseen forces of nature. "We'll leave," he had said, "because there is life so much fuller than in this place."

That feeling was not yet gone, but it was hard waiting, waiting and not understanding.

Around her, the men had begun construction on artificial weather systems to replace the sun. Rows of stadium lights broke the darkness with strange, blue tinted light. From each windmill, a giant rotating sprinkler was installed, with a huge, black hose winding its way down the mill, into hand dug trenches that finally converged with the other hoses into a writhing pit of snakes sucking water from the reservoir north of town. They made light and took water, but they couldn't create the wind, and even the men commented on how strange it was to not hear the windchimes their wives had hung on porches or feel a cooling draft as they slaved under the stadium lights.

She was still watching the sky, although the lights made the stars harder to see, when she heard a pickup pull up next to her car.

"Donna, hey, Donna." Buck. Donna didn't look down from the stars.

"Pretty smart, those lights, huh."

She waited.

"The sprinklers were my idea," he said. "You know, the crops are doing okay. Great, even."

"Do you ever wonder if you missed a sign?" She said, more to herself. "Like, if you would have paid attention more in school or listened to the old folks better, things would have turned out different?"

"You know, I was born right after Slim, down to minutes actually. Actually, it's even debatable who was born when."

Donna looked at him, he was gripping carnations. He had a cocky way of shifting back and forth between his shoulders, and a big, long nose dividing his face in half. "Oh Buck," she said. "You're no Slim."

The tips of his ears pinked. He dropped the flowers, yellow carnations, in the dirt and left.

Time silently swept through the darkness now punctuated by the weather systems. The days were marked by the different women's groups and evenings with Rhonda talking about Slim. Donna began to confide in Rhonda.

"Sometimes I wish I were a lot smarter, knew stuff like other people," she said. "I feel like I'm trying to figure out all these mysterious going on and the answer is right in front of me, but I'm not smart enough to figure it out."

"Honey, smarts don't do people a bit of good, it just turns them into jackasses. Where real knowledge lies, it's somewhere deep in your bones. You already know everything you need to know." Rhonda sometimes said very wise things and sometimes very foolish things, the trick for Donna was sorting the two out.

"I hear other boys been coming around. Like Buck?"

"Buck," Donna said. "No, I'm waiting here for Slim. He said he'd be here, he will, I'll wait."

"Phht. Buck and Slim are cousins, you know. Then again, most everybody here is."

After that, Buck's visits became more and more frequent. He'd show up with a bottle of cheap wine.

"Did you hear they're gonna celebrate me next Harvest day? Seems like we're doing alright afterall. I knew it of course."

"Of course."

"Donna, Slim abandoned us, and Longing doesn't need him anymore. You don't either."

She got in the car and locked the doors.

The cold set in, sudden and harsh like it does. And with the cold came the wind, much to Donna's relief. She curled up in her snow-buried Lincoln, watching the darkness outside. The headlights of occasional snowplow illuminated the wind rolling the snow along the great empty land, the roads hidden beneath snowdrifts. The wind rocked the car and Donna wished for the curl of Slim, big spoon and warm against her back.

Oh Slim, her heart filled. She traced the outline of his face in her mind. This wait will be worth it. This wait will be worth it.

Cold winter lifted. The giant sprinklers drenched the Earth in spring rains, her car's wheels sank into the mud. Then, the fluorescent lights brought the heavy heat of summer. Corn and soybeans grew and grew and grew under the man-made weather. In town, the men whispered that Slim did them a favor by leaving. Some men wouldn't say his name anymore.

Emboldened by the Harvest ceremony and by the whiskey in his veins, Buck proposed one evening. Donna cracked him in the head with a casserole dish, and then with her little fists hit, hit, hit until he stumbled back into his truck. And although Donna cried after he left, she felt better than she had in ages.

Soon after, Buck got engaged to Sarah Goodlove and Sarah soon after had a baby. Buck continued to drive past the windmill in the evenings, slowing to a crawl, but he never got out of the car.

Time flew, time stood still. More crops, more harvesting, more winter. One year and then another and then many whirled around Donna. One evening the moonlight raked along the Rhonda's skin, showing creases Donna hadn't noticed before. Rhonda was getting old, and so, Donna realized, she must be too.

Storms passed the wide horizon, lightening burst open the sky, ripe sore tornados seeped out and ran through the fields. Buildings started to grow up in the fields around her. Donna stayed faithful to her vow to wait for Slim. Every year at Halloween, more and more little girls would wear long wigs with grey streaks and shriek at the boys, "Slim, oh Slim, come back to your dear old Donna." Rhonda's house finally was demolished and a community pool was built and named after Donna. The townspeople had the rusted out Lincoln towed to the town square so it'd be easier to keep watch on her. Rhonda was bent and slower with age, and moved into the car with Donna. Donna watched after her as the nights drew on.

"This town," Rhonda said, "this town will say it's traditional, it's rural, but it'll throw out any old thing that gets in the way of what it wants. Honey, you'll show us all in the end." She coughed her old smoker's lung. "Hell, we ain't seen daylight in decades."

She died not long after that. Donna never spoke and never cried after that.

At the gas station, the old men of the town played cards and watched her from the window. Foolishness, they agreed. Damned foolishness.

"Oh Buck, you're just sour," the old women would say, prodding at his gut. Sarah sat silently by him. She too, long ago, had loved Slim and felt connected to Donna, lovingly, enviously, suspiciously. She longed to know her but never had the courage to approach her.

The old folks' children thought the aging woman wise. The children's children felt sad for her. They washed her car and planted morning glories in the dirt around her. The vines stretched up the hood, entwined around the windshield wipers; the flower buds waited with their silent companion for sunrise.

When that did not seem like enough, they held fundraisers and bake sales to commission a statue of her for the center of the swimming pool. They would tell the generations after them of the woman who waited there, in a pool of her own tears.

Her tear ducts, however, had run dry long ago. The light in her eyes had passed, fogged with cataracts. Her ovaries were barren hollows, low in her body. She was old. Her skin was thin and translucent, lying smoothly over her skull, in folds around her neck. When the wind blew hard, her bones would creak. She barely moved, ever faithful, knees curled to her chest, covered in the long fine wisps of her hair.

Her mind faded. Bits of memory flickered in her senses. A hand in hers. A taste of apple wine. A whisper. Other days, she only felt the dull hammer of abstract emotions – loving, longing, waiting. Waiting for what? When her mind cleared and she remembered, her whole body withered in aches, wishing for an end, but she kept on.

Some of the townsfolk advocated a stop to charity towards her. “Our women have been feeding her every night, we’ve been clothing her,” they’d say. “If everyone decided they’d just wait in a field for their dreams to come true, what would get done? Where would we be? Look at us, the legacy of Longing. We’ve done away with dusty old legends and made way for progress!”

A child interrupted the meeting, point chubby fingers toward the window. “Look, look.”

Three vultures circled overhead, around the Lincoln. Descending, ascending, descending again. The meeting adjourned. Someone turned off the artificial lights. People went to their families, watching from blankets on their lawns and rooftops.

The morning glories shifted. The stars faded as light reached up the sky. Inside the Lincoln, a distant smell of sawdust and charcoal and notebook paper overtook Donna, igniting recognition and the layers of past years and she felt the handsome, thoughtful man she’d fallen in love with. The old woman breathed in the feeling and with great light in her eyes understood all of knowledge the stars had offered her. Like dried twigs, her arteries snapped, her heart broke in joy and sadness, and she died.

Outside the Lincoln, the people cried out. Clouds. The townspeople saw clouds for the first time – inexplicable, miraculous lumps. Even the oldest men wept at the sight.