

Engine and Annie

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Engine watched Annie walk up to him. The dusty old park they met at everyday complimented her nicely. She was practically formed from shades of tan and brown and beige, only distinguished from the dry ground by the beat-up purple sneakers he'd watched her steal from Walmart 2 years ago.

“Hey, Engine. Engine, Engine, Engine. Is that your real name?” She sunk down next to him on a faded green merry-go-round.

“Dunno.”

“How'd you get called Engine? Was your momma drunk when she had ya?”

“Dunno.”

“Well, Engine,” Annie laid down on the merry-go-round, squinting at the bright sky. The zippers on the fanny-pack around her waist made noise as she moved. “I was readin' in that one red school book today. I know it's summer but I was bored outta my head and I knew you wouldn't be out so what's the point of outside if daddy ain't screamin' his mind out and you ain't out here. In my school book there were lotta photos of Arizona. You know Arizona have a trout that ain't anywhere but there?”

“Nope. You interested in Arizona?” Engine had gotten up to follow Annie, who had jumped up spontaneously sometime between ‘You know’ and ‘ain't anywhere’.

“They had four battles in Tucson, Engine. Four.”

“Okay.”

“Anyways, I was reading Arizona in my book and daddy came into the bed-room and was all swaying. He was real quiet, and I got weirded out, so I left to come find you.”

“Quiet?”

There had only been three times in Annie and Engine’s friendship that she had told him her father had been unusually quiet. Engine stopped walking, causing Annie to also stall. He stared at her neutral expression and how her foot lingered in the air for a moment before she set it to the ground. They were almost out of the park now, headed toward their houses.

“You good?” He asked.

Annie let out a puff of air and looked back at the roundabout.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, Engine. Yes. Move your feet, asshole.” Annie turned and started walking again, tugging at the hair-tie on her braid until it came loose. Stretching the hair-tie with her right thumb and left pointer finger, she shot it across the street. “We have shit to do.”

“What shit?”

“We’re road tripping to Arizona.”

“Roadtripping.”

“Yeah. We gotta pack.”

“Roadtripping.”

Annie picked up her pace. Engine kept up with her a few feet behind.

“Yes, Engine. Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Go home and pack. One bag only, we need a light load. Grab clothes, your other shoes, and get a second bag but put food in it. Only food in the second one.”

“Okay.”

Engine’s kitchen table was flipped on its side, one of the brass legs bent inward. It had been that way for two weeks, so usually he ate in his room or went outside. Today, he hung a bag on the unbent leg and searched in the pantry for anything unopened. He brought out a wheat-thins box and two cosmic brownies. There were maybe bagels in the fridge, but fighting the rats for them didn’t sound too pleasant. Engine opened his first bag, shuffling through his clothes to get to a little bag with two twenty-dollar bills and three fives. He shoved it in with the food and closed both bags, swinging one over each shoulder and pushing the screen door open. He slowly walked to Annie’s house. She was sitting in her driveway when he arrived, a bag sat on each side of her and a key fob in her hand.

“Engine. Engine, Engine, Engine. Is that your real name?”

“Dunno.”

“How’d you get called Engine? Was your momma drunk when she had ya?”

“Dunno.”

“You got clothes?” She asked.

“Yeah.”

“Shoes?”

“Yeah.”

“Food?”

“Yup.”

“Good. Put your stuff in the back.” Annie stood up and walked to the back of her father’s grey van. She unlocked the back doors and opened them for him, stuffing her bags in before stepping aside.

“I only got 55 bucks. You got cash?” He asked.

“Nope.”

“Then we don’t got roadtripping money.”

“\$55 is roadtripping money.” Annie closed up the back and started walking toward the passenger door. “You can drive?”

“Yeah.” Engine walked to the driver’s side and didn’t speak again until both of them were settled in their seats. “We’re gonna need gas. And food, a place to sleep.”

“We’ll sleep in here,” She adjusted the hem of her shirt, looking out the window. “and I can get guys to give me money if I ask pretty enough.”

“Guys.” He said.

“Yeah. Guys.”

“You hang around any guys?”

“Other than you?” She looked at him. Her face was still. “No.”

“But you would for cash?” He looked at her until she spun her face toward the window again.

“Engine. Engine, Engine, Engine. Is that your real name?”

“Dunno.”

“How’d you get called Engine? Was your momma drunk when she had ya?”

“Dunno.”

He hears a small smile in her voice.

“Start up the engine, Engine.”

Annie’s eyes were still focused on the world beyond the van window. He looked at the back of her head for a moment before sticking the keys in the ignition.

“Okay.”

The van started moving, jolting Annie out of her window-gazing. She moved her head to the side, stopping when her eyes landed on Engine. He pulled out of the driveway and turned down the road, navigating through their neighborhood. He seemed calm, taking one turn and then another as she watched his face.

“Wait.” She said. The van slowed but didn’t stop, and he looked at her. “I left my school book at the house.”

“At the house.” He said. She looked him in the eye.

“Yes, Engine. Yes.”

The car stopped and Engine turned the wheel. He reversed and pulled forward, repeating the process until the van faced Annie’s house again. They drove slowly, and he backed into the driveway, returning it to its original spot. Annie sat in her seat, staring forward at the street. She opened the van door and got out, walking to her front door and disappearing inside. Engine waited about 5 minutes to make sure, and then got out of the van and got his bags out from the back. He walked home, and ate Wheat-Thins outside until the sun set.

The next morning, when Engine got to the park, Annie was already sitting on the merry-go-round.

“Engine.” She whispered when he sat down next to her.

“Engine, Engine, Engine. Is that your real name?”

“Dunno.” He said softly.

“How’d you get called Engine?”

“Dunno.”

“You’re a good guy, you know that right?”

They looked at each other, she tilted her head slightly.

“Dunno.”