

Picnic on the Freeway

“It’s been forever since you’ve taken me on a date,” said Helen, plopping herself down into the passenger seat of Eric’s car, a smoky pre-owned BMW with retractable hard-top roof, six-speed, and 3.0 liter inline engine. Helen could feel the melodic, sustained, upright bass hum-hum of the exhaust as it vibrated through the car’s chassis and lightly shook the floorboard beneath her. She drummed the palms of her hands on her slender thighs, rubbed the fragrant pomegranate lotion off her fingers then clasped them together, interlocking them like a giddy and impatient child before flashing a neon-bright nano-thin smile in Eric’s direction. “So where’re we goin’?” she asked, still smiling to herself, still getting comfortable in the seat, still imagining the little bundle of cells, splitting and growing, inside her uterus. Eric pulled the driver’s side seat belt across his body, brushing one of Helen’s fallen, wheat-colored, hairs from his thigh.

“It’s a surprise,” said Eric, “you always talk about how we never do anything fun and I want tonight to be special.” Eric slid the transmission out of neutral, into reverse, before pulling out of his reserved parking spot and into the street. Helen exhaled, with a short intoxicated purr, and settled, like a moist spring leaf, into the soft, earth brown, heated leather seat. She glanced over just as Eric, running his bare fingertips across the top of the steering wheel, began dipping his foot in and out of the accelerator. The BMW pitched forward, tires squeaking against the pavement, metal grinding metal beneath them, engine buzzing like a cracked kazoo before finally stalling. Helen giggled, and then straightened-up in her seat before adjusting her fluid aquamarine dress, the one Eric had bought for her, the one he had asked her to wear for that evening. She playfully squeezed his arm as he stepped into the clutch and restarted the vehicle,

before successfully shifting the transmission into first, then into second and down the sunless asphalt street.

“I swear that’s never happened to me before,” Eric said. His short laugh, the one where he just sort of smiles and exhales. The one where he tries hard to hide the beautifully polished teeth behind his smooth practically made-for-kissing lips. The one little burr of emotion that Helen loved the most, that caw-ish kid snort, let Helen know he wasn’t the solemn twenty-eight-year-old her sister always told her he was. It was a tiny embarrassing huff from his lungs that forced its way out and gave Helen hope that last week’s argument was resolved, that Eric finally understood the great joy he had implanted in her life and inside her coy and narrow body.

“Likely story,” said Helen, poking him gently on his cheek with her finger, “boop.” Eric turned and pulled his head away from Helen. They drove silently out and onto the four-lane avenue, content to just be cruising gently against the thick summer wind. Helen slid closer to Eric and rested her head against his broad and bony right shoulder. Eric shifted into third. The wind loudly wrapping around her face, her hair a netted mess as he changed lanes swiftly to maneuver beside an old-looking red Pontiac coupe. Downshifting, decelerating, clutch depressed against the floor, Eric pressed his palm against the shifter knob, pulled, slid, and moved the transmission into neutral before bringing the car to a halt at the traffic light. The red Pontiac pulled up in the next lane and both cars began to idle calmly at the intersection.

“Are we going dancing?” said Helen, watching Eric’s rigid face for any indication, following the taut outline of his neck down his pressed white button-up cotton shirt which was tucked into gray dress slacks. Her eyes eventually fell onto the rusty pair of Nike track shoes he wore, his favorite, which pressed against the brake pedal. She reeled her focus back to his face.

His solid and pale summer eyes saw Helen completely. Every time she glanced and caught him glancing back, she turned in a hurry, quick to curl away, quick to peel back, and suddenly weakened, as if his strong hands were clinched tightly around her chest instead of softly dragging against her legs. He stared right past her and at the car sitting next to them. Helen turned, fingering the hair from her face, so she could peek at the vehicle humming outside her window. Inside was a smiling man and a small boy. And somewhere, in the four feet of humid night air between the two cars, were all of Helen's dreams for her and Eric's future together. A crimson brick house built behind three old silver maples with a happily unmanicured yard where their child – their children – could break sticks against the ground or pull long blades of grass from the ground around the mailbox. A house that could become a home. She could see it clearly now. How the driveway curved around to the back of the house where, in the summer, their children would glide down the subtle grade on their new scooters while she and Eric – her husband – could sit under the shade of a patio parasol and feel okay, feel pleased with owning the course of their lives, even if it was just for an hour of two. And what lives they would all have. Helen imagined a damp August morning in a future where Eric, after kissing the children off to school, would hold her close and caress her with the backs of his fingers like she was the sole flowering lily of his often murky world. As they drove along, she dreamed of parting the moist petals of his mouth with hers, undressing him one thread at a time all the way down to his stamens and with the passion of a pistol pressed against the roof of his mouth.

“It's a surprise babe,” he said, patting the inside of Helen's thigh before pressing the dashboard button to raise and lock the convertible's hard-top, “but I just know you'll love it.” The phosphorescent hue of the traffic light coming through the windshield gleamed against Helen's dress. The airy turquoise fabric hovered like a foamless waterfall around her body. She

pulled the hem across her knees and caught Eric staring at her but she shied away again, looking out her passenger window as the red Pontiac rumbled away from the light and down the street in front of them. She could feel Eric's eyes against the back of head, wrapping around her throat like a thin silk noose. The red brake lights of the Pontiac hung in the distance ahead of them in the dark, glaring against the deep shine of the now yellow traffic light above Helen and her boyfriend. Eric shifted the car into first and pulled through the intersection before throwing the transmission into second and driving straight, ten and two, down the road, following the beaming red lights of the Pontiac. "We're not going dancing" said Eric, "but don't you worry, angel. We'll be there before you know it."

"Well, at least give me a clue," said Helen, thumbing some hair behind her ears before gazing out the passenger window, the warm amber street-lights whipping by overhead quicker and quicker, before, after a few minutes, receding, like immolated stars into the distance of an increasingly unfamiliar road around them.

"No." Eric looked straight ahead, ten and two, then just ten while he shifted the car into third.

"Don't be like that" Helen pouted, feigning a sort of wimpy frown that had always won Eric over. She wore it like a mask on the inside of her face, carried it everywhere they went together, like a chattering golden key that could unlock him, turn him, pry him apart and open him like a window. The cool air of her affection could breeze across his sill, through his chest and around the wire-thin bones of his past left in his heart. Helen stopped pretending to frown and kicked off one of her dark amber flats, before scratching the back of her calf with her recently pedicured, doubly-subtle pink and polished toenails. "Ah. Damn it all," Helen whispered

to herself, leaning down to rub her left leg with her hands, feeling a spiky patch of leg hair that she didn't shave when she was showering this afternoon. "I missed a spot." She looked up at Eric, his hand now at six o'clock on the steering wheel, his dry and flakey face, unshaven and scraggly.

She reached for the dash and turned up the volume on the car's six speaker high-performance luxury surround sound system, before falling back into the seat as Eric ground the BMW's six-speed transmission into fourth. A song by Claudette Meyer came through the radio, a lazy three-chord ballad that Helen thought was catchy enough despite the hopeless pining of its chorus. Eric reached out for the dashboard and returned the car's stereo to its original, attenuated quietness. Helen noticed his tight hands, the same hands that knew every peach hollow, every gentle hill, and every calming spot of private flesh on her body. His fingers were the same fingers that pressed against her shoulders and the backs of her arms while she slept against his chest, the same soft-tipped but still hard fingers that would keep Helen's hair out of the way when he kissed her forehead. His hands were different now. They looked tired and broken. The knuckles bruised and the quick of his fingernails bitten off and left jagged, like little broken spring-steel saw blades, pink and clear and a little bloody.

"I don't want to be a father." said Eric, nearly inaudible, as if to himself. Helen shifted the folds in her dress and pressed her shoulder against the passenger side door but didn't respond.

"Where are we going?" she asked again, this time leaning back in her seat, watching the needle of the speedometer glide past fifty-five miles-per-hour, the whirling hum of the car's exhaust creeping, reaching, crawling, into Helen's ears. She twirled her necklace, a thin silver chain with a sterling elephant pendant, around her finger. Eric bought the little elephant for their

last anniversary, before he lost his job but after he went off, then back on, then off, his medication. She watched as his eyelids opened and closed like two antique handled bellows as he sped past a burnt out street-light and onto the freeway entrance ramp. His every movement was mechanical, structural, yet vaporous and adaptable. Eric was a man that wasn't exactly, fully, completely there in the driver's seat beside her, and just maybe, Helen realized, hadn't been for some time, even before their argument last Sunday. He depressed the clutch and shifted into fifth, missing it by a little and letting his hand slip off the shifter, coughing, blinking, never turning to check his car's blind spot before merging, drifting, falling, as if backward off a ledge, into the freeway's evening traffic, a harsh blur of red and white-yellow lights all around them.

“You don't have to drive so fast. I don't care where we're going as long as we make it there alive.” Helen's words stumbled out of her mouth. Her fingers, suddenly and tightly, wrapped like vines around the door's armrest. She pushed herself back into the seat, her little feet stuck hard against the floorboard, arms to her side. Her head spun from Eric, to the red tail lights of the cars ahead of them, then to the distant and lethargic line of traffic on the feeder road. All stopped calmly at a traffic light, as if waiting in line at a carnival, and in a few seconds, already a mile behind the winding, swerving, of Eric's Beemer.

“Don't worry angel. We're almost there,” Eric said, pinching Helen's knee, his hypnotized stare fixed steadily on the freeway ahead of him. “It'll be like a little picnic. You love picnics don't you?” His trembling lips slurring over the grinding roar of the engine. She fingered the door's handle like a panicked lover. A heavy fear pressed down upon her. The unconscious tinge of tension surging through her arms and out of her palms. Her fingers clasp the broken chain of her necklace that she had unknowingly ripped from her chest. Eric sped past a dusty, hunter-green mini-van. She clung to the stiff cloth upholstery as Eric turned the steering wheel

with both hands around another group of patient, limit-abiding motorists. He straightened the car out, the engine spinning wide-open as he shifted into the sixth and final gear.

“Stop messing around.” Helen’s voice cracked like a vase as the car tore past seventy-five. Eric dropped his hands from the steering wheel, running them through his dark, oily hair, steering the speeding car with his left knee. His right foot extended firmly, straightened out into the accelerator, deep in the floorboard. “Slow down,” she demanded, pushing his hand away from hers, hitting him in the side with her tiny, angry fist, a little bur of pain bouncing, like a pin, between her rapidly beating heart and her swollen womb. She stared at Eric as he leaned back in his seat, his frozen, depleted eyes shutting as he grabbed her flailing hand with his. He twisted the steering wheel, turned it like a vise.

At one-hundred and four miles-per-hour Eric drove the car off the freeway and into a large concrete column that supported the Center street overpass. Just before impact, amid the noise, the lights, the overwhelming and crushing fear, after all the future August leaves were pulled from their branches, but mere milliseconds before the crash, Helen heard something. Somewhere, in all that confused chaos, as she watched the ever looming concrete end to their date approach, she heard, she swore she heard him whisper. Though, she swore she didn’t hear all of it. Didn’t remember exactly what he said but only remembered it being familiar and from a man she at once remembered knowing. A whisper like the muffled words of a lover too tired to speak words too powerful to mispronounce. Like the asymptotic compression of two souls, lost in that faded moment before falling asleep beside each other, seemingly forever.

After the BMW shattered against the bridge’s heavy reinforced concrete support, after the entire front clip of the car separated from the rest of the body. After the silver convertible’s

hardtop was scalped from above the two lovers. After the car spun and contorted across the freeway's median. After the half-pretzeled tangle of steam and aluminum dug into the soft grass and earth. After the windows broke and fell out. After the small bits of metal, rubber, and interior trim lay thrown out like discarded soda-cans and food wrappers on the cold evening grass. After the sirens and lights surrounded the scene. All the traffic stopped, drivers and passengers swaying in their seats, periscoping to see the wreckage. And in a low-slung red Pontiac, a father reached out and covered his son's eyes, doing his best to keep the boy, in his little league baseball uniform, from seeing the two mangled, torn, and nearly naked, bodies being pulled out of the car by the paramedics.

“What happened?” the kid asks. The father is silent for a moment, pulling the thoughts out of his heart before replying,

“Just a terrible accident.”