

Rain Check

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He had been dating her for just under a year when a boldface heading in the newspaper travel section caught his attention: OCEANFRONT COTTAGE. What a romantic notion, he mused. He decided that he should make reservations for the weekend in secret and surprise her that evening. She had been acting standoffish lately; perhaps this gesture would get the two of them in a better place.

He made the phone call to the owner of the cottage, and learned that the beach was strewn with rocks and had not been raked or cleaned for a few seasons. The owner warned him that strolling down there would be less than pleasant.

"But there's an ocean view, right?"

The owner said the view alone was worth the price and gave his personal guarantee that the two lovers would have a wonderful weekend. The cottage was reserved for two days.

She arrived at his apartment that night after several hours at the research library, burned out and ready for bed. Meanwhile, he could barely contain his glee. The advertisement had been laid across the pillow on her side of the bed—that is, the side she preferred when she chose to stay the night. She slipped out

of her jeans and found a pair of sweatpants in his dresser drawer. As she tied the drawstrings, he stopped being coy and showed her what he had done. Her reaction left him cold.

"It sounds lovely," she said, but went on to scold him for failing to give her advance notice. She disappeared into the bathroom for a few minutes, and returned to find him under the covers looking at her with wounded eyes. She pushed her ponytail over one shoulder and looked at the ceiling. "This is a critical week for me," she said. "I meet with my advisor in ten days, remember? I can't lose sight of that. Not when I am so close."

"You can bring your books to the cottage," he offered.

She got into bed with him and tickled under his chin. "I'll still be distracted, darling."

"Think of it as a vacation," he said.

"It's a vacation for you," she said. "The steam whistle doesn't blow at five o'clock in my world."

"Will you come? I paid the deposit this afternoon, and I can't get a refund." He thought it fair to twist her arm with a white lie (he wouldn't put down any cash until Thursday) because the trip would do her some good. The deception paid off. She agreed to accompany him and turned out the light. They shared a quick kiss in the darkness.

While she rolled over and fell into a dream, memories touched the edges of his consciousness. There had been a time when both of them were students, looking at graduation day as a final goal. A subtle difference divided them: he had always looked at school as a running race for a diploma while she had chosen academics as her career. He tried to be supportive when

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term papers came due, but fastening that top button and wearing a necktie had changed his perspective about academia. He sometimes thought that her educational efforts were sucking the life out of her. School had certainly affected their relationship; that much was obvious. He breathed in and out with purpose. Finally, he shifted positions, put his arm around her waist, and drifted off to sleep.

He packed light, needing little to survive apart from a change of clothing and some toiletries. She loaded her bag with textbooks and pads of paper, and even brought a paperback book for free reading. He thought it fortunate that her beauty routine didn't require a makeup case or hair-styling products: where would she carry them? They loaded two duffel bags into the hatch of his subcompact car and hit the road.

She never cared much for road trips, and he knew it. The country roads made her dizzy and the freeway system bored her. He hoped that she wouldn't complain this time. She regularly made complaints about his tiny little car. The payments were reasonable enough, but considering that he bought it in college and was now earning good money, it seemed that he should look for something more comfortable. It served the purpose, he always said, and who did he have to impress? She didn't have a car of her own. He had always been willing to drive her where she needed to go, and she could walk to her classes. One-sided as it was, the arrangement had been working fine.

B R E N D A N H O W A R D

It hadn't crossed his mind to check the weather forecast; he never thought about those kinds of details when struck by a spontaneous mood. When the first raindrops splashed on the windshield, she cringed. "It's raining," she said.

"I can see that," he said. "It doesn't look too bad."

"Famous last words," she said, and they didn't speak for the next hour.

The rain grew stronger as time wore on. It pelted the roof of his car in a madcap rhythm and streaked across the windshield. The speed of his wipers didn't have a discernible effect. Oncoming headlights looked fuzzy through the windshield, but he play-acted as if he could see clearly. She asked if they were lost.

"No, we're fine. Don't worry. We're fine." He leaned forward in the driver's seat and peered into the distance. He rubbed fog from the inside of the windshield and narrowed his eyes.

"What highway are we supposed to be on?"

"Don't worry about it. I have good directions."

She left it at that, and stared through the passenger side window at the shadows on the horizon.

The hour grew late, and she became impatient. He recognized the huff in her exhalations as a precursor to sighs, and saw that her leg was bouncing up and down in time with her increasing anxiety. He knew that his time was almost up.

"We got turned around somehow. We'd better stop for the night."

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She kept her lips together and nodded.

"Don't be mad at me. We'll find it in the morning. All the roads are connected somehow. We'll pick it up again tomorrow."

"There's a place," she said.

He looked ahead and saw the glow of tall lights illuminating a parking lot on the side of the road. Beyond the lot he could see the outline of a modest inn with a neon sign flashing VACANCY into the darkness.

"We're in luck!" he said. She didn't respond. He knew she was angry about the situation and he didn't know how to change those feelings. He pulled into a parking stall and turned off the car. He found an old newspaper in the back seat and handed it to her. "Use this as an umbrella," he said.

She pushed it away, yanked the door handle and popped out. Sheets of water invaded the car before she could slam the door and sprint to dry ground under the canopy over the inn's entrance. He was left holding the stained newspaper, considering whether he should use the newspaper now that she had rejected the idea. The color drained out of his face.

They entered the inn together. "They have a restaurant and it's still open," she said. "Let's get something to eat."

"We should get a room first."

"I don't want to wait. I'm hungry. We can check in after we eat."

"Go get a table," he snapped. "I'll meet you there in a minute." She took a step back as he spoke. Their eyes met and a new