

DESIREE EVANS

Whirligig

Delma's catching up on sleep in her truck somewhere east of Pearl, Nevada. Pulled off-road on a weedy slice of shoulder. The area is quiet, if neglected: long stretches of dry, brittle grass meeting the crumbling black tarmac of a never-ending highway. She escaped most of the heat of the day here in her pickup, her body curled up in the passenger seat, boots kicked off, bare feet hanging out the window. Her dog, Ghost, is a tiny, fluffy pile of white Spitz-mix curled up beside her. He snuffles in his sleep, and she scratches behind his pointy ears, turns to look at the desert outside her window.

She's missed this, Delma thinks. This heat and sand and dry air coating her lungs. She tries not to breathe but ends up choking on the challenge of it all. July is drought season, and it always feels like the world's coming undone, heat so dry it sizzles in the air, makes her daydream about throwing off everything she wears, racing naked across the desert until she's nothing but sand herself, ground up pieces of rock caught on the wind, blowing, blowing, *blowing*.

Delma laughs under her breath, the thought silly. But stay in the desert this long, and everything starts to feel a little bit uncanny—and a little bit more possible. She's been on the road for four days, searching for her wayward brother, Ry, circling his usual Southwest haunts. Ry has a nasty habit of disappearing for weeks at a time, months on occasion. But this is the longest he's been gone without letting her parents know where he is. Delma's daddy called earlier that day to let her know they'd finally heard from Cousin Lou, who said Ry had shown up at his place last night. Something inside of Delma settles at the thought of it, Ry finally safe, soon to be found. With a nervous breath, she starts up the truck and settles back on the highway, driving toward Cousin Lou's place now. She slides the truck to an easy eighty, eyes on the desert horizon, on the lookout for Lou's home—a bright blip of trailer that scars the skyline. With every passing mile, she wonders what she's going to

say to Ry, her little brother by eleven minutes, her twin, her best friend.

It's half an hour before Delma pulls the truck over outside the trailer, and it's another five minutes before she's ready to move, finally feeling a little more steady in her body, resolved to doing this. She stuffs her thick, curly hair up under a ballcap, rolls the windows down so Ghost has some fresh air, and exits the truck. She approaches the trailer slowly, the tilt of sun hot on her back. It's close to three in the afternoon, but the yard is quiet. She passes a rusting red minivan, figures it must be one of Lou's. Lou is an older, distant cousin, someone Ry had followed around as a kid. She doesn't know the guy too well herself, but he seems to care about her twin, and that's all she can ask for most days. Plus Lou's been good about keeping in touch with her parents over the years, letting them know if and when a wayward Ry comes through his doors.

Delma sees movement through the front window of the trailer, a dark shadow drifting behind floral curtains. Her boots crunch on the dried weeds as she approaches the door. When finally she gets up the nerve to knock, she wonders if it's anger that makes her hand shake. Maybe it's fear mixed with a lifetime of concern. Or maybe something hotter than all of that, something uglier. But when Ry actually opens the door and she sees him for the first time since she left for college twelve months ago, something in her chest splits open, bleeds out, all soft and forgiving. All she can think of is holding his hand to cross the street, sharing beds with him in the run-down places they'd always called home. Late nights back home in a town in the middle of nowhere, listening to shitty pop music and getting high with their friends Frank and Willa.

Looking at him now, she still sees Ry, the short kid with too-long arms, big eyes, and soft, light-brown skin. Not the wild, crazed thing she'd come to think of in her mind, the out-of-control addict her parents had painted in her head. *He's been so lost*, they'd said. *He needs you, Del.*

She sees Ry, her skinny, doe-eyed twin brother, standing in the door, looking at her with an easy smile. She looks back. Notices the new things. He's a little taller now, like maybe he's growing into himself. His afro is sticking up in every direction, so thick and untamed it's starting to naturally dread, long locks falling across his forehead. He has a tiny star tattoo under his left eye. That's

new. They're not quite mirror reflections anymore.

"Just gonna stand there looking at my pretty face?" he asks with a wide smirk. Sharp eyes, deep dimples, smart-ass mouth.

"You gonna let me in or what?" Delma returns, her eyebrow arching.

He steps back, lets her in. "Pop sent you," he says. Not a question.

"You left without a word and haven't returned anyone's phone calls in two months. Mama and Daddy thought you were dead," she breathes out, and closes the door behind her. The trailer is dark, shadowy, cluttered with books and house-painting supplies.

"And you left Harvard to come look for me?" he says, showing her through to the small kitchen area.

Delma rolls her eyes, corrects him: "Princeton." She settles in a chair at the card table they use as a dining area before adding, "And yeah, I've come to save you from yourself." She says it as a tease, but she can tell it still has bite.

Ry snorts, shrugs his wide shoulders. Delma watches as he settles across from her at the table, shuffling magazines and notebooks aside to make more space between them. "You're looking good, college girl," he says after a time, his words quiet.

Delma smiles, tilts her head. "I'm surviving."

Something sad flitters across his face, and for a moment he looks closer to the kid she knew at thirteen, not nineteen. "Me too."

Delma nods, glancing around the small trailer. In the living room there are two ancient couches and an old-school box TV. A small wooden coffee table sits covered in dirty cups and bowls. Through the doorway she can see the bedroom, a toffee-colored quilt covering the bed.

Ry is watching her. "I don't need any help," he tells her. "I've been doing good."

She turns to look at him. "And how long have you been here?"

He blinks, then sighs, "Two days."

"And where were you before here?"

"Atlanta."

"Before that?"

"Detroit."

"And that?"

“Vegas.”

Delma lets loose a soft whistle, then slouches back in her chair. “Look, I’ll stay the night, and we leave for home in the morning, all right?” She’s wearing her big sister pants today, and she’s hoping it works.

It must, because Ry doesn’t argue with her; he just nods. “Lou’s gone for the week, so I’ve been using his bed,” he says. “You can take the big couch and try not to snore your mammoth snore.”

“Screw you,” Delma laughs, meeting his eyes across the table. He smirks back at her, and for a moment it’s like no time has passed, like they’re both still sixteen and going *absolutelynofucking-where*, before the scholarships and the drugs, before the running away. Before the growing up.

She lobbs a crumpled piece of paper at him, which misses his head by a mile. He flips her off and motions toward the TV. “Super Mario Brothers?” he asks.

“Hells yeah,” she says, and maybe this is them making up, easy-peasy. Like the drugs don’t matter, like the marks on his arm are nothing, like she’s not taking him back home to Daddy’s judgment and Mama’s tears.

Like she’s not going to leave him again for the idea of something better.

Delma sits in the midnight dark of the trailer, bare feet pressed flat on the cool linoleum floor. Her tank top and boxer shorts are not enough to fight off the night chill of the desert, so she’s dragged a thick comforter around her. Her hands massage at the scruff of Ghost’s neck, bunching the skin and smoothing it down, the sleepy dog moaning in happiness.

She woke up an hour ago, and she can’t get back to sleep; couldn’t anyway with the noise. Ry’s crying, or at least he was. She’d spent the last twenty minutes listening to the sound of creaking bedsprings, the restless tossing and turning, the soft, low whimper of her brother needing something she couldn’t give him.

Ry’s been clean for months, he’d sworn it to her in that quiet moment before they both went to bed. He’d even spent a few weeks in rehab in Detroit when things had gotten particularly bad, he’d explained. While Delma knows he won’t start using again just because she came back, his suffering is almost as bad, and there’s a

part of Delma that wants to go to him; she wants to take him away from all of this, wants to hide away his brokenness. She wants to mother him, hold him until he falls asleep, maybe sing him one of Grandmama's old lullabies.

Nights are the worst for her back at college too; she tosses and turns for other reasons. The creeping, cold feeling of loneliness, a sensation of something in the darkness waiting to grab her, make her disappear. She doesn't belong there, doesn't know why she ever thought she would. Jersey's nothing like the desert that birthed her, nothing like driving through the night with the windows rolled down and the full moon the only light around. Howling like a wild desert animal, because she could. The lonely harshness of the desert is something she understands.

Tonight it's Ry's crying she hears, and Delma has to stop herself from going to him. He has to make this ride alone, and she has to learn to let him.

They stop somewhere east of Velray, at one of those silver-bullet trailers turned '50s roadside diners. They've been driving for about three hours, and those hours have brought a catching up of sorts: stories, at first hard to vocalize, have become easier to come by as the highway rolls beneath them and the radio turns from Top 40 to static.

Delma's eating from a plate of banana pancakes, and Ry's ordered a cheeseburger, a side of fries, and a slice of apple pie. He hasn't eaten much but a few fries, probably can't stomach anything with the way his insides feel all twisted up, memories of his last detox probably still fresh in his mind. But he watches her eat, dipping his fries in the pile of ketchup on his plate, and she's watching him watch her. Mirror reflections.

"Wanna try this instead?" she says, letting her fork drop and motioning to the syrup-soaked bread on her plate.

"Looks disgusting," Ry says, a smile creasing his lips. "Sure." He takes a small bite of her pancake, following it with a big swig of his soda, spilling some down his chin before he wipes at it and laughs at himself.

Delma smirks and pushes her plate closer to him, encouraging. She watches him spear up a bigger chunk of pancake with his fork, chewing slower this time. He licks his lips in a show of appre-

ciation, patting his belly. "Thanks, Mama," he says.

"You're still ridiculous," she tells him.

"Yup," he acknowledges, and then he's licking his fingers and humming, and she's fighting back another grin.

When they finish eating, they sit quietly for a long time, letting the breakfast bustle unfold around them. In those moments Delma watches her brother's hands fold and unfold nervously; there's a slight shake to them when he finally sets them on the Formica tabletop. The backs of his hands are smooth, pale, and she can see the thick bulge of veins. A slice of sunlight falls over his knuckles, and she thinks of their daddy, his dark, mechanic-rough hands beating at their Buick's old motor; she thinks of her Mama, her small brown hands kneading dough. She remembers holding Ry's hand the first time he ran away, after he'd come home sweaty and dirty, shaking like a starving man. They'd been eleven. Their daddy had stood in the yard, watching them both, breathing heavy. Their Mama had stood behind him, wind blowing the tails of her yellow skirt, her face breaking.

Their daddy had strapped them both real good with his belt, and Ry had mouthed off still, and Delma had screamed and screamed until what power had existed in the household felt reestablished. Delma had tried to protect Ry all the time back then. It had been useless to try, and it's only now that she understands this.

"You called me a couple of times when you were high last fall," she says, because she needs to say something.

Ry's eyes widen. "Really?"

"You don't even remember, do you?"

Her brother leans back and sighs, shaking his head. "Maybe. . . . I don't know, Del."

Delma sinks into her seat, her head turning to look at her truck, the silver bumper sparking like lightning in the noonday sun. She wants him to live knowing something more than this. But she's not sure what that is, wonders if it exists. They shared a placenta once, so maybe she'll always want more for him.

Ry nudges her foot with his own. "Remember that time we snuck into Abe Conrad's house?"

Delma smiles. They shouldn't have been in that crazy old man's house, but they'd snuck in, eaten all his food, and swum in his pool.

"I remember you tearing out of there in just your swim

trunks," she tells him.

"He had three shotguns," Ry says in his defense, chuckling softly. "All aimed at me."

"We were idiots," she says, letting laughter fill her belly. "Poor old Abe."

Ry nods. "Yep," he says, his voice quieting as he adds, "Did you know some kids burned his house down about a month after you moved away?"

Delma hadn't known. She recalls the man had killed himself that spring before she'd left, but she hadn't thought his home had undergone its own tragic end. It seems wrong that all they have left of him is a story.

Ry sits up suddenly and covers one of her hands with his own. "I do remember calling you once when I was drunk as hell, sometime last fall," he says, catching her gaze. "From a payphone outside the bingo hall."

Delma remembers that night. It'd been storming on his end, and she could barely hear him over the receiver, but she'd still spent an hour on the phone, telling him how the tacos sucked in her dining hall, and how all the girls in her dorm suite had rich white girl problems like traveling the world and paleo dieting.

"Maybe call me sober next time, yeah?" she suggests, squeezing his hand. She'd spent that night after the call in one of the empty dorm common areas crying, hiding out for almost an hour so her roommate wouldn't ask questions. In her memory of that night she hadn't cared that Ry was drunk, had only thought about the summer they'd turned thirteen and camped out by Gaylord's Gorge. Lying side by side, staring up at the stars, watching the Gemini twins dance around the sky.

Delma breathes in deeply and releases it. "You ready?" she asks him.

Ry looks at her, the corner of his mouth twitching. He squeezes her hand back. "Not at all."

Delma recalls all the years she felt she was in fragments, broken into too many small parts that could not join back up. She had been one of her mother's ceramic clay pots, cracked and abandoned on the side of the road. Away at school she had been ashamed of this brokenness. She'd felt tragic for all the ways she

didn't know how to perform middle-class idealism. She'd spent too long being ashamed of her family's poverty, ashamed of spending money on books when she knew better—knew the difference that kind of money could make back home. She'd always know better. She'd been too brown and too poor in a place that didn't understand either thing.

They're in northern Arizona somewhere, the dusty road winding into red flats and cactus sprouts. Dusk sneaks up slowly, the summer heat still high even as the sun sinks low into the hills. She's got a CD in the player, and old-school hip-hop fills a charged silence. In between Biggie tracks, the air spins softly through the windshields. The evening heat is lulling, and the outside world is too stark and bright. Ry is a restless lump beside her, the earlier calm broken by his needy whimpers. The need comes, the need goes. The sound of his breathing is a constant comfort, though.

The weather's been good so far, but she's driving them north, toward the places where the rains touch down, toward the summer desert storms.

"You ready to talk about it all yet?" Delma asks, the first words between them in two hours.

"Nope," Ry says.

Delma sighs and replies, "We got time, little bro."

"One day you're gonna save me from being saved," Ry quips, voice low and teasing, tender-soft.

"Only if you save me from doing the saving," Delma replies, and her words carry them back into the silence.

They stop at the small flea market on the side of the highway outside of Dutton, about 200 miles from home. The market is really just an old tent-covered lot, an abandoned drive-in turned swap meet on the weekends. A handful of tables sit in a row, covered by random kitchen gadgets, woven native baskets, and colorful pottery.

Delma stands watching the soft, dusty breeze catch at the row of wind-spinners, weathervanes, chimes, and dreamcatchers. All these whirligigs sent spinning and spinning by the wind, and she feels lost in the motion, pulled toward it.

She turns when she hears the sound of Ry returning from the restroom, his boots crunching over broken bottle glass and

gravel. He's looking tired, his hands running up and down his arms, a mimic of the deep craving in his eyes. His presence has always been such a comfort, but now it feels changed, charged.

Ry. Twin, best friend, other half. They're only nineteen, but that's damn near eighty in wolf years. They're just a couple of old wolf souls, really.

The wind dies away, picks up again, and blows in her face, and she forces her tears to stay down inside her, where they belong.

Ry looks at her and asks, "What's wrong?" He can always tell what she's feeling. He stands before her, his locks falling across his forehead, their black color a nice contrast to the warm brown of his skin. She takes in his scarred forearms, the way he's shivering even in the heat.

She sighs, turns to glance at her boots, covered in the red silt of the road. "Maybe we can stop at that old train station in Wyatts-ville, camp there and head home in the morning?" she asks.

What she wants to say is, *I'm leaving again, and what will you do without me?* But she can't make herself say it aloud, ask the question. What she really wants to do instead is hug him and take him with her. Sit back to back with him on the rooftop of the largest building on campus, pressed close together like they'd do when they were little. At night they could play their favorite game — rename the constellations after popular '80s bands.

What she wants is for everything to be the way it used to be.

Ry looks at her and asks, "What is it, Del?"

Delma releases a tired breath and just stares at him, really stares. His eyes are bright, flickering in and out like the flames of a campfire, one she's standing close enough to get burned by. "I can't keep doing this," she tells him, and she means finding him, watching him lose himself. All of it. She can't keep doing it. "I'm missing work for this, Ry. Blowing what little savings I have and driving up my credit card balance just to keep enough gas in the truck to search the state for you. Do you even care?"

"I never asked you to do any of this in the first place," Ry says, and the edge of his voice is bitter, wound up by shame.

"You never had to!" Delma yells, and she's surprised by the force of it, the pain in it, the anger and resentment. She can see the surprise behind his eyes, gone wide and glassy at the punch in her words. Part of her wants to punish him for fucking up again.

Punish herself for not staying, for running off on her own, for leaving him. She wants to punish them both for being here, in this moment, dancing around an impossible future. She wants to fight with him but doesn't know how. All their childhood fights turned to laughter, turned to needing each other.

"Say something," she pushes instead, frustrated when he just continues to stare at her.

"I . . ." he begins, then steps back from her like she's dangerous. He opens his mouth to say something else, but Delma watches that die too, watches the unsaid words trail from his mouth like smoke.

Delma sighs. Steadies her breathing, her hands. Repeats, "Please say something."

"I can't," Ry whispers.

The silence comes in again around them like a wave, swallowing them up. She listens to the windchimes, watches the pinwheels spin. The desert sun feels life-giving against her skin, comfortable and familiar like the East Coast sun had never been.

"I really hate you sometimes," Delma says, the words spinning away from her too. Suddenly there's too much heat on her face, too much sun in her eyes.

"I hate you too sometimes," Ry admits, his voice cracked and open. Delma senses no real anger in his words, no bitterness, just the feeling of truth; a twin to her own admission. Ry looks at her, and Delma looks back at him.

After a long beat, Ry says, "When you leave this time, don't come back." His voice is hoarse with strain, low-toned when he adds, "You deserve so many good things. You don't need to keep saving me, okay?"

Delma bites back the burn of tears and asks, "What the hell am I supposed to do instead?" She knows it comes out broken, a paper torn to shreds.

Ry's eyes are wet as he steps toward her, and a soft laugh creeps out of him when he offers, "I don't know. Save the world instead?"

She bites down on her bottom lip, smiles through the pain. "Figures. You always thought I was superhuman."

"Nah," he says, shrugging, brown eyes liquid in the sunlight. "Just more human than most."

Softness plays across Ry's features, and Delma feels some-

thing in her chest loosen. She huffs out a little breath and turns to look out at the road for a moment before glancing back at him to ask, "Will you ever learn to do this without me?"

"I don't know," he admits. "I really don't know." He runs a hand over his face and groans softly. He turns to meet her eyes and says, "I wanted to use just now, but I didn't . . . and I'm not going to if I can help it. But I need you to know that I'm trying. I need to be able to get myself together even when you're not here. I need to figure out how to be me without you around to ground me. I need to figure out how to stay clean. Maybe make some fucking art that matters."

The confession is enough to shake them both. Delma walks toward Ry, places a hand on his elbow, squeezes, and wants to believe him. He's trembling, and Delma remembers Ry trembling during those first months when he'd tried to get clean, all his pride and certainty falling away. She remembers him coming to her, wide-eyed and lost, a little brother needing his big sister's help. Back then there were parts of Delma that liked being needed for something, liked being the one who helped Ry get through the tough times, who always found him when no one else could. But she knows that isn't the answer anymore, never had been the answer for them. She squeezes his arm again, remembers running with him through the barren field behind their house. They'd been so good at running, so good at chasing and being chased by each other. Behind her eyes, the amber light of her memories lingers, and in front of her, Ry's whispering, *sorry, sorry, sorry*. Everything about his apology feels like a weight as much as a comfort.

She doesn't know how to explain it, even to herself. The way love hurls them forward but also pulls them back. Delma wants to save Ry, but she wants to save herself too. She doesn't know if those two things can even live in the same universe. Delma opens her eyes and stares at Ry, and he's solid and heavy in a way none of her memories of him are.

"Let's go home," she tells him, because that's somewhere to start, and it's the one thing she's always known how to do—bring her brother home.

Delma drives them north into canyon country, home closer on the horizon. Ghost is woofing at Ry, the two of them curled up like

old friends in the passenger seat. Delma listens to the low purr of the engine and the soft rattle of gravel from the road. The land is flat around them and the road is straight ahead of them. There are a few stormclouds on the horizon, painting the sky in purples and blues and grays. She thinks of how it will be later when they pull up in front of their parents' home. How they will spin around each other for a time, their daddy breathing heavy and their Mama looking weary, Delma feeling caught in the ghostly in-between, not here nor there. Elsewhere.

Delma thinks of her roommate Rebecca and the stories the other girl tells Delma about her wild nights on Sorority Row. She thinks about all those mornings spent sleeping through TA sessions in Alexander Hall. And she thinks about the distances between all the worlds she's come to call home. The past and the present slide together on the far horizon; time trembles and warps in the desert heat.

Ry still carries the sketch of Delma that he drew on the cardboard back cover of his geometry notebook in the 10th grade. He shows it to her somewhere outside of Tempe, their last stop before the home stretch. The truck is pulled over on the side of the road and the two of them sit on the hood, sipping at Coke bottles.

Drawn in black ink and smudged and wrinkled by the years, the likeness is still pretty good. Ry managed to capture Delma's mouse-round nose and puffy cheeks, the mole by her left ear. Her eyes: serious, dark, surrounded by long, black lashes.

"You were good," she says, fingers edging along the sketch.

"Still am," he says.

She turns to glance at him. The sunlight is dazzling, and she has to raise a hand over her eyes to shield them. "You got some new artwork to show me, kid?"

He grins, squints up toward the sun. The months have carved new lines on his face, making him seem so much older. Back in the old neighborhood, they were always children, Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. Children like them never grow old. Out here, though, they are something else entirely.

"There may be an alley wall or two in Detroit with your face on it," he tells her, shrugging all nonchalant-like.

Delma snorts, shakes her head. "I can't believe you!"

"Hey, it was a commissioned mural. I actually got paid for it," he says, his hands going up in defense when she makes to smack

his arm. "The city hired a bunch of us 'needy urban kids' to make art on abandoned buildings. So I painted you." He pauses for a moment, then laughs and adds, "Plus your face is basically my face, just uglier."

"You're uglier," she huffs back, and she's about to tell him off for putting her face in strange cities when she hears a soft, quavering howl off in the distance. They both turn toward the sound, eyes fixed on the bleeding horizon. Ghost barks from inside the cab, alert now too.

"Coyote or wolf?" Ry asks, squinting toward the skyline.

"Wild dog, probably," she says, remembering the stories about roving packs out this way.

"Okay, then," Ry says, smiling over at her. "We gotta protect our territory, Sis. You know the drill."

Delma rolls her eyes, remembering this game from their childhood. Delma and Ry, wolf pack of two, warding off all danger.

Even though she knows it's coming, Ry's howl still takes her offguard, and she watches him with some kind of deep awe as he sits up straighter, cupping his mouth. Loud, hitching sounds erupt from his throat, almost too wild and dark and primal for her ears. Something inside her twists up in response, but when he turns to her, he's smiling like this is all normal, like a nineteen-year-old boy howling is perfectly okay. The top coils of his afro catch the amber light of the sun, illuminating him; his body seems suddenly a lot more comfortable in this version of their world. A beautiful wild animal under a desert sky. He's happy, she realizes. He's grinning as he turns and pokes at her to join in. Delma shrugs and starts up her own howling, something heavy and forceful unleashed from her chest, and Ry just howls louder, eyes wide and excited, and damn, *dammit*. She's missed this part too.

She tilts her head even farther back, lets out another loud howl, feels the sound ripple out of her throat from deep, deep down, all the fear of the last year, all the jumbled pieces looking for a slot. She can feel her face warming in surprised glee. Ry watches her, lets loose another cry, shrill and high-pitched this time to match Delma's own. Ghost is barking along, excited.

The wind in the distance picks up, sends swirls of dust dancing across the highway. Their twin howls move through the airy, barren trees. She imagines them both flying across the desert like grains of sand, just blowing, blowing, *blowing*.