



ALABAMA RAIN

by

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We first made love on a shrimp boat in the rain, your grease stained hands and Pall Mall kisses moving over me like whispered secrets deep into the salty hope of my skin. When you proposed three weeks later, I cried as you slipped an onion ring onto my finger at White Castle and promised you would never drift out to sea.

I never knew I could take a punch until I fell for you.

Now that you're gone, it feels like waiting on the thunder after the lightning strikes. I pray to God to forgive me – not for pulling the trigger but wishing I had sooner.

Taking a bath after you raped me felt like being baptized again. My toes would pull open the drain, the tepid and dirty water receding until my body lay empty in the wake of salvation circling down the pipes. It reminded me of being in your arms on the deck of that boat, the rain washing our sins away.

Washed clean, still covered in the detritus of my shame, perfumed in loneliness.

Every day I find myself standing still, something of yours in my hands, paralyzed by the need to throw it away or keep it, a talisman of who you were to me, the man who never showed up. Old pictures, clothes, your hidden porn stash – all these treasures I would find as I dug my way through the emptiness of memories and mistakes. One night last week I lit a bonfire out back and burned most of what I had kept, sitting there in your favorite rocking chair, wearing that Crimson Tide jersey that smelled so much like you. The dog sat next to me, watching the fire crackle and dance as it consumed all of my offerings. Out there for hours, singing old Beatles songs, I finally pulled the gold wedding band off my finger and tossed it deep into the blaze.

“You deserve something after him, baby girl.” He couldn’t handle me after you, and with his only son dying on that motorcycle three years ago it must have seemed like God was trying to sail him away from the wreckage of our name. All he could do was fix up his old Chevy truck as a going away present and take me out for a steak dinner the night before I left. His kiss felt boyish on my cheek when he gave me the keys and told me to call collect when I arrived.

Before leaving town, I drove out by the shore and pulled the truck up on that old shrimp boat, the headlights shining on the name you hand painted on her. *Chloe*. Sitting in the truck, I opened the windows and let the breezes push through my hair, breathing in the musk of the night as I listened to the water lap against the boat, the creak of her moorings skipping the beats of my heart as I heard echoes of my crying out in your arms that night. After a while, I got out and went over to the dock, casting off the line and standing with my arms folded as I watched in silence, the drift of the tide pulling that boat away from me and the night I loved you the most.

Found a one night stand on the drive to Montana. He looked like those old Sunday school pictures of Jesus but had black hair and smelled of oil paints and real good pot. The sex was

good but I couldn't remember his name. All throughout the rest of the trip, Huckleberry would sit in the seat and look at me as if I had done something wrong, like I was the one caught scavenging in the trash.

She kept talking around your memory like there was a tripwire in my heart that she was scared to death she would fall over. When I finally said your name, the air in the truck stood still, like ice cubes of memory dumped into a glass of sweet tea.

“*Let the dead stay dead,*” Lilla said through lips tighter than the head of a snare drum. “Near as I recall, he almost *killed* you.”

“Still alive,” I declared to her. Huck barked from his place in the back, like an exclamation point hijacking a period. A twinge fluttered deep in my belly, and I pushed back the tears at the memory of you kissing my navel the last night we shared a bed without fighting.

It was then I wished it had been an open casket, so I could know what your face looked like when they pulled you out of the shoals. As I turned away from the lake, Huck stood at the water's edge and bayed as if the moon were full in a night's sky. He sounded afraid, like I was going to leave him too. I gazed at the blue sky above me and wished to be in a thundercloud, mending that loose thread you never were to me. My hand slipped into the pocket of my jeans, trembling fingers taking a sure hold of the charred ring of gold. Aunt Lilla watched as I threw it as far as I could out into the lake. I barely saw a ripple break across the water, a last drop of Alabama rain across the skin of my heart.