

sally's diner—dusk | Sara Vallejo

They're whipping down the highway, a streak of blue against the black asphalt and the undulating sea of golden prairie, when the sky rips open. Rain slicks across the windshield, and even with the window wipers screeching and thumping back and forth as fast as their tiny motors will allow, neither of them can see more than ten feet in front of the hood of the pickup. It's Lucy, the girl with ginger hair and too many freckles, who spies the flickering neon lights of the diner. Roland, who mustn't be more than twenty, makes for it as carefully as he can, leaning over the steering wheel so his nose is nearly pressed to the windshield to see through the fury. No one is quite sure how long this particular smudge of prairie has been home to this junction, home to Sally's Diner—open twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, boasting both the best Belgian waffles and Salisbury steaks this side of the Atlantic.

Rain crashes down around them and thunder growls, and they can't seem to reach the diner soon enough. But, suddenly they're tearing across the gravel lot, their jackets pulled up over their heads as umbrellas, panting and laughing as they're bombarded by the warm summer storm.

He holds the door open for her, and they stumble into the diner. "Roland, it's perfect," she murmurs, and he takes her hand and points out a booth. "There?" he asks her. She smiles. "Yes, there." They drip all over the floor of the diner and hunch together sheepishly as they slink toward the booth, tripping over their sodden sneakers. Their waitress, a short woman named Carla with a crown of tight gray curls, is unduly nice to the two rascallions that have just tracked puddles across the yellowed linoleum, even more so when their sincere apologies stretch shy smiles across their faces. When she serves them generous slices of blueberry pie and steaming coffee, she smiles at them like she smiles at her own grandchildren.

They are deliciously happy with their pie and with Sally's Diner, with each other, and with the web of state and national highways that zips two halves of the nation together. They're running away—no, not away but rather, toward. Running toward something grand, their feet slapping the hard earth with each bound and stride. Even Sally's Diner, a single spark of light

against the muddy earth of Midwestern prairie, an oasis, is more extravagant than the dreams they'd had before they'd set off.

Roland presents her with their tattered map, and she takes the precious article from him with eager and trembling hands and spreads it out on the Formica table. She traces the tip of her finger down the curving red line of the highway and finally marks their stop with a red dot. She notes *Sally's Diner—dusk. Blueberry pie* in careful script across the intersection of an estimated latitude and longitude. He smooths the folds from the map, and they both look, awestruck, at the miles and miles before them. They hide in the diner, the rain lashing against the windows, lightning lighting the sky like the flash of a million cameras. They drink their coffee and eat their blueberry pie, share smiles and laughter, brush fingertips and marvel at each other and the sheer wonder of Sally's Diner at dusk: the sky, the acres of prairie, the summer storm, the freckles across the bridge of her nose, the curl of his hair.