

If ignoring the speed limit on a barren highway doesn't count as breaking the law, then Laura leaving the pub midway through her shift doesn't count as a fireable offense. Not that she cared about either one anymore. Damp, drowsy, and claustrophobic with clouds, the midnight air matched Laura's mind: abysmally fed up with the course of the world. Her aching culinary school dreams rotted in the teary quiet, anguished by her grease-spangled apron on the backseat. The lonely headlights sliced nightfall, and with only mere hours before her shoes were reconciled with the familiar soil of the cemetery steps, her vermilion-streaked eyes were drooping with the weight of concentration. Or lack thereof.

"You okay?" Juni asked, dolled up, a twinge of a smile peeking through her concerned inflection, interrupting Laura's internal orchestra of useless thoughts. Laura had almost forgotten her best friend was there, perched on the passenger seat, the same way she had always sat since their culinary school days. Juni's olive-green eyes dissected Laura via the windscreen's reflection.

Even without looking, thought Laura, Juni always knew when a little life was draining from her. "I'm fine, really" Laura's unconvincing reply choked, voice cracks uncontained.

"No, you're not." Juni's cold hand went to hold Laura's vacant palm, both hands fraternally torn up from kitchen knives. As their familiar knuckles interlocked, a pin dropped within Laura, poking a hole in the ballooning feelings she had imprisoned for the past five years.

"It's just work" huffed Laura, gaining the courage to meet Juni's eye for a fleeting moment, her neck then promptly snapping back around. "They wouldn't let me take the day off for the drive. And I told them- I told them what today was. The anniversary... They just-- I couldn't go."

Juni swivelled in her seat, knotted knees pressed to her chest, so she could examine Laura with total awareness. Understanding her. The ability to feel was always an area Juni excelled in, thought Laura; her mind was a meticulous tuning fork to whatever resonance her heart spilled out. Juni squeezed Laura's hand, welcoming the emotional riptide welling inside Laura, no matter the cost.

"I hate working there, at the pub." Laura shuffled in her chair, crawling in her seat with brazen dislike for showing she was capable of feeling. Her lips pursed with envy at Juni's human understanding, as being the emotional arachnophobe in the spider's den was irritating at best. Especially on days like these. Laura glanced at Juni from the corner of her crooked eye. She groaned at herself for being so childish, and after some begrudging deep breaths, Laura let her tide crash.

"I mean, this was always meant to be a stepping stone to better things. Like, after I graduated... but I'm a veteran there-- everyone has left. And I just... I can't seem to leave." Her voice grew in agitation, Juni tethered to every feathered word flown her way. "The only original staff, the only one who still even remembers what it was like there initially, before you... left, is Charlie. He doesn't even ask about you anymore. It's sick. I just don't get it. He knew you, like really knew you, and I had told him about the drive, but he didn't even ask about you. Not one word. And it's just like... aren't you worried you'll be forgotten?!"

A solemn silence washed over the car. The tiring engine rumbled under the seats; its clarity unmatched since the drive had started all those hours ago. Shallow breaths plagued Laura, scared the subtlest movement could remind Juni of Laura's existence, apprehensive she might detach, from both their clammy handhold, and the moment.

"Hey." Juni's voice had a cooing nature to it. "Look at me." Through the bleary view, Laura's glassed eyes skimmed to Juni's. She could sway Laura like a lifeboat, and her voice could hum louder than any engine. "Your shift's over and I'm here with you now."

Laura's bottom eyelid wilted, her sobbing smile expansive under the salt tears, mirrored too on Juni's face. An imperfection across the outside scenery flickered into Juni's vision. Through the landscape of paddocks and nothingness, a green and white sign peeked out-- only a hundred

kilometres to go. “We’re so close” Juni smiled, twisting Laura’s internal bittersweet blade even more. “We’re going to be fine.”

They croaked into silence together. The clock ticked onto a new hour. The fuel symbol blinked burnt orange. The acute gap narrowed between the floor and accelerator. Laura’s eyes forgot to shift back to the road.

A vein-bursting cry broke. “Juni!” Split visioned, Laura zigged the zagging wheel, her passenger remained unphased. The engine gave a volcanic roar. The tar streaked black with a deafening squeal. The hood dived headfirst onto the road. The world spun. “Ju-!” A tire howled. Then the air was metal. And before the oblivion, just for a moment, the cosmos stood still.

*It’s happening again.*

Laura pictured the cemetery, as it was five years ago. The guilt was parallel to what it was then, Laura wishing she could switch places, and make it her that was six feet under. From five years prior, the ghostly words echoed still. “We’re going to be fine” ...from the bloodied headrest... “We’re going to be fine.”

It was Laura who had driven that car, it was Laura who had crashed, and yet it was Laura who had survived. It was Laura who was a wreck, losing her best friend and love for living in one fell swoop. Charlie and the other culinary school mourners may have been hurt in the moment. That moment had passed, for them. But that death was the torn wound in Laura’s side, bathing in salted lemon until the sting desensitised, which it never did. What a handsome trauma it was, living in memories, in work, and in every car; forever haunting Laura as this angel of youth, snow globed in a time loop. Beckoning her to live again. But if alive was a little present she was to give herself once a day, thought Laura, then this day was decidedly ungifted. “We’re going to be fine...” rang untrue again.

As Laura took one final look back, before time intervened, it wasn’t Juni she saw beside her. Just the flowers she was taking to Juni’s grave.