



Ketchum

Emma Rushfirth

This extract is the novel's beginning, which details Nell's journey back to Ketchum after 24 years.

Nell – 2018

When I dream, I dream of Adrienne.

The shape of her face, mainly nice. The way her nose would crook slightly to the right, her plethora of freckles, the exact indents in her cheeks when she would smile. The way she'd rock on her heels when smoking. The heavy Midwestern lilt in her voice, catching on the vowels. The smell of her hair after a day on the slopes. The coldness of her breath. The colour in her cheeks. Her worn overcoat, the marks from her sturdy boots imprinted in the snow.

When I still lived in Ketchum I would dream in pieces: fragmented images of my father that would shock me awake like ice down my back. These dreams began some time before Ketchum and I've kept them with me long after. Adrienne used to rock me back to sleep, clammy sweat sticking our bodies together. I never dreamed of her then.

Now, I wake from a dream of her, in the front seat of my Chevy. I feel like I've just met God. I feel like I've just shook His hand. Pushing open the door, I swing my feet out and crunch my way down the small layby. I light a cigarette. Breathe it in, and watch the odd car snake across the desolate Idaho highway.

The wind is biting. I can taste the frost in the air, feel the sting of early morning snow and if I breathe sharply, I can feel the hard peaks in my throat. It's been a long time since I've seen this expansive stretch of white sky. It's been a long time since I've seen Ketchum.

I stub the cigarette out with my heel. There's a long drive ahead of me. I wipe away the remains of sleep. Tomorrow, it will have been twenty-four years since I last saw Adrienne. I need to be awake.

A cop pulls me over twenty miles away from Ketchum.

I'm surfing through radio static with one hand when I hear the sirens and feel the cool blue light on my face. It takes me a few seconds to realise the sirens are blaring at me, and a few more to manoeuvre the car off the freeway. I shut off the engine, turn around to the backseat, littered with maps, coffee cups, layers of clothes that I've shed as the day warmed up. There's my old afghan on the seat behind me. Small splatters of blood cling to the fabric. I've been meaning to get rid of it for years. I can never bring myself to.

He knocks at the window and I roll it down. He's an older man, in his fifties, with a wiry grey beard and a gut that strains against his uniform. He's got a pad flipped open in one hand, a pencil in the other.

"You were going pretty fast."

I smile apologetically and nod. I was cruising at an easy fifty, well below the speed limit, but I know this kind of cop: bored on the stretch of empty road, pulling over any car with a dented bumper or faded plates.

"You in a rush?" He's looking between me and his pad, face drawn sceptically. I wonder if he recognises me.

I say, "Not particularly," my voice cracking slightly at the foreignness of speaking. The cop frowns. He looks older with his brow creased and his mouth downturned. Maybe he's older than I think, sixties not fifties.

He hums thoughtfully at this, peering to look into the backseat. He knocks on the darkened window. "Does this roll down?"

I scramble to oblige, yank the window down. It makes a painful screeching noise which makes both of us wince. "Sorry."

"This yours?" He points towards the afghan, reaching a hand over to pick at the stained pink material. I swallow. He rubs the material between his fingers thoughtfully. "Could do with a wash."

"She had a nose bleed," I say. "My daughter. It's my daughter's."

The cop drops the material but doesn't lean back out the car. He uses the pencil in his hand to poke at the empty coffee cups.

"I've just been out to visit her, and her nose just wouldn't stop bleeding. She's at college. Started in the fall." I can feel the cop's eyes on me, my entire face burning with the heat of the lie. "Out in Boston, of all places, it's like she doesn't know there are colleges closer by. It's like I said to my –"

The words stick in my throat, and I can't force them out.

“I know how you feel,” the cop says, leaning back out the window. “We were looking around colleges with our youngest the other week. She wants to go to the East Coast. It’s like they can’t wait to get away from here.”

He laughs and I do too. I wind the window up. I’m scared if he looks too hard, he’ll see the cracks in my story, in this mask I’ve grown so used to wearing.

He wants to run my plates. He takes down the numbers in his little notepad, and when he asks for my name, I don’t hesitate to say “Hailey Chiles.” This has been my name for long enough now that it slips out easily. Everything comes up clean. I pretend not to be relieved.

There’s an urge, right as he’s leaving, to tell him my real name. To see the way his face would turn, the darkening of his eyes, the flicker of recognition. Would he see the familiarity of my features once he knew who I was? Would he wonder how he didn’t see it straight away?

He stops suddenly a few paces from the car, half turns to face me, and I’m convinced he’s worked it all out. I swallow.

“You think she’ll be okay?” he asks. “My daughter. By herself at college?”

There’s this feeling, in the pit of my stomach, like I’ve missed a step or fallen off the sidewalk. I shrug. I hope it’s reassuring. The cop raises a hand to say goodbye and retreats into his car.

I lean back breathlessly and close my eyes for a second.

-

When I open my eyes again, the sky has darkened to a deep blue and a thin layer of frost has covered the bonnet of the car.

-

The motel is just a short drive from where I was parked, 18 miles out of Ketchum, and practically deserted. For a second I think it’s closed, but the dimly lit bulbs flash on the “open” sign and there’s a man in the reception, sucking on the end of a barely lit pipe.

I pay in cash, and the man asks no questions, though does crook an eyebrow when he sees I’m wearing muddy blue trainers instead of snow boots. They’re eight years old, soaked through and peeling apart at the sole.

“No grips on ’em,” the man says. “One patch of black ice and you might take a nasty tumble.” He doesn’t show me to my room – instead, he points to his right. “Three doors down on your left. Don’t leave the shower running all night.”

I want to ask if that's something guests do often, or if he's making some clumsy reference to Psycho, but he's already turned his back on me and is doubled over, trying to relight his pipe.

I follow his instructions – three doors down to my left, the last room in the motel – and push the door open with my shoulder. There's a particular stench to the room, like something decaying, and a mark on the bedspread the colour of dishwater. I cover my nose with one hand and shut the door with the other, praying that if this man is the descendent of Norman Bates, he'll at least kill me quickly and with all my clothes on.

Avoiding the bed, I inspect the rest of the room. A beat up desk, a telephone haphazardly stuck to the wall, a lamp with a smashed bulb. The bathroom is a small square with a basin, toilet and shower. I run my fingers over the tiles and count the cracks. Seven, one in the centre of the shower wall the length of my arm. I turn to the mirror. I avoid catching eyes with the woman staring back at me.

I'm tired suddenly. I lay on the stained bedspread. I close my eyes and when I do, I see Adrienne. She is dancing for me, twirling by the fire. There's a glint in her eyes and a deep feeling in the pit of my stomach that something is going to happen that I can't stop. I watch her dance, in her ski pants, braids twirling around her head like halos, hoping the act of this is enough to reach back and change her mind, keep her dancing, stop her from leaving me.

I open my eyes and Adrienne is gone.

-

I am standing smoking in the bristling morning wind when the motel owner appears and asks to bum a cigarette. I pull one out and he holds it for me to light, cupping his hands around the flame to protect it from the breeze.

"I know who you are," he says, and I feel my breath catch in my throat. I take a drag, hoping the smoke will remind me to breathe. Instead it makes me splutter. I stifle a cough.

I don't recognise this man, but he could know me. I'm not vain enough to think my face hasn't been weathered by the years, but there are still certain features that give me away. My height, for one, unusually tall for a woman, and the cluster of moles above my lip.

I drop my cigarette to the floor and crush it slowly under my foot. "Oh yeah?"

"You're one of those Hemingway fans," he says. As he exhales, the smoke curls in front of my face. "We get a lot of those lot passing through. Off to visit his grave, I'm guessing."

I nod, relieved, accepting this disguise he has granted me. "Are you a fan?"

The man shakes his head, nose scrunching up. "Not for me, darling. I prefer my writers sober and sane."

I laugh. The man scratches his chin. “I like a good murder, I do. Christie, Capote – though of course, they call that ‘true crime’ nowadays. Do you write?”

“A little,” I shrug. I think about Adrienne. I shake my head no. “Not as much as I used to.”

“Well, if you were looking for a story, Ketchum would be the place,” the man says sagely. “Had its very own serial killer, some twenty odd years ago. My Jane was still with us then, God rest her soul. I remember her coming home from work in the evening when that body was found. I bet you heard about it. Gruesome business. Snow was all red from his blood, poor fella.” The man shakes his head sorrowfully.

“I’m not looking for a story,” I say.

“Shame,” the man replies, then drops his cigarette into the melted snow.