

Crash

Long distance drives are easy when you're fueled by desire. I once made the eight-hour trek from Boulder back to Albuquerque in closer to six to love a girlfriend gone three weeks. And now here I was, the second week of June, making the twenty-three-hour drive from Minneapolis.

I sing with my CDs, jot images from the drive, count the miles each hour, and eat. There's almost constantly something in my mouth, whether sunflower seeds or bubble gum or one of those cheap McDonald's ice cream cones. Keeping my mouth busy keeps me awake, which is a good thing to be while piloting steel past the speed limit.

It's easy to forget how close you are to dying. Even after decades of advancing automobile safety, car crashes yearly end some forty thousand American lives. It can happen to anyone; it doesn't matter who you are. If you drive, there's the chance someone will demolish your Ford Taurus, killing your wife of fifty-seven years instantly and you an hour later, as happened to the elderly couple who lived next to my parents. Or you might look down to change a CD, lose control of your Saab on a mountain near Taos, and end up dead after being flung two hundred feet, as happened to a friend of mine. Or maybe you and your girlfriend could be decapitated so soon after you stopped at McDonald's that the first paramedic on the scene notices your fries still steaming in the December sun.

The paramedic told me that story the day of my crash.

"One thing stands out when it comes to accidents," he said, "those who were wearing seat belts survive, those who weren't, don't."

"We get crashes where a car's wrapped around a tree, windows smashed, all that, and we think, 'Shit, this is going to be messy.' Then the driver steps from behind the car and waves. Because he had his seat belt on. Then there

are other calls where the car's barely scratched, but either it'll be empty because the driver's been thrown a mile or the guy's inside, like he's asleep, but completely dead from being scrambled in the car."

The paramedic listened to how when my car came to rest I was upside down, strapped to my seat, sunflower seeds suspended from the ceiling like tiny bats in an upholstered cave, and I said, "So if I hadn't been wearing my seat belt . . ."

"You probably would've broken your neck."

That would have meant, among a million other things, no Rachel.

We met in yoga class. But as friendly as she was, and as talkative, she was always dating Salem. And as friendly as I was, and as good a listener, I thought of her as taken. And while her description of their relationship made it sound like he took her for granted and didn't share her politics, she seemed loyal.

But after Christmas there came a message to call "Rachel from yoga." We met for lunch, then for dinner, then for January's first Friday night.

"I'm going to watch some hockey and then we could get a drink," I said on the phone.

"That sounds good."

"Do you want to just come over and we can go from here?"

She pulled up between the game's second and third periods. I gave her a tour, ending with my room. Red Christmas lights traced the large window near my bed, KUNM's salsa show on the stereo. Rachel set her brown leather purse on my desk and stretched her arms above her. She stood a few inches taller than me. I didn't know what was going to happen. I wasn't even sure how much I liked her. I fully expected that we'd have a drink and I'd come home alone.

Rachel went to my bed and lay across it. I sat next to her and we talked in the red lights' glow. Then I thought, "Well, it sure seems like this is what she wants," and leaned in to kiss her.

I was right. So right that as I accelerated west on I-40 a couple hours later I still smiled, thinking of her smooth back folding before me, her black hair around her face on the pillow, the curve of her hips to her waist. We'd made plans for the next week and said goodnight, then I'd gone for coffee,

filled the Subaru with gas, and pulled onto the highway. A day-long hike with Flagstaff friends awaited early the next morning.

In twenty years of driving I'd never crashed, never even had a speeding ticket. The night was clear and the route was interstate all the way. Grants, Gallup, then Arizona. Painted Desert, Petrified Forest, you see signs for Winslow and think of that Eagles song.

I doubt many people who've been in car crashes have planned on them. They were doing things—coffee, gas—they did every day. They were on their way, they thought they knew what would happen.

When snow started falling, I didn't think much about it. I'd spent my first twelve driving years in Minnesota. Still, I had both hands on the wheel and kept under the speed limit. Snow came steadily head-on, but the highway looked dry. Then the semi pulled in front of me going slow, and when I braked, my car began to slide.

It's a sick feeling. I'd had it before, but usually only for seconds as I regained control. It's a sick feeling because while your hands still grip the steering wheel, you sense the steering wheel no longer grips anything in turn.

It happens quickly. From the moment I began sliding to when I came to rest was probably less than thirty seconds. But even now I can't be sure because in some ways it felt like time disappeared or lengthened like taffy.

It happens in slow motion—sliding toward the truck while you wrestle the wheel. You watch the experience from outside yourself, but the outside world disappears. Nothing happening in stock markets or Stanley Cup playoffs or Middle East peace plans makes any difference. The road doesn't care. The car doesn't care. The vehicles you're about to crash into don't care. The snow comes silently. The days you've lived can't lend a hand; nothing you've done with your life matters. You're a pair of tossed dice, and the only thing to do is to watch what numbers come up.

I go back to that moment where I sat strapped to the seat, hands clutching the wheel, Third Eye Blind rocking the CD player. Friday night, comfortable jeans, and faded maroon University of Minnesota sweatshirt, basking in Rachel's affection, on my way to friends. Every person in every crash has experienced that moment, that one when you're still who you were before the crash, not yet scarred or wounded or killed. Your heart must beat, you must breathe, the blood must go round inside. But it feels like everything stops, all those life forces suspended until the outcome is known.

You can't believe this is happening to you. I remember an eighty-six-year-old woman once telling me, "If you live long enough, you'll experience trauma." You can know this, and still, when the trauma comes, it comes as a surprise.

And you feel sad, because this isn't what you wanted. There was so much more life to live. That's what's in that moment of sadness—that realization of how precious life is. And you don't want to lose it, you don't want to give it up. Not yet. You feel sadness, not anger, because you feel love, and you don't want to stop feeling it.

On Valentine's Day Rachel came over, and we watched the Gophers score three times in the second period.

"We don't have to watch this," I said. "We can do something more romantic."

"This is romantic," she said.

"You're sure? Because we can go get some dinner."

"I like watching sports. I grew up going to games with my dad." She leaned over and lightly bit my neck. "Wanna just get a pizza?"

I looked at her. Brown eyes, black eye brows. "Have you been sent by spies to make me love you and learn my secrets?"

She smiled. "I wore my stockings."

So this is how I fall for a woman fourteen years younger. She orders the Monster green chili pizza from Pudge Brothers and takes me in her small brown car to fetch it. Back home we sit on bedroom carpet eating slices by candlelight and drinking Barefoot Merlot from the bottle, passing it between our lips. She sits near me, scratching my back with dark fingernails, then we stroll through Old Town. Back home I find her on my bed, black stockings to her thighs. Valentine's Day costs fifteen dollars, and she falls asleep by my side.

I got lucky. I didn't slide left into the gully between traffic or right into the shoulder's steel light posts. I didn't smash vehicles ahead, nor did the vehicles behind hit me. I slid across the right lane and off the highway backwards.

Someone being beaten must feel this, sensing the imminent blow, waiting for it to fall.

The Subaru backed down a slope and flipped like a pancake. The music stopped, and I listened in silence to the windshield and roof crashing to earth.

And then spider-webbed glass and crumpled roof and sunflower seeds in my hair and the hiss of engine steam, and I'm upside down in my seat belt still and feeling the first flow of fear, even imagining the car bursting into flame. I tear at my seat belt and push the driver's side door, then the passenger's side, and the fear builds because it would suck to survive the crash and then be trapped while the car burns. I crawl back through CD cases and maps and all the crap I keep in my car. When a door opens I go through it, and a man says he "can't believe you're not hurt," that his girlfriend stayed in their car because neither of them wanted to see what they were sure they would. Fat wet snowflakes plastering my hair and clothes, I stand nodding, not sure whether to laugh or cry.

I'm grateful I didn't die. Grateful I wasn't hurt.

I mean those words, but they are just words, and they seem not nearly up to the task of describing what I mean. I think sometimes it's just impossible to be grateful enough for life.

Rachel called her car, an old Volkswagen Rabbit convertible, Bella. She covered Bella's backside with messages advocating midwifery, organ donation, La Montañita Co-op, organic food, preserving wilderness. In the back seat she kept her rolled, purple yoga mat. And from the Halloween before, angel's wings.

I loaned her a silver, insulated coffee mug to use on mornings she left for work or school from my house. A mug reading "Brookstone," from which she promptly scratched the last six letters. She kept it in her car like a piece of me.

Rachel taxied me around while I searched for a new car. I found a red Subaru at a salvage yard in Albuquerque's South Valley. I remember the owner phoning back to the shop. You could tell the voice on the other end asked which car, because the owner said, "la rosa." I went outside and leaned through Rachel's window. "I think we have a name for her."

Rachel pulled me in for a kiss. "I like that. La Rosa," she said, rolling the r.

It's La Rosa I drove now to Albuquerque.

I've made the drive a dozen times. Around Minneapolis and straight south down I-35. After Des Moines, I-80 west across Nebraska, I-76 southwest into Colorado, I-25 south to Albuquerque.

On the plains, planted fields running to the horizon, fat, slow rivers

winding wherever they want, soil so black you want to stop and sink both arms down. Even the sky grows larger here. Grasses, wind, green, yellow, brown. The prairie plowed under, farmland passing like poetry.

I could live happily in this subtle beauty. In a way, this is where I'm from. My mother was born in Iowa, and I remember as a child visiting her parents in southern Illinois. We'd leave Minneapolis before dawn and by dusk be driving an empty highway through blankets of dirt and darkness. I'd press my little boy face to window glass and see a cornucopia of constellations, and on the horizon a farm's single white yard light like some solitary star come to rest.

Her father, John Milton Holcomb, was a black-haired Swede with a sharp mind till the day he died. At my age he lived in Ames and worked as a professor at Iowa State. Papa used to take me to watch cows milked at the university dairy building. I always think of him when someone says, "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream."

My grandmother, Gladys Ersland Holcomb, was a blond Norwegian who worked as a nurse. There's a photo of Papa and Mama on their wedding day, Papa wrapping his arms around her waist. Mama wears a big grin, Papa the closed-mouth smile he still had when I knew him. A black Ford in the background waits to deliver them to their future.

The day Papa went through the Ford's windshield my mother, Judith Amalie, was an infant. Her sister Joan was seven years old. A cold Thanksgiving Day in 1940 found the family of four driving snowy gravel. A wire left across the road by a telephone crew struck the windshield, and Papa lost control. Aunt Jo remembers the Ford on its side, Mama's head through the broken glass of the driver's window screaming, "Milton! Milton! Milton!" Papa lay curled in a snowbank, blood steaming around him. Farmers took them to safety, Mom and Aunt Jo in the front seat, Mama crying in the backseat next to Papa, his left eye lying on his broken cheek.

But everyone survived, and my grandfather refused to wear a seat belt the rest of his life.

He died when he was eighty-nine. Mama waited seven years, then died at ninety-three on the same date. All my life I've wondered, "What's it like to love someone the rest of your life?"

I bet my friends Jeff and Jennifer thought they would know. They were college classmates of mine—Jeff a crafty, witty guy, Jennifer a quiet woman

with long, brown-blond hair. I think of them every time I travel a highway, especially whenever I find myself behind a pickup loaded with furniture. It was furniture that fell from a truck the day they drove to visit family in Iowa. Furniture they swerved to avoid. Furniture which they avoided but in doing so placed them squarely in front of another truck going the other way. They'd been married a year, the rest of their lives ahead of them. Jennifer's back was broken, but she recovered. Jeff has never recovered. He's been in a wheelchair ever since, brain damaged. They divorced so Jennifer could move on with her life. Jeff stopped moving forward the night of the crash.

Before Rachel and I started dating, I'd made plans to move on myself. I remember walking with her in March morning sunshine, piñon coffee and blueberry scones from the co-op in our hands.

"I'm probably not going to be in Albuquerque next fall. Chances are I'll go to school outside New Mexico. You have every right to bail now. I'd miss you, but I'd understand."

"I know," she said. "I don't want to stop."

Rachel had one more year to her nursing degree and then would begin a two-year program in midwifery. She was working on the labor and delivery floor of the university hospital and caring for two disabled women in their home—fixing meals, cleaning house, bathing them.

She used to come to me at night with stories of her day: her first patient at the hospital an old man who was nice to her until bath time when he yelled "get your hand out of my ass!"

We'd sit on my bed while she practiced her assessment training—counting my pulse, taking my blood pressure, stethoscope around her neck, black rimmed glasses giving her a scholarly look.

"I like being nursed," I'd tell her.

"Do you?" she'd say. "Can you take your shirt off, please?"

"You bet."

"Thank you, Mr. Bogard."

"Nurse Rachel?"

"Yes?"

"Shouldn't you be wearing a white cap and smock and stockings and shoes?"

"No one wears that stuff any more."

"You wear scrubs?"

She nods.

"But if you had a special patient who requested it, would you?"

"Maybe."

She comes from a large family, especially her father's Hispanic side. She has two brothers and a sister, but her dad has seven sisters. She wants to have four or five children herself. Soon. "I want to be a young mother," she says.

We'd walk UNM's campus. In the evening it's quiet and uncrowded, with clear, cold fountains and slow weaving pines, blackbirds gliding in to roost. Sometimes she'd say she'd talked to Salem.

"Did you say neat things about me?"

"He knows about you."

"How does it feel to talk with him?"

"It makes me angry and sad."

"Why angry?"

"Because I think about how when I went to Florida last fall he didn't even pick me up at the airport. And how we just sat around his apartment watching tv. How we hardly even had sex. And it's been dawning on me that he was probably cheating."

"Your relationship never really sounded so great."

"My friends say the same thing."

"So, why sad?"

"Because we were in love once. And we both wanted to have a big family. And now he says he realizes some things that he hadn't before, but it's too late."

My grandmother was a nurse and my grandfather a professor, and they were married more than fifty years, raising four daughters in the country's heart. That sounds like a beautiful life. But would they have stayed together in today's world? It's easy to wonder about monogamy, about all the divorce. It's easy to wonder if you'll ever find someone to love.

* * *

I killed two birds with one car last summer, watching their yellow black bodies drop in my rearview mirror like used Kleenex. There was nothing I could do—there never is, right? You're in a hurry to get somewhere and suddenly two songbirds swoop into your life. You want to stop, at least I

do, and say a prayer, but traffic keeps you flying past. You find their dried blood and a tiny yellow feather on the silver grill.

The cost of our getting to where we think we want to be lies around us. At least a million birds and animals a day don't survive meeting our cars and trucks. If blood stains lingered longer our highways would wear a permanent blush. You don't have to wait to see the evidence. Before I'm even to Iowa, a gray car like a wet mop at the side of the road, scraps of squirrels, a blackbird squished on an off ramp. When I open my hood to check the oil, orange black butterflies lie stilled around the engine.

We love our cars, though, and we're not about to give them up. It's funny how we come to associate our friends with their vehicles. Hamilton's red Nissan pickup, Bonnie's silver Toyota truck. You see those cars and think immediately of the people who drive them.

While I looked for a new car I biked to school. I remember one day asking Rachel to stay with my dog, Luna, for a while because I'd be gone from dawn to dusk. When it turned out I could get home for lunch I called, smiling when I came around the corner to see the brown Volkswagen in my driveway.

Sometimes at night I'd walk out to where moonlight reflected off Bella's fenders. It felt good to see Rachel's car in front of my house. What is that? To see your lover's things? Is it proof of something? I'd look at the moon and down at the car and think, "Yes, she's here with me, and I love her."

But let's be honest, I didn't love her enough, or at least soon enough.

I knew I was leaving in a few months; I knew it would end. I looked at her and thought "Yeah, she loves sex but when we talk I'm sometimes bored." That her twenty-one-year-old body was smooth and tan, I didn't mind that kind of youth. But that she was . . . what? Something that's hard to nail down, that difference in life experiences. And how much of it is ego? I liked her liking me. When she told me her secrets I felt strong and understanding. But when she said, "I love you, Paul" while sliding her warm skin close, I kept quiet. And of course she noticed, but I thought, "Well, I'm being honest."

And now, honestly, if La Rosa could run purely on desire, I'd drive without stopping.

Seas of flowers. Blue silos, white barns, orange cones. Yellow highway machines like giant grasshoppers. Farm houses hidden in stands of spruce. A

beefy red-haired farmer climbing from his tractor, suspenders straining to keep his belly from escaping. A gray heron staring into a still stream. Lush rows of knee-high corn like a crowd waving deep green hankies. South Skunk River. Middle Raccoon River. We were supposed to meet in Kansas City tonight, Rachel flying up to join me for the rest of the drive. White yellow brown, waist-high flowers. The sadness comes in sudden waves like wind.

In April I made the decision to leave New Mexico. It didn't seem real; nothing changed. Rachel still came to stay with me four nights a week, the enchiladas at Barela's were still wonderful, campus still lovely. I walked around thinking, "Am I really going to leave all this?"

Then a few days went by where I didn't hear from her, and when I did, there was a distance that hadn't been there before. She says, "I realized a week ago that I was totally in love with you and that you were leaving, and I just can't do the long distance thing; I want a partner I can sleep next to at night."

Somewhere inside it's like a great river begins thawing. It's slow at first, but this is some of the heaviest blood, the deepest emotion. Suddenly you're sitting next to this woman who you've enjoyed spending time with but always thought you'd say goodbye to and you're thinking, "Am I really going to let this go?"

She says, "I don't know what to do." That she loves you but has been disconnecting herself because she doesn't want to feel the hurt when you leave. And half of you is saying "Yeah, you're right" and the other half is screaming "No! I don't want to stop." Maybe those waters moving inside are just trying to keep you from losing what you have. But maybe they're trying to get you to realize something.

Bonnie loses control of her Toyota 4Runner while driving at night in southern Colorado, flipping several times. Her windows shatter and blow as though a bomb's gone off in the cab. The truck lands beyond the fence separating farm field from highway. Bonnie comes to yelling, "Where's my dog?" Her black lab, Cosmos, has disappeared. Soon, she's wailing "Where's my dead dog, my sweet dead dog?" Cosmos comes from the darkness, wagging his tail.

Hamilton hits black ice in the old Nissan pickup. As he vaults the embankment he wraps his arms through the steering wheel and tracks the

times his truck cartwheels down the hill. His count stops at nine. He crawls from the wreckage unhurt.

West on I-80 the land rolls. Sea swells, prairie schooners. Cornfields cropped close, the scalp beneath the crew cut. Spools of wheat like bolts of fabric. White gravel roads running to the horizon. Adair, Anita, Audubon, Atlantic. A deer on the shoulder, black glassy eyes, blood mustache. Slash piles cut for highway expansion like spent cigarettes stashed in ashtrays. Pigs packed in silver semis, snouts pressed out. Trucks through wind like trout in a stream, tails weaving. Inside an Amoco a big man says, "And then a goddamn deer walks right into my front yard," and his friend asks, "Why the fuck didn't you shoot him?"

Beauty amid destruction. Hope in the face of doubt. Butterflies crowding my stomach as I drive leaning forward, arms wrapped through the steering wheel, not knowing where I'll end up, not knowing what will happen when I see her.

What happened in May was Rachel decided she would stay with me through our coming trip to Boston, but once I'd gone to Minnesota for the summer she would be alone in Albuquerque. I remember lying next to her, letting my face fall into the pillow. So here it was, the end in sight. I took a deep breath.

"That isn't what I want, but I guess that's what it'll be."

"I've thought a lot about it."

"I know. It's just that in the past week your 'disconnecting' has made me realize how I love you."

And then there I was, freeing the things I loved about her. Her little clucking noises, her skin's scent, a laugh that drew me to her. The way she held my hand while I drove La Rosa. The way when we were driving back to my bedroom at night she'd unhook her seat belt and put her head in my lap. How she'd tie her short black hair in pigtailed that stuck straight out. I loved that she kicked my ass when we hiked, that she happily helped two women in wheelchairs wash and clean and eat, that she was vegetarian and fooled her father into eating tofu dogs whenever she visited Phoenix. And yes, I loved that she loved me.

We stayed awake all night on my bed, making love with our bodies, with our words.

By the time we said goodbye in rainy Boston three weeks later we'd decided not to let it end. When I dropped her at the airport she handed me her red compact umbrella and said, "You can bring this when you visit me in Albuquerque."

"I'll be there in two weeks."

But a week before I'm supposed to see her she starts backing away again. I don't hear from her for a couple days, and then just a week after she e-mailed that she "can't believe she's in love with a 35 year old but it feels so right" she cancels our Kansas City rendezvous. Fifteen hundred miles away I hear her saying she's confused, I hear her crying, I hear her say maybe I shouldn't come down. But I also hear her say she does want to see me, that she's thought of moving to Nevada with me. She says she's scared; that she knows if I visit we'll have a great time, but then I'll leave again and break her heart.

Her phone battery begins to die.

"I don't feel like we're done talking," I say.

"Call me tomorrow," she says. "I'll be home by 5:30."

When I call at 5:30 she doesn't answer. The next morning I climb into La Rosa and begin the drive to Albuquerque.

Another pig truck blasts by, then almost immediately after comes a billboard reading "I scream, you scream, we all scream for...pork loin." A dead crow on Highway 3, and soon after that a red-tailed hawk, a single feather standing behind its smashed head. Insects turn the windshield into a Van Gogh night sky—comets, planets, stars. Feed lots full of cattle standing in shit. The stink even in the closed car across three lanes of highway. Hazy yellow sun above cottonwoods and Holsteins. Bare hills, blue sky. A sign for Fort Robinson, where Crazy Horse was killed. A sign for Yellowstone. The long day's sun swallowed by horizon clouds. An orange circle in a bed of rose.

The next day holds thirteen hours to Albuquerque. Brown stockings on southern Colorado horses. A few buffalo, a handful of pronghorn—crumbs from the meal of plenty that used to be the plains. The Canadian River, emaciated in northern New Mexico. There's no way to hurry this long road. Desert now. Hot sun, no clouds. Heat and light forcing their way through the windshield. Sage, piñon. Hazy mountain outlines north of Taos. Fluorescent pink cholla in red rock.

South of Santa Fe my body aches with anticipation of hers. Outside Albuquerque the Sandias loom dark on the eastern horizon.

I stop at a friend's house to brush my teeth, change my shirt. I say to myself, "Well, let's get this over with," thinking I'll see if she's home, if she'll talk. Maybe we'll be making love in an hour. Maybe she'll say she wants to be alone, and I'll be on the road to Reno in the morning. Either way it'll be good to find out.

Just before nine o'clock on a Sunday night there is a brown dog in the narrow median of I-25, cars rocketing past a few feet on either side. He trots beneath streetlights, pink tongue hanging from the side of his mouth, almost smiling.

I know the way; I've driven there a thousand times. Her brown car sits parked outside her apartment, a light on behind her orange bedroom blinds. She must be home. I go to the white door and knock, then knock again. No answer. I look through the window and see the living room I know so well. I try the handle and the door opens. I stick my head in and say, "Hello?" Stairs rise before me, stairs I've climbed a thousand times. They lead to her bedroom. I step inside and notice an open wine bottle on the kitchen table and two glasses. The swamp cooler whirs its white noise upstairs. I think, "Maybe she's talking on the phone." I ignore the other thing I'm thinking.

When I climb to near the top of the stairs I see her bedroom door is open, and I see her, my Rachel, standing with her back to me, naked and wrapped in a white bath towel, looking down at her bed. I take another step and see his hand flopped off the side of the bed, and then his dark hair and his face as he smiles at her from under the sheet. Thinking back I won't remember breathing. Maybe I don't for a while.

She turns. She's beautiful, her black hair messed a little, her face flushed—it's a face I've seen as we've made love a thousand times. I'm trembling. I extend my hand and my first words are "I brought your umbrella back." I take a step toward the bedroom—to what? To see who it is? I don't know. She closes the door and takes the umbrella. She says, "No. You need to leave."

She'll say that three more times in the moments that follow, but not that she's sorry. "Look," I'll manage to say. "I just drove all the way from Minnesota to see you, so give me a second to speak." She'll begin wiping tears from her eyes as I say, "I love you. And I'll always have great memories of being together. So let's not end this way. I'm not here long, so when can we

meet again so we part on more friendly terms?" She looks at me with amazement in her eyes and says, "You still want to be my friend?"

It all happens in slow motion. Even now, looking back, it's hard to know how much time passes. You're the same person you were just a few minutes before, but now everything is different. It's that same sick feeling that though your hands still grip the wheel, the wheel no longer grips anything in turn. You can't believe this is happening and there is sadness because you feel love, and you don't want to stop feeling it.

She says it's Salem. That she should have told you. That she knew he was coming to town.

"For good?"

"He's here for a wedding."

And then there you are, standing on her front porch, the door closed behind you. You want to cry but no tears come. You want to be angry, but you're too much in shock. You sit on her front steps and stare into space. Then you walk to her car, open the door, and take your silver coffee mug.

* * *

I talked with Rachel the next night.

We sat on her steps for minutes in silence before she whispered, "I'm sorry." When I asked for more, she said quietly, "I don't really know how much there is to say. I completely fucked up, and then I was a total bitch to you."

Trapped, that's how I felt. I'd finally made up my mind to love her. I'd called Nevada, gotten the OK to defer, and returned to Albuquerque ready to see where time together might take us. But now there was no reaching Rachel.

I took a breath. "Do you want to take a walk before I leave?"

She shook her head. "I don't deserve to spend time with you."

Maybe with more time I could have convinced her. That I was scared and hurt but wanted to go ahead. Maybe, if we could've sat on those steps another week, a month. But it was futile; there was no more time.

La Rosa might disagree. After nineteen hours from Albuquerque to Reno and thirty back to Minnesota I parked her beneath pines and didn't move her for weeks. The first night back, under a giant, waxing gibbous low over

the lake's south bay, I stood barefoot on our redwood dock knowing wherever Rachel was she could see that moon, too.

I knew the next weekend she'd be with her family in Phoenix, the weekend after that in Farmington for a friend's wedding, and then, I didn't know what plans she had for her future. I'd started to imagine myself in that future—me a professor, her a nurse, living our lives together, maybe with a daughter or four, maybe even to old age.

That's the hardest thing, letting that future go. So often we get to our imagined futures, but sometimes we don't. It's so easy to forget what little control we have. What hurt we cause making our way.