

~~“How many ya got?”~~

~~We ate thirty five of those things between us. I threw up for the next three hours of dull Texas countryside, until falling asleep somewhere near Midland.~~

11:45 p.m.

When I awoke, it was approaching midnight. My shift was not to start for another couple of hours, but something had yanked me out of sleep and demanded that I stay awake. Life has a cool way of doing that. It knows when you should be experiencing something, and it somehow finds a way to make you realize it as well. Thank god for this, because for me, what happened next became the most vivid memory I have of that entire summer.

“Someone needs to document this,” Andrew said from behind the wheel.

At first, the flashes came sporadically—about once every minute or so—and we never thought we would actually catch up to it. But as The Van continued west and rolled deeper and deeper into the Texas midnight, the lightning began to pick up in both frequency and brightness. It was violent; it was fantastic.

Flash.

From my perch in the back, I was able to take in the entire scene through the car’s large side windows. Michael slept in front of me, sprawled out on the impromptu mattress created by the folded-down bench seat. My legs rested next to his back while my eyes remained glued to the sky.

Flash.

Just as the shimmering lights of El Paso appeared somewhere out there on the horizon, we plunged headlong into the electric storm. Headlights became pointless; nature lit our way,

its electric fingers stretching down from the sky every two or three seconds.

Flash.

In western Texas there lies a sixty-seven-mile stretch of Interstate 10 that trapezes the southernmost edge of America, dancing perilously along the banks of the trickling Rio Grande. Traversing this section is a lot like trying to cross a border on a balance beam; a slip to the left drops you in Mexico while a slip to the right lands you in America. It was on this stretch that we now drove, The Van teetering along in the right lane, its bulky frame easily swayed by the strength of the rising wind. The lightning flashes now seemed to match our rpm rate. It was like driving through a cultural photo booth: every flare of light exposed us to the reality of our current position in fleeting snippets of illumination.

Flash. A glimpse to the right showed the rooftops of large department stores, gas stations, and fast-food joints standing immediately on the side of the road. America. *Flash.* A quick look to the left saw the lightning catch the silhouettes of small houses and barren streets across the river, only fifty or so yards away. Mexico. *Flash.*

“Someone needs to document this,” Andrew said again, craning his neck to try to catch as much of the wondrous scene as he could.

“I’m trying!” Frazier said next to him, staring through the lens of his camera. Yet his efforts were quickly proving to be in vain; no matter how many times he clicked, the lightning evaded his capture. No matter how many different angles he tried, he could not catch both sides of the road—both countries—at once. The Nikon could do no justice to the scene, and the lightning flirted with the frame, taunting Frazier’s efforts. As each image showed up dark on the digital screen, he began cursing the unfortunate results. “Damn!”

For me, this was the moment. This was the moment when I realized that what Andrew was saying was as true as it gets: somebody *needed* to document this. Yet it went far beyond the awesome lightning storm. This was the moment when I realized that somebody needed to document our *entire* story, for it was worth telling. It wasn't all flashes of light, it wasn't all epic travel anecdotes, and it certainly wasn't a canonical coming-of-age story—but what we were doing deserved to be told nonetheless.

But perhaps above all, this was the moment when I came to understand the true potential of the written word. As I watched Frazier continue to fail to capture the fleeting scene, I realized it wasn't his fault at all; even if he did manage to snap a picture of a bolt of lightning, a camera simply can't reproduce everything that goes into a scene like that. An image perfectly encapsulates visuals, but it often misses emotions and sensations. It was at that exact moment when I developed my own mantra as a writer: If a picture is worth a thousand words, then I shall write a thousand and one. I think I actually said it out loud right then and there.

Flash. I leaned forward and picked up the navy notebook I had purchased back in Phoenix. I hadn't written in it for a while, but a pen was still stuck into its spiral binding. I removed it quickly. Now tucking my legs up near my chest, I flipped to a blank page somewhere in the middle of the notebook, clicked the pen open, and wrote every word you just read.

"Somebody needs to document this," Andrew voiced once more.

"I'm on it."

Flash.