

# A Hurt In Negative

written by Guest Contributor | November 20, 2019



[Image: from "The Wide Night," Rebecca Rebouché]

Her mouth is a wound, all chewed up inside. At the end of the drive, she will have to confess where she's been.

She likes to look at photos and think about what isn't in the picture. Pictures are tiny windows, like in dollhouses. Dollhouses like the one her grandmother had, look but don't touch. The mother seated at the kitchen table, still in her tiny bathrobe, legs stretched out inhumanly straight, plastered smile on her face, hair carefully brushed and hanging straight down. The view through the tiny windows change—a step to the right reveals the father, watching the mother, smiling a plastic smile. But photos are bound by the limits of the two-dimensional frame. The viewer only sees a small square the photographer captured. She tilts the pictures and never fails to be surprised that the image remains the same. Images show one thing and one thing only. The world in negative haunts her.

She received a Christmas card a month ago from the married couple that lived in the apartment down the hall, a photo of the two of them in sweaters, scarves, and Santa hats. They have no children. The woman was a brunette with long straight hair and vibrant blue eyes. She had later seen a man at a The Ravenhead bar on New Year's. He gave her that all-to-familiar sensation—the *I've seen him before*. But the *when* of before, she couldn't make out. The girl was younger than him—much younger, purple-haired, her slender arms covered in tattoos; she was not the woman in the Christmas card photo. The girl's name was Evangeline, she overheard. Evangeline with faint Xs on the tops of her hands.

Before she moved out of apartment 3F she wrote a letter to the wife, describing his indiscretions. The letter was fun to write, an imagining of what happened behind closed doors. She signed it Evangeline and left it at their front door.

The gray night gives way to morning as the red sun peaks its head over the hills. She is driving down an empty highway—is the car hers?—in a small white pickup truck. The highway is a silver bracelet, the snow melted and refrozen in the crevices of the rumble strips. The sunlight gleams off of the neat rectangular blocks, a priceless heirloom laid out for miles and miles.

Who am I? She liked to ask the men and women that approached her at the bar.

Not because she knew and wanted them to guess, but because she was genuinely interested.

"What's your name?" They asked.

"Guess."

She chose a name from the list they recited. Some of them she rather liked. She had been an artist—a painter, working primarily in the beauty and mysteries of the nude human form. The woman named her Alice and asked to pose as a subject. Alice liked clove cigarettes and Sapphire Gin. Sapphire Gin tasted like Christmas trees. It was her favorite drink.

She had been Jade, a sex worker on her night off. From the man who named her Jade, she took \$50 that was in his wallet before the sun came up.

She had been Evangeline, a girl barely old enough to ask for drinks in a bar. A girl who liked much older men. A girl who satisfied a convoluted desire left empty from wives who would not give them a daughter. Daughters who did not have to ask for drinks at the bar but were handed them.

Each of them, she suspected, felt sorry for her. They gave her all manner of gifts they thought she would like. The truck is filled with them. A gift-shop mood ring, a tiny acorn paperweight, a bookmark an epigraph about daughters with a shamrock trapped inside, a bottle of peach schnapps, money, a book about clouds, a set of shading pencils, lingerie, a pack of clove cigarettes, a pocket-sized journal, a t-shirt from the show of a band she claimed to love, but actually had never heard of.

She sat with this box of things and went through it all. Are any of these things mine? She lit a clove cigarette. Did she like it? She liked the t-shirt—it was too big for her, and comfortable. She liked how she felt when she wore it, like she belonged somewhere. But the name of the band emblazoned on the front rang no bells, brought no memory of happiness. The ring didn't fit any of her fingers.

And then there were pictures. She had an old camera that spat out each picture. She took pictures of others and had them each take a picture of her. She threw the others away, but the pictures of her were proof that she existed. Every once in a while, she would take out the photos of herself and lay them out end to end across her apartment floor. She searched for a change. A change in the many photographs, she thought, would have more to reveal than any single one. In any single photo, the girl she was didn't matter. But if there was a change, she couldn't see it.

The night left her with tears. Tearing, she threw the photos around the room. The next morning, she picked them up and put them carefully back into the box.

It's in the seat next to her now, as if the items inside would help her explain herself. Maybe they wouldn't care where she'd been. She had a hard time imagining her homecoming going well. Homecoming wouldn't really be homecoming; home had never been home. He was dead, and that was the only

occasion that could have brought her 500 miles in a truck she didn't think she owned.

She still has the photos of herself as a little girl. Photos that could not show the hurt, the ugly things that she'd never told anyone. He is no longer in the photos, though he still lingers just outside the edges of the frames. He lives in her mother still, she knows. Returning home is a last desperate attempt. Perhaps if she can see the self she might have been without him, she can finally say her own name aloud without fear.

A brown fuzzy blur flashes across the road. A blur the size of a bus, obscuring her vision. She slams on the brakes, but the blur is gone. She looks around for it, but it's nowhere to be seen. She idles in the middle of the highway, knuckles white, arms braced. The mood ring on her thumb is vibrant blue.

The box of things tipped and scattered items across the floor.

She pulls the truck off to the side of the road and climbs out, leaving the keys in and the engine running. She stands in the middle of the highway, first looking towards home, and then back the way she came. She starts walking.

An old man in a yellow Jeep stops for her. The yellow Jeep reminds her of sunflowers and raincoats.

"My car broke down," she says through the open window.

"Hop in. I'll give you a ride back to town."

The Jeep is nice and warm.

"What's your name?"

She hesitates, remembering. "Elaine," she says.



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