

EIGHT DAYS

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Willie Lyonsan was barely twenty one, directionless, and living out of his car in an ungodly nowhere town outside Battle Creek, Michigan.

There was this quiet little side road that ran from the gravel patch beside the shrub line, where he'd tuck away his old beat-up Pontiac LeMans, to the dive bar he frequented almost daily. Seemed he'd always sniff out the nearest dive bar wherever he found himself. Every night on the way there he'd pass this one house, a modest, slightly run down two-story with plastic flowers out front and a porch light that flickered like morse code.

The woman who lived there was Korean, 38 years old, who worked at the factory in town like most others living there.

She had a cold look and a no-nonsense aura that made most men cross to the other side of the street. Not Willie. He tipped his hat every night like some dusty cowboy, calling out, “Good evening, Miss.” She was quite beautiful if you looked through the snarl. After a few weeks, she finally asked him in very broken English what he was doing sleeping in his car like a stray dog. He gave her that Willie grin and shrugged, “It’s home.”

“Well don’t park it there, park it here on my side of the shrubs...you’ll eventually get it towed parking there”, she barked.

He circled back, jumped in, cranked it over, wheeled it around and in less than a minute, it was parked on her side of the shrubs, safe and sound. He got out of the car, glanced back, tipped his hat and hollered out “Thanks a lot” with a wave, and off to the tavern he went.

Her name was Hui Ko. She had three kids – 13, 16, 19 – and worked ten-hour shifts at the local textile plant around the corner. She'd been living there on her own for quite a few years. Her ex-husband, who also worked at the plant, had been a US soldier stationed in Korea. He married her there and brought her back. Within five or six years he left her for a local girl – one his mother approved of – to fend for herself.

She was well-liked in town. She'd make big trays of egg-rolls – I'm talking authentic, world-class, straight from the mother-country variety – and smartly drop them off in batches at the town hall for the clerk, police and fire staff, and she'd give them away to neighbors and local businesses. Shortly after her husband left her she walked to the textile plant. The shift supervisor was a regular recipient of her famous egg rolls through his wife. She asked him for a job. He

obliged. She went to work the following week. She worked first shift. Her ex-husband worked second. It seemed to work.

Behind where Willie parked his car and down the hill there was a rather large overgrown garden that had seen better days. Willie asked her about it. She said she used to grow all of her own vegetables there but when her husband left she didn't have the time. Willie borrowed the neighbors rototiller one day while Hui Ko was at work and tilled that whole garden. Planted corn, lettuce, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers and a few other vegetables over the following few days. She was thrilled. Willie tended that garden like a man trying to coax forgiveness from the dirt.

She'd bring him water and meals. He'd be out there working away for hours on end. The garden came in nicely. This was a good arrangement.

With Willie, though, good arrangements were usually followed by some unintended chaos fueled by a sequence of inexplicable events.

As time went on, the routine seemed set. Willie would drum up day work somewhere, come *home* to his little patch at Casa de LeMans, tend the garden, and head out to the tavern. Week in. Week out.

By now, fall was in the air. The garden's harvest was pretty well wrapped up and the nights carried with them a chill that required an extra blanket or two to get through. Hui Ko knew this. She and Willie didn't have anything physical going on between them. Just a friendship, of sorts. They'd drink beer together on lawn chairs by the garden sometimes after dinner. They had a few laughs. She could see he was a pretty good guy with a pretty good heart. After being alone for so long, it was nice to have a guy around to

help out. He never interacted with her kids. Pok the oldest was nearly Willie's age. They had their own lives. To them, Willie was just the weird guy who lived in his car behind the garage.

One night after drinking a few beers together, and probably a few shots of whiskey, Hui Ko, a woman with fiercely traditional Korean standards, made an off-hand suggestion. "It's getting cold at night, you want to sleep inside now? If you do, you have to marry me first though!", she exclaimed in a loud, broken, animated tone.

"Ok." Willie replied.

Three days later, just like that, they were married.

Willie grabbed his pillow, blanket and bathroom bag and moved into the house. Snug as a bug in a rug...

Hui Ko's kids weren't thrilled. They looked at Willie like a fungus growing under

the sink. The eldest, Pok, was only two years younger than Willie, which made for one hell of a dynamic. It started off rocky – side-eyes, slammed doors, silent meals – but Willie had a gift. He was magnetic in a way you couldn't explain. Pretty soon, they all came around and really got to like him. Willie wasn't the greatest influence on Pok, who soon started ditching school assignments – he attended the local college – and day drinking stolen Soju with Willie while Hui Ko was hard at work, none the wiser...

Needless to say, the honeymoon phase didn't last very long.

But the beginning of the end came on what was supposed to be a routine delivery run. Willie scored a gig delivering premium wholesale roses to a distributor down in Kentucky, not far over the Indiana border. Twelve-hours round trip. Easy money. Leave at noon, drop the load by five, grab a quick bite

and gas up, be home in time to buy a round at the tavern and tell another tale. Simple.

Only, on *that* particular day, Pok showed up around 10 a.m. with a bottle of Jim Beam and two corn dogs. “Breakfast of champions,” he said. And that’s how the trouble began.

They drank in the garage until Willie’s vision got a little wide. Pok bet him he couldn’t do the delivery and be back in less than ten hours. Willie took the bet. Got behind the wheel of the clunky old delivery van he was assigned – the one with a busted odometer and loose gas gauge – and with forty bucks in his pocket and what he *thought* was a full tank of gas, off he went.

Around 4:40 p.m., twenty minutes from his drop-off, the engine sputtered and died. He coasted onto the shoulder, cursed the universe, and looked up to see a flickering

neon sign just down the street: *Puss N Boots Gentleman's Club*.

Willie took it as a divine message.

Inside, the air was thick with perfume and bad decisions. He sat at the bar, ordered a boilermaker, and tried to act like he belonged. And that's when he saw her.

Lexi. A redhead with fire in her step and brass in her soul. Five foot nothing, attitude for days, a voice like broken glass and velvet. She didn't dance. She commanded.

Willie was smitten. He sat through her whole set like it was Shakespeare. She noticed him too – this strange, charming drifter in scuffed boots and a beat-up Carhartt jacket. When her shift ended, she sat beside him, swiped his drink, and asked if he believed in fate.

They talked until closing, then until sunrise. She told him about her dream of moving to Vegas and opening a tattoo parlor

for bikers. He told her about his epic gardening skills and his ongoing feud with a neighborhood rooster named Jerry.

By now, his goose was thoroughly cooked back at home. Hui Ko would be absolutely livid. He was supposed to have returned by 11, or midnight at the very latest, and here it was 6 am the next morning. The delivery was never completed – the load of roses lay blown and wilted in the back of the van, which still sat abandoned on the side of the road. His boss would surely have his hide for this blunder.

Most of Willie's misadventures – especially the later, more operatic ones – usually came by way of a wrong turn he didn't mean to take, or a series of unforeseen events that derailed whatever half-decent intentions he might've started with. But not this one. No, this one was different. This one was on Willie. Squarely.

Granted, he was only twenty-one at the time – young, broke, and still figuring out what not to do with his life. But still. He had a weakness. Women. The moment one got within fifty feet of him, his emotional radar would short-circuit like an old ceiling fan rattling itself loose from the ceiling. Once it started wobbling, there was usually no stopping the crash.

So now what? He was in it deep. Married to Hui Ko – basically for the roof – and now caught with his pants metaphorically (and maybe literally) down. He'd disappeared for a delivery job, never called, never showed back up, and spent the night wrapped up in Lexi, a redheaded fireball who was currently chain-smoking and daring him to run off to Vegas.

Said they could stay with her sister. Said she was leaving anyway. Said the universe was giving them a sign.

Willie paced a little in his head. Going back wasn't much of an option. Hui Ko would kill him – slowly. His boss would surely dock him pay he didn't have for the roses he never delivered. That left one door wide open.

Vegas, huh? He thought to himself.

What the hell. When you start with nothing, it's easy to start over. Again.

He'd need to gas up the van, make one quiet run back to the house while Hui Ko was at work, sneak in, grab a few things, grab the LeMans, and burn rubber westward. That was the plan.

"I'm in," Willie said.

"In what?" Lexi asked, looking at him sideways.

"Vegas," he grinned. "Let's do it."

Lexi grabbed a couple garbage bags' worth of essentials from her apartment, chucked them in the back of the van, told her

roommate she was gone for good, and just like that, they were off.

Northbound – high on adrenaline and low on gas – they headed towards Michigan before the trek West to the shimmering mirage that was Las Vegas, Nevada.

As they approached town, they kept to the back roads – narrow veins of cracked pavement flanked by cornfields and low-slung power lines. They crept around the edge of town like burglars casing a joint. Willie took a winding route through dirt-road neighborhoods, avoiding main streets, avoiding chance run-ins, avoiding fate.

Then came Amcop – the textile plant where Hui Ko worked. Willie caught sight of her car in the lot out of the corner of his eye as they passed.

Good. She was at work. Game on.

He took the turn onto the narrow side road where he used to park. Rolled the van

slow over the gravel patch beside the shrub line, just like old times. So far, so good. Lexi stayed behind, tossing her bags into the LeMans and sliding into the passenger seat without a word – like she'd done it a hundred times.

Willie crept around the garage, moving like a fox in church shoes, and made his way to the side door. Quietly, he slid it open and slipped inside. The house was still. Empty. Just the low hum of the fridge and a TV someone forgot to turn off. He didn't need much. A couple changes of clothes. His bathroom bag. Maybe the books on his nightstand if he had time.

But something felt... off. This was too easy.

He moved quick. Grabbed what he needed and made for the door. Swung it open, and all he saw was blinding daylight between him and the LeMans. Lexi – looking like a

goddamn accomplice in a getaway scene – was motioning out her rolled down window for Willie to come quick, mouthing “hurry up, hurry up.”

Willie bolted. A dead sprint across the yard, clothes under one arm, toothbrush in his teeth, boots flapping. He dove into the car, turned the key, and that old engine roared like it had been waiting for its moment.

They peeled out of that gravel patch like hell was on their heels.

“Holy shit!” Willie shouted.

“Holy *shit!*” he said again, laughing now, as if to confirm it was real.

And just like that, they were gone – two lost souls in a rust bucket LeMans, \$185 between them, 1989, chasing neon dreams and outrunning all the good sense they didn’t have to begin with.

There’s something about driving across that punishing stretch of ground

between Michigan and the Mississippi river. It'll break your spirit! It's ugly and brutal. Narrow, boring, flat. Unending strips of plain pavement that make you feel like you're driving on a treadmill. The sky is right on top of you – close enough to suffocate, it wears you down. The silence was so dense that the only sounds were the faint rattle of the rear window, the whine of balding tires on blacktop, and the low drone of wind through the gap in the side door. All the while, Willie kept his foot on the gas and his mind on the plan: *make it to the Mississippi and it'd all be downhill from there*. But getting to the big river was no small victory.

Willie knew that. He told me he almost lost it before they made it. It was the merciless bottlenecks between Michigan City and Joliet that really got to him. Logjam after logjam of semis, moving vans and RVs. Pure Hell, he said. It's along that stretch of road that he

nearly ditched the whole thing and turned back.

“Where are we now?” Lexi asked around mid-day, kicking her feet up on the dash and lighting another cigarette. They’d already burned through the first tank of gas and a six-pack of Hamm’s.

“Still Illinois,” Willie said.

“You’re kidding.”

“Told you it was one long bastard.”

Lexi shook her head. “It’s like we’re not moving.”

“Tell me about it,” he said. “About lost my mind already.”

“We’ll make it,” she said. “We’re close to the river, right?”

“Close enough.”

But Willie wasn’t so sure.

He said it took an eternity to break free of the city sprawl. Then the horizon opened up, but not in the way he imagined.

The wide open skies on the west side of the Mississippi, especially when you reach desert, has a way of making everything feel temporary – like even time itself is just passing through. That’s the headspace Willie Lyonsan found himself in as he rattled west across state lines in that beat-to-hell LeMans, a rusted-out chariot carrying a redhead with a busted past and a man freshly married to someone he hadn’t said goodbye to.

The ride droned on – pavement, sky and a whole lot of bad ideas stitched together with beer, caffeine, and bravado. The radio barely worked. It gave them two options: AM gospel and crackling mariachi. Lexi flipped it off and hummed to herself instead – some half-remembered country song, soft as wind.

Willie was quiet. The kind of quiet where you’re not thinking about the road but about everything you just left behind and what might be waiting at the next truck stop. He

wanted to feel free, but the guilt stuck to him like desert sweat. Hui Ko. Pok. The delivery job he'd flubbed so hard it didn't even qualify as sabotage – it was more like performance art. And his family. His family had no clue what he was up to – not that they'd be all that surprised anyway.

And yet, he laughed. Out of nowhere. Some deep, wild laugh like the kind you let loose when you realize you've gone too far to turn back.

“Christ,” he muttered. “What the hell are we doing?”

Lexi just smirked and lit another cigarette.

“Same thing everybody's doing, babe. Running from something.”

They'd been driving for hours when the LeMans started to groan – some rattling noise under the hood like a pocketful of loose change in a clothes dryer. The heat warped the

highway. Mirage country. Nothing but horizon and heatwaves. That's when they spotted it: a flickering motel sign off the highway, bent and leaning like a drunk old man.

The Starlite - Vacancy.

It looked like it hadn't seen a renovation since Elvis faked his death. A horseshoe of tired little rooms wrapped around a parking lot the color of scorched toast. A single bulb flickered above the office door. Willie parked under it, engine coughing its last breath.

Inside, they found a front desk manned by a tall, half-blind old man in a bolo tie and pressed slacks. He looked like he'd been waiting specifically for *them*.

"No need for a name," he rasped, handing Willie a key.

"Just remember – some doors don't open unless you close the right one first."

Willie blinked and cocked his head.

“What?”

But the old man just smiled like he’d dropped a Bible verse and walked away.

Lexi leaned into Willie as they walked to the room.

“Creepy old dudes say creepy shit. Let’s take a shower before I lose my damn mind.”

Later that night, wrapped in motel sheets still warm from the desert day, Lexi stared at the ceiling, her cigarette tracing lazy smoke rings that the ceiling fan – half working – refused to disturb.

“I tell you I’ve been married before?” she asked, voice flat.

Willie turned to her. “No. But I’d be more surprised if you hadn’t.”

She chuckled. “Once, legally, to a guy in the army. Big boots, small brain. Didn’t last.

The other was a girl named Rina. Bartender in Biloxi. Wild as hell. She left me for a pastor.”

Willie didn't say anything.

“I got a kid too,” she said after a long pause. “Girl. Three years old. I haven't seen her since she was born.”

Now he turned. “Wow, Lex.”

“She's with my mom. Which is its own kind of nightmare. I wasn't ready. Still ain't. I'm not headed to Vegas for fun, Will. I'm running from Kentucky. From court dates. From my name.”

Willie exhaled slow. The ceiling fan clunked overhead like it was trying to keep time with his heartbeat.

“We're not there yet,” he said finally.

“What?”

“Vegas. Life. Any of it. We're not there yet. Let's just... be in the middle for a while.”

Lexi reached over and held his hand without looking at him.

They hit the road the next morning, late and sunburnt, vending machine coffee burning their throats. Somewhere near the Utah-Arizona-Nevada line, Willie missed a turn – maybe on purpose – and they ended up in a place that didn't seem to exist on any map.

The town had no name. Just a rusty old sign that said “POSTED.” No gas station, no people. Just abandoned buildings holding onto their last bit of shape. The sun lit everything in high contrast – burned-out beauty.

They spotted a dusty old bank building with a wooden stoop and two cracked rocking chairs. Willie parked, killed the engine, and they just sat.

“Think anyone lives here?” Lexi asked.

“Doubt it. Place looks like God quit halfway through.”

She pulled out a soda from the cooler – RC Cola, flat but cold – and handed it to him.

“You ever think we’re just ghosts from different timelines?” she asked.

“All the time.”

She turned to him, eyes soft now.

“What do you want, Willie? I mean really. What’s the endgame?”

He took a sip, looked out at the empty street, trying to be dramatic.

“I want to land in a place where nobody’s waiting on me to be anything but tired,” he said.

Lexi nodded like she understood too well. She kissed him – not sexy, not hungry – just human. Like a promise. Or maybe a goodbye.

They pulled out of that ghost town just as the sun began to fold itself into the horizon. The LeMans roared back to life like it had been given a second chance.

In the rearview, the town was already gone – dissolving into dust, memory, maybe myth.

Lexi fell asleep in the passenger seat, her head resting against the door, red hair lit gold by the dying light.

Willie kept driving, hands loose on the wheel, eyes fixed on the straight line ahead.

Vegas shimmered in the distance like a promise Willie had no business believing in. He told me later that somewhere in that moment – sun bleeding out in front of them, Lexi asleep beside him, the engine humming like a lullaby – he could already feel it coming to an end. Not just the drive. The *whole thing*. That wild, beautiful escapade was already folding into memory before it was even over.

This all happened some thirty years ago now. Eight days, he once told me. That's how long he knew Lexi. Eight days. But she still lives in the soft corners of his story – those

places reserved for people who mattered more than time allows. They shared something – brief, chaotic, intimate, sacred. A spiritual bond forged in quick getaways, motel sheets, ghost towns, and gas station coffee. No regrets. None that he’s ever confessed, anyway.

He never contacted Hui Ko again. Said it wouldn’t have been right. Though every now and then, usually in late summer when tomatoes were in season, he’d mention her garden like a man remembering a place he should’ve stayed longer.

He never heard from Lexi again, either. That part, I think, stung a little. But whenever her name comes up – and it does, usually with a grin and a shake of the head – he smiles. That Willie smile, the one that says *I lived through it and I wouldn’t change a thing.*

That eight-day detour kept him in the West for almost a decade.

California, Nevada, New Mexico... he got lost in it all. Or maybe it found *him*. Hard to say with Willie. The adventures didn't stop – they just changed their clothes.

But Lexi? Lexi was the spark that lit the fuse.

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