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Hasty Journaling on a Badass Little Old Lady's Computer

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We entered the house of this really friendly badass little old lady with pixie-cut white hair, whose name I've unfortunately forgotten. The walls are all a different solid color, and some of the windows were stained glass.

It was essentially the interior of my dream home. So much humility, so many colors.

She sat us down at this table covered with random paraphernalia. "Now, let me ask you. If you had to leave your home forever, for whatever reason, and you had only fifteen minutes to pack, and you could only fit your belongings in a small box, about this big," she held her hands about a foot and a half apart, "what would be important enough to you for you to bring?"

It was the classic Trapped on a Desert Island/If Your Home Caught on Fire question. There was a silence.

"Definitely pictures of my family," Tasha said.

"My box of memories," Ella said.

"My laptop," I derped.

"Your laptop," she repeated.

"Well, yes. All those things, pictures of my family, memories, and a bunch of journal entries, all of that is in there. I used to have these objects sort of scattered around, but when I got my laptop, which was sometime last year, I put them all in one place, my hard drive. But I mean," I wanted to make it clear that I wasn't a clueless privileged kid—privileged, maybe, but not clueless—"I realize that if I were going on a journey where electricity wasn't an option, the laptop would very much become, just like, an unopenable box."

"Very good point," she nodded at me.

(Thinking back, I probably should have said my external hard drive. I could back up everything on my laptop, and it'd be much smaller and easier to carry. Not to mention it'd be, truly, an unopenable box. Of course, this is all with the anticipation of eventually reaching a location with electricity...)

"And what if, for some reason, while you were on your journey from home, you couldn't carry this box any longer? And you had to leave it behind in the sand?"

I winced. I'd lost 2 GB of writing once before, I wasn't in a hurry to do it again. And all those pictures...

"How would you want people to treat these things?"

"Well," Ella said, "For mine in particular, it would be filled with pictures, yes, but also some random things... a gum wrapper, an old wrinkled receipt..." she grimaced. "If someone found it, they'd probably assume it was trash."

"Exactly," Badass Little Old Lady said, clapping her hands together. "Now, with that in mind, I want you to look at the objects I have here on the table."

And suddenly the realization hit me and I felt sick to my stomach.

I looked down at the objects before me, scattered in deliberate chaos: one baby shoe, a game of keys, a stack of family photos, books, rosaries, various large water bottles, jewelry...

“And you are exactly right,” she said, motioning to Ella. “These objects, we find in the desert of the US-Mexican border, and they are completely perceived as trash. We, here, realize that these were once people’s most prized possessions, and do our best to honor them as such.”

And she was off. It made me realize how much of a modern archeologist she was; she took each object and asked us to think about it closely, wonder why a person would take it, what use it might have had, what it said about the person that they decided to take this object in particular, and why they might have left it behind.

For example, one lady’s makeup bag. Paola said that it belonged to a woman who was very concerned with her appearance. Silvia said it was probably a woman who wanted to clean up and look nice, blend in with everyone once she had crossed the border. And Badass Little Old Lady said it was probably a woman with a lot of dignity... which reminded me immediately of my mother and how she is loath to leave the home without makeup on.

The next thing she showed us was a man’s belt. We said he might have left it behind because the buckle was shiny and it reflected light, which wasn’t good for camouflage. I said it could have been used as a weapon.

“All valid hypotheses,” she said. “But... also consider this. 80% of the women who cross the border are victims of sexual violence. It’s... entirely possible that this belt belonged to a man who, once he had finished with a woman, had left the belt behind.”

An awful, ringing silence followed her words. I swallowed back bile.

But one thing really got to me... the game of keys. Clipped to the keys were two yearbook portraits of two kids from LifeTouch, and an Albertson’s membership card.

A spitting image of my mother’s game of keys.

That was what got me, what got me clutching the keys to my heart, squeezing my eyes together to stop the tears. The pictures were from 2008... the older kid was probably my age about now. I wondered if that kid was somewhere now, out in the world, waiting for his mother to reach him.

I looked at the back of the Albertson’s card. It read: If keys are found, please return to the nearest Albertson’s store.

I wanted to scream.

Badass Little Old Lady continued. She showed us people’s strategies for keeping their water cool, since inside the bottles the water could reach up to 120 degrees. She explained to us the coyotes (people who are paid to transport migrants across the border) and their involvement with the drug cartels. She told

us how sometimes, they would cover the floor of a van with people, place a wooden shelf inches above their faces, and then cover that shelf with a second layer of people, and so on, until the van was full. To optimize the number of people who could be transported.

“That sounds really familiar,” I managed. “Like the Transatlantic Slave Trade.”

She nodded at me with a bitter smile.

And she told us her work, which was to help the migrants survive their journey as much as they could. Their house was like a checkpoint of the Underground Railroad; if they found a migrant stumbling around in the hot sun, they took them in and nursed them back to health, and sent them on their way.

And it really made me see that parallel, so forcibly, I couldn't believe I'd seen it before. This is an entire race of people who have been oppressed into unbearable living conditions by another race of people, and who have no choice but to flee northwards. There is law enforcement along the way that will capture them and take them back. And... there are kind people on the other side, willing to take them in and help them.

But the Harriet Tubmans of this era are money-grubbing coyotes.

It also made me realize exactly how much, despite the fact that we could all call ourselves undocumented, their experience was absolutely nothing like mine. I came here on a comfortable plane. The only thing I have to deal for my troubles is fear. Not memories of this dreadful journey. Not living in the country that oppressed my own nation into submission (not *directly*, at least).

She kept talking. And my empathy was reaching its breaking point, vicarious misery was swelling in my forehead, throat, and eyes. I was going to crack. I pressed the baby shoe to my forehead and willed the words to not leave my lips: *Stop. Please stop.*

My nerves were very much emotionally fried by the time we got up and proceeded to do the desert walk and eventually visit the border. In the diversion of the murmuring and the putting-on-jackets, I walked up to Badass Little Old Lady.

“This is going to sound really weird... but... is it okay if I keep these keys?”

“You want to keep the keys?” She smiled at me.

“Yes. They... remind me of my mom's keys.”

“And where is your mom right now?”

“She's... she's here. She's home in Los Angeles.”

“And is she... is she undocumented?”

I clenched my toes. “We're all undocumented.”

That was my first mistake. She grabbed me by the shoulders and said, “And you're going to visit the border??”

“I mean, I have my California ID, and I'm a DACA recipient...”

“Do you have your DACA with you?”

“N-not exactly...”

She called Silvia over, who clapped her hand to her mouth and talked to our two group leaders.

“You didn’t bring your DACA??” Serena hissed.

“I didn’t think I needed to...”

“Didn’t think you needed to! Isabel, that document is the only thing that can keep you from getting deported!”

“But I have my California ID! The only way I could get this would be if I had a Social Security Number, and the only way I could get one would be if I were a citizen, a permanent resident, or a DACA recipient!”

There was then a scramble to get a lawyer, a friend of Badass Little Old Lady, on the phone. I talked to him and explained to him the situation, and I actually had to explain the ins and outs of the DACA process and how I got my California ID. He didn’t actually know (well, Arizona lawyers don’t specialize in California law).

I actually half-forgot my DACA, half-deliberately left it in my dorm. For the following stupid reasons.

- a) I didn’t want Border Patrol to know I was undocumented, DACA or not. If I showed them my DACA they would know and look at me funny and I’d get scared.
- b) I figured, since I needed an SSN to get my California ID in the first place, it would be implicit that I was a legal resident.
- c) I sort of saw the California ID as an upgrade. If I had it, no one needed to know I had a DACA. No one ever had to know I was undocumented. No questions would be asked.

But Silvia brought up a good point; they were going to ask us all if we were American citizens. And while the rest of the students could easily say yes and flash a US passport, we the undocumented DACA kids (there were two of us on the trip, including myself) were required by law to say no, and show them our IDs and DACAs. If I admitted to not being an American citizen and had no DACA to show for it, but had a California ID... they had every suspicion to think it was a fake, and take me into custody.

SB 1070 in full bloom.

“But I needed a Social to get this ID,” I argued helplessly. “They’d quickly find out I was fine...”

“This is Arizona,” breathed Gloria exasperatedly. “We can’t take that chance.”

She was right. They were all right. I bit my lip.

“But... I have rights...”

“I understand the feelings you’re feeling right now,” said Silvia, pulling a face of sympathy. “We always knew the separation would be emotionally difficult for you. It’s not fair. We know.”

I hated her. I hated her so much, for bringing up my feelings and making the heat sting my eyes and eventually dribble down my cheeks. I was horrified.

And I felt so *stupid*. What was I thinking, leaving my DACA at home? There was a time when I wouldn’t leave the home without it. How could I have put myself in this position?

So it was decided that I would stay in Badass Little Old Lady’s house while the rest of them went on the desert walk and eventually to the border. Badass Little Old Lady’s husband has very kindly offered to let me use their desktop computer. And I’ve been sitting here, typing mindlessly, with silent tears streaming steadily and stubbornly incessantly down my face for some reason.