

A Thousand Miles

By Warren Florence

On most mornings following a gin-and-tonic, late-night binge, Steve Partridge likes to sweeten his exotic coffee or espresso. He twirls the spoonful of sugar and sometimes cream, careful not to bang the mug, until he sees a liquid tornado. But today isn't bittersweet; it's just plain bitter. Instead, he'll take a shot of whisky with his coffee, for in about an hour Steve will begin the four-hour drive to abandon his wife.

Once his first foot hits the floor from the bed, chocolate and vanilla Labs follow his every step down stairs toward today, too bright a morning light coming off the tile floor. Given last night's late party and the early time of day, Steve fumbles with the sliding glass door locks and opens them out to the deck for a Potty? Gotta go potty, girls?

The dogs take off into the fenced backyard.

He walks to the fridge, opens the stainless-steel doors—the cold air rushing out feels good on his face—and reaches for the cream, places it on the counter. He reaches to the two small cabinet doors above the fridge for the Makers Mark and a shot glass. *This should ease this pounding hangover*, he thinks. Leave no doubt, this should also ease the day he is about to have. He heaves one down. The heat to his throat and chest causes him to shake it off violently. *Whoa! Shit!* So there he stands, a whiskey bottle in one hand, a shot to his heart in the other. *What the hell? What's one more going to do to me now?* The second one goes down a little easier than the last.

Steve leans, palms flat on the counter with both hands and feet spread, as if he's being subjected to a police search. He's merely holding himself up, a blank face hovering over the over-priced coffeemaker, hoping it'll drip faster.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip.

Through the glass pot he fixates on each drip. No matter how small or light or insignificant an amount appears, it falls onto the placid surface and a ripple occurs. *A ripple effect, all right!* he thinks. As his eyes fix at each drip's impact, he falls into it, staring into a portal, a time machine. *Let's get her outta here.* The imagined rehearsals of today's drive are broken when the dogs come back in.

Drip. Drip.

Steve gives himself a little crotch scratch and pinches the roll above his pajama line. This mush. This roll. This stuff sitting inside his skin, just lounging around his waist. He could blame the recent fat on a year's worth of anxiety. *But it's all over today.* Realistically, he knows it's the result of two months of too many late, hard-drinking nights and anticipates "a few too many" more during the months to come. What better way to handle the events leading up today's long drive than to sip it away? Than to unconscious toasts to powerlessness, depression, the unknown, to counting the days differently.

Despite recent drinking and nightly gourmet meals, he's escaped the dangers butter can do to a chef's body. Steve has come to chopping and pan-flipping and sauces later in life. In his early twenties, living among Atlanta's urban sprawl, he was in computer programming (which came with a bad business partner), then real estate (a money-cheating boss), then commercial appraisals—where he did well for himself—then his share of romantic interests. He'd woo this blonde or that brunette with late-night omelets and interesting cocktails at her house. He'd romance dinner dates at his house, serving up recipes he found in food magazines and cookbooks. Steve was among those early '90s guys willing—no, expecting and sharing—in domesticity. He had described all this to Linda, the girl he'd pictured marrying for ten years when they met in their mid-thirties. The giggly, business-conscious blonde fell to the "woo," the guitar playing and especially the cooking. A year into their relationship, Steve followed Linda's encouragement to pursue what he wanted: entertainment and feast, business and flavors. With cooking papers in hand and

exhausted by traffic, two gas tanks a week, and back-stabbing colleagues, Steve took the knife into his own hands, and made his home hobby his life's work. They bought a restaurant on the Carolina coast.

Steve hears water running upstairs. Linda has started her shower.

That's good, eh girls? he says to the dogs, waiting for their morning treat. Mommy's up. He rubs them both under their chin.

He wondered if he'd find Linda curled up under the sheets as he had a few times, panic stricken and unable to get out of bed. No one but Steve has consoled her sleepless nights. The red, puffy eyes. The unknown. *Perhaps she'll finally get the rest she's needed and deserved.*

A downward spiral would likely happen if she doesn't feel *needed*. With all that's ahead, she does need the restaurant (for it can't run without her, right?), the greeting and seating and managing the quaint front and wait staff. It's a distraction she's come to depend on. Like Steve, Linda likes the semi-entertainment business, too. Especially in a small town starving for cool food, where few culinary chefs diligently prepare creative dishes.

Steve pours a cup for Linda, and added cream. The dogs growl over a tennis ball. *Make coffee, check. Shower. Gas car. Grab the directions. Go. That's about it. There's nothing to pack.* According to the pamphlet she had received in the mail, she needs 'only the clothes you wear in.'

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