

JAKOB

NOSTALGIA

Jakob looks at the ice cream shop and he remembers back when it was a gas station. It's been an ice cream shop for twenty years now, so his memories of it before have begun to tatter and fade: he wonders if he'd remember it at all if the place didn't still *look* like a gas station, if you couldn't look at the building and see exactly which part of it used to be the service garage, if you couldn't imagine exactly where the pumps used to stand just from looking at the layout of the parking lot. And yet sometimes a cluster of memory flares so brightly—he can remember, during the 1970s, being with his mom, waiting in line for gas at this exact station. It was an Exxon. He can recall everything about that moment: the upholstery of the car's back seat, the dust that sank through sunlit air, a faint odor of juice.

He's in Ohio, visiting the town that was *home* for the first 28 years of his life. It's just for a week, then he needs to head back to Chicago, find a job, let his summer vacation end. After all, it is officially autumn. The leaves are still green but the air has the first faint note of winter in it, and the stone bench he's sitting on chills his ass.

He's here with Melissa Flaum, a friend of his from high school, someone who he fooled around with the summer after graduation. They kept the romance casual—they knew that they'd get involved with other people when they went off to their separate colleges, and they hoped not to hurt one another when this happened. It worked: they stayed in touch, and they got together during the summers when they were home, and they each listened, without jealousy, to news of the other's relationships. An attraction continued to hum between them through all this, and occasionally, if it happened that they were both unclaimed during a summer, they would get together to watch a movie and find themselves making out on the couch an hour in, immersing themselves in the comfort of physical familiarity, taking solace from the closeness and the warmth of the other.

They caught up on the walk over here: he's told her how life in Chicago is treating him, how things are going with Freya, and, in return, she's told him stories about her clients at the mental health clinic, and, more solemnly, the tale of how her engagement disintegrated over the past year.

She watches a kid run around in the parking lot.

—Do you ever feel nostalgic? she asks.

He does. That's part of why he wanted to go to the ice cream shop, even though the air is cold and the shop is about to close for the season. He feels nostalgic for the time he spent here over the course of twenty summers. As a teenager, he loitered here, having conversations, gossiping, arguing. This is where he began to learn how to adjust the network of his allegiances. He remembers doing juvenile shit like fishing Reese's Pieces out of his sundae and flicking them at someone else, but he also remembers that a kind of intellectual curiosity awoke in him here; he had conversations with his friends about whether they believed in God, what they thought might happen after death. They shared a common interest in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and they discussed the political and ethical issues raised by the show. An argument about existentialism happened here after Jakob read *The Stranger*, another one about rationality and charity happened after someone else had fallen in love with *Atlas Shrugged*. He misses the freewheeling broad scope of those conversations: his past few years of academic study have revealed how infrequently people step outside of the space they've demarcated for themselves, how deeply they can retreat into the niche of a singular interest.

—Nostalgic? he says. —Yeah. I do. I'm a *totally* nostalgic person. I'm nostalgic for high school, nostalgic for college. Hell, I'm nostalgic for *right now*, sitting here, with you, eating ice cream. I can already tell that this is a moment that I'll miss when I go back to Chicago, and that makes me miss it right now, while it's happening.

He knows that Melissa's asking whether he feels nostalgic for her. Whether he misses her. And he does. He remembers making out with her on a dark jungle gym behind the elementary school; he remembers swimming naked in her pool one weekend while her parents were away somewhere. Furtive sessions, exciting—the risk and adventure, even in memory, make the events gleam in his mind. He does not see a return to those sorts of times in his future.

And, strangely, he misses not only the danger, but also the ease. Sometimes in his relationship with Freya he feels like he's treading through a brambled field, and just when he thinks he's found his way through, he hits the tripwire that causes the landscape to explode up in a curtain of hot mud. He's mapped out her head as well as he can, but he's unsure whether he's negotiating his way any better than he was two years ago. His times with Melissa seem breezy by comparison, effortless, and sometimes he yearns for that sort of ease, that comfort.

And yet he did not go to Chicago because he wanted to feel comfortable. He went because he wanted to learn, to face challenges. There are struggles, yes, but he believes that struggles have value. And this is why he does not want to return to Ohio. Not yet.

—But at the same time, Jakob continues, I think I'm pretty lucky. I've never wanted to go back to an age that I've already been. I wouldn't want to be a teenager again; I wouldn't want to be in my early twenties again. I'm *happy* to be almost thirty. I think I've got my shit together better than I ever have before. I may not have a job, or know what the hell I'm going to do next, but I think I'm going to do something good. I think I'm going to like my thirties.

Melissa looks at him. She seems ready to say something, but then she just studies his face for a while. When she finally speaks, she says: —Did you know you have a gray hair?

—This one? Jakob says. He points at his one stark white hair, the one that points out at a crazy angle from the rest of the hairs in his eyebrow.

—That's the one, Melissa says.

—Yeah, Jakob says. —I know it's there. But I kind of think it's cool. It's like a badge, you know? Like a sign that I've seen some stuff in my day. I'm kind of proud of it.

—I pluck mine out, says Melissa.

—You shouldn't, he says. —You would look great with gray hair.

—You're sweet, she says.

They look at one another for a while. It seems as though they can almost catch a glimpse of another possibility for them, as though the membrane that keeps the parallel universes separate has begun to wear through. But it passes. The membrane snaps opaque, and they are left with the only possibility they have: the one they have spent the last twelve years making for themselves.

Melissa points at his cone. —You're dripping, she says.