

Cryptography

By Greyson Sanders

You lean against the car door and scrawl something in a Moleskine notebook. The journal's leather is unwrinkled - excluding a few bursts of crinkles like veins - and the edges of its pages nearly white. In fact, without its gold-trimmed, the scarlet bookmark slipped between the pages on the further end of three-quarters through, the notebook could pass for unused. You trace the saffron initials "FL" bulging from the cover with your finger and glide away with the strokes of your pen as it bleeds ink onto the pages. The ambience of cicadas and sprinklers.

"I'll never get tired of seeing you like that." Kaleb's voice guides you back to reality. He's back from fetching the rest of his painting supplies and making your lunches. "Staring down at your notebook like somehow you could push your brain onto the pages with only your eyes."

"Mm." You smile, slide the pen into your pocket, gently close the notebook after setting the bookmark, and slip it into the messenger bag resting on the ground at your feet.

"Will you ever get tired of me asking why?"

"I haven't yet."

"So then, Mr. Writer," Kaleb sets the lunches and supplies on the hood and steps toward you expectantly, "why do you scribble away in your books? Hm?"

"So I can look back on my journey." You'd lie if honesty with Kaleb weren't so damn easy. Innate even. "To keep a record of The Vault."

He smiles, and you're grateful he's never asked for more, "Where is it we're going again?" he grabs the supplies and lunches from the hood and begins loading the car.

"St. Anthony's Daycare."

"I mean the address."

"136 Coral Ln."

"And the phone number we're supposed to call if we need directions?"

"379 - 2261"

He finishes loading the car and takes a place in front of you, smirking, "And the number of miles to get there?"

"Seventeen." You've caught on and purse your lips slightly.

"And the number of stairs in your childhood home?"

"Total or -"

"Total."

"Twenty-two."

"The number of kids in your high school biology class?"

"Twenty." You keep your mouth small, pushing out every sound.

"It's still incredible." His smirk opens to something more genuine and the glint in his eyes to something less malicious. Like the sun losing its brilliance as it sinks into the horizon.

"Mm." You smile and sit in the passenger seat. You're not supposed to be mad now. Kaleb joins you, starts the engine, puts his hand on your shoulder as he looks

behind him, and pulls out of the driveway, the bits of loose concrete crinkling like paper under the tires.

After a few minutes of silence and intersections, Kaleb turns on the radio and the Top 40's drift through the air. You prop your head against the window to watch him, there, in the driver's seat. He's tapping his finger and right heel to the beat of the music. Occasionally he gets carried away with the music and presses too far on the pedal, causing the car to lurch forward.

"Oops, my bad," he says as he turns to show you his smile somewhere between "We've been here before," and "It'll be okay."

The simple, gold wedding band and its chain he wears around his neck glisten in the light like the dancing sparks of sunlight on water.

"It's closer to our hearts this way," he'd said, when he first brought up the idea.

You caress the protrusion of the ring under your shirt. Another lurch.

"Oops, my bad." As if on cue.

"It's okay." You carry with the momentum and reach for the messenger bag at your feet.

"F-L," he chuckles as you take out the notebook and begin to write. "I still remember that day, ya know?"

"Mm?" You feign ignorance.

"Health class, senior year. You sat two seats behind me, next to Elizabeth Montgomery who – I think we can both agree – turned out to be quite an...unpleasant person." He glances to you for affirmation. You nod. "Anyway, we

were talking about drugs and alcohol and inhibitions and all that. And the teacher asked us why we make poor choices and why guys will drive really fast with a bunch of girls and play their music really loud and” -- he turns down the radio -- “and all that. And the whole class was just quiet. And then you raised your hand, for what I swear was the first time ever and said, ‘Because we don’t have a fully developed frontal lobe.’” Kaleb laughs and beams to you. “Remember?”

“I remember.” You smile, showing a few teeth this time for emphasis.

“You know, I think that’s the day I fell in love with you.”

“Hm?” You cock your head a little.

“I know, I know. High school love doesn’t have much merit these days, but... I mean high school is a rough time for everyone. Everyone’s scrambling to fit in or find themselves. But you. You were so... So self aware.”

Another peek at you that lingers just longer than enough to be sincere.

How’d you get so lucky?

“You know, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Mm?” You’ve had this conversation before.

“F-L.” He looks to you, “You’re name doesn’t start with ‘F.’ There’s not even an ‘F’ in it.” His words loiter into a silence you’re meant to fill. But you don’t. “Alright then.” He breaks the quiet before it can fester.

Shadows of the world passing by flick across the pages of the notebook like wraiths you only catch in the corner of your eye. “It makes sense to me.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t need to pry, “We’ll be there soon.”

“I kn –“

“I know, you know.” He smiles and puts his hand on your knee, giving a slight squeeze and rubbing it gently with his thumb. “Excited?”

“I’m not really one for painting.” You return the notebook to the messenger bag.

“I know, but you still came.”

“Yes, but –“

“Stop.” He flicks a look to you. “You came, and that matters. And who knows,” he takes his hand off your knee to turn, “maybe – “

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“Don’t start this again. We’re not ready –“

“Start what again? I was just gonna say –“

“ - and fixing up a daycare won’t change anything.”

“That’s not what I was gonna say, I just -”

“No, Kaleb!” You blast silence into the car. Kaleb’s fingers grip the steering wheel like tiny constrictors. A few moments of soft engine rumble and stifled music before he pulls down the sun visor and turns up the radio louder than it started. You reach for the journal but halt and look to Kaleb. He is stiff, tensing every muscle. In the shade, his skin is muted white and his contours sharp, a statue of paper. The necklace and ring have tarnished to tombstone grey, and you feel - for what you swear is the first time - the chill of the ring under your shirt.

You place your hand on his knee, which remains rooted to the floor, and squeeze before caressing with your finger. You watch as a tear pushes itself out of

his eye like lead from a pencil and crawls down his face, leaving a slug-trail of salt.

It trickles down to his jaw and hangs, as if asking permission to plunge. Kaleb inhales with a tremble and the tear falls, splattering on your hand like the first raindrop before a storm, when the skies are clear and the air is still.