

Brenda Sorrels
Circadian Rhythm

They wake at 3 am. The sharp, electric tone of R.'s phone alarm shudders Tay's senses and she fights the desire to pull the blanket over her head and curl up. The muscles in her back clench. She hasn't slept well anticipating this breach of her circadian rhythm – even more jarring than expected.

"Time to roll." R. is on his feet pulling on cargo shorts and a tee, fiddling with his backpack and camera – stuffing in a portable tri-pod. "You coming?"

Tay waits. She takes a moment watching the breezy window curtain play in the shadows of this tight room. They're in an aging hotel on a small, rocky island off the coast of Maine driving up from Connecticut the day before in R.'s old Saab convertible.

R. was a guy she'd dated years ago and their budding romance had been interrupted when her college boyfriend, now ex-husband, came barreling back into her life. Through her ten years of marriage, Tay had sometimes thought about him, wondering what may have happened had she given him a proper chance. That R. had reached out to her two days after she'd gone on Match felt like a sign to her. Maybe he was the one, her lost soulmate.

Tay shrinks at the urgency in his tone. "Give me a minute."

She's never been a morning person. It goes against her grain to pop up out of bed even at a normal hour. But she wants to protect this new beginning, so she bolts. She fumbles for her jeans, a briny taste bubbling up from her stomach. It's hard meeting good men and R. checks a lot of boxes including the all-important chemistry. Her sex life had felt like it was over, but R., by a long shot, proved that it wasn't.

He'd taken up photography in the years since she's known him, and on the drive up, had explained the importance of setting up his equipment well before the sun began its rise. Tay had viewed dozens of his photos captured in rugged landscapes both in and out of the states as they snuggled before his big screen TV. In the four months they'd been dating, she had dropped numerous hints about how much she wanted to travel to places like these near and far and that this was something that had been missing in her life. But R. had not picked up on her clues. It bothered her that he hadn't invited her along on his annual August trek off the coast of Maine, so close, so doable. Did he even listen to her? Had he heard her at all?

"Men aren't mind readers," was the consensus of her friends. Anxiety had plagued her all summer and she'd complained to them relentlessly but they thought she was making too much of it. "Just say you want to go to Maine with him. What's the big deal?"

Her logical brain knew they were right. Why couldn't she just say it? Speak her truth.

"I'd love for you to show me Maine," she'd finally texted him one

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weekday night when her mind had spun the dilemma too many times to count.

Like her friends had predicted, R. jumped on board going on and on about how much she'd love the lobster rolls and the stunning views that drew famous en plein air artists and writers to this island that featured the highest ocean cliffs off the Maine coastline. He told her what kind of hiking shoes to buy and to bring something light for rain. It began to feel like *their* trip so when they pulled up to a liquor store on their way out of town, she thought R. might even surprise her with a bottle of champagne.

"What kind of wine do you want?" he'd asked.

"I like Chardonnay."

Minutes later, he handed her two bottles of Sancerre. No champagne.

"You know you like it."

R. tosses her a mini-flashlight that fits in the palm of her hand. "Take this, and stay close behind me," he says, "I'm wearing a headlamp." He grabs a small bag of muffins off the dresser. "You got room for these?"

Tay zips the muffins into her back pack as R. locks the door. The wooden floor creaks under their feet in the dimly lit hallway. At the end of the corridor, another thin window curtain flutters like a ghost.

Outside, stars sprinkle the sky more like shards of glass than glittering diamonds for the little illumination they offer. The dark air vibrates with the unseen energy of insects and sleeping animals. Tay senses a vulnerability as they crunch down on the dirt and gravel around a bend of gothic trees and the last of the hotel lights disappear. The road ahead is unlit and pitch-black. R. is a fast walker, but she matches his stride which gets her blood pumping. Already, her forehead feels damp. She feels so alone. But no, R. is right here beside her. It's ridiculous to be afraid. She wishes he would take her hand, but he doesn't.

It's nearly a mile across the island through wild land and dense woods that are warned about in the tourist brochures. NOTE: "The woods and undergrowth are so thick you can't cut across from one trail to another without becoming lost. Rocky ledges, steep inclines, wet rocks, invisible moss stained black by the sea. People venturing onto such rocks have slipped, fallen into the crashing waves and been lost... recently."

R. ploughs ahead with determined focus as they enter the trail, a rutted narrow path that only allows them to walk single file. The air is rich and green. You'd never know the island is so far out to sea here in this tunnel of balsam and fir more like access to a coal mine than an ocean view. Tay stumbles over the gnarly tree roots that fill the earth below her. Her weak flashlight is useless and it isn't long before she is lagging behind. But in the ambient glow of R.'s headlamp, his white tee shirt is still visible, so she keeps moving. As the distance between them lengthens, a sinking feeling sets in.

"Hey," she calls out.

R. stops for the first time and turns around. He waits for a moment, wordless, and when she is half way to him, trucks on. Tay pushes herself,

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afraid to stop and lose him but afraid to pick up the pace lest she trip and fall. It's impossible to know what's in front of her feet on this unfamiliar path. She has no idea how much further they have to go.

Tay loses sight of R. as a delicate veil of light filters up through the trees. Suddenly, shadowy ferns come into focus; a clutch of purple wildflowers rest in a shady glen. Breathless, she comes upon a pile of rocks that seems to mark some kind of intersection though neither path looks like much of a trail. She flashes her tiny light with hopes of a tree marker but nothing is visible. Tay walks left to a row of brambles. There is a messy opening where hikers have passed through, but the incline is steep and she hesitates. Nearby the sound of waves crash against the cliffs. So close. She returns to the intersection of rocks. There is enough light now to notice a set of small numbers on one of the trees. R. must have gone right, not left.

Tay ponders the situation. It feels oddly familiar. Hadn't she played out scenes like this dozens of times before? In her marriage? She is not unlike the loose pile of stones, pieces easily broken apart with the tap of a shoe.

After a minute, Tay balances the useless flashlight on the top rocks and turns around. Bathed in the emerging forest light, she takes a deep breath and heads back toward the hotel.