

Rain Again
By Amy Tate

PART ONE: THE DRIVE
DWIGHT, ILLINOIS: DAY 28

“Ana? Hey, Ana? WAKE UP!”

Her eyes still closed, Ana slowly sat up.

“Hunh, whaaaa? Hmmm?, ” Ana said, opening her eyes.

“We’re low on gas, “ said Agatha, “and it’s your turn.”

“Ohh...OK...(yawn) where are we?”

Agatha didn’t respond as she focused on the busy intersection up ahead. Ana looked around to find out for herself.

“Oh, okay, it’s Dwight! Are we stopping at-”

“Yes.” Agatha finished Ana’s sentence. “It’s the only place that ever has gas. We need gas. So yeah, we’re stopping there.”

Ana rolled her eyes at Agatha.

“Okay, okay, I get it. Daang.”

Fully awake, Ana stretched her arms. Not wanting to antagonize Agatha any further, she focused on what was outside the car.

“Still raining,” said Ana.

Agatha said nothing.

“At least there’s no fog today, “ said Ana, “that’s good.”

“Yeah” replied Agatha, “I guess? OK, so remember, this one doesn’t have a bathroom, so we’ll need to stop at the Pilot on the way out of town unless you want to pee in the rain again.”

“We could go to the other one. I bet they have a bathroom.”

“We’re already here, and the Pilot is closer.”

Ana sighed deeply.

“I suppose,” said Ana. “I wish the Pilot had gas. It’d make all of this easier.”

“Sure, but it doesn’t. A lot of things are weird right now. Yet somehow life goes on.”

“I guess, if you call this life. Still wonder why--”

“Ana, fuck, if I knew the answer to that, we wouldn’t be stuck on this road trip.”

Ana frowned and thought of saying something but decided not to risk it. Agatha drove the car across the railroad tracks, into the gas station lot, and stopped next to an empty pump.

“OK, time to fill ‘er up. Do you want anything from the store?”

“Sure...”, said Agatha, thinking for a few seconds. “How about...Sour Cream

and Onion chips and Diet Coke?”

“Got it!”

Ana got out of the car, stretched her legs, and walked around to gas it up. Looking at the other pumps, she noticed there was only one other car, and they weren't paying any attention to her or Agatha. She was glad they weren't staring. They weren't always so lucky.

Ana stared at the nearby railroad tracks as she waited for the pump to finish its job. Frequently when traveling along I-55 or on old Route 66, she'd see an Amtrak train. That confused her so much. What happened to the train passengers after they fell asleep? Did they restart in another place in Illinois as well? Or were they on an entirely different type of journey?

The pump abruptly shut off and brought Ana back from her thoughts. The gas tank was now full, so she finished up and walked into the convenience store. A few minutes later, she headed back to the car and opened the passenger door.

“THINK FAST!” she said, throwing the bag of snacks at Agatha.

“Hey, shit!” said Agatha, barely catching the bag. “Oh, nice, pickle chips! I've not gotten sick of those yet.”

“I know, right?” said Ana. “I guess it's been a few days since we had them.”

“Yes, it has, like three, I believe. So, do you need to stop at the Pilot?”

“Ehh, noooo? I think. Look, I know I made a whole deal of it, but I'm good for another couple hours. Assuming we stop in Springfield or around there, it'll be time to stop for the night.”

“Agreed,” replied Agatha, much more concerned with the traffic on the road.

They sat at the entrance of the gas station, waiting to get back on the highway. Backed up by the passing train, several trucks were just now heading south, so it was going to be a wait.

For the time being, the radio was off, so all they heard was the hum of the engine, the rumble of the passing trucks, and the windshield wipers, well, wiping.

“So, I know you don’t have an answer for this, but why the fuck do we have to travel every day?” Agatha asked. “Can’t we just pick a spot and hang out?”

“We tried that,” said Ana. “It didn’t work.”

“Yeah, OK, the nearly empty hotel couldn’t book us for another night, right. But what if we just went to a movie theater and hung out?”

“They’re closed, remember?”

“OK, bad example. But what about a state park?”

“Oh-hoh, look at who wants to spend time out in the rain hiking now?”

“Ugh, OK, yeah, you got me. At least it's warm and dry in our car.” Agatha sighed.

“Forget it.”

Ana shrugged her shoulders and looked at the trucks driving south.

Finally, the traffic thinned out, and Agatha headed north towards the interstate. She got the green light at the Pilot's intersection, so she stayed ahead of yet another set of trucks. She merged onto the interstate and headed southwest towards Springfield.

Or at least it's supposed to be Springfield. It's in the same place as Springfield, and looks like Springfield, at least from the interstate. Exit the interstate and drive through town at noon, and all of the buildings would be there. But once you stopped at an exit for the night, it was different.

There would be a gas station, the same three fast-food drive-throughs, and a standard mid-range hotel with a name like Roadside Inn or Infinilodge. No matter the part of the state, the day of the year, or if the town had those businesses, if it was time to stop, that's where they stopped.

The small towns along I-55 seemed to blend as they drove past. Oddington? Chedell? Lenowanda? Only Pontiac stuck out in either of their minds enough to be remembered at all. It wasn't that they disliked the small towns. They were just ready to crash that it was hard to pay attention to them. About an hour or so later, they came across Bloomington-Normal, the first "major" city along this leg of their trip. Since it was the second time they had passed through the area, and she was in no mood for a diversion, Agatha stayed on the interstate to bypass the twin cities. Soon they had sent I-74 on its way to the east and were again heading towards the southwest.

During this part of the drive, Ana and Agatha didn't say a word to each other. It wasn't an awkward silence, but it wasn't the comfortable silence of two close friends content with each other's company either. On the radio was a pop station out of Peoria.

Ana drew a deep breath and looked out of the window. She rarely checked her phone for anything new at this point. Twitter had the same five arguments over and over, and Facebook was your terrible uncle's chain mail mixed in with baby pictures. She'd read a

couple of e-books, but most of the time, she talked to Agatha or watched the scenery fly by. Sometimes it was something new and exciting! Usually, it wasn't.

Whenever Ana saw another car, she assumed they were real people. Or rather, they seemed real enough to her, at least. Were they stuck in this loop like them? Or were they just passing through, as if things were happening as expected?

Were they stuck like her and Agatha? She doubted she'd ever know for sure. They all seemed to take it very well. Or at least seemed to be. Maybe they were just good at hiding their feelings about the weirdness of it all.

Now onto this train of thought, she went over her favorite theories for the cause of the perpetual road trip. Maybe they were both dead? And if so, what form of the afterlife were they stuck in? It was too dreary to be a heaven but too comfortable to be a hell. But some kind of limbo? Possibly.

There was evidence to support this, after all. Most convincingly was the lack of basic economics. Agatha and Ana didn't work and never deposited money into their bank accounts or paid any bills besides those incurred during their travels. Despite this, they always had more than enough money for everything. Also, they hadn't had to do anything to maintain the car except keep the gas tank filled, and there never was any appreciable wear and tear on it.

And then there was the weather. It had rained or snowed non-stop for a little over a year, yet the rain had barely swollen the rivers, ditches, and ponds. The ground was soaked but not "hundreds of inches of rain over a year" soaked. Perhaps whatever was going on wasn't supernatural, but it felt that way.

And what was the evidence against the afterlife? Well, Ana didn't feel dead, and as far as she knew, neither did Agatha. Maybe that was enough.

Ana rolled her eyes, annoyed by going down this road again. Unless knowing the cause of what was happening would help end it, it didn't matter.

[BUMP-bump]

Agatha driving over the rough bump brought Ana out of her deep thought.

"Holy shit, " said Ana, "we're already south of Lincoln?"

"Yeahhhh," said Agatha. "Does it matter? We went through there two weeks ago. It's not that interesting of a place."

"Oh no, just surprised at how far we made it while I was zoned out. Let's cut over and go through Mount Pulaski this time?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I think it's kinda neat! There's a hill in the middle of town! In Central Illinois!"

Agatha just stared at Ana, looked back at the road for a bit, and looked back at Ana.

"Agatha, it's OK to blink, y'know."

"You're fucking amazing, " said Agatha, "you know that? Four weeks into this nearly endless drive through Illinois, one of the flattest, most boring looking states in the United States, and you want to see things you've already seen!"

Agatha was not from Illinois. Originally from Rhode Island, she was visiting Ana when they both got stuck on this seemingly unending road trip. She drove past the exit without even slowing down.

“Well, maybe we can go through Mount Pulaski next time, “ said Ana. “And screw you, it’s not like Rhode Island is exactly overflowing with mountains.”

“Y’know what?” said Agatha. “I don’t fucking care. We have hills, certainly more than this place. God, this place is so flat. Just millions of acres of mud covered in corn”

“Fuck, Agatha, Illinois isn’t just a flat mud-covered cornfield! We have hills too. Remember Garden of the Gods? Yeah, we made a special stop in the rain to check that out. Remember how you almost fell on your ass on the trail? Because I sure do.”

“Yes, I remember Garden of the Gods. You wouldn’t shut up about Garden of the Gods. And it was nice. But I didn’t fall down. Not even close.”

“OK, sure. And what about up near Galena? And...ummm...river bluffs? Some moraine ridges? Ooh, we’ve got some big landfills and slag heaps, do those count?”

“Hahaha, whatever. Face it, Ana, your state is flat. Flatter than Kansas, flatter than Minnesota, flatter than...”

“Not Delaware and Florida, ” Ana said, interrupting Agatha.

“OK, I’ll give you Florida, “ said Agatha. That’s a flat fucking place. As for Delaware, I can’t say. I’ve never felt an urge to explore Delaware. I mean, it’s bad enough having to pay all of those tolls to them just to sit in traffic on I-95. Why would I want to spend any more time there?”

“Trust me, “ replied Ana, “it’s flat. I went there once, on a trip. Kind of looks like Illinois, at least if Illinois had more of the eastern deciduous trees and less of the Oak-Hickory woods.”

“OK, are you a naturalist now?”

Ana chuckled, smiled, and nodded her head up and down.

“Want to watch something tonight, Agatha?”

“Honestly, Ana, I’m ready to check-in, eat, and go to sleep. It’s been an annoying day, and I want it to end.”

“I get it. I wish there were something I could do to fix it.”

“Well, you can’t get me off this fucking road and out of this fucking state, so I don’t think so. But I appreciate it.”

With that, the tension that had slowly dissipated all afternoon had reappeared again. Agatha was not happy about whatever was happening, and she blamed Ana. She kept it hidden as best as she could, knowing how unfair it was to blame Ana. But it came out from time to time all the same.

They’d been online friends for a while before Agatha decided to travel to Illinois to go on what was supposed to be a two-week road trip with Ana. Even with today’s irritation, they were growing closer as friends through it all.

“I’ll tell you what, Agatha.”

Agatha sighed but decided to play along.

“OK, I shouldn’t encourage this bullshit, but what, Ana?”

Ana sat straight up in her seat and looked off into the distance. She took a deep breath and rested her chin on her left hand.

"I'm getting awful tired of this rain. How about you?"

Agatha laughed derisively.

"That wasn't funny two weeks ago, and it isn't any funnier now."

"But it's not less funny than two weeks ago, right?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Seriously though, fuck this rain. I'm so tired of it. I can't believe there isn't any serious flooding. Except for that viaduct in...where was it...Vista Grove?"

"Really, the Villa Grove viaduct? That's a deep cut, even for me. Of course, it helps when you have first-hand knowledge as we do."

"Yeah, glad I saw those detour signs. Wouldn't have wanted to get stuck in that mess. To think I would have missed out on the rest of scenic Douglas County.."

"Aww, sarcasm doesn't help, you know."

"Well, " said Agatha, "I didn't mean it to help, you know."

"Oh, I know," said Ana. "I know quite a lot."

"Are you going somewhere with this?"

"Umm..."

"Did you back yourself into a corner?"

"Yeah, okay, so I backed myself into a corner. What else is new?"

“Not the weather, that’s for sure.”

Ana snorted and rolled her eyes. She saw the highway sign for Old Highway 66 and Sherman up ahead.

“At least we’re almost there,” Ana said.

“Yeah, “ said Agatha, “this went pretty fast today. Sure...umm...what exit?”

“Let’s go to the Adlai Stevenson Drive exit, a couple-few exits south.”

“OK, sounds good.”

After crossing the swollen but not flooded Sangamon River in heavy traffic due to perpetual construction, they reached their exit on the southeast side of Springfield. They immediately saw the familiar red and yellow general store on the gas station sign, the same three fast-food drive-throughs, and the usual mid-range hotel.

“Well, “ said Ana, “we’ve had worse options.”

“Have we now? Whatever, I guess it’ll do.”

Within minutes they were checked in, unpacked, and eating their dinner. Whatever was on the TV that night didn’t matter; they weren’t paying attention. By 9:00, they were both in bed, heading off towards sleep.

“Good night, Agatha. Maybe tomorrow it won’t be raining.”

“Good night, Ana. Don’t count on it.”

PART TWO: THE FIGHT

SOMEWHERE IN FORGOTTONIA, ILLINOIS: DAY 370

Ana and Agatha left Marion late in the morning and drove north. It was Ana's turn to drive. Now late afternoon, they were just south of Monmouth. It had been almost five hours on the road, and Ana and Agatha hadn't said more than a dozen words. Silent trips were a common occurrence a year into the two-week trip.

Though the silence suited Agatha just fine, Ana was restless. They were almost to their destination for the night, but she felt the need to kill some time.

“Okay, so ice skating is not a sport,” said Ana.

It took Agatha a second or two to react. Then, processing what Ana said, she turned her eyes towards her.

“First, what the fuck, Ana?” said Agatha. “Second, figure skating is a sport.”

Ana smiled. She finished passing a semi, took a deep breath and continued.

“Y'know how I am sometimes. Just north of Macomb, I started thinking on it, and I concluded it's not a sport.”

“Figure skating is in the Olympics! It's a sport.”

Ana rolled her eyes at Agatha but kept smiling. Agatha was neither smiling nor visibly angry. They passed a farm lot with an old barn and a large shed for storing implements.

“I know it’s in the winter games!” said Ana, her eyes still on the road. “It’s totally a form of competition, and sure, athletic ability is absolutely required to be great. It’s just...,” Ana paused as if she was collecting her thoughts, “...to be a sport, it's gotta have a measurable score and not be a judgment call.”

Agatha rolled her eyes and stared at Ana with her mouth open, unsure of what to say. Ana blinked, looked at the road, occasionally checked her mirrors, and never looked at Agatha.

“You’re fucking around, right?” said Agatha. “I’ve never heard that the use of human judgment makes it not a sport. Does that mean diving and gymnastics aren’t sports either?”

“I don’t know,” said Ana. “I’m not talking about gymnastics and diving. I’m talking about figure skating. Not sure why you’re taking this so seriously, Agatha.”

“Ana, I am not in the mood for your bullshit,” said Agatha.

For the next minute, the car was silent. Ana focused on her driving. Agatha switched between looking at Ana and looking out at the countryside.

“OK, what the fuck,” said Agatha. “You’ve opened this box, so we should go ahead and empty it. Continue with your argument.”

Ana paused for a few seconds. They passed a junction with a country road.

“So, uh...it’s umm... everything to do with how we assign subjective scores to performances or actions, and that’s where it becomes a problem calling those activities sports. Look at baseball, football, basketball and so on. They all have specific scoring rules.”

Agatha glared at Ana.

“OK. What about boxing, Ana? Judges assign arbitrary scores for matches. Does that matter in your little criteria box?”

“What’s a criteria box?” said Ana. She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Nevermind. It’s true, boxing judges, especially the corrupt ones, can be arbitrary. But c’mon, boxing is so clearly a sport. The contestants are fighting each other. It’s the basic essence of sport.”

Agatha was smirking now. She wasn’t fake angry now; she was actually angry.

“Oh, I see,” said Agatha. “You’re moving the goalposts.”

“I’m not moving the goalposts. I’m just stating a fact.”

Ana looked back at the road and checked her mirrors. Neither of them was in a hurry to speak. The light mood of a few minutes earlier gave way to something tenser. It was officially an argument.

“OK, fine. How about golf? Or shot put? Discus? Those aren’t direct competitions against other people. Are they sports?”

Still looking at the road, Ana nodded her head.

“Of course they are. Golf has very rigid scoring rules. Shot put and discus do as well, with scores based upon measurements and rules on boundaries. Figure skating doesn’t. If the Russian judge hates your guts, she can wreck your score.”

Agatha sighed deeply. They passed a large farm along the highway.

“Well,” said Agatha, “I don’t know for sure, and I don’t feel like looking it up, but I’m pretty certain figure skating has scoring rules based on the routines and technical aspects and level of difficulty. So instead, I’ll ask you this. What about instant replay?”

Ana looked at Agatha like she had dumped an entire bottle of mustard on her head. She was starting to get angry.

“You say that as if ‘instant replay’ just, y’know, wins the argument. Who gives a fuck about instant replay?”

Agatha adjusted herself in the seat. She was getting angry.

“Well,” said Agatha, “it gives the ref the ability to determine whether or not events in a game happened. What if he has it in for the other team? What if he’s on the take and is throwing it because he borrowed money from the wrong guys? What about referees playing favorites? Remember Chris Carter and Michael Jordan?”

Ana snorted. They passed a car turning off the highway down a country road.

“Yes,” said Ana, “I remember two of the best athletes of the 90s. I know they worked the refs. That’s different. By the way, it’s easier to be subjective without instant replay. Either way, the scoring rules are set in stone.”

“OK, I fucked up my argument about instant replay,” said Agatha, “I’ll give you that. But figure skating rules are set in stone as well.”

Ana leaned forward to stretch her back and then sat upright in the chair, never once taking her eyes off the road.

“Yeah,” said Ana, “but the scoring is subjective! It can’t be a sport without athleticism, and either objective scoring or direct competition between the athletes.”

Agatha just sat and stared at Ana for about fifteen seconds. Ana did everything in her power to look like she wasn't angry. It wasn't working.

"OK," said Agatha, "I think you are making the rules up as to what is and is not a sport to suit your argument. It is classic Ana bullshit. I swear to god, If this is a bit, it is not funny."

Ana laughed derisively.

"It's not a fucking bit. I'm dead serious."

She adjusted herself in the seat again, trying and failing to get comfortable. The tension between the two was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The argument was close to being a fight.

"OK, Ana, seriously. You cannot be so committed to your argument, can you?"

Ana looked away from Agatha. She was very agitated at this point. When she looked back, there were tears in her eyes.

"OK, Ahh-gatha," said Ana, in a voice mocking Agatha, "I wish you'd fucking support me sometimes."

Agatha was rendered speechless for a few seconds.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?" yelled Agatha. "YOU WANTED AN ARGUMENT! I'M GIVING YOU A FUCKING ARGUMENT! Am I just your yes woman, here to rubber-stamp every foolish thing you say?"

Ana's face was getting red, and the tears in her eyes were now running down her cheeks. Though otherwise, she looked calm and composed, it was clear she was barely keeping it together.

"No, it's just...no one ever supports me," said Ana. "They always assume I'm just doing a bit or think I haven't thought about it and am just spouting random stuff for attention. Nobody ever takes me seriously."

Agatha looked at Ana with a look of concern. She looked at the console in the dash for a short while and then looked back at Ana.

"That's not true at all, and you know it. You're doing this whole routine just to win this fucking argument. You're better than this!"

Ana shrugged, trying unsuccessfully to hold back her sobs.

"Am I? Are you? You...look down at the Midwest and any of us from this part of the country. There, I said it. You look down on me because I'm not some high and mighty Rhode Islander. Okay, sometimes you humor me like you would an odd bumpkin who showed up in town one day with wild stories about hamburger horseshoes. But I'll always be 'Ana the Sucker' to you."

Agatha gave Ana a puzzled look. Tears were in her eyes as well. Ana took a drink from her water bottle sitting in the console, her eyes never leaving the road.

"No, you won't. I have never called you 'Ana the Sucker', not once. I would never make fun of where you are from, not like that."

"You've certainly thought that. After all, you called my home flat and full of corn."

Agatha grabbed the sides of her head in frustration.

“YOU SAY THAT!!! LIKE MULTIPLE TIMES A DAY!!!”

“But I’m from here, so I get to make fun of it. You don’t.”

The windshield wipers whooshed on.

“Also,” said Agatha, “Illinois is flat and full of corn! At least that part of the state we were driving through the day I said that. You laughed at my comment! I wasn’t insulting your home. And besides, it’s not like you don’t make fun of Rhode Island. You belittle it all the time.”

“I don’t belittle Rhode Island. It’s already little enough.”

Agatha flopped back in her seat. The argument was officially a fight.

“OK, WHAT THE FUCK, ANA? YOU’RE SUCH A FUCKING HYPOCRITE!!! GOOD GO--OK, I admit I set myself up for that. We should calm down.”

A notification dinged on Agatha’s phone. She knew better than it right now.

“I’m perfectly calm, Agatha. You’re the one who just yelled. You’re always so angry. And rude. So fucking rude. Remember how you yelled at that McDonald’s cashier the week before last?”

Agatha banged her left hand on the dashboard.

“What the fuck are you talking about? I told him we had the wrong bag of food! I did not yell at him. I didn’t even raise my voice.”

Ana angrily turned down the heat as the argument was making her warm.

“You were abrupt and rude to him. You can still be an asshole even when you don’t raise your voice.”

Agatha took a deep breath, trying to regain her composure. Ana looked at the road for a few seconds and checked her mirrors.

“I was direct,” said Agatha. “Yes, sure, I did not couch it in the pleasant smarminess of a midwesterner. Besides, I have seen you get angry before as well.”

The road was becoming a limited-access highway, a sign they were getting close to Monmouth.

“Yes, okay,” said Ana, “I was yelling in the car about the drive-through taking so long. I didn’t say it to the cashier.”

Agatha looked out the window to see if a sign told them how far they were from the turnoff to Rock Island.

“Because you are too much of a coward,” said Agatha. “Remember how you ate that sandwich last Sunday, even though it was wrong? You didn’t even like it that much! I mean, good lo--OK, you’ll want to turn left at the second intersection.”

Ana didn’t acknowledge Agatha’s direction.

“FUCK YOU,” yelled Ana, “I’M NOT A COWARD!!! I believe in a little thing called manners.”

The light at the first intersection was turning red. Ana slowed down to a stop, somehow still paying attention to the road despite being in the middle of a fight. Agatha narrowed her eyes at Ana.

“OH LOVELY!” yelled Agatha, “THERE YOU GO AGAIN WITH THAT WHOLE STOIC MIDWESTERN MISS MANNERS SHIT!!! Yep, you midwesterners are going to show us 'elite easterners' a thing or two about being determined and polite, gosh darn it. Like you aren't a person unless you've looked up at the stars on a winter night in the middle of a fucking field outside of fucking Bement.”

The light turned green, yet the car didn't move. Ana wasn't paying attention.

“I NEVER DID THAT, NOT ONCE!!!” yelled Ana. “HOW DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHERE BEMENT IS? YOU'RE FROM RHODE ISLAND!!! FUCKING BEMENT?”

Agatha held her hands up in frustration at her companion.

“I'VE DRIVEN THROUGH FUCKING BEMENT FIVE TIMES!!!”

The light was red again. Ana turned the heat off, and they both sat in silence for a few seconds.

“Oh...oh yeah, right.”

“That is about four more times than I would volunteer to go through there if things weren't so fucked up!” said Agatha.

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU HAVE AGAINST BEMENT?” asked Ana.

The light was green. This time Ana decided to go forward.

“OH, FOR FUCKS SAKE, ANA!!! I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT BEMENT!!! YOU'RE THE ONE WHO CARES EVEN A LITTLE FUCKING BIT ABOUT BEMENT!!! WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS!!!”

Tears were streaming down Ana's beet-red face.

"BECAUSE I LOVE THIS STATE, MY STATE, MY ILLINOIS!!! EVEN AFTER THIS TERRIBLE FUCKING YEAR, I BLEED ILLINOIS COLORS!!!"

Agatha rolled her eyes and gave Ana a look to stop a charging rhinoceros.

"JESUS, ANA, WHAT THE FUCK DOES THAT MEAN?"

Ana's face was beet red and covered with tears as she drove around a curve. Up ahead, the light at the second intersection was turning red. A bus in the right lane put on its brakes, slowing down to stop.

"FUCK IF I KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS!!!" yelled Ana. "WORDS DON'T ALWAYS HAVE TO MEAN THINGS!!! BUT IF YOU INSIST, IT MEANS I LOVE ILLINOIS!!! WHY AM I LIKE THIS? WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS? WHY THE FUCK AM I STUCK IN THIS FUCKING CAR WITH YOU!!! I'M SO TIRED OF LOOKING AT YOUR FACE!!!"

Ana and Agatha were fast approaching the intersection where they were supposed to turn left. They were still in the far right lane and showed no sign of getting over.

"I HATE THAT I DECIDED TO COME ON THIS STUPID FUCKING ROAD TRIP WITH YOU," yelled Agatha. "EVERY NEW DAY IS THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE!!! I HATE THIS STATE, I HATE THIS CAR, AND I THINK I MIGHT HATE YOU!!! IF BY SOME MIRACLE WE GET OUT OF THIS HELL, I NEVER WANT TO FUCKING SEE YOU AGAIN!!!"

Ana and Agatha's car barreling towards the intersection. Neither was paying attention to the road. Ahead, the bus stopped and waited for the red light.

“GOOD!!!” yelled Ana. “YOU’RE A TERRIBLE FRIEND, AND I KNOW I FUCKING HATE YOU!!! IF WE’RE NOT ALREADY DEAD AND THIS ISN’T OUR ETERNITY, YOU’LL DIE ALONE AND DESERVE IT!!!”

Both Ana and Agatha looked ahead but didn't process what was happening on the road. Ana had yet to slow the car down, let alone stop it. The school bus continued sitting at the red light.

“JESUS CHRIST, THAT’S A HORRIBLE FUCKING THING TO SAY!!! WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU SAY THAT!!! WHY DO I EVEN--Ana, the school bus.”

Ana slammed on the brakes instantly before fully processing what Agatha had said. The car stopped a foot or so behind the bus' bumper. Neither of them spoke as they waited for the light to turn green. As soon as she could, Ana found a bank parking lot, pulled into a parking space, and shut the car off.

The only sound heard inside the car for several minutes was the rain hitting the windshield.

“If you don’t mind,” said Ana, “would you drive the rest of the way?”

“Of course, Ana,” said Agatha.

Once they switched places, Agatha started the car again and headed back onto the highway north to Rock Island.

“I think I’m going to take a nap,” said Ana. “Do you mind keeping the radio off?”

“Not at all,” said Agatha

Neither of them said a word the entire way to Rock Island.

PART THREE: BY THE RIVERS GENTLY FLOWING: Part 3**ROADSIDE INN & SUITES - CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS: DAY 384**

They started from Freeport and followed the highways east and south into East-Central Illinois. Since the big fight outside Monmouth, Ana and Agatha didn't talk much, and today was no different. The stop that night was Champaign, and like always, the exit had the same businesses. Picking the one with the best milkshakes, they ate quietly in front of the TV. They were not in the mood to watch anything specific, so they left it on *The Shawshank Redemption* with muted sound.

“Okay, so I’ve had some time to think,” said Ana, breaking the silence, “and I’m ready to talk about the fight. I mean, if you are, Agatha.”

Agatha looked at Ana and thought about her question for a moment while taking a bite of her cheeseburger.

“Yeah, OK, sure,” said Agatha. “It is time we talked about that.”

“Great,” said Ana. She crumpled her sandwich wrapper and tossed it in the garbage.

“First off, why did you mean by ‘why are you like this?’”

“What do you mean?” said Agatha. “I’m confused.”

“Why am I like this? What does that mean?”

Agatha didn’t say anything for many seconds. Instead, she drank from her milkshake and ate an onion ring. Her eyes were focused anywhere but at Ana. After a few more seconds of silence, she sighed deeply.

“OK,” said Agatha, “why do you fight me over the stupidest things? I mean, you get so angry sometimes. And over the most pointless things.”

Ana's body language changed to be more defensive at Agatha's question.

"What?" said Ana, "Because I'm a trans woman, I can't get angry anymore? Is that what you are saying?"

Agatha rolled her eyes.

"No," replied Agatha, "that's not what I'm fucking saying. I'm a trans woman, too, shit. Listen to me, and you'll get that."

Ana cracked her knuckles and looked towards the window.

"Then what are you saying?" said Ana.

"What I'm saying," said Agatha, "is that it is OK to be angry. In fact, I think you *should* be angry, at least to a certain extent. We are in a terrible situation with no end in sight, stuck in the small world of our car and our hotel room, and never have a respite from the rain. It is a custom-made situation designed to make us lose our tempers."

"Yeah, okay, sure. There's a but coming, right?"

"Umm, no? Maybe? Yes? Look, Ana, you're a good friend, and I love you, but learn to pick your battles better! Your stubbornness gets old very fast. And even when we agree, you continue arguing, as if you can't stop until either you win, or everybody's deeply unhappy."

Ana took a sip from her milkshake. She held the straw for a second or two, thinking about what Agatha had said and how to reply.

"I...you...you're right."

Agatha looked at Ana and smiled.

“Shit, Ana,” said Agatha, “to be fair, it’s not like you are the only one who blew up over nothing. I was loud about it all as well. You and I had a big meltdown over what? Some pointless thing? To be honest, I don’t give a fuck about whether or not figure skating is a sport, not enough to end a friendship over it. Do you?”

Ana took a few seconds to consider the question.

“I mean, it’s not a sport, ” said Ana.

Agatha’s face became stern at Ana’s comment.

“So help me fucking god, Ana...”

Ana nodded her head and smiled. Then she stopped smiling and sighed.

“Okay, yeah,” said Ana, “I don’t really care that much. I think...I’m just tired, that’s all. I’m just tired of being stuck on these same fucking highways. Watching TV and eating and sleeping in the same fucking room night in and night out. Having nobody to talk to but you. And the rain, just so much rain. It’s really hard, Agatha, and I’m so tired.”

Ana had tears in her eyes as she looked at Agatha.

“I know you are,” said Agatha. “So am I.”

Ana nodded weakly. She didn’t talk for twenty seconds.

“I’m sorry, Agatha,” said Ana, “I know it’s been really hard on you and that I’m not the only one who has had a difficult time with all of this. And I’m blessed in so many ways. But even so, and though I know it could be so much worse for us, it’s still really fucking bad. And I’m just so tired. So, so tired of it all.”

Rain pattered against the room’s window.

“Me too.”

They sat in silence for over a minute.

“I just want to go home someday, said Ana. “Not to the hotel, and not to my parents' house for an occasional night, but home. Wherever that may be at this point.”

Agatha nodded. An ambulance zoomed by out on the highway next to the hotel, the sirens and lights all on.

“It’s just a lot,” said Ana. “We aren’t meant to live like this. We’re not supposed to spend so much time just.. cut off from other people. I want to sit in a restaurant and eat. I want to watch a movie in a theater. It doesn’t even have to be a good movie. Any piece of shit would work! I want to sit in a dark room, eat greasy popcorn, and escape the world for a while.”

Agatha smiled and nodded.

“Yeah, me too,” said Agatha. “It would be nice to leave this fucking state and get back to my neighborhood. And I don’t even like my neighborhood that much.”

“No argument from me,” said Ana. “I wish you could get back home, Agatha.”

“Yeah...yeah.”

They sat in silence for another couple of minutes.

“You know what feels the worst to me?” said Ana. “It’s just like those awful fucking days before I came out. I mean, you know what I’m talking about. The isolation, the fear, the constant blah feeling of being detached from myself and the world around me. I thought I put that behind me, but I guess not.

And now here this shit is, and I’m getting older, but I’m still stuck in neutral. And of course, it’d have to happen here, where I’ve driven so many of these roads before. It’s like we’re chasing the ghost of the person I tried to be. And I’m so sick of it.”

Ana broke down and started crying in painful sounding sobs that often sounded like she couldn't breathe. Agatha got up from the bed, went over to Ana, took her hand, and rubbed it.

"OK, Ana, breathe. You're here in the hotel with me, and you are safe. Stay with me here. It's OK. You're going to be OK. I'm right here."

Soon Ana's breathing returned to normal, even though she was still crying. Ana smiled weakly and started wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Are you OK?" said Agatha.

Ana laughed faintly.

"Umm, no," said Ana. "Not at all."

Agatha wiped the tears from her face and smiled at Ana. She went back over and sat down on her bed.

"Was that a ridiculous question?"

Ana laughed again, this time stronger.

"Yeah, kinda. But I'm done crying, at least for now. Thank you, Agatha."

"Oh, Ana, of course!" said Agatha. "You'd do the same for me. In fact, you did the same for me. Remember a couple of weeks ago down near St. Louis?"

"Yeah...damn," said Ana, "we're both messes, aren't we?"

"Given this bullshit, I'd be scared if we weren't."

"That's true."

Ana and Agatha sat quietly for a minute, pondering their conversation.

“You’re a great friend, y’know?” said Ana. “I hate that I got you caught up in all of this. You don’t deserve it.”

“And you do?” Agatha said, looking puzzled at Ana.

“Well, no...that’s not what I meant, “ said Ana. “But if it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be here.”

Agatha rolled her eyes but kept calm and smiled.

“This isn’t about you, Ana! Fuck, I love you, but it’s not! We’re not the only ones stuck like this. I’m doing the same thing if I never joined you on this trip, just in Rhode Island. I wish we were not stuck in the middle of this, but since we are, I am glad to be stuck with a friend.”

Ana smiled brightly, touched by what Agatha had said.

“Aww, that’s sweet,” said Ana. “But at least you’d be with your in-real-life friends and family if you were stuck in Rhode Island.”

“Well,” said Agatha, “you do not know that. Perhaps the isolation is the point of...well...whatever this all is. Maybe I occasionally get to see my friends and family back home, just like you’ve managed. But even so, it would not be enough. I mean, look at you. You have seen your family, like, three or four times?”

“Yeah, ” said Ana.

“Do you feel better about everything?” asked Agatha.

“Not really. Maybe? I don’t know. It helped for a while. But I still miss them and feel just as trapped as before.”

Agatha nodded at Ana.

“There you go,” said Agatha. “Stop acting like this is all on you. We don’t know what caused this. It appears to affect everybody. I bet some are stuck at home, while others are like us. Perpetually traveling the roads around them until it stops.”

“But...what...”

“If we are dead?”

“It’s been on my mind, yeah.”

“Yeah, I get that. And you know what? Maybe we are. So what? Not a lot we can do about it now. At least we are dead together.”

“Yeah, I’ve never thought about it like that! Thanks, Agatha.”

“Sure thing, Ana.”

The energy in the room was warm and friendly, the best both Agatha and Ana felt in months. They sat quietly for a couple of minutes. On TV, Andy Dufresne asked Red if he could get him a rock hammer.

“You’re really great at keeping things in perspective, “ said Ana.

“Thanks?” said Agatha, “But you are not so bad at it yourself sometimes. After all, I have had plenty of anxiety about all of this. And guess what? You helped me find solid ground.”

“Awww, thanks,” said Ana. “But you are the best at it! You’re always so calm and composed, unlike me.”

“Yeah, that’s bullshit, Ana. I *seem* calm and composed. Beneath this tranquil exterior, I’m a fucking mess. I constantly doubt myself and wonder why I cannot do anything right. I get that it is only occasionally based on reality. But still, it is hard not to think that way a lot. I just...keep so much of the shit below the surface.”

“Are you sure you’re not from the midwest?”

“Hah-hah. You’re a real smart ass at times. Are you sure you aren’t from Rhode Island?”

“Fair point, Agatha.”

“You’re pretty confident and composed yourself, Ana.”

Ana shrugged at that. Her face betrayed her doubts.

“Ehh, maybe. I definitely don’t feel it. But maybe it’s less of a feeling and more what you do?”

“Perhaps,” said Agatha. “OK, OK, changing the subject, assuming we’re not getting out tomorrow, where would you like to end up tomorrow? And don’t say ‘home’ or, like, ‘your parents’, that’s too easy.”

Ana took a few seconds to think about Agatha’s question. On TV...it doesn’t matter.

“Ooh, that’s a good question!” said Ana. “Well, I like when we go through Chicago because spending a day there is always a blast. Or, if we get near one of the state parks, a rainy hike is sometimes just what we both need. However, it’s going to be like 45 out tomorrow, and rainy, soo...”

“Yeah, sorry, Ana, I don’t want to slip and slide around some canyon at Starved Rock, hoping I don’t end up hypothermic. It might be your idea of fun, but I am more of a ‘warm drinks in a dry place’ kind of hiker.”

“Booo, Agatha, BOOOO! Um...well, the drive from Alton to Galesburg is always kinda neat.”

“Yeah, we haven’t done that in a few months. Maybe.”

Ana nodded yes to that and then thought for a moment. It was clear she was debating whether or not to make her next suggestion.

“There’s always Snake Road, “ said Ana. “I guess it’s a bit too early for that, though.”

“What’s on Snake Road?”

“Snakes, especially cottonmouths.”

“No.”

“Awww, c’mon.”

“No, no, no.”

“I promise they’ll be lethargic and not aggressive!”

“Pick another road, Ana.”

“Okay, Okay. I guess either up near Galena or down in Southern Illinois would be my vote. Or maybe Woodstock!”

“Woodstock?”

“The town where they filmed *Groundhog Day*!”

“Oh wow!” said Agatha. “You know, it is weird we haven’t visited there yet!”

“We’ve been close. I think we drove through Antioch on the way to Freeport that one time. It must have slipped my mind that day. Who knows what the hell I was thinking. Maybe going to Woodstock will end this?”

“Perhaps you are right, “ said Agatha, “but it’s way too neat of a solution, though. But hey, why not?”

“I mean,” said Ana, “that’s how I’d end this if I were writing the story.”

Agatha laughed at that.

“For your sake,” said Agatha, “I hope you didn’t write us *into* this”

“Yeah, okay, but at least we could end it then. Anyways, I’m guessing it's some kind of time loop, and more like some kind of puzzle.”

“Oh no, we better not be in a puzzle. Fuck that.”

“Yeah, if it was, who put us in it? The fucking Riddler?”

“J.J. Abrams?”

“J.J. Abrams is the Riddler? That’s a hell of a reveal, Agatha.”

Both Ana and Agatha laughed loudly. After a few seconds, though, Agatha’s smile gradually dropped from her face as she thought of something less funny.

“Maybe there is no end to this,” said Agatha. “It is just life now.”

“Oof, that’s an awful thought, “ said Ana. “And one I’d not like to dwell on much. Who knows? Maybe it will work differently at some point. That may not be a good thing, but I hope it is. And that hope is just enough to keep me going.”

“See,” said Agatha, “I told you that you could be confident at times!”

Ana and Agatha both laughed at that. The room was silent again but neither tense nor merely friendly. There was a charged energy in the air.

“Uh...umm...hmm...I’m just soooo shocked *Shawshank* is on again, “ said Ana. “It’s so unexpected!”

“I know, right?” said Agatha. “It is *never* on cable. I think we’ve only seen it playing like...oh...about 75% of the time over the last year or so.”

“That’s got to be an exaggeration.”

“Maybe. It’s probably more like 60-65% of the time.”

“OK, I’d buy that. Although I’m not sure the 10% difference would be something we could tell without recorded proof. Unless...Umm, Agatha? This isn’t your way of telling me you’ve been keeping a spreadsheet of what we’ve watched, is it?”

Agatha looked taken aback by the question before realizing Ana was joking and loosened back up.

“Ummm....no. But what if it was? I do like my spreadsheets.”

“That’s for sure. I’m sure that’s why we’re such good friends.”

“Such good friends,” Agatha said with an affected accent. “But seriously, no, of course not. So many nights, we just watch parts of things anyway, and often I’m too tired even to bother unpacking my computer. So yeah, sorry, I don’t have any recorded proof of the percentage of time *The Shawshank Redemption* has been playing on this neverending trip through Midwestern limbo.”

Ana shook her head exaggeratingly to make sure Agatha knew that was an acceptable answer.

“Well, glad we cleared that up,” said Ana.

Ana looked at Agatha with a satisfied smirk and shrugged. Agatha glared back at Ana but in a playful way.

Agatha looked over at the window.

“What’s it like outside?” asked Agatha.

“It’s raining,” said Ana.

“Yeah, I fucking know that! Is it heavy or light? I guess it is not cold enough to snow tonight.”

“Yeah, the weather app says it’s 42 degrees out right now.”

Ana got off the bed and walked over to the window. Ana pulled the curtains back and looked out.

“Agatha, you’re not going to believe this...”

“God, Ana, this joke was stale the first two hundred times you told it.”

“Yeah, I know. Doesn’t mean I’m going to stop.”

“Hah-hah. What’s it doing, you dork?”

Ana looked back at Agatha, gasped in mock offense, smiled, and looked back out the window.

“It...it looks like it’s raining out, but not as heavy as earlier, ” said Ana.

“You think it will be like that in the morning?” asked Agatha.

“To be honest? I don’t know. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t.”

“Yeah, OK. You’ve been so very helpful.”

“Awww, shucks, just doing my job, miss.”

Agatha rolled her eyes at Ana.

“Fine, I’ll play along. You are very welcome, ma’am. Without your assistance, I might have had to do what I do every day and walk out into the rain to get into the car to go to another town in this flat, forgotten state.”

Ana looked at Agatha. She was still smiling playfully, but there was an edge to it that told Agatha to tread carefully.

“OK, I know we are playing...,” said Ana.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry. Cheerfully withdrawn, ” replied Agatha.

“Much appreciated.”

Ana looked at Agatha for a few seconds, looked down at the floor, over at the TV, and then back at Agatha. She walked from the window towards the area between the two beds. However, instead of sitting down on her bed, she sat down next to Agatha, picked up the remote control, and tried turning off the TV in a smooth motion. It didn't work, much to the amusement of everyone involved.

“Agatha?”

“Yes, Ana?”

“Do you want me to kiss you?”

“Yes, Ana.”

Ana and Agatha kissed each other. Outside it continued to rain.

THE END: DAY 385

Ana stood under the covered entrance of the hotel, looking at the rain and waiting for Agatha to check out. She had a cup of coffee in her hand. It wasn't great, but it was hot and free. She had half a banana, some breakfast buffet bacon, and a small cinnamon roll on a paper plate.

“Ready to go?”

Agatha hugged Ana and kissed her on the cheek.

“Wuh-huh, what?” said Ana, her train of thought thoroughly broken.

“Oh, did I startle you?” asked Agatha. “What are you looking at?”

“Hmmm...I don’t know...”

“Aww, did you think last night was going to end the rain?”

“Uhh...noooo”

“Aww, that’s sweet,” said Agatha

Agatha kissed Ana again.

“...misguided and self-centered,” Agatha continued, “but sweet.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” said Ana. “Weren’t you hoping it might do the trick?”

“I mean, I’d have welcomed it if it did, but come on, Ana. What did I say last night?”

“You...love me?”

“Yes, OK, I did say that. What else did I say?”

“It’s not about me?”

“Exactly. It’s not about you, and it’s not about me. Whatever is happening here is bigger than all of us.”

“OK, yeah, sure, I get that,” said Ana. “But what if we’re wrong? What if this is all centered around me, you, or both of us? What if we’re doing the wrong things, and only once we do the exact right things in the exact right sequence, we’ll get out of this? Or fuck, what if it’s the opposite? What if we’re stuck here forever? What if everything we

encounter has meaning, and we must put it all together to solve the puzzle? Or nothing does? Shit, Agatha, I don't kn—"

Agatha kissed Ana.

"Damn, you know how to shut me up, don't you?" said Ana.

"God, Ana," said Agatha. "I can't shut you up, even if I wanted to! But I finally found a way to make you pause for, oh, at least a few seconds."

Ana grinned and blushed.

"OK, Agatha," said Ana, "what happens now?"

Agatha shrugged.

"Do I look like I know?" said Agatha.

"Yes."

Ana smiled at Agatha, and Agatha just stared right back.

"We'll just take it one day at a time and see where it goes. Who knows how long this is going to go on, but you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm glad I get to spend it with you."

"Awww...That's really sweet, Agatha. I'll have to remember that the next time we fight over something silly."

"Fair. Oh, wait! One other thing."

"What's that?"

“It’s your turn to drive.”

“But I drove yesterday!”

“No, no, no, it’s who finishes the drive that counts.”

“Whatever, fuck. Alright, I’ll drive.”

The End