Paul Bogard

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.

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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

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.