

TRACES OF MEMORY

by ANN WUEHLER

CHARACTERS

PHOEBE: 30 or so, on the run from the law. Average-looking.

RUTH: Older than Phoebe, anywhere from 35 to 45. Average-looking.

SETTING

Beside Highway 50, somewhere in the middle of Nevada. A map of Nevada has been painted across the road, the rocks, etc. Light is early morning, summer.

Time is now.

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TRACES OF MEMORY

[At rise: PHOEBE stands by the side of the road, a backpack stuffed full of items at her feet. She is past the first bloom of life, facing the long decline into middle adulthood. She wears jeans, a dark vest over a lightweight plaid shirt not tucked in. She bends down, digs through backpack, finds a broken candy bar, begins to eat it. Phoebe enjoys every last bite. RUTH enters from left, dressed in jeans and an old, soft worn shirt. Ruth stops, studies Phoebe.]

RUTH

You from here?

[Phoebe shakes her head, sneaks peeks at Ruth, who is now looking off into distance, shading her eyes.]

Break down? Nearest town is...

PHOEBE

Look. I don't want to be rude--leave me the fuck alone.

[Chews contentedly. Ruth nonplussed but not offended.]

RUTH

What did you do?

[Ruth waits. Phoebe stares ahead.]

Murder? Armed robbery? Break someone's poor little heart? Regicide?

[Phoebe frowns at this.]

Ah, that's the murder of a king. Did you murder a king down in Vegas?

PHOEBE

Yeah. I murdered a king.

RUTH

Fabulous.

[Silence.]

I left the dishes in the sink.

[Phoebe does not react.]

I left a chicken out to defrost. I left the TV on. If I get going now, my husband'll never know. He won't suspect a thing. Except for something I left in the microwave! It's a humdinger. If I leave now, nothing will happen that I can't take back.

PHOEBE

I really don't care.

RUTH

That's okay.

PHOEBE

Then don't go back. Keep walking. Decision made!!

RUTH

Oh but just imagine my husband coming home to the stink of rotting chicken. To dishes with soap scum on them! To a house not cleaned. Bed not made. Other problems of a domestic nature.

PHOEBE

Boo fucking hoo.

RUTH

Yes indeed.

PHOEBE

Yeah.

[Silence as Phoebe stares into distance. Ruth sighs, rubs at her neck.]

RUTH

I love this old highway.

PHOEBE

Great. Enjoy it.

[Hefts up her backpack, begins walking off, halts. Ruth notes this with interest. Phoebe stops.]

I was here first. Get lost.

RUTH

Can't we share? If I had known someone was going to be here, in this spot, which is just perfect for almost seeing my house, I would have made cookies. Or at least brought some water.

PHOEBE

I picked this spot. It's mine.

RUTH

I can stand over here...

PHOEBE

Don't you speak English!?!

RUTH

I always wanted to speak German. My grandmother was German.

PHOEBE

Was she a Nazi?? Did she bake Jews like casseroles?

RUTH

No. She was crazy, though. Not as crazy as my great-grandmother--she loved Himmler. Had a picture of him on her second floor landing in Nebraska—she would talk to it, have long conversations with it.

PHOEBE

Fabulous. I'm really glad you told me that.

RUTH

You're not. You want me to go. You want to be alone.

PHOEBE

Does a bear shit in the woods?

RUTH

Of course it does.

PHOEBE

Yep.

RUTH

So we both want to stay here but for different reasons. You want to be alone. I want to be not so alone.

PHOEBE

I have a knife. It's dull but still a knife. Somewhere.

[Shakes backpack.]

RUTH

We're not men. We don't need to fight it out.

PHOEBE

I think we do.

RUTH

I'll stand over here. You stay there. Surely that's enough space, even for you.

PHOEBE

Why are you here?? It's the middle of nowhere! There hasn't been a car by for an hour! An HOUR! How can you thumb for a ride if the ride never shows up??

RUTH

I live just down the road.

[Phoebe's attention caught by something in distance off left. Turns attention back to Ruth.]

PHOEBE

Where that long column of smoke is?

RUTH

[Unperturbed.]

You betcha, sweetie.

PHOEBE

Don't you think you should go put it out?

RUTH

Just burning some trash.

PHOEBE

What if it gets out of hand? It's very dry here.

RUTH

Not my problem. Nevada was meant to burn.

PHOEBE

Air pollution, destruction of property, loss of life? Really-- go take care of that fire.

RUTH

It'll burn itself out.

PHOEBE

Not without some help.

RUTH

So falsely caring. Obvious.

PHOEBE

Yeah, you got me. Is that even your house? Why burn it down? That's cool—I can respect a firebug.

RUTH

Honestly?

PHOEBE

Oh sure.

RUTH

You respect me?

PHOEBE

I'd respect you MORE if you checked on that fire.

RUTH

There'll be traces of memory on the air now.

[Silence. Phoebe starting to fume. Ruth calm.]

Traces of love and hate and indifference.

PHOEBE

Okay, lady...

RUTH

Oh my, call me Ruth. You wouldn't happen to be Naomi, would you?

PHOEBE

Was that an explosion?

[Cups hand to ear, very cartoonish and exaggerated.]

RUTH

Never mind. I'm Ruth. No last names today. Nothing that links us to anyone or anyplace, except this bit of Highway 50, which we can both share. And who are you? Other than fierce guardian of the blacktop.

PHOEBE

I don't have a name.

RUTH

Because you murdered a king.

PHOEBE

Of course.

RUTH

So I can call you whatever I want. Naomi it is.

PHOEBE

No, I hate that name.

RUTH

Too bad, Naomi.

PHOEBE

I said no.

RUTH

Does anyone listen when a woman says no, Naomi?

PHOEBE

Apparently not.

RUTH

That's the first honest thing you've said. Bravo.

PHOEBE

Honest Abe, that's me.

RUTH

Apparently not. I've burned my house down, Naomi, so what have you done?

PHOEBE

Quit calling me that hateful name.

RUTH

Am I to guess? Naomi?

PHOEBE

Don't you go to jail for burning your house down?

RUTH

Oh sure, if they catch you. What did you do? Just curious. No judgments here. God knows I've killed and buried my share of enemies and friends alike.

[Silence. Phoebe shrugs, remains mum, though it's costing her.]

I've always loved this view. I can barely see where I live, or used to live now.

[Phoebe begins digging through her backpack.]

So what are we to do now?

PHOEBE

Where is it??

RUTH

Do you want me to help you look, Naomi?

PHOEBE

No.

[Now has a small canister of pepper spray in hand.]

I don't want your help. I don't want your company. I don't want you here in my spot. Go away. How more clear can I make this?

RUTH

Oh dear.

PHOEBE

That's right. Get moving, lady.

RUTH

It's Ruth.

PHOEBE

Ruth, Duluth, whatever.

RUTH

Fine. I can take a hint, subtle as you are, dearie. But here's my price--you have to tell me what you did. Only fair!! I shared, now...it's your turn. Otherwise, I'll just keep following you.

[Smiles. Phoebe struggles with this, but Ruth has no pity.]

Well, Greta? You can almost smell the smoke. Almost.

PHOEBE

You'll really go?

RUTH

Sure, Greta.

PHOEBE

Did you really burn your house down? It's not Greta.

RUTH

I put a coffee cup full of gasoline in the microwave.

PHOEBE

That's just your word.

RUTH

Believe me, Naomi or Greta or Junebug or...

PHOEBE

It's Phoebe, goddamnit!

[Pause.]

How can I believe anything you say?

RUTH

Phoebe. What a beautiful name. Phoebe. I don't have the answer to that.

PHOEBE

Then what's the point??

RUTH

Two strangers on a road less traveled-- that's the point. I told you something, gave you my trust. I've just confessed to arson. As you pointed out, a punishable offense. Especially when you left three children tied up in the kitchen. Watching the microwave.

[Silence.]

That annoying border collie puppy my husband insisted on buying for five hundred dollars. Five hundred dollars!! I haven't had a pair of new pants for three years and he goes and buys a five hundred dollar dog. People dump free dogs around here all the time. It was too much.

PHOEBE

Ah...okay.

RUTH

I'm not crazy. I'm probably going to get caught. Fingerprints. DNA evidence, who knows what they got. And now-- this confession. I'm not a very good criminal.

PHOEBE

Are you...serious?

RUTH

[A long silence. A show down.]

Yes.

PHOEBE

I could turn you in for a reward.

RUTH

What?

PHOEBE

A reward. For the baby-killing, puppy-frying lady arsonist.

RUTH

But...that takes time. They would have to charge me. I'd have to escape in a blaze of gunfire or I could throw rocks, I don't have a gun...

PHOEBE

Fine, whatever. You wanna know what I did?

[Takes a deep breath.]

I beat the hell out of the skank my boyfriend was banging. I put her in the hospital. You know what? She DIED. The bitch never woke up. I got real problems, you psycho weirdo. I'm not making this up. Not like you. Nobody burns their kids and their dog up. Nobody.

RUTH

I don't think it's a new idea, Phoebe. Such a nice name.

[Silence.]

Will you take him back? Your kind always does.

PHOEBE

Take him back?? No.

RUTH

You will. You'll get lonely on the run. Come back to Vegas, sniff around, cause you got that itch that you mistake for true love when it's really just an itch. You'll crawl back to him and you'll forget. And you'll grow blind again and deaf again, because it's love and nobody understands him, nobody makes you feel like he does...

PHOEBE

Shut up.

RUTH

You're already thinking he needs to be forgiven. After all, the other girl's dead, right?

PHOEBE

You said you'd leave if I told.

RUTH

I did, didn't I? Or...we could hook up, go on a cross-country spree of some kind. We've both killed, so maybe robbery.

PHOEBE

Goodbye, Ruth.

RUTH

The secret to getting away with a crime is not to tell anyone—at least, not leave anyone alive who knows what you did.

[Ruth smiles.]

My memories are burning, now I'm free. We've got this stretch of nowhere to get lost in. And this fine morning. It was nice talking to you.

PHOEBE

Free.

RUTH

Until the next man and the next one...

[Ruth trails off with a shrug. Phoebe holds up pepper spray.

Attention caught by far-off fire.]

Free until then. Will I keep my promise?

[Ruth exits right. Phoebe waits but Ruth does not return.]

PHOEBE

Nobody burns up their kids and dog. Nobody...

[Sound of a car approaching. Phoebe sticks out her thumb. Lights fade to black.]

END of PLAY