

15 Miles *by: D. Barnes*

Kris turned off the highway and onto the two-lane road that led to his house, the sky dimming into that tired blue that came after a long day decided it had taken enough from everyone. His shoulders ached from lifting and bending and pretending to be patient. The radio was on low, a talk show he wasn't listening to, voices filling space the way dust did when you hadn't opened the windows in a while.

He hadn't spoken to Lynn in two days.

That fact sat heavier than the work boots he kicked off at the door. The house greeted him with its familiar quiet—the hum of the refrigerator, the ticking clock above the kitchen doorway, the hollow echo of rooms that knew his footsteps well. Three bedrooms. One his. One that had become an office-slash-storage room. One that waited, undecided, like it was listening.

Kris dropped his keys in the ceramic bowl by the door. They clinked too loudly. Everything sounded loud when you were alone.

He opened the fridge, stared without seeing, then closed it again. Hunger came later these days, after the knot loosened enough to allow it. He leaned back against the counter and pulled his phone from his pocket. No new messages. He hadn't expected any.

Two days ago, the conversation had ended in a way that wasn't really an ending. It was more like a door left ajar, the kind that made the wind whistle through the house all night.

We need to talk about this, Lynn had said.

We are talking, Kris had replied.

No, we're circling, she said. *And I'm tired*.

The circling was about space. About fifteen miles. About whose life bent to fit inside the other's.

Kris owned his home. He'd bought it before Lynn, before the promotion at work that came with longer hours and better pay but less daylight. The house sat just outside the city limits, far enough that the traffic thinned and the stars came out clearer at night. He liked that. He liked the quiet, the sense that he could breathe here.

Lynn's apartment was in the city, close to everything—restaurants open late, friends who stopped by unannounced, the pulse of movement that made her feel

alive when she wasn't at work. Her place was small but warm, decorated with intention. Plants on the windowsills. Framed photos leaning instead of hanging, as if they were still deciding where they belonged.

There wasn't enough room for Kris' things there. Not really. His books. His tools. The boxes he hadn't unpacked since moving in because he hadn't needed to. The life that had grown outward instead of upward.

And she didn't want to leave the city.

Kris pushed off the counter and walked down the hall, stopping at the doorway of the third bedroom. The door was open. Sunlight from the afternoon still clung to the edges of the room, catching dust in the air. He imagined Lynn here—her shoes kicked off, her laugh echoing down the hallway, her presence changing the way the house held sound.

He imagined it so clearly it hurt.

Lynn sat on the edge of her bed, laptop closed but still warm, phone face down beside her. Outside her window, the city moved on without her permission. Sirens. Laughter. A bus sighing at the curb.

She loved this part of the evening—the moment when work ended and the night hadn't yet made demands. Usually, she filled it with noise. Music. Calls. Friends.

Tonight, she sat with the quiet.

Two days ago, she had questioned everything out loud, and now she couldn't stop hearing her own voice.

I don't know if this works for me, Kris.

She hadn't meant *you*. She had meant *this shape of us*. But the words had landed the way words always did—heavy, imperfect, impossible to take back.

She loved Kris. That part was terrifyingly simple. He was steady. Thoughtful. The kind of man who noticed when her favorite mug cracked and replaced it without making a show of it. The kind who remembered the small things.

But love didn't answer the practical questions. Love didn't shorten fifteen miles or make space where there wasn't any.

Her apartment was hers. She'd fought for it. Long shifts, side gigs, saying no to things she wanted so she could say yes to herself. The city fed her in ways she didn't know how to explain without sounding dramatic. It made her feel visible.

Kris' house felt like a pause. A deep breath. Maybe even a future.

But she wasn't sure she was ready to exhale forever.

She flipped her phone face up. Still nothing.

He's giving me space, she thought.

Or maybe he was pulling away.

The uncertainty gnawed.

That night, Kris slept poorly. Dreams came in fragments—Lynn standing in the hallway, boxes stacked too high, a road stretching endlessly between them. He woke before dawn, the house cold and too big.

He made coffee and drank it standing up, staring out the kitchen window at the pale edge of morning. He considered texting her something light. *Hope you slept okay.* Or something heavier. *I miss you.*

Both felt wrong.

Instead, he went to work early.

The day moved slowly, each hour stretching like it knew he was counting. Coworkers talked around him. Machines hummed. Tasks repeated. Kris did what he always did—kept moving.

On his lunch break, he sat in his truck and scrolled through old photos. Him and Lynn at a street fair, her hair pulled back, eyes bright. A blurry selfie from his backyard, the two of them laughing, the city a distant line behind them.

He closed the app before the ache turned sharp.

What if she leaves? the thought asked.

He didn't try to answer.

Lynn met her friend Maya for coffee after work, the kind of place that smelled like roasted beans and overheard conversations. Maya listened the way she always did—head tilted, eyes steady.

“So you’re asking him to give up his house,” Maya said carefully.

“I’m not asking,” Lynn replied. “I’m just... not sure I can move out there.”

Maya nodded. “And he’s not sure he can move into your place.”

“It’s not just the space,” Lynn said. “It’s the life. Everything I love is here.”

“And everything he’s built is there.”

Lynn stared into her cup. “Why does it feel like choosing means losing something no matter what?”

“Because it does,” Maya said. “The question is what you’re willing to lose.”

Lynn thought of Kris’ quiet smile. Of the way he listened. Of the safety she felt in his arms.

She also thought of the city at night, alive and buzzing, reminding her she was part of something bigger.

“I don’t want to be the reason he resents me,” Lynn said softly.

“And you don’t want to wake up one day and realize you resent him,” Maya added.

Lynn nodded. The truth settled heavy but honest.

On the third evening, Kris pulled into his driveway and sat with the engine running. The house waited, patient as ever.

His phone buzzed.

Lynn.

Can we talk tonight?

His breath left him all at once.

Yeah, he typed. *Call me when you're ready.*

He turned off the truck and went inside, the familiar quiet no longer comforting. He paced. He straightened things that didn't need straightening. When the phone rang, he answered on the first ring.

"Hey," Lynn said.

"Hey."

Silence stretched. Not empty—full.

"I've been thinking," she began. "About us. About what we're actually arguing about."

Kris leaned against the counter, the same spot as two nights ago. "Me too."

"I don't want to lose you," she said. "But I'm scared of losing myself."

He closed his eyes. "I don't want you to feel trapped. And I don't want to feel like I'm erasing my life either."

"So where does that leave us?" she asked.

The question hung between them, fifteen miles wide.

"I don't know," Kris admitted. "But I know I don't want to rush a choice that turns into regret."

Lynn exhaled. "Me neither."

They talked then—really talked. About compromises that didn't feel like surrender. About timeframes. About the possibility that living apart a little longer didn't mean failing.

“I need to know we’re moving toward something,” Lynn said.

“And I need to know we’re not forcing it,” Kris replied.

They found a fragile middle ground.

That weekend, Lynn drove out to Kris' place. The road unwound beneath her tires, the city slowly releasing its grip. When she arrived, Kris was waiting on the porch, hands in his pockets.

They hugged longer than usual, like they were both checking to see if the other was still real.

Inside, they walked through the house together. He showed her small changes he'd made. A cleared closet. A repainted wall in the third bedroom.

"Not a promise," he said quickly. "Just... potential."

Lynn touched the wall. "I appreciate that."

They sat on the back steps as the sun set, the sky open and wide. The quiet felt different when they shared it.

"I don't have all the answers," Lynn said. "But I want to keep asking the questions with you."

Kris smiled, tired but hopeful. "Me too."

The distance between them wasn't gone. Fifteen miles still existed.

But for the first time in days, it felt navigable.

Not a wall.

A road.