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## Bones

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# Bones

2,072 miles

When I leave White Plains, the humid air is so thick that the sky is blurry. I don't know where I'm going.

1,977

There's an accident in Yonkers. I'm stuck in traffic for an hour.

1,706

It's getting dark. I'm at one of those super rest stops with a McDonald's. I mean, I guess I've traveled through a lot of states, but at the same time all I know of them are places like these. Nobody wants to stop here, after all.

1,499

I got one of those double espressos from Starbucks, and I am practically vibrating. It's almost ten. Seventy miles an hour doesn't feel fast enough. I feel nauseous. I feel dizzy, but not in the usual way, not from the vertigo attacks. I imagine that ghosts are walking in the great blue yonder on the side of the road. He never made it to his brother's. He got as far as Tennessee before the cancer caught up with him and his lungs inflated with fluid.

I wonder if he's with them now.

1,300

Somewhere on the side of the road, I stop for the night. I have never seen night this heavy. I lay on the hood of my car—all the while the engine ping-  
ing as it cools—and look up at the stars. I don't know if I will sleep, but I  
know I will feel more comfortable in the car than in some dive motel.

I have never been so consumed in my life. The sky might just crush me.

987

I stop at some run-down diner for some real food. It's quiet, nothing but a  
few truckers, a family, and me. My waitress is chatty. She asks me where I'm  
from. I'm too tired to explain. I say nowhere in particular.

"Well, ya'll have to be careful out here, all alone. These hitchhikers can be  
crazy. One day, you might just disappear. And the people won't even wonder."

She's right, but the thought terrifies me anyway.

635

I'm getting gas at a Texaco when I see it; a family, in a blue minivan, also  
getting gas. The mom pumps while the dad brings the kids inside for a potty  
break. They emerge with snacks and slushies in hand, all of them holding  
hands in a line. One of the kids is crying, which makes me glad that I can't  
hear. Then something shifts. I can feel their panic simmering through the air.  
The line jerks in my hand—the tank is full. One of the kids is missing.

A teenage boy with red hair like his comes out of the station dragging the  
missing kid by the hand. The parents wring his arm over and over, thanking  
him, you saved my baby, my baby...

My heart stops and I sit on the curb, breathing hard with my head be-  
tween my knees until another car honks for my spot. I'm almost there. I can  
feel it in my spine.

341

I stop on the side of the road to pee and suddenly he's there, almost like he  
was never gone in the first place. *Why are you here?* he seems to say. I wonder  
if I've gone crazy. Too little sleep, too much caffeine, low blood sugar. Some-  
thing. *Of all the ghosts you have, why me, Aaron? Go home. Nobody said you had  
to live for me.*

I'm not sure if I'm really hallucinating, or if I'm just pretending for my  
own sake. It's desert out here, in the deep South; it could be a mirage. I rub  
my eyes. It's not him, it's a hitchhiker, a woman. Her hair is black, not red.

"It's okay. I see them too sometimes," she says to me, and keeps walking.

166

It's very early. I am dirty, greasy. How long has it been at this point? The map says I'm where I should be. All that's out here is sand and the occasional one pump gas station. I'm woozy thinking about it. Even with the AC on full, I'm sweating, almost feverish. In the rearview mirror, I can see him following me. I knew he wouldn't understand. I have to know what is out here that was worth throwing everything away.

120

On the state border to New Mexico I make the mistake of turning on my phone. I told them that I was going, and not to worry, but still my phone explodes with messages, especially from my dad, and from Luke, my best friend. I tell them I'm fine and shut my phone again.

"Stop lying to them," he says.

He startles me so badly that I drop my phone. I'm hard of hearing but I can hear his voice perfectly. I almost forgot.

My phone screen shatters on the hard-packed dust. I think about responding to him, but I don't.

"You went to all this trouble to dig me up again," he says. He leans against the car. "And now you won't even talk to me."

My eyes smart from the dust. I stoop to pick up the phone. The yellow dust is ground into the gaps between cracks. I open the car door.

"All right. Well, I'll see you soon. I love you."

The whole way down my eyes won't stop watering, like a bucket dragged from the well again and again.

52

Without warning my car breaks down. I have been on empty highway for hours. The only thing telling me I've gone anywhere at all is the odometer. I keep turning the key but the engine won't start. The little angry red light flashes at me—oil, oil. I passed a sign a while back telling me that the nearest town was ten miles. My phone is busted, and even if it weren't I doubt there would be reception.

I reach into the back of the car, find the mostly-full gallon jug of water, and start walking.

50

It's so hot. I have no idea what time it is, but it can't be much later than 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. I'm sweating buckets and can feel the sunburn chafing already.

I hate myself. I hate everything. I hate that I let it get this bad, hate that I let him fuck me, hate that I allowed myself to fall in love until I drowned.

48?

I keep drinking water but I still feel woozy. Heat boils off the dirt. I have come all this way without a vertigo attack, but my luck has run out. Even so, this feels bigger than that.

I trip over something in the shoulder of the road and plant face-first in the dirt. One of my hearing aids is knocked loose. Dust swarms in my lungs; my heart rate picks up, just like the car's torque had before the engine seized.

Am I going to die here?

I can't catch my breath. The thing I tripped on rips into my shinbone, and I reach for it. It's some creature's skull, crumbly and flooded with tooth marks. I sob into the dirt. My tongue is streaked with blood; I must have bitten it. I watch red droplets fall and let my head down. I am so tired.

A hand strokes my hair. I know it's him before he speaks. "Oh, Aaron," he says. "Why did you do this to yourself?"

"I can't let you go. I tried. But you won't leave me alone."

"Are you sure about that?"

I can't even look at him. "Louis, I..."

"Please don't follow me anymore, Aaron," he says. "For your sake."

My head is going to explode. I lean into the dirt. The sand floods my mouth and erodes me away.

?

Someone hoists my head up and feels for a pulse at my throat. It's getting dark. They say something, but as usual I can't hear. Sand coats my tongue and makes it hard to breathe, much less speak. All of my bones, every last one, have been wrenched out of place and pain flares through my body. A flashlight clicks on and scorches my eyes. They say something again.

"I can't hear you," I say. "I'm hard of hearing, I can't..."

The light is pulled away from my face and moves to the left so I can see. It's a cop, a trooper in a black and gray uniform.

"What are you doing out here?" the officer asks. "You're lucky I spotted you. Another hour or two and you would have blended into the side of the road."

I force myself to my knees. My vision is swirling, and I can barely read the cop's lips.

"Do you need an ambulance?" she asks me.

“I feel...” I look over my shoulder. He’s gone; the skull I held is gone, too. The gallon jug of water I carried is split on its side mostly empty, evaporated into the ground. “I’m...My car broke, down, and I...I was walking to...”

“I understand,” she says. “I can call triple A for you, okay? We’ll get you help.” She offers me her hand. “What’s your name?”

I am delirious. The sun has bleached away everything. “Louis,” I say. “My name is Louis.”