

There's always something off about everyone knowing everyone else, even in the small town of Brightway. Especially since Rachel could not remember meeting any of the overly friendly faces that greeted her every day. Whether it was in the town coffee shop, a wave from the other side of the old worn streets, or every person who pushed past the smudged doors of the gas station she worked at.

She handed change to an old man with a halfhearted smile.

"See you later, Rach!" he said on his way out the door.

No one she cared about called her that.

"How's it going, Rachel?"

Smile.

"The family still doing alright?"

Nod.

"Always such a sweetheart."

Smile.

Finally the darkness set in and the knowing faces left her alone with the dim buzzing lights and stale food. No one except out of towners traveled through town after dark and for good reason. It wasn't a discernable reason, just a good reason. A gut feeling, a feeling that had everyone indoors by 7pm. Parents in other towns told their children to be indoors when the streetlights came on, parents in Brightway didn't have that luxury. Streetlights didn't come on in Brightway. The light poles were there, they littered the highway, backroads, and neighborhoods. But in her 19 years of living in Brightway, Rachel couldn't remember them ever coming on.

Though it was rare, people on road trips would sometimes stop at the gas station at night. Which kept the gas station open into the night and Rachel in a job no one else dared take. Before Rachel's desperation for money had led her to apply, the position had been worked by the owner for the last 10 years.

Leaning across the front counter, she watched the lights change at the intersection in front of the gas station. The only lights in town that worked at night. The same feeling that kept everyone else in town in their homes pulled lightly on her stomach and dried out her throat. Staring at the flickering lights helped to ease the tightening of her heart. The stoplights were old, their oddly shaped bodies hanging from exposed cables. No wind blew, but the misshapen lights still swayed.

One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... Seven... Eight...

Green.

One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... Seven... Eight...

Yellow.

One... Two... Three...

Red.

One... Two.....

No cars passed. None were ever needed. The lights would continue to change with or without travelers.

A man blocked her view of the lights. The door hadn't chimed, but there was a man at the counter. The same man that came in every night. He didn't blink as he waved a hello Rachel assumed he intended to be friendly. His dark hair was wind swept and his boots shed a light layer of dirt, his hands shared the same layer of dirt.

"How did your day go?" he asked putting a soda on the counter, the same soda he always bought.

"Not bad," Rachel found herself staring into the blackness where his eyes were. "Got another invitation to come to church."

"Which one?" he asked as she scanned the soda. There were many churches in town and for good reason.

"The one near the field."

"Which one?" There were also many fields, for other reasons.

"Hell is real." Rachel was of course referring to the large wheat field with the giant sign proclaiming to passersby on the road, "HELL IS REAL!" in cheery red paint.

"Ooh, that's a good one." His eyes lit up with the first emotional Rachel had seen from him. He handed over the dollar bill and nickel, the same amount he handed her every night, his long nails caked with dirt.

"Is that the church you go to?" Everyone went to at least one of them in town.

"The field," he corrected, smiling with too many teeth.

"Oh."

Rachel frowned but he had already turned to leave.

"See you, Rachel." He smiled from the door, his eyes crinkled but never closed. The door chimed this time.

With the first planned interruption of her night out of the way, Rachel went back to stocking the shelves. After opening box after box and breaking down the same amount, the buzzing of the lights above her had turned into a gentle rattling. Laying her hands on the counter, she could feel the counter buzzing as well. Her eyes went immediately to the side windows to watch as the train passed on the tracks behind the gas station.

As the lumbering beast made its way through town, Rachel's mind went to her nightly fantasy of hopping on the train and letting it take her away from this job and town. She could see herself running for it now. She moved, but only to the window. The last cab made its way away from her. It had a torn up seat and a light that lit the small area. She knew it wasn't a practical idea, but the last car always called to her with its well-worn seat no one sat in and its steps coming off the back. The steps beckoned

like a helping hand asking her to hop on. She watched at the window as the light on the back flickered away into the trees. She felt the same drop in her stomach she felt every time she had to watch the train leave her behind. It was ridiculous really, she already had a plan to leave. It involved saving up money working at the station instead of living life on the railroad tracks. After she had enough, she would pack up and hit Highway 55 and take it into the closest city a good 150 miles away. Anywhere was better than the vast fields and empty eyes in Brightway.

She didn't look at the clock, but as the train disappeared it was time to close the station. Locks clicked into place and old water hit older floors. Rachel had given up on trying to actually make the station look decent a few months ago. No matter the effort she put into the floor or walls, the old lights cast a dingy light that made everything look dirty no matter its actual state. The station saved a lot of money on cleaning supplies as a result.

Her ticket out of town had finally arrived in the form of \$5,000 in the bank and a tank full of gas. The sky was slowly turning green and the field across the street waved her goodbye, the corn stalks whipping violently in the wind.

Her ma was not pleased to hear her daughter was leaving.

"Why would you wanna leave Brightway?" Her ma asked watching with fearful eyes as her daughter continued to load boxes.

Rachel didn't respond, they had had this conversation before. The first 20 or so had taken place while Rachel was in high school, then more had followed when she had got the job at the station. She was done talking about it.

"No one leaves Brightway, Rachel," she continued.

"Of course they do, Ma," Rachel finally replied. "Jason from my class left the day after graduation." She sat down a box next to her car as she stared into the Tetris game that was her trunk. "Maybe I should've gone with him."

Her ma's eyes grew dark. "You have to come back to your home," she stated as Rachel found a suitable slot for the box.

"Of course I'll come back to see you," Rachel said misinterpreting her ma's words. "But what if somewhere else becomes my new home?"

"It doesn't work that way," Her ma's eyes left her face to stare at the flailing corn stalks across the road. "This is your home, you can't change that."

Rachel hummed in reply, wanting to deescalate the escalating mood of her ma and the corn. People created new homes all the time. People immigrated to other countries, crossed state lines, and moved out of towns. People moved, but according to Brightway history, Rachel's family didn't. Rachel's family

had populated Brightway since her great-great-grandparents' generation. Apparently ma wanted to keep it that way.

"Will you at least wait to leave in the morning?" She asked her tone slowing slipping out of disapproving and sliding into worry. "I don't like the idea of you driving through the dark most of the way."

The sun perched just above the corn field, fat and sinking fast.

"Ma," she laughed, "do you feel this way every time I go to work? I drive through the dusk and dark all the time."

"Not for this long."

"I know," she sighed. She had waited long enough, had gone through too many lonely nights to wait even one more. She couldn't give what her ma asked. "But, I'll be fine. All the roads run straight through everything until you hit the city." She tried to placate her ma's fears. "I would have to be pretty stupid to mess that up." She laughed.

Her ma didn't.

"I'll call you when I get to the motel." She held open her arms to her ma. "Okay?"

Her ma's mouth twisted into a worried smile, but her eyes crinkled all the same as she wrapped her daughter in her arms. She would've given anything to keep her there, safe in her arms. She wouldn't have to give anything.

"I love you," She said, finally letting Rachel go, in more ways than one.

Pulling the door closed and hearing the loud bang of her car door sent a shiver of anticipation and a smile to Rachel's face. She was finally leaving, finally getting out of nowhere, out of Brightway.

The gravel skidded a little under her tires from the weight of her car loaded with all her possessions.

The wind whipped at her car as she passed row after row of corn and then row after row of wheat. It was getting later in the year so the combines would be making hay bales out of the land soon enough. Rachel was always fond of that time of year. Finally being able to see across the land for part of the year made the vast expanse less eerie. Though the few weeks before the hay bales were moved out, Rachel could always swear she caught things quickly moving to hide behind the large cylinders. Last year the price of hay had gone way down, too low to move the bales quickly after harvest, that had been a bad year.

It hadn't taken long before Rachel was passing the worn sign at the edge of town.

"Leaving Brightway! Come back right *away!*" The leaving town sign happily warned.

Rachel frowned at the pun and focused on the road. She had only been across city lines twice in her life. Which is why a huge map accompanied her in the passenger seat. It may have been just a straight line into the city, but Rachel was more than a little nervous about leaving the only place she really knew.

30 miles in and she had reached her first stop sign. Part of her wanted to just coast through it, but she came to a stop at the 4 way even though there were no cars.

The engine cut off as she came to a stop. Her hand quickly went to the keys, this had happened before. She jiggled the keys in the ignition and put it into neutral. Shifting back into park she tried again, the engine rumbled and then went quiet. Trying her routine again, the only response she received was repeated clicking noises.

“Come on, boy,” She pleaded, “You can do it.” She patted the dash board as she continued to turn the key. The night was closing in on the small car. Her heart picked up at the realization her car wasn’t going to start.

She had a jumper box just for this reason. She knew she needed to leave the car and hook up the cables to her battery. She needed to, but she couldn’t.

When she was working inside the gas station the gut feeling of needing to stay indoors was a small tug. Out in her car, surrounded by field, with nowhere to go, a cramping hit her stomach and a tightness made its way into her heart. She focused on taking long breathes in through her nose and out through her mouth. Spots formed in her vision anyway. The intersection in front of her car got darker, her lights disappeared, and her eyes closed.

“Hey, Rachel,” said the dark man with dirty boots.

She looked up from her magazine. “Hey.”

With the expenses she incurred to fix up her broken down car she was stuck back at the gas station. Hopefully just for another month. It also meant she would be stuck riding her bike to and from work while her car was marooned at the mechanic shop.

The doctor had said the blackout was most likely from a panic attack induced from being out alone in the night, in the middle of the dark.

“Could happen to anyone,” he had reassured her with a kind smile that didn’t fill his eyes.

“Didn’t see you around for a while,” he put the soda on the counter. “Was worried something bad happened.”

“Well uh,” Rachel scanned the soda. “Something kind of did,” she cleared her throat. “Happen, I mean.”

His eyes brows raised above his unblinking eyes.

“My car broke down outside of town and I had a panic attack,” she said her face turning away. “Luckily, someone called a tow truck and got my stupid self back to town.” She laughed off her embarrassment.

The man didn’t laugh.

“Who got you back?”

“Um, you know,” she said her eyes focusing on the dollar and nickel now in her hand, “I didn’t ask.” She frowned. “Just got lucky, I guess.” She dropped the money in the register.

"I guess," he repeated a lightness coming back to his vacant eyes.

"See you around." She followed him to the door.

Only silence followed his departure, just like every other night he came and left.

The shaking had started again. Rachel's hand shook with the glass door. She tried to push it open, but the pull on her stomach to stay inside the station wasn't letting her go.

Her face heated as her heart tightened looking into the parking lot. Taking a few steps back from the door the pain eased. Putting her hands on the counter she didn't let her eyes look outside. She did the breathing exercises the doctor had told her to do.

Sighing she pushed off from the counter, her frustration with herself fueling her. Before her body could keep up with what she was doing she was barreling through the front door. As the door opened the wind slammed it open, she hit the ground hard, but accomplished. Small rocks embedded themselves in her hands as she pushed herself up. Running around the side of the building she gripped the wall to watch the train rumble by. Standing a few feet away from the metal beast was very different from watching from the station or listening from her bedroom.

Rachel saw the nightly train as an escape, a slow and unhurried one. A lumbering cow making its way across a quiet town. That was not at all what greeted her around the corner. It speed by her much smaller form, its wheels spitting sparks at the teen's legs, hissing a warning to stay away. She did. She didn't run for the last car like she had always imagined doing. The reality had set in, the speed of the metal giant had her watching the last cab leaving much quicker than ever before.

The night had settled, she locked the station and got on her bike. Home was only 2 miles away. Turning on the flashlight clipped to her bike she took off. After the many days of traveling through the dark unprotected the anxiety had died down a bit. It only appeared at certain times, one which was fast approaching. Somewhere around the exact middle of the journey passing row after row of corn the feeling would grip her anew.

"HELP!!"

Rachel's bike slid to a stop.

Her heart pounded wildly as she looked out into the not so empty field.

Fields are dangerous in Brightway, especially corn fields. With hundreds of acres and few dirt roads going through them it was extremely easy to get lost, even during the day. Enter a corn field at night and you were gone.

"SOMEONE! GOD, HELP!"

"It's going to be okay!" Rachel called back to the woman.

Getting off her bike she unclipped the flashlight.

"Are you hurt?" she asked as the light hit the wall of corn.

The darkness offered no reply.

She rolled down her sleeves as she approached the wall, thankful she had worn clothes that offered a lot of coverage. Walking through corn stalks is no easy feat. Corn leaves are sharp and stalks can whip into you if you aren't careful. Rachel had gotten corn rash once before from being cut too many times and was not about to repeat the experience.

Taking a deep breath she carefully moved aside a stalk to enter the field. She would go straight forward 10 rows and if she couldn't get to the woman she would turn around and head straight back out.

She didn't make it that far.

Lights flashed around her. "Rachel, what are you doing?!" The young man leaned out the side of the patrol car.

Lowering her flashlight Rachel quickly made her way up to the car. "Hey, cuz," she said in relief. "There's someone out there screaming." She explained pointing back over her shoulder at the field.

"Woman screaming, huh?" His older partner leaned over. "Most likely a cougar, you should head home, we can take you the rest of the way."

"Yeah, why are you out here on a bike anyway?" Her cousin added.

"What? No," she shook her head in confusion. "She was screaming words, I've never heard a cougar speak English," she said getting slightly annoyed by the disbelief coming from the two men.

"Most likely just your imagination, the quiet can get to people, Rachel."

"Yeah – uh no actually, there's a woman out there," She was sure of it. "I think she's being attacked." She shifted her weight from foot to foot and looked back at the field. "She keeps—"

A loud crying sob cut off her words.

Nervousness for her safety lost at the presence of the police, she launched herself into the rows.

"Rachel!"

He was out of the patrol car before his partner could get a word out in warning. He even reached the edge of the field before his partner tackled him to the ground.

"She's gone, Jim, just leave it."

"I can't. She's family," Jim said, struggling with the other man's weight.

"Didn't you say she was trying to leave town anyway?" His partner hissed. "Would've happened sooner or later anyway and you know it." He was right.

Jim breathed in the grass around his face until his heart slowed. He would have to tell Aunt Shirley in the morning.

"You'll have to get used to it. I can't always be saving you from the field. We lose too many every year as is." His partner dusted himself off.

Twenty rows in and she still hadn't been able to locate the woman. Stalks rustled around her.

"Are you alright?" she asked the darkness. It didn't reply.

"Jim, I swear if you're fucking with me..." the stalks had stopped.

A hand grabbed her arm stopping her wandering. She couldn't scream.

"Rachel," The dark man said with a question in the void of his eyes and a tall measuring pole in his hand.

Rachel had always wondered what exactly her nightly visitor had been doing every night, she hoped it was measuring corn samples and not following her around. She ran, towards what she thought the road was. It wasn't. Her careful movements left her as leaves cut along her face and exposed hands.

"Rachel," she could hear her name being called from behind her.

"Rachel," from in front of her. She stopped.

"Do you want to leave this place or not?" Asked her nightly visitor from behind her.

She turned and her eyes answered for her.

"Follow me," he said moving to turn around.

"What about the woman?" Her eyes left his voids to glance around.

"That wasn't a woman." He answered as he walked away. The pounding in her heart and the cramping in her gut made her stop to breathe before she stepped into the next row after him.

After hundreds of rows, the field opened onto a forest. The trees were barren even though winter hadn't set in and most trees were still clothed in their autumn finery. These trees were different. All about the same height at 7 feet. As they approached the barren wall of branches, faces and arms started to appear within the gnarled branches. Slowly fingers, hair, and poorly attached faces formed from the broken and twisted wood figures.

Erected before them were row after row of stick dolls.

"Oh my god." Her eyes flitted from body to body "What is this?"

The man didn't respond and the forest of bodies seemed to squirm, their too thin bodies went on into the darkness beyond her flashlight. A coldness added itself to the pain in her stomach at the sight of the congregation of scarecrow-like bodies assembled at the back of the field.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" he asked with concern in his flat black eyes, "This is Brightway, everyone is here, you are here."

"Of course I'm here, you brought me here," She said her voice getting tight with fear.

"Not your body, your heart." He said arms crossing. "If I'm honest, I was wondering when you would make it here." His dark eyes caressing the morbid scene before them.

Rachel was on the ground at his words, her gut making it hard to stand.

"When you find your heart you can leave," He said staring out at the forest of suspended bodies.

Rachel willed her eyes to look at the figures. "None of these look like me, they don't look like anyone."

"No one looks like what they are," he said gingerly touching the face of a smaller stick body. "I'm not supposed to, but I'll give you a hint." He let go of the thin body to turn his face toward Rachel. "If you don't trust your gut, you will never find it and you will never leave."

Finally leaving the ground, she had a feeling he hadn't just meant not leaving town. She had to do this and do it right.

Rachel took a slow breath. The whole way to the back of the field her gut had been pulling her backwards. She was sure if she followed it to ease the pain she would end up back at the road. Branches creaked and Rachel could hear the rustling of wind like the breathing of a thousand lungs. For all she knew it was.

She took a few steps forward into the forest of bodies and the pain increased slightly. Her heart sped and her hands gripped the flashlight in a vice. Something was following them. A breeze caressed the back of her neck and branches lightly tugged at the fibers of her shirt.

The feeling of being followed was getting to be too much. She stopped next to a tall stick person, its face mangled and looking off to its right. She took a few deep breaths. She refused to look behind her, the fear clenching her stomach wouldn't allow it.

"Is this the one you choose?" the dark man looked up to the strange mangled body of branches and sticks she clung to.

"No," she replied turning to look him in the face, "No, it's not the one I choose." She pointed the light onto the man's chest. His face while illuminated held no answers.

The shaking in her hand was more prominent. Breathing in through her mouth and out through her nose she stared into the man's void like eyes, eyes she looked at almost nightly. He tilted his head, his mouth opened, but before words could be spoken the darkness of his eyes spilled out into the world as Rachel clicked off the flashlight.

Rachel turned quickly to face what everything within her begged her not to. She held in a scream as dry cracked branches grasped her body. Sticks scratched her face, tugged across her clothes, and tangled into her hair. Dropping the plastic tube to the ground she grabbed back at what had been at her back in the forest. As they fell to the ground, the fragile being broke apart in her arms.

A thick cord wrapped its way around her throat. Her breathing quickened, her breathing stopped.

Rachel busied herself with reorganizing the shelves around the front counter of the gas station. The corded necklace around her throat bounced lightly against her skin. The metal at the end warmed her.

She was ready when the gentle rumbling of the building began. Clicking off her name tag, she set it on the counter. Turning around she strolled toward the glass doors, no coldness or tightness hindered her approach. She grabbed the backpack leaning against the wall next to the door and walked out into the night. No goodbyes to her late night home were necessary.

The train hissed by at its usual speed, looking down the track a small light illuminated the end of the train. Rachel ran alongside the beast. Her feet stumbled along the track, but her speed didn't falter. The last car reached out its hand. She took it.