

Sample of *Yellow Lines*

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The following day, Grady's last before he left, Marisol knocked on his motel room door at 9:00 AM. She wore a light blue cotton pullover and a white skirt over bare legs. He took a moment to look at her. Now that they would soon be apart she seemed even more vibrant and precious.

"Put a decent shirt on. I'm taking you to breakfast," she said.

"Don't I get a hug first?" Grady wrapped her in his arms.

Marisol pressed into him. Grady felt the muscle under her body's façade of softness and the grind of her pubic bone. He buried his face in her hair, breathed in, and recoiled from the sour stench of stale cigarettes.

"Have you been smoking?" he asked.

"No."

"Don't lie to me. I can smell it on your hair."

"It was just one cigarette, Grady." She stepped toward the orange chair. "I didn't tell you 'cause I knew you'd overreact."

"Overreact!" Grady raised his hands. "Jesus!" His hands dropped slapping against his thighs. "How could you smoke after seeing what it did to my mom? I don't believe this!"

Marisol turned toward him. "Do you really want to spend our last day together like this?"

"I guess not."

Grady zipped open his suitcase and sorted through the folded shirts. How could somebody who'd seemed so right be so stupid? He pulled out a pale-yellow polo shirt to go with his gray camou pants and silver chain that attached his wallet to his belt loop.

They left. Outside the overcast had already burned off, unusual for that time of year. The air was still and sweet. A few children splashed each other in the pool. Marisol put her arm around Grady's waist, escorted him to her Saturn, and unlocked his door before getting behind the wheel. They drove along the coast and passed the golden-domed yoga center at Swami's. A squadron of pelicans, looking like an ill-advised aeronautical experiment gone horribly wrong, flew overhead.

"Do you remember the first time you kissed me?" Marisol asked.

"Behind the bleachers at the dance."

"Maggie Cathcart said Doug Peterson put you up to it."

"It's true." Grady looked out the window. A swell rose from the ocean's glassy surface and two surfers paddled to keep up. "But he only dared me because I told him I thought you were hot."

"Why did you think that?" Marisol asked.

"It must have been the time you wore your bedroom slippers to homeroom when you were late, the ones that look like bunnies."

"Mrs. Esposito sent me home."

"I know."

Marisol turned into the parking lot of a Mexican restaurant.

"I still have those slippers," she said.

"I know."

The restaurant was crowded but they managed to get a table by the window. Grady could see a bit of ocean through the gaps in the palm trees across the highway. He ordered eggs. When they came he punctured the yolks so the golden center ran all over the plate and mopped them up with pillowy flour tortillas. He left the fatty, refried beans mostly uneaten. Marisol picked at her yogurt and fruit and discussed her plans for a summer job.

“It depends on how much I earn,” she said, “but I think joining you in Europe for a week will be okay. Where will you be in August?”

“We’re starting in Ireland and going east. Maybe Italy or Greece by then.”

“Oh, I’d love to see the Parthenon. School starts in mid-September so I’d have to be back here by Labor Day. You do want me to come. Don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“You about done?” Marisol nodded to the waiter who brought the bill.

“You mind stopping so I can pick up some Andre the Giant stickers?” Grady asked.

“Some what?” Marisol put some money on the table.

“You know, those stickers with the creepy face that say obey. It’ll be cool to post them all over the world.”

“Whatever.” Marisol sighed.

They decided to spend the day at Balboa Park. After stopping at a bookstore for the OBEY Giant stickers they drove to the park passing under the Cabrillo Bridge, one of Grady’s favorite views. It stood like a row of white M’s connecting one tree-lined canyon wall with the other. Marisol parked and they walked past the Organ Pavilion and Japanese Friendship Garden.

“Do you think our relationship can last with us being apart for a year?” she asked.

Grady chose his words as he would if he were on the witness stand. “It might be difficult but you want to concentrate on school. Remember?”

“Cause we could agree to date other people,” Marisol said.

The circuits in Grady’s brain went into overdrive tallying the calculus of self-interest. Being cooped up with his parents for a year, he wouldn’t have many opportunities with the opposite sex but Marisol would have plenty at college. Did he really love her enough to hold on for a year or was she only a convenience close at hand? He didn’t know the answer.

“Let’s see how we feel when you come out in August,” he said.

They strolled along the Prado with its Spanish Colonial buildings and vendor stands along the edge of the walkway. A shirtless man with a headdress of feathers set up a boom box and did an Aztec dance to recorded Mexican music.

“Look!” Grady pointed. “The model train museum! Can we go to the model train museum?”

Marisol rolled her eyes but had to concede since it was Grady’s last day. They went inside. At the ticket window she motioned Grady to put away his wallet. This day was her treat.

“Wow!” Grady hurried to the exhibits leaving her behind.

HO trains ran through mountainous miniature landscapes complete with trees, grass, and gravel track beds. Grady followed the yellow, tandem Union Pacific locomotives as they pulled their cargo of plastic freight cars past the green-roofed station and railroad crossing where a 1950s vintage auto waited on the road. Everything looked so real. There were boulders, fence posts, signal lights, telephone poles, and even water tanks for steam locomotive. Grady hovered like some all-seeing, all-powerful being. Life on the HO-scale was so much easier to control. The train turned a corner and disappeared into a tunnel only to emerge in a desert landscape and cross a trestle spanning a deep gorge.

Grady felt Marisol's arm slip around his waist. He hadn't heard her approach. Together they examined the other exhibits. After an hour she asked, "You ready to go?"

Outside they walked to where a dozen more vendors' stands circled a fountain like Conestoga wagons awaiting an Indian attack.

"Let's get our fortunes told." Marisol took Grady's hand and dragged him toward a banner depicting a red palm.

"I don't think it's such a good idea." Grady started to pull away.

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun."

Grady looked at the heavysset woman, with a hairstyle that could have come from a 1950s sitcom, who sat behind the table under the banner. What could he do if his future contained more sorrow like his mother's illness? It was better not to know.

"I don't want to do it." He stared walking away.

"Grady!" Marisol caught up with him and took his arm. "We don't have to. I thought you might like it. That's all."

The city cooperated with Marisol's plan to make Grady's last day special. Even the notorious traffic was light. After spending the afternoon at the park they ate dinner and saw a movie in Hillcrest and then drove back to Encinitas to watch the sunset from Moonlight Beach.

They sat behind a large piece of driftwood, out of sight of the crowd. The rhythmic sound of waves breaking on the sand muted the talk of the other beachgoers. Grady felt the warmth radiating from Marisol's body against his skin. He put his arm around her waist and drew her closer. She turned and offered him her soft lips. Grady's free hand caressed her side and came to rest on her bud-like breast. Marisol placed a warm hand on top of his to keep it there.

"Yeah, fuckin' A," a voice called from the distance. Someone laughed.

Grady withdrew his hand and Marisol straightened her clothes. Two blonde surfers, in wetsuits, carried their short boards past. Grady let them pass before kissing Marisol again. They alternated between passion and interruption until the sun was an orange crescent on a field of blue. Grady watched it inch lower. The moment the sun vanished below the horizon he saw a green circle, not much larger than the sun, with a dark dot in its center. Laughs and hoots came from people by the volleyball net.

"The green flash!" he said. "I can't believe it. I finally saw the green flash."

The temperature dropped. Grady and Marisol huddled together in the chill for a half hour before he said, "I suppose we should get going."

He took a last look at the ocean as they walked up the beach. Marisol drove him to the motel and escorted him past the empty swimming pool, up the stairs where a Ho Chi Minh trail of ants crawled along the support beam, and into his room. The clock on the nightstand said 9:20.

"I don't have to go yet." Marisol sat on the bed.

Grady kissed her. They had little time to waste on preliminaries. Rather than engaging in the usual piecemeal undressing, Marisol stood and bared herself. She came to him not as a ghostly figure of longing in his imagination but naked and real with a few pink pimples scattered on her butt, razor stubble on her ankles, and the indentations the elastic of her bra and panties had left on her torso. It frightened him a little. He stripped off his shirt and pants and then paused before shimmying out of his white briefs. Marisol got into bed while Grady rolled on one of the condoms his mother had given him on prom night. Marisol lifted the sheet and he crawled underneath the covers and into the cozy comfort of her warm flesh.

After making love Grady fell into a narcotic sleep. Several times that night he woke fearing she was gone but Marisol was always there to offer a soft shoulder for him to rest his

head on. The scent of her skin soothed him. Around 4:00 AM he drifted off to sleep. They woke to the sound of birds in the early morning.

“I’d better get going.” Marisol slipped on her panties and stood.

Grady watched her dress in the light from the edges of the curtains. He stepped into his pants and walked her to the door.

“I guess this is it.” Marisol squeezed him for the last time. “Write me.” She slipped out the door and was gone.