

Fade To Black



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Warnings: Character Death

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Summary: Saying 'Yes' the world has ended and gone full circle, Dean drives through the states in his Impala with Castiel's vessel in the trunk looking for his brother with nothing but a photograph and a post-it note for help.

A/N: I started this story a long time ago. I finally finished it.

When Dean saw the diner, the first to be standing with four walls and a roof in two states, he pulls over without much thought. It's a boxcar diner.

The paint has been stripped off, not by anyone's hand. By the little scraps of undercoat left over from what angelic or demonic or whatever monster of a thing had blown passed, Dean can see that it was once red. A little red diner, only one of its kind statewide.

There are people inside, eating and talking about a life that's relatively normal. A little bit hopeful. A little bit uncertain. A whole lot of 'why's. And it's normal conversation now; less small talk about weather more talk about philosophy and Nietzsche *proverbs*.

Who could murder God?

He thinks of a warm slice of apple pie right from the oven with creamy vanilla ice cream melting on the side and a day old ham sandwich to go. A cold beer

sounds great too.

Dean shifts the Impala into drive, because this isn't where he needs to be.

Less than a month ago, Dean woke up. It was his first breath in who knows how long and his lungs had ached with it. He was on the ground, a fog of dust had his eye's watering and his back had felt like it'd been broken into two completely separate spines. Blood filled his mouth and he had spat out one of his molars.

The scene had been familiar. It was like a bomb had gone off. Trees lied flat on the ground, circling him. The grass singed into ash and his clothes and arms were a blackened mess. The air smelled like burnt electricity. And he had been so damn thirsty. He had choked on his own swelling throat when he tried to swallow.

But he hadn't been alone.

Castiel was feet from him, unconscious. Unmoving and pristine looking and such a beautiful sight that he could only kneel before the angel because he was sure his legs wouldn't be able to keep him from falling on his face.

Dean had grabbed Castiel by the lapels, by the shoulders, every part he could grasp, shaking him with all he had. Had punched at his thin chest, pushed air into Castiel's lungs. Willed him to just wake up. To breathe. To show that he wasn't left with a corpse as some fucked up angel joke.

He didn't move. For a long time he didn't move.

It was subtle when it had happened. Slow, steady breaths. Like he was asleep. Castiel's chest moving up and down with an evenness that made Dean think this could only be one neurotic, perfectionist angel trying hard to fit in.

Dean had brushed the dust from the angel's face, lowering his own to feel the life coming from *Castiel*.

Or maybe it had been Jimmy Novak. Maybe it's Jimmy breathing softly, acting comatose. Dean still isn't sure and it makes him feel human.

He's in the outskirts of South Dakota when he pulls over to a run down motel called, "Jupiter's". The neon sign is broken, but the 'J' is still flashing bright blue. There's a kid's birthday party happening in the parking lot.

The little girl has a red and green striped cone strapped to her head. Her name is Sara-Emma and she's turning nine years old. They don't have a cake, but they have a single brown candle lit up and she blows it out quickly only watching the flame for a second.

Dean waves at them and parks the Impala as close to the room as he can. Taps the trunk and says '*goodnight*'.

He parks the car in front of the window. He dreams.

Sam is sitting next to him in their Impala.

It's hot and all four of the windows are rolled down. The radio is on, he doesn't know what the song is but it's anemic and something only Sam and twelve year old girls would like. It's a cassette that his brother had bought from some gas station a few hundred miles back. It was cheap and the only one for sale.

They're on their way to a haunted gallery. (Maybe it was a museum or an old farmhouse in the country or a damn Chucky Cheese in Hollywood, he doesn't quite remember.)

Sam is looking at him and he's smiling. Grinning. A white smile that is just so damn blinding and full. Dean doesn't have to count how many teeth he can see because for the entirety of Sam's life Dean has been keeping track. Remembering each one that had fallen out and the ones that had grown in. Sneaking quarters under Sam's pillow, convincing his little, shorter brother it was the Tooth Fairy and no she wasn't going to stab him anywhere. It was the one monster that he didn't have to grip and aim his .45 for.

Dean had thrown the teeth in the dumpster outside, anticipating the new ones and the new grins.

"Dude, why the Hell are we listening to this crap? Are my ears bleeding? I feel like my head's gonna explode from the sheer shittiness of this band." Dean says, looking sparingly for his shoebox of tapes.

"It's different, Dean. We need different. Listening to the same thing, the same tape over and over again. That's Einstein's definition of insane. And we've been

listening to these songs for our entire lives.”

“We’re not going insane. Don’t you think we’d notice?”

“Maybe we’re too crazy to tell that we’re too crazy. Maybe we’ll be in this loop forever.”

“What loop?” He’s confused and ignores the road rushing under the Impala and stares at Sam.

Sam who is saying something. He’s smiling and he’s saying something. But the damn pansy music is too loud.

Dean wakes up half passed three in the morning with the sheets sticking to him and tangled around his legs. The sweat is drying quickly and he’s freezing. He takes a shower (the only reason he even rented the room), the water is hot and he thinks he might just burn from it.

His skin is raw and blistering when he gets out. The few scars he managed to gain from his years after being resurrected are gone, except the handprint on his shoulder. The scar is still red, it still stands out and catches his eye every time he happens to look that way. It’s the only thing he has left to remind him it wasn’t all in his head.

The angle is too awkward and off for him to fit his own hand against the brand. Dean tries to anyway, his palm only brushing a blistered ridge and only feels a slight rush of sensitivity that hits him low.

He ignores it.

He shoves his Smith & Wesson and canteen of salt into his duffle and tosses the motel key onto the bed.

Popping open the trunk he sets his duffle aside, pressing his fingers to the warm neck of Castiel, looking for a pulse. It’s there; it’s always there. Slow and steady and perfectly in rhythm. He presses a thumb to Castiel’s bottom lip, feels a hot puff of breath escape from chapped firm lips. He slides his thumb further and feels a wet heat.

The angel, or maybe just an ordinary and very unlucky man, feels incredibly alive. He is alive, whoever it is in there. The blood is running and the breathing is natural. Dean grabs hold of Castiel’s hand, squeezing and hoping for any response. Any sign.

He get's nothing. Like always.

"Night, Cas." Pauses, "Or Jimmy." It's awkward, but he needs to say something.

Half the time he expects some response from the man or angel sleeping in his trunk and finds himself waiting until his feet are sore for blue eyes to look back at him. To see a friendly face in a world that's gone to Hell and come back for the worse.

He let's go of the hand. They were never very physical, the angel always standing close but never touching. Dean had patted him on the shoulder, manhandled him when aggression was the only way—but words had done it. Dean wasn't very articulate, never knowing quite what to say, only ever trying, but what he could get out seemed to get across to Castiel.

He closes the trunk gently, patting the car as he heads to the driver's side and throws his duffle onto the passenger seat.

Before Dean starts the car, he pulls out a photo and a post-it note from his jacket. The neon 'J' the only light in the small parking lot makes him squint.

A picture of a barren crater, attached to it a yellow post-it note of a sigil he doesn't recognize. Michael had left him clues.

Dean is on the I-405 in California, the Impala rutting along on the empty stretch with only two other cars sharing the highway. He doesn't turn the radio on. The stations are all static having been blown away one way or another.

The government controls the one station that does work. It's an army General with a Texan accent drawling on about what happened—what's happening. The General talks about explosions and catastrophes Dean doesn't remember. Death tolls that reach the millions. Cities that have been obliterated by unknown forces. Blame that's circling the world like a disease.

He can only ever stomach five minutes of the station before he slams on the brakes or punches the steering wheel or yells so damn much that he's sure he's woken up Castiel.

There's no music, not anymore. He shuffles around in the beat up shoebox and

picks a random cassette. It's Metallica.

He slides the tape in and the Impala dutifully begins to erupt in guitars and roaring vocals. Cracking the window Dean belts out against the silent highway "*I have lost the will to live; simply nothing left to give—*"

Dean cocks his gun and stares at the vampire in front of him.

"Haven't seen your kind in a while." He says. The vampire flicks the stray hair out of her face. She's the first non-human Dean's seen since he's woken up.

"I could say the same thing. You hunters just about disappeared. Thought you'd all gone to the church and gave yourselves to the '*Lord almighty*'."

"What can I say? Not all of us are believers in the lazy son of a bitch."

"I feel like we should be fighting. Shouldn't you be swinging around a machete and not a shotgun? Shouldn't my head be covered in dirt?" They're circling each other and Dean hasn't lowered his gun. He's aiming at her chest. It would hurt her but it wouldn't kill her. His knife is underneath his coat. The blade warm from the press of his skin, he barely notices it.

She's unarmed.

"You *want* to die?" He sounds surprised, he is.

The vampire shakes her head and looks up. The full moon is the only light and she looks sick. Vampires always look a little off, the way they walk is predatory, but this one—this one looks starved.

"The world ended but we're still here—barely. I've seen so many people being ripped apart. I've eaten my share, I'm not denying that. I won't. But they were so scared. They tortured and obliterated and they were so damn scared." Dean doesn't ask who 'they' are. He knows who 'they' are. He was one of them.

"I can't do it anymore." She says after a pause, smiling slightly and she looks ethereal in the dark. Serene and beautiful. "I haven't had a single bite in months. But I'm still here."

Dean sets his gun down reaching behind him he pulls the machete out of its spot.

The vampire doesn't move just keeps looking through him and Dean feels the hairs on his neck stand on end. He hasn't done this months—maybe even years.

"You sure?"

She nods.

He slowly walks the few steps between them, pressing in close enough that the cut can be as clean as decapitating can be.

"I've seen you before." She says suddenly. Dean pauses.

"Where?"

"You were possessed weren't you? By one of those angels." Dean nods. "I saw your meat suit in Seattle. Put on one terrifying show."

He doesn't remember. Everything is a blur. Michael had left him in the dark, never giving him a moment to see what he agreed to. It was a small corner and Dean had been forced to face the wall, an invisible hand holding his head in place.

She could be lying but he doubts she cares enough.

He pulls out the photo of the crater and shows it to her. She stares at it before looking back up.

"I don't know where that is."

Dean gently slides the photo back into his jacket's inside pocket. He pats it to make sure it's not going to fall out and brings the machete up.

"Good luck." She says before her head is on the ground covered in dirt.

Sam is next to him in the Impala. The windows are down and his hair is blowing in the warm California air. He's smiling, all pearly white teeth are blinding in the sun.

Sam leans over and slips a cassette in. The music starts to play. It's not one of the tapes they listen to; it's new and still has the plastic case it came in.

“What the Hell is this?” Dean asks, reaching to eject the tape but his hand is pushed away. Sam is humming alongside the singer’s quiet voice.

His hand had felt real—bones, muscles, and calluses that Dean only knows as Sam’s.

“Sam?” Dean grabs Sam’s shoulder. He’s warm and firm and right there. Grabbing a fist of the flannel shirt, Dean tugs at his brother.

“Sammy.” He says, ordering his brother to look at him. Tugging harder he ignores the road and reaches two hands across the Impala’s seat to grab Sam. Sam isn’t looking at him, he’s staring ahead and humming along with the song.

Dean is shouting, his ears ringing and the pressure suddenly becoming too much. His desperation becoming binding.

“Where are you?” He asks, finally letting go of his brother. His own hands falling to the leather seats. The road is still going by with the Impala roaring on her own.

Sam is still humming, still grinning like an idiot and Dean wakes up.

The Impala still had Dean and Sam’s cell phones when he had found her outside the clearing he had woken up in. The best explanation of this was that Michael had left her there for Dean. It’s the one thing Michael has done that Dean knows about and understands.

The rest—the photo of the crater, the sigil on a post-it (how he got either is beyond him), and Castiel/Jimmy are as much a mystery as they had been the day he woke up. He isn’t thankful for the return of his Impala, he can’t be. Dean tries the cell phones, one after the other—none of them work.

This is when he learns that communication in the new world has all but vanished. This is when he learns that it’s been years. And two days later of non-stop driving is when he learns Bobby is gone.

Dean salts and burns the body, a hunter’s funeral. He doesn’t pray. He watches the flames as they erupt and engulf his friend—his father.

It's a cloudless and beautifully blue day in Nevada when Dean sees a functioning bar. The man who owns it, his name is Ed and Ed gives Dean a free bottle of Crown Royal after not knowing where the crater was.

"You look about as beat down as I feel. Take it. Share it with somebody you give a shit for."

Dean had laughed because the prospect of getting drunk was just about the best thing he could dream for these days.

He was on Route 50 in Nevada when he pulled over. There was no one around. Not a car not even a bird. Going around the car, he unlocks and pops the trunk. Castiel is still there.

Sometimes, in moments before he falls asleep, he thinks that one day he'll open the trunk and it will be empty. Castiel will have flown off and gone back to Heaven, leaving Dean behind to find Sam on his own.

Now, though, now the angel is still there, curled slightly to fit into the trunk. He looks the same (*ragged and ruffled like he fell right from Heaven*). Putting his hand in front of the angel's mouth Dean can feel the soft intake and exhale of air.

Quickly unscrewing the cap to the bottle, Dean takes a swig of the whiskey. The burn is thorough and lights him in a way he hasn't felt in long time. Coughing he takes another drink, swallowing as much as he can, the whiskey is warm and it needs some ice because Nevada is hot as Hell. He drinks more despite the heat.

"You would love this, Cas." He says quietly, gesturing to the bottle in his hand. "Shit is strong, you might even get a little tipsy from this."

Another drink, more of sip. His head is finally feeling a little lighter—a little more like a stranger.

"Are you some sort of reward for giving Michael a vessel? If that's true, there's not much we can do when you're comatose in my trunk." Dean says, cursing at Castiel for being asleep, for not being with him. He tips the bottle back and drinks through the burn.

"I'm freaking alone and I'm missing so much—It's like I'm losin' it. And Sam—"
His voice snaps. Finishing that thought is something he can't do; he can't allow himself to even think that. His throat constricts painfully and suddenly he wishes

he hadn't stopped and just kept driving. He wishes he hadn't been weak.

"I shouldn't have said 'yes'." It's an apology he thinks the angel would understand. Screwing the lid to the bottle back on, Dean leans over and brushes his lips against Castiel's brow. The skin is so warm that Dean feels himself drifting to press against his friend.

Instead he closes the trunk, patting the metal as he does so. "Night, Cas."

Sam's smile is bright. He's sprawled out in the seat next to Dean in the Impala. The air is warm and confining like an embrace. The effort to keep his eyes open is getting more difficult. But he wants to watch his brother.

"Sammy, where the Hell are you?" Dean asks. Sam is smiling at him and he feels himself drift into consciousness.

Along the highways there are military checkpoints. Dean avoids them; he has a body in the trunk and he really doesn't want nor know how to explain. The checkpoints are used, from what he can gather, to give citizens a 'helping hand'. Water, food, a clean place to take a piss.

But Dean is what caused the checkpoints, and if anyone had pictures of him—well, he wasn't sure what they'd do. Spending any time in lock up would just keep him from finding Sam and that's really the whole point of Dean's life now. Taking care of his baby brother and he's been doing a pretty shit job recently.

Just as he's entering Utah he sees down the strip of road a hastily built check point with men dressed in camouflage waiting for his car to come near. It's too late to turn back and not be suspicious. He rolls his window down as the man approaches.

"You doing all right today, Sir?" The soldier looks young and Dean finds himself picturing the man terrified at the bloody genocide that had been happening.

"I'm *swell*." Dean says, grinning.

"Well, I'm glad someone is. You're the first one to come this way today. You need

water? Some granola?" Sam would be all over the granola. Dean shakes his head 'no'.

"I've got plenty of water, thanks."

"Good, good. There's a gas station about 20 miles North if you need some. Other than that you keep havin' a mighty swell day." The soldier smiles at him and it may be the most sincere smile Dean has ever seen.

Quickly taking out the photo, Dean fumbles to show the man the picture as he does to every person he has met.

"You know where this is?" He asks, handing the photo over to the soldier. The man takes it and looks over it with earnest. Suddenly he waves the other soldier who has been off to the side over. Dean feels the urge to press on the gas pedal and leave before any more people can come closer to the car. To Castiel.

The two soldiers are looking at the picture, saying something too quiet for Dean to hear.

The first soldier hands the photo back.

"That, my friend, is the Barringer Crater. It's in Arizona." The blood swarms into his ears and all Dean can hear is his heart pounding.

He says thank you and has never meant it more in his life.

The crater is large and expansive—and enclosed. There's a small building on the outskirts that leads to the crater. Parking the Impala, Dean double-checks the lock on the trunk.

He runs.

The building is empty, no one is there and the sunlight through the windows is the only lighting. His head is thundering and he can feel every inch of himself as he moves through the beige rooms, passed the crater maps and info graphs.

Kicking the door to the crater open Dean stops only to slide down the dusty slope of it. It's deep and he picks up more and more speed—sliding across stones and sand. He reaches the bottom and stumbles back into running. The center of the

crater holds a flat stone surface.

Pulling his knife out he slices his palm. Blood gushes from the deep cut.

He doesn't need the post-it of the sigil—he's memorized it. It's become something innate, something he's drawn when he's half asleep over and over again in half-hearted hopes that it might just work regardless of where it is.

With his other hand Dean dips his fingers into his palm and draws the circles and lines that make up the sigil.

He waits. Nothing.

He slams his bloodied hand into the center of the symbol. It glows. The ground cracks beneath him. Pushing himself away Dean watches as the ground opens. Light erupts from the earth, the brightness too strong, too much for Dean to look.

A hand is on his shoulder, strong and firm forcing him closer.

"This is where Lucifer was forced into Hell, Dean." Castiel says pulling Dean against him, embracing him. The light is gone and he can see the dusty crater. Sulfur is suddenly engulfing the air and Dean struggles to breathe. The stench burning his throat as he gulps for breath.

"What the Hell?" He manages to gasp out. He wants to ask how Castiel is awake, what happened to the angel—but he just needs to turn around. He has to. The arms encircling him are like steel and he can't move.

"Sam—" He starts, struggling harder against the angel to let him go.

"You let his soul out, Dean. You freed Sam from the cage." Castiel's voice is gruff and he's talking fast; his arms grow tighter around Dean.

"The fuck does that mean?" He gets his arms in between them and Dean pushes against Castiel's chest. The angel seems to finally get it and releases him.

The crater is empty. The bloody sigil is burnt and cracked. Sam isn't there.

"You freed him." Castiel says quietly, Dean feels him place a hand on his lower back.

"You freed him."

Dean pictures a peaceful Sam with a toothy, blinding grin.