



# Tape Deck

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In the car, Michael asks me to sing Tammi Terrell's half of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" and I laugh anxiously, crossing my arms to form a full-body no. If there were anyone in the backseat to witness they'd probably think it's because I'm nervous, or I sing off-key, or I don't know the words. That, or they'd think it's because I like Michael. I don't.

I'm not nervous. I can't carry a tune, but I don't care, and I know every soul-belted syllable of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" but I can't sing it with him. I can't stand Michael. He's always showing up as a thumbnail on my phone screen telling me things I need to hear: to drink more or drink less—water or whiskey, it's all the same. Whatever.

I can't sing "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" because singing is something I only do drunk in karaoke bars after tequila shots with strangers I'm only pretending to like so that they will like me, so that I will be invited next time they decide to get drunk and sing karaoke. I don't give a shit if Michael likes me.

When his whiteboy-lemonade voice finishes off one of Gaye's lyrics like a well-placed exclamation mark in a black Baptist praise chorus, he tosses me the imaginary microphone—his other hand slinging the dinghy steering wheel. I don't move. Michael doesn't seem to care. He believes I've simply missed my cue and carries on what's been dictated as my portion of the song in a manner so cheerfully unaffected that I know I've become a single face in a crowd of three-thousand, watching a one-man Broadway play where the character can't quite see the audience (and doesn't really care to) because the spotlight is on him, and it's so bright, and he is so beautiful.

Michael is so beautiful, but I'd never tell him that.

Headlights and rain beat gently on the windshield and leak through the cracked window, soaking my thigh. I don't mind. I just want Michael to look more at the road and less at me. Right now his gaze is a weight I can barely hold and it's demanding I flex a muscle I simply do not have. You see, I hate Michael, and that takes so much energy.

I've hated him since we were eighteen and naked on his mother's living room rug. Before that moment we were just friends, and back then we shared a common dialect nobody else spoke—one which has since passed on to be declared a dead language. It was borrowed books and iPod playlists. Our friendship floated mostly on banter and odd questions, like, "What does your family do for Christmas?" and "If you had to live eternity on a deserted island, who would you spend it with?" Back then, I might have answered "Michael."

But I'm 23 now. I'm too old to have sex on the floor and too old to play cool anymore. I am 23 and he is too. We've both learned that Life is a large, ugly man we can't dance with sober, and one day both of our mothers are going to die. I've watched him fall out of love at least five times and he's watched me leave home every day for six years. He always waves goodbye like it's the last.

For me, Michael will always embody the sensation of homesickness: a feeling he reminds me is not just missing home. It is sickness; it is illness, and in mine and Michael's case, it is incurable.

He knows we're alone out here together on this island of Understanding, sending smoke signals and drunkenly shoving notes out to sea in glass bottles of Jäger. We're both hoping they end up in the hands of two doe-eyed eighteen-year-olds, afloat on a rug raft in a Midwestern living room, too clumsy to know not to touch the sharp parts, like broken bottles and each other's body parts. You see, I love Michael.

The tape deck is busted but the bass beat buzzes weakly through the portable Bluetooth speakers he's wedged between our seats as a makeshift car stereo. It barely drowns out the sound of the storm. When he sings, "No wind, no rain or winter cold can stop me," I turn my head, facing out towards the storm. I smile.

The headlights cast light on our faces as soft as secrets that could break us if they were just a bit brighter, and that's why I can't sing with Michael.