

FREE OF CHARGE

By Dori Ostermiller

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My brakes finally gave out on a bucolic back road between Santa Fe and Taos, and I kicked myself for breaking up with Nate one town too soon. Not that he would have been much help—he knew nothing about cars beyond that nifty trick of propping the gas nozzle open at filling stations. Nate was always looking for shortcuts, and had convinced me to take this backwoods way, insisting there'd be less traffic. He'd been right—I stood on the side of the road for half an hour, thumb flagged to the empty desert breeze, before I realized no one was coming.

I might have walked along the dry shoulder of that road all day, kicking rocks and thinking what a fool I was to try this trip alone. But after 40 minutes or so, a battered silver truck came bounding up, a tad too close, and coated me in reddish dust. The truck's windows were open, and the driver casually motioned for me to get in. He didn't really look at me, just jerked his dark head toward the seat next to him and kicked open the passenger door, as if he was already tired out by the whole affair--as if this sort of thing happened between us daily.

You're in luck, he said as I slid onto the dusty seat, trying to swallow the fear that parched my throat. I'm a mechanic, he said, and then, That is your black Honda a couple miles back, with the California plates?

Oh--right. It sure is, I said weakly, searching for the seat belt a good minute before I realized there wasn't one.

Don't worry, I'll drive carefully, he said as he pulled his truck onto the road.

That's not what I'm worried about, I said, and he glanced at me sideways under the brim of his Santa Fe Opera baseball cap.

Look, if you want, I'll take you to my shop and we'll get that car of yours towed and fixed up. Or I can drop you off in town. Whatever you want. You can get out right here if you think I'm deranged, he added with a lopsided grin. Name's Joe, by the way.

Joe Mechanic?

Joe Montgomery. Mechanic, business owner, father of three, unbearably dull and trustworthy, though it's good to be wary, I guess.

Well, a woman never knows, does she? I mean, a woman alone has to be on her guard, right? I tried to sound jaunty and tough, but my voice came out high and watery, the way it always had when I spoke back to my father.

You women are the scary ones, Joe said, shaking his head as he navigated a series of hairpin turns. He had a profusion of black eyebrows and his green eyes were rimmed with curling lashes, but that wasn't what reassured me. It was his hands—big and grease-stained, black under the nails. I imagined a rapist would have clean, well-manicured hands, antiseptic hands with pale protruding knuckles, a fake wedding band, no sign of blood.

You women are the ones who leave *us* in tatters, he said after an awkward pause and I remembered the slack, reverberant look on Nate's face two days ago, when I told him we were finished, how he'd doubled over, holding his sides as if I'd slugged him with a baseball bat. I remembered how he slumped right down in the dirt at the bottom of Chaco canyon, how he'd sat there for a good ten minutes, his head in his hands while I paced the dry ground before him. Look, I'd finally said, it's not like we really had a future, after all. I mean, you were probably going to leave me once we got to Boston, right? He'd looked at me then, eyes narrowed as if trying to discern who I was, this woman he thought he loved, his tormentor.

I glanced at Joe's hands again, now noticing a strip of white flesh marking his otherwise brown ring finger. It wasn't hard to detect—over the years, I'd grown used to looking for wedding rings on the hands of my mother's lovers. Over the years, I'd learned that it was better for me if there *was* a ring in place; it meant that my mother would still be home most Saturday nights, even if she spent them crying in her room. A ring meant that the affair would be over sooner, and we could go back to just us again—for better or worse.

What are you doing out here all alone, anyway? Joe the mechanic asked as we pulled onto Taos's main street—a quaint gallery of adobe storefronts, Mexican restaurants, New Age bookstores, churches. I felt that we'd driven straight into a postcard. So far from California, I mean, he added, turning onto a road that seemed to shoot straight as a runway toward breathtaking mountains and low-slung sky.

Well, that's the question I keep asking myself, I said, fumbling in my bag for a cigarette. I glanced at his face, noticing deep, boyish dimples marring an otherwise serious expression. I wondered again, was he rescuer or captor? I'm not sure yet what I'll answer myself, I said. Is it OK if I smoke in your truck?

Feel free, he said. You watch a lot of Winnie the Pooh?

Pardon?

Winnie the Pooh, he repeated, laughing flatly and clearing his throat. He always says, "I don't know what I'll answer myself." My boys watch the videos, he explained, shrugging, when he saw my bemusement. Their mom buys all that crap, he added as we pulled into a driveway neatly lined with cars, over which hung a black and red sign that read, unbelievably, *Joe's Garage*. She buys them whatever they want, he muttered.

So, *she* must be the one who left you in tatters, I said, instantly regretting it as he shot me a gloomy look, eyebrows bristling.

It's strange how certain moments or days from the past remain vibrant, standing out in eerie relief against all the weeks and months of misplaced memory. I can't remember for sure what highway I took through the Rockies that night, or where I finally slept, when I wound up in Denver at first light. I can't really remember why I left Nate, either, aside from acute restlessness, a nagging feeling that I *needed* miles and miles of solitude, the open road with no one but me on it, edging toward Nebraska at four in the morning when I might have been lying sleepless, again, pressed against Nate's sweaty spine. I don't know if I immediately regretted my decision, if I called my jilted lover from a hotel room in Lincoln or South Bend or Niagra. I do remember the moment I finally entered the Massachusetts Turnpike; slapped hard by August humidity amid acres of dreary, deciduous green, I finally wept for everything I'd just got free of. Strangely, it was Joe Montgomery's face that I pictured then, Joe's gravelly voice saying, Leaving is easy, darling, when it comes down to it.

Joe towed my car and fixed my brakes that day, then took me driving up the back roads east of town to test them out. It was a warm Tuesday afternoon, the sky milky blue but rimmed with thunderheads. While he drove, Joe told me about his wife, who had left him that April, how he'd given over custody of the three boys simply because he knew he couldn't handle them without her, but God, he missed them--even missed the damp Cheerios exploding underfoot, the obnoxious blueberry stains in the kitchen grout. His new apartment was clean as a pharmacy, he said, and he missed his wife's lousy cooking and her weird apricot smell, missed her in bed too, damn her, even though she'd run off with a ski instructor half her age.

Wow. Is he *really* half her age, I wanted to know, or do you just get more sympathy if you say that?

Well, my wife is 38, said Joe, and this punk is 20-something, but he may as well be 19, you know? Anyone who plays in a *grunge* band seems teenaged when *you're* middle-aged and dragging your ass to work, then dragging it back in time to pick up kids for swim team or karate or whatever damn thing; you don't have time for a thought of your own much less to kiss your wife the way she probably needs it.

So you're saying it's partly your fault she's gone, I said, feeling I could say anything, since he started it after all, and since we would probably never see each other again after tomorrow.

Hell, I suppose she sees it that way, he said, although lack of romance doesn't seem like any excuse to jump ship, considering. Nobody married with kids makes out in the backseat--least, no one I know. We spent 13 years together, he said, angling up an incline that ended in a scenic overlook where we stopped, idling. Thirteen years, he said again, shaking his head, and I tried hard to imagine what this meant; 13 years of her hair spread over his pillow, maybe, the particular scrape of her calloused heel against the back of his calf. Or maybe they had slept spooning, the way Nate and I had, his heavy brown arm anchoring her hip bones, her knees cradling his, the irritating comfort of his snore at the nape of her neck, the apricot smell engulfing his senses.

Only now can I *really* imagine it--the year-after-year of dirty dishes and take-out food and kitchen sink squabbles, late night compromises and bleary risings, the boys slipping between them in the predawn light, the hustle of school lunches and burning bacon, the parent-teacher conferences that required a dose of whiskey, later on. Thirteen years of home improvement projects and Friday night sitters, her hand on his knee in the movie theatre, or not, the silences and crying fits, the moments of shock at such long-dormant passion. Thirteen years of dentist appointments and mortgage payments, musty vacation rentals and frantic Christmas Eves. At the time I couldn't fathom the depth of those roots, when mine were the size of alfalfa sprouts.

My own parents had lasted just long enough to have me before he started to drink and lash out, and she to sob and sneak around. By the time I was five, my father had had enough of family life, with all its itinerant comforts and confinements.

I looked hard at Joe's profile, his straight, slim nose and protruding brows, the three-day shadow, crow's feet creeping across his brown cheekbones. He was gripping the wheel tightly—like a man who had many times envisioned his own highway demise—even though we weren't going anywhere at present, and I realized that 13 years was about half my lifetime, and 20 times longer than I'd ever spent getting to know a lover before one of us got antsy or jealous or scared.

I guess I've always just taken solitude for granted, I said. I guess I've never really believed I could be happy with another human, long term. Dogs seem like a safer bet, I said.

Only dogs die too, after thirteen years, Joe said.

Yeah, that's why I don't have one.

Joe chuckled, saying, well, that's one way to stay safe. Just don't ever take any risks—thatta girl. He turned my car around, pulled back onto the dirt road leading to town. The thunderheads were looming to the west now, like great purple bruises in an otherwise flawless sky.

This was a risk, I said. I took a risk getting in the truck with you.

Sure you did, he said, his eyes darting toward me. But that's not the same as putting your heart on the table, is it? Most people would risk bodily harm sooner than real intimacy, he said. I thought about this as we came to a light, as Joe tapped a nervous rhythm on the steering wheel. Was it true what my father had said the day before I left LA—that I was running away? He'd said it with a smirk, over warm sake and mounds of Chinese chicken salad, but there was a challenge in his gray stare, and he waited for me to defend myself. I'm not running *from* something, dad, I'd finally answered. I'm running *to* something. You know, a new life. You know—graduate school, the American dream and all that, just like when you came out here from Nebraska to go to medical school? Remember?

But I wasn't leaving anyone behind, my father said. At least, not anyone who gave a damn.

Yeah, maybe not *that* time, I ventured, shoveling a pile of crispy noodles into my mouth, to keep myself from saying more; I had a tendency to overeat during these lunches.

I was so busy remembering that last lunch with my father—his knobby hand gripping my shoulder, squeezing too hard as I slid into my car on Melrose that afternoon, his face peering through my half open window, saying, *be careful now, kiddo; it's a long drive to Massachusetts*, with such surprising sincerity it made my throat hurt—that I didn't notice when Joe had started talking about his wedding. He was saying that his wife had quoted Rilke' at their wedding, something about embracing each other's solitude, about being alone *together*, and he'd liked it at the time. At the time he was comforted by the thought that they could maintain their separate identities--they didn't have to lose themselves. He said he hadn't realized just how lonely marriage could be, how soon enough he would *wish* to be lost in someone, rescued from his goddamn solitude as from a burning car. Did I know what he meant?

Oh sure, I said, even though I didn't. Wasn't it solitude that I was after, after all? Wasn't that why I'd just left my best boyfriend standing on a curbside with his duffel bag at his feet--so that I could have myself to myself for two weeks on the open road?

After we climbed out of Chaco canyon together, Nate had been fairly good-natured about it, understanding in a hangdog, rock-kicking kind of way, like a little brother whose siblings don't want to play. The next day, when I left him at the Albuquerque airport, I felt a hard, empty lump in my chest, like something I'd swallowed whole without chewing--was it guilt or regret or something else? I spent that night sleepless in a narrow, stale-smelling motel room over the university next to a Coke machine that rattled the wall near my head. I smoked too many cigarettes, and thought all night about Nate's little irksome habits on which I blamed my decision--his refusal to rinse the coffee grounds out of the sink in the morning; his insistence on meditating an hour before breakfast, even on vacation; how he kissed with lips that were too puckered and dry, as if he were worried about cooties. I thought about his inability to carry a tune, his pretentious quoting of Naruda and Rumi, and all of this fueled me for the drive ahead, the winding highway from Santa Fe through the mountains where my brakes had finally given out as if in warning, or protest: What was I running from? Wasn't Nate the kindest man I'd been with? Didn't he have a slow, forgiving smile and a giddy laugh? Didn't he teach me to meditate and string my own guitar? Didn't he tile my bathroom floor and show me how to stuff a turkey? Hadn't he listened to me rage against my parents, then read me Walt Whitman when I was sleepless at 3 a.m.? I remembered that he'd once held my hair off my face when I was sick, gathering my curls gently with his square, easy hands--hands much like those of this stranger who was fixing my car.

Suddenly I felt nauseous with loss.

I watched in silence, sipping my Diet Coke as Joe slid beneath my car to change the oil, free of charge, and I regretted that the brakes had been so easy to mend, that there was not something more serious going on with my CRX that would require days, maybe weeks to fix. A broken head gasket, a new transmission--something that would keep me moored in this tiny gorgeous town, tucked in by mountains at the edge of the slow opening sky.

It was hard to believe I'd been in such a hurry.

That should take care of you for a while, Joe finally said, walking toward me, wiping his long fingers on a grease-stained rag. Seems the oil hadn't been changed for quite a while, he said.

Thanks, I said. I never thought that the guy who owned a Joe's Garage would really be *Joe*, I said, swiping my hair off my forehead and suddenly wondering how I looked. I always thought the guy's real name would be Simon or Cecil or something. But you can't have a business called Cecil's garage, can you? I laughed, flapped my tank top against my breasts. The heat was stifling. My jeans felt too tight and I could smell the tang of my own sweat.

His name is Simon, said Joe, narrowing his eyes at me and tossing the rag onto the countertop. The 20-something ski instructor *asshole* is Simon. Did I say his name or was that just a freakish coincidence?

You may have said it, I answered, knowing full well that he didn't say it, but not wanting him any more freaked out than he already was. I was a little spooked by his woundedness, though I liked how easily he talked, how the words tumbled out of him loose and rough, like handfuls of river pebbles.

Anyway it's a common enough name, isn't it? I bet he's common--that ski instructor, I offered. I bet he goes to community college and wears his baseball cap backwards and eats at Taco Bell. I bet he's never read Rilke. I bet he doesn't go to the Santa Fe Opera.

Aren't you sweet, he said. Aren't you a love, trying to rescue my ego. He took off his baseball hat, revealing a crop of dark, Tom Sellicky curls, and I thought him cute in a goofy way, tall and big-jointed, too tan, and too classically handsome to be really sexy. I had always distrusted men with such straightforward good looks, but I liked what Joe saw in me, or what he thought he saw--womanly compassion, maybe, wisdom beyond my years, groundedness? He didn't need to know that I was about as grounded as dandelion fluff in a cyclone, scared shitless of the very things he seemed to crave all the way to his marrow.

I feel like taking you somewhere else. He said this a little too eagerly, stuffing his hands in his pockets and rocking back and forth on the soles of his sneakers. Can I take you to my favorite spot? he asked. I hesitated, suddenly imagining what my mother would say if she knew I'd ditched my companion--*the only man who could ever put up with you*, she liked to say about Nate--and was careening around the desert with a divorced 40-year-old mechanic I'd just met. I could practically see the worry lines carving her beautiful forehead in two as I nodded my consent. I'd very much like to see your favorite spot, I said.

About a mile outside of town, Joe parked by a huge open meadow flecked with wildflowers, sagebrush, and paint horses, their tan and white flanks fluid in the fading light. The clouds had moved in, crowding out the blue above but leaving one sheer neon strip of sunset above the mountains. We climbed out of the car and lit cigarettes, then sat on the bumper of the Honda gazing west. Joe teased me about my oxidized paint and I told him the story of getting sold a lemon by the Iranian yoga guy in Echo Park, and how I let that guy bully me into seeing *his* mechanic instead of mine, and how two days after I brought the car home Nate and I started to notice things--the tiny dry fissures in the black paint, the ominous squeaks emitting from the hatch. How my heart sank at the realization that I'd been duped. How Nate tried to comfort me by praising my trust in people. But it's not true, I added. I don't trust people at all.

Joe looked at me quizzically for a beat or two. Then said, you're not still scared? Of me, I mean.

I giggled nervously, hating how young it made me sound. Shit, I was never really *scared* of you, I finally said, wondering if it was true, and remembering the only other time I'd been picked up hitchhiking. I was 17 and had run out of gas in my mother's car coming down Pacific Coast Highway after a party in Malibu. I'd been tipsy at the time, so it had taken me a few minutes to recognize the face of my father's partner through the window of his Mercedes. I didn't think twice about letting him give me a lift, didn't suspect him even after he'd pulled into an empty parking lot in Brentwood and placed his hand on my thigh. When he reached to kiss me, I slipped from his car and ran to the nearest mini-mall with such speed I impressed myself. Later, my mother had fed me scotch-laced chamomile tea, shaking her head and saying, They're all the bloody same, the bastards. You can't trust a one of them farther than you can kick them.

That mistrust was her legacy to me. That and her own impossible loveliness, her distracted affection which made me fake fevers on school days, just to be near her. She filled me with terrible longing for things just out of reach, and suspicion for all that was offered freely. But hadn't I trusted Joe Montgomery?

He was staring at me hard now with those angled green eyes, his brow creased--impatient? Angry? Did I seem so *totally* harmless? he finally asked, shooting his cigarette into the desert.

I hopped off the bumper and put out my own cigarette, grinding it with the toe of my boot. I could see the sweat rings on Joe's black T-shirt, his Adam's apple bobbing painfully below the unshaven jaw. I could smell the sharp, minty scent of his deodorant. My own throat tightened. Did you *want* me to be scared? I asked, giggling again lamely.

Not scared, no, he said slowly, sliding off my Honda, brushing the seat of his worn jeans and staring toward the sunset. That's not what I wanted. He didn't look at me for a while, and I wondered how I'd irked him, what hidden nerve I'd just hit without meaning to.

I did feel a *little* nervous, I offered. I mean, I was pretty much at your mercy—I don't even know how to change a tire.

And there I was, right on time, he snapped, cracking his knuckles and leaning against the car. Then he laced his fingers behind his head so that I could clearly see the darker circles of his armpits.

There you were, I echoed, as the last light finally faded, turning the night inky black. A man who knew about cars, no less, I said. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, wondering how far we were from town, and whether or not I could run there in cowboy boots if I had to.

It was downright accommodating of me. He chuckled joylessly. My wife always said that about me—that I was so fucking accommodating. Didn't realize until too late that it was a liability.

I'm not your wife, I said quietly, hugging my elbows, searching my mind for something else to say—something that would soothe him, restore our easy rapport. My pulse echoed in the cave of my ear, and I suddenly felt flooded with the ridiculousness of my situation, standing in the dark with a jilted, six-foot stranger on the outskirts of town, about one thousand miles from anyone I knew. It was the same leaden fear I'd once had swimming in the Pacific off Malibu—that sickening feeling of having gone too far, overestimating my strength and luck, misjudging the distance, forgetting about tides and the unpredictability of currents. That dread you get in your cold center that tells you you're not any more special than the guy who drowned out here last week, or the girl whose body they found on the side of the road. How fortunes can turn, just like that.

I never insinuated that you were *anything* like my wife, Joe finally said, breaking our silence.

I just—I only meant—not all women will treat you the same, I said, despising how taut and airy my voice sounded—like a balloon about to burst. I cleared my throat, tried again: My boyfriend always said that I shouldn't let one rotten asshole spoil the whole gender.

He suddenly threw his head back and laughed—a welcome sound. And did you listen?

Nah, I said, I never listen. I like to learn things the hard way.

Joe wanted to know where this boyfriend was now, and how he felt about me making this trip alone. Not that a woman shouldn't drive all over the damn continent in an oxidized lemon, he teased.

The boyfriend doesn't always get the final word, I said. Though it does seem a bit nuts going alone, if you want to know. Especially right now. Actually, I keep wondering if I shouldn't have left him, I added.

And then he offered the phrase that would come back to me, about how anyone could leave, when it came right down to it. Leaving is easy darling, he said. It's staying still that takes guts.

Yeah, well, it doesn't feel so easy just now. It feels terrifying. Maybe it was for *her*, too, I said after a pause. Bet it was a hell of a lot harder for her than you know.

He didn't answer, just clicked his tongue softly and turned to face me. I could barely see him, just the outline of his shoulders, all those curls, his hand reaching out to touch my shoulder, lightly tracing my rain-flecked wrist with his square fingertips, then turning my hand over and opening it, feeling my palm as if searching for something he needed. I held my breath. His warm fingers closed around my own, curling them back into a fist. Come on, he said. Get in the car.

I slid into the passenger seat and waited, the rain muttering softly on the metal roof, until Joe got in beside me, started up the engine. I asked him where we were headed and he said, We're going to teach you how to change your damn tire. People your age never think anything's going to happen to them. But things happen.

I don't want to take up your whole evening, I said as we pulled onto the road, and he snorted, saying, Christ, please do. It's not my turn to take the kids until Friday. And I don't feel like going home just now. To the pharmacy? I asked. Yeah, the pharmacy. Only I've been sober eight years, so there aren't many good drugs—just Tylenol PM and Nyquil, he said. I told him those were *my* drugs of choice, and he laughed again.

It was late by then. We picked up slices of black olive pizza in town and on the way back to his shop, the sky finally split, spilling raindrops the size of fifty-cent pieces onto my windshield. Joe clicked on the wipers and I suddenly felt like a babysitter being brought home by a father with dubious intentions, though I'd only babysat once and that was for a dog.

I kept thinking about where I would stay that night—another cheap motel, most likely, but in which town?—and whether I'd sleep. I wondered if I should ask Joe for directions to the nearest motel, or if this would seem somehow forward, or too unfriendly, considering all we'd been through. It felt like days since I'd left Santa Fe. I wondered if I should ask more questions about his boys—I didn't even know their names—but I was too tired for any more talk. So I sat on the cool concrete floor of the garage hugging my knees while the storm spattered on the tin roof, reminding us that anything could happen in New Mexico late in July. I smoked another Marlboro, though Joe said it wasn't safe, pointing to the No Smoking sign hanging low over a line of waiting cars.

Nothing about this is safe, I told him, watching his fluid hands as they unfastened my lug nuts. I wasn't sure exactly what I was referring to--the trip I was about to embark on alone? My new life that was supposed to be waiting for me in Boston, complete with housemates and a research assistantship at a school a million miles from these lonely shouldered mountains, the coyotes starting their eerie ruckus on the outskirts of town? Joe's fingers—grease-blackened and battered--were suddenly too exquisite to bear.

He turned then, stared at me for a long moment, wiping his hands and biting his lip, as if carefully considering the next thing to say. He cleared his throat and I inhaled, readied myself for his question, but he never asked. Instead he turned slowly, moved to open the hatch of my car. Get over here, he said softly. I want to show you that you actually have a spare underneath all this crap.

Maybe that was it--all my suitcases. My guitar and my computer and my books in the back, reminding him that I was a kid, a grad student on a grand escapade, that I still had my whole life coming to me and I'd be running to grab it the next day, or the next, on the other side of Iowa by Friday, as he barbequed hotdogs, toasting the buns precisely as the littlest one liked them, setting the table for four. I hadn't ever confessed my age, but surely he'd guessed that it was about the same as his wife's young lover's: I felt saddened and implicated by this--condemned by youth and impudence. His movements were heavy and businesslike now, pulling out the spare, pumping the jack, and I could tell by the hunch of his shoulders that he was tired, that he would sleep hard and alone in his clean apartment tonight.

Still I'd seen him pause for a breath or two, for that moment when he'd considered me so well, as if peering inside a room good and hard, trying to memorize its contents before shutting the door tightly and walking away. I wished he would have stayed a little longer, long enough to say what he saw in there, long enough to tell me what I needed to know.

He slammed the hatch shut, wiped his hands clean, and ordered me to put out the goddamn cigarette before we blew the place up--before somebody got hurt. This is my business, for Christ's sake, he said. It's all I have left.

THE END