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Eyes Like Wildfires (excerpt)

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Eyes Like Wildfires (excerpt)

“Ricky. Ricky. I know. Calm down. I’m working on it.”

Barbara rifled through the plastic bags at her feet with one hand while the other held her phone close to her face. Ricky was screaming on the other end. Entire cities were roaring past in the window in the time it took her to say Ricky’s name; buildings turned into silver blurs reflecting harsh sunlight. The sterile skylines racing past were rippling like the muscles of a jungle cat, and bright white light glinted into the train car. Barbara threw the shade down so hard it bounced back up. She left it there. “I can’t see a thing in this blasted sun,” she muttered.

“I’ve been on the phone with the company for hours. We just gotta pay half of the bill. They keep putting me on hold—I know, hey, I’m trying here.” Barbara’s voice was gravelly from years of cigarettes filling in for friends. “They keep asking for my pin number. You got a pin number?”

She was in the aisle and had thrown open the overhead compartments before Ricky answered. He didn’t know. “Well you best find one ‘cause I’m not coming home to a cold house.” She was digging through her bags, all of the ones she had somehow loaded onto the train with her. This purple plastic one, with the fake alligator skin pattern, the one she had bought in a subway station from a knockoff purse vendor that only took cash. This one. There was her wallet.

Barbara fell back into the seat, her brittle ponytail brushing the headrest. She set the phone down on the empty seat beside her; Ricky could scream into the abyss for a minute. After shuffling through the stack of credit cards for a moment, then another, she found it. Or was it this one? It was definitely that one. The card that could pay the bill.

She grabbed the phone off of the chair beside her and the flash of her bright red nails made her feel a little better; she hadn’t gotten a manicure in a decade but the ninety-nine cent quickdry was enough to make her feel pretty. “Ricky, I’ll call ya back. I’m gonna try this card.” She snapped the phone shut; some of the buttons were missing, and it was dented, but it was okay that she couldn’t afford a new one. She loved the way it felt to snap a phone shut when someone was yelling at her. This was control.

One red fingernail ran over the raised numbers on the back of the credit card as she was put on hold. Her face was tired and grayed from this life, but her eyes were wildfires, so much potential energy if only they get the chance to see a forest. But out the window—there were no trees out there. Just a steel jungle, shiny and glass and blurring past. Totally unaffected by a wildfire.

She was a woman at odds with herself. Her face was exhausted but her eyes glowed. Her hair was like fine silver thread, a texture earned with age, but she bundled it up in a leopard print scrunchie, fake crushed velvet. Her left hand was holding her cellphone that held all of the bills, responsibilities, and threats of indebted adulthood, but her right hand was amusing itself with the surface of the credit card in question and was wondering with childlike curiosity at just how they raised those numbers out of the plastic. Those numbers.

She was a rough woman in every way. Just listening to the sound of her voice was enough to scratch you. But that word. Rough. It only talks about what's on the surface.

"Oh yes. My name is Barbara Davis, that's B-a-r-b-a-r-a." She'd gotten through. She wasn't on hold. There was a real person on the other end of that line; and that real person could fix this. That person could make her house a home again. Maybe Ricky would calm down. Maybe he would stop coming back at three in the morning. Maybe the kitchen would smell like pasta sauce again and not just beer. "D-a-v-i-s."

And the person on the other end of the line needed the number on the card. One finger, calloused and numb and gray, moved across them one by one. How did they get those bumps in the plastic?

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, but there's no balance left on that card. Do you have another form of payment?"

And she didn't.

So Barbara snapped the phone shut, but it didn't make her as happy this time. It wasn't as dramatic if the person on the other end wasn't yelling at her; and the person on the other end had nothing left to say to her. This was worse than yelling. This wasn't control.

She didn't want to think about what she was going to tell Ricky or what he was going to say or do. She didn't want to think about the hole he had punched in the drywall and the plaster dust that she cleaned out of her hair for weeks. She didn't want to think about him at all. It was his house. He should've paid that bill, it was his house. And he didn't even know his own pin number. It was his house. And that wasn't her daughter or her dog, either. And she had wanted to help them. She had tried. But she needed help, too.

The train rolled to a stop, and then lurched forward. There was a concrete platform next to her window that she hadn't seen coming; suddenly, it had just appeared. Barbara didn't have a plan, she just grabbed all of the bags that she could carry and left the ones that she couldn't. That purple alligator skin knockoff that she swore was identical to something expensive—left in the overheard compartment. She left that broken phone on the empty seat, sitting there beside that credit card with no one left on it—and thought one last time about how they got those numbers raised in the plastic—and she stepped off of the train onto the platform. She didn't know which station this was, or which state she was in, or what she was going to do next.

But it felt good.

It felt like snapping a cellphone shut.

Barbara dropped those heavy plastic bags onto the concrete. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes squinted to see into the distance off the platform. She didn't move for minutes, she had to be sure they were really there.

Trees. Trees on the horizon.

The wildfires in her eyes sparked.

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A man in his early sixties was standing on the train platform. He had long silver hair in a braid down his back and eyes that were hidden behind clouds, rimmed in red and purple, as if age itself was a sunset. He was wearing a white t-shirt so thin and threadbare he may as well have not been wearing one at all. Jeans stiff from dirt and fraying at the hems, with a tobacco ring in the back pocket, and a dinged-up black flip phone clipped to his belt in a plastic holster. His voice sounded like smoke, even when he breathed. What was most striking about him, though, was how he didn't move. He had placed himself by a concrete pillar in the corner and was leaning against the wall, with one foot flat on the brick behind him, looking like he thought he was posing for a cigarette ad in the sixties. He was looking down the tracks to where they met the sky. The only sign he was even still alive was the blink of his sinuous eyelids, like the sheer membrane of an exotic lizard. He was staring so hard at the rusted tracks, willing the train to appear, that it seemed he was watching even when he blinked.

The other people on the platform, eagerly awaiting a daughter home from college or a fiancée back from a job interview, gradually moved away from this stone man by the pillar. The wisps of his silver braid were dancing in the wind in such stark contrast to the grooves on his face; something about his presence made them uncomfortable, and they didn't want their joyful reunions to be somehow tainted by the gaze of this man, the man with the cloudy eyes and the smoke on his breath.

Ricky.

The train roared into the station and he straightened up. He took his shoe off of the wall and he took a single step forward. He cleared his throat and a whisper of something choking him escaped into the still air. Passengers spilled out of the train, towing suitcases and stories of their journeys. They ran into the arms of the people that were waiting for them. Ricky was suffocated by the cheer, that indescribable nervous tension and relief and nostalgia all united in one force that haunts train platforms and arrivals gates. He was surrounded by smiling faces and hugging strangers—and still, Barbara hadn't gotten off the train. He was looking for a leopard print scrunchie, a purple alligator skin bag, snapshots of a woman in the crowd. He thought he saw her.

Of course, Barbara wasn't coming.

Something changed in this man's eyes. The clouds cleared, perhaps. As the train sighed and squealed away to deliver more joy and nervous chatter, Ricky realized that Barbara wasn't coming. Of course Barbara wasn't coming. He wouldn't have wanted to come, either.

Years of truth, or what he had chosen to accept as truth, had hardened Ricky, had hardened all of them. He realized in that moment that he hadn't known truth until the train roared away without bringing him Barbara. He had thought, all those years, that he would scare her into staying. He had thought that the smell of beer so strong you could taste it and your eyes would water, the hole in the wall and the plaster dust she had cleaned out of her hair for weeks, he had thought she would never leave. He had thought he had control.

He had thought he had hated her. He had thought that everything had been her fault. That's why he screamed, roaring around their house like a demon. Their house, his house. It was his house. He had thought he had hated her. But that wasn't true.

This wasn't control.

And if you looked in Ricky's eyes at that moment, you wouldn't see the clouds clearing over a sunset, the red and purple edges of an old man's eyes full of realization, regret, or love. The clouds were gathering back together, tighter, so no person would ever get close enough to split them apart again. The clouds were growing darker, and there was lightning on the horizon.

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The train pressed on to its next destination, faster and faster like a racehorse lunging into its bridle. Faster and faster. The cities outside, graffiti, power lines crisscrossing like the stitches on a quilt. Faster and faster. Barbara's cellphone, broken and snapped shut, was laying on the seat beside the credit card that couldn't pay for anything. What an ironic pair, sitting there. Itching for a purpose, knowing that they had none.

A child a few rows ahead was growing impatient, as children do. Blond ponytail bobbing, she asked her distracted mother if she could walk up the cabin again. "Whatever, fine," the woman said, through the pen she was holding in her mouth, both hands too busy with her keyboard on her lap. "Zoe, just don't touch anything," she called after her daughter with a sigh. The child took off, toddling up the aisle and waving to the strangers who happened to look her way.

Little Zoe stopped at Barbara's chair, pulled there. The cellphone was interesting; there were buttons to press, hinges to open and close, and a screen that was shiny and smooth and small. She was finished with it moments after picking it up. The credit card on the seat flashed like a toy, or a diamond, something that demands to be examined closer. Sure to break the one rule her mother had half-heartedly tossed at her, Zoe snatched up the credit card and ran her fingers over it. It was beautiful, it looked important. Adults used these things, you got one if you mattered and knew what you were doing with your life. She had seen her mother use wave one around, that was how she knew how important they were.

The card was beautiful, with a metallic stripe across it and a bunch of numbers and boxes on the back that she knew meant something but she wasn't sure what. And the card wasn't smooth.

"Hey mom," Zoe toddled back up the aisle with the credit card between her tiny pink fingers. "How do they get those numbers in here?"