

Excalibur

On the day we met it was summer. It had rained all morning and everything was still gray. I was wet. Your dad was there. And another man who is always around. They did most of the talking and you stood behind them but I saw you smiling and smiling.

Smiling at me.

The three of you went away and you came back alone. “Hello,” you said. You laughed. There was no one else around.

We went out to the main road and got on the highway and we went fast. You put music on loud and even though it was still raining a little you had the windows down. I was getting wet again but you put your hand out the window and your arm got wet, too. You were yelling things. Over the wind and music I couldn’t hear them but you were happy and with your hand you hit the steering wheel and yelled and yelled and we went faster.

That night we stopped in the city underneath a big bridge. Cars and trucks and trains went over us and were loud and going fast. They honked and screeched. We were parked but you didn’t get out right away. It was dark and still and you took a deep breath and said, “Okay. Okay. Here we go.” Then you took your backpack and went inside a building made of bricks. Parts of it were crumbling. Lights went on inside and there were other people moving around but I couldn’t hear. This was your house.

The first night under the bridge it got very dark. Every so often a person would come by. Sometimes they were alone and quiet and walked by quickly. Sometimes they were in a

group and they were loud and broke bottles. One fell down. Birds were in the beams under the bridge and their mess was everywhere. There was spit and gum and glass on the ground, but a man with a beard went and lay down nearby anyway. Before morning another man with a flashlight came and poked the bearded man with the flashlight. “Move it along,” he said. His voice was quiet. The trucks on the bridge were loud like thunder.

In the morning you came out. You were with another man and the two of you were talking and laughing. You looked over at me as you crossed the street. Then you stopped and came over. “Jesus,” you said. “That your car?” The other man said. “Yeah,” you said. “I’ve never seen that much birdshit,” the other man said, and you both laughed. He was your friend. You told him to go ahead and you went in and got a towel and cleaned the mess off. You were whistling.

I stayed under the bridge. In the daytime many people walked by. There were people holding hands and people with dogs and people with children. The older people didn’t notice me but the children sometimes touched my side when they went by. One boy in a red hat came up and licked the window. “Aiden! Don’t touch that!” his mother said. She looked up from her phone. “Can’t you see dirty it is?” His tongue made a streak. It stayed there until it rained.

Most days I saw you twice. First you came out of the building early in the morning, before the sun was up. You were usually quiet but you always touched me as you went by. Later in the day you came back. Sometimes your hair was messy and sometimes your face was red. You walked slower at the end of the day. Some days you went by without

looking and went up into the building and I heard the door close but lights didn't come on for a while.

The days got colder and under the bridge it was quieter. It was fall and sometimes there were a few leaves blowing down the street, but I never saw any trees. The man with the beard started coming back more often, and one night the other man with the flashlight came back, too. The man with the beard was snoring. The man with the flashlight came up and stood near him for a moment but he didn't say anything. Then he walked away. The snoring was loud, like wind, like heavy things going by on the bridge.

One night when you came home you came right up to me. You opened the door and got in and put a sticker on the inside of the windshield. You sighed a little. “There,” you said. “Gonna see a lot more of each other now.”

The next morning you came out like usual but you and your friend didn't walk by. You came to me and got in. Your friend moved the seat around. “Music?” you said. He made a sound. “Too early,” he said.

We went out across the city and the day started to get lighter. The roads were small and broken and sometimes you didn't see a hole and I hit it hard. You would make a face, like a stretched out smile, but not happy. “Sorry,” you said quietly. You were saying it to me. Your friend laughed.

We stopped on the corner of a busy street and your friend got out. You and I kept going and went to a parking lot. There were a few cars. The sun was coming up. Across the street was a big building and you took your bag and went in. In the parking lot there were

big noisy birds and lots of trash, but I was clean and in the sun and it shined and shined all day long.

Every day we made this drive and parked in the same spot. Once the sun came all the way up other people came to the building and went in. Most of them were children, loud children, singing and playing and pushing each other. They usually stayed across the street and didn't come to the parking lot, but one day a girl came over. She had yellow ribbon and she was tying it on the antennas of the cars. She tied one on me. When all the children left at the end of the day and you and the other people came out one of them was angry about the ribbons. She took the ribbon off of her car and ripped it up and left it on the ground. She got in her car and drove away fast. You looked at the ribbon on me and you didn't say anything but you got in and we drove away. The ribbon stayed on for weeks and then one day you took it off and put it in your pocket.

Then it was winter. It was cold and sometimes it snowed, but not under the bridge. The bridge kept me dry. There were more cars under the bridge now, and sometimes the spot I stayed in had another car there. We parked somewhere else and it snowed all day. Soon I was covered and the whole world was white and cold. You came out in a hat and gloves and shoveled the snow. Your face got sweaty and red.

The problem with the winter was the cold. It was hard to start in the morning and it was hard to go at first but most of the time you didn't wait and tried to go anyways. I made a lot of noise when you did this. “We can wait a minute while it warms up,” your friend said. “It's fine,” you said.

After we drove I could stay warm for a little while. If it snowed when I was warm the snow would melt and run off like rain. You were staying with me a little longer in the mornings, eating. The heater was on and it smelled like food and I got warm and stayed warm for hours.

Under the bridge in the winter there was a cat. Now when we went home at the end of the day it was dark, and as soon you went into the brick building where you slept the cat would come out from under the fence and crawl up into me. I was still warm from the drive. The cat had big pieces of fur missing and its tail was bent. When it climbed up into me it was shaking, but after a while it stopped. Once I got cold again, the cat would get out and go back under the fence and then it'd be morning and you'd come out and we'd go. But one time it was extra cold and the cat didn't get out. You came out and tried to start and the cat made a sound and moved quick and there was a big bang and I couldn't start. You made a face and then tried again but I just clicked and clicked and couldn't start. “Shit,” you said quietly.

A man with a moustache and overalls came and opened me up. The two of you stood at the front of me. You were shivering. He wasn't. He laughed loud and then coughed. He reached in and made a grunting sound and pulled out a handful of fur and blood and bone. “Looks like you had a squatter,” he said. You put your hand over your mouth and looked away. The man cleaned the rest of the cat out of me.

One day in the winter we went somewhere else. It was a little street with a tree and we parked right under it and you went up to a building and pushed a button. From somewhere above there was a buzzing sound and then a girl came out. You smiled at

each other and you said something that I couldn't hear. She got in and we went. She had brown hair. It was tied up with my yellow ribbon.

We started going there a lot. She would get in and we would go to new places, places that weren't in the city. When she was around your voice sounded different. You talked more. When we got out of the city the roads were wider and smoother and there were trees and birds and you went fast, so fast, until one time she grabbed the handle near her window. “Easy,” she said quietly. Your neck and ears went red. You drove slower after that.

It got warmer and the roads were muddy, especially outside of the city. It splashed up under the wheels and I got dirty. One sunny morning we went to a field. The road was old and loud and made of gravel. You pulled off and the two of you got out and took your bags and went into the woods. It was sunny and quiet and you were gone for a long time. When you came back the sun was behind the trees and it was almost dark. She was up against the door and you leaned up against her. Your ankles were muddy.

You were saying sorry but you were both smiling. “I'm sorry,” you said again. “I have a problem. With my mouth.” She laughed. “Just forget I said it,” you said. “Why?” she said. “You think I'm afraid to say it back?” She took your hand and she picked up your finger and put it on the muddy window. She wrote. Your eyes were watery and you both got in the back seat. The windows got foggy. Your clothes came off and went all over me, the front seat, the back, the steering wheel. The woods got dark and when we went back to the city she fell asleep against the window.

After that we started picking her up at the end of day, and when we parked at the spot under the bridge she would go in with you. The lights came on and the door closed and I

couldn't hear anything except thunder on the bridge. Her smell was on the seats. It was like lemon and clean clothes.

Once when I was under the bridge she came and met your friend. He was outside sitting and waiting for her and when she came up they hugged and talked. I couldn't hear. He gave her my key and she took us down the street to a building with a garage. We got in a line of cars. She put on the radio. While we waited she looked around inside. She put her hands on the middle part of the steering wheel and swept off the dust. The line moved and we went forward. There were bags of trash and paper and old food on the ground and she picked them up and put them in a big bag. We moved forward and I could see into the garage. There was water coming from the roof and the floor. Big things like trees spun around and went over the cars.

It was our turn and we went through. The water was warm and soapy and the things like trees were soft and they reached all over me. At the end great wind machines blew hot air and I was dry. We went out to a parking lot. Under me was dripping. The bird mess was gone. The mud from the day in the woods was gone. She took a machine and sucked all the dirt and crumbs from the seats and took me back to the bridge. I was new. I smelled like her.

She took a piece of paper and wrote. Then she stuck it under the windshield. Then she touched the window and went away.

You came home later. You were walking by and you looked at me and stopped. You came up and you were confused. You went to the window where the mud had been and touched the spot. Then you saw the note. You picked it up and read it. You took out your

phone and went in the building and I could see you through the window of your house. You were pointing at the air with your finger. There was a line in your neck that was sticking out. Then you took your phone and you threw it somewhere. It was away from the window so I couldn't see.

We didn't pick her up for a while. It was starting to get warmer and you put the windows down sometimes, but even when your friend was in the car you kept the radio off. He talked a lot but you were quiet. There were more bags of food and trash than before and sometimes it felt like you put me into puddles on purpose. I was dirty.

One day when I had become very dirty we parked under the bridge and you ran up to your house. You were going fast and your phone was on the seat. A man came by and saw it. He looked around. It was quiet under the bridge. From under the fence where the cat used to live he picked up a brick and he threw it through the window. I broke. Glass went everywhere inside. The man took your phone and ran. The brick was on the seat and the glass was on the floor and the dashboard and all over me and the wind came inside.

You came out soon. You almost got in but then you saw the glass You yelled. You took your hand and you hit the door, hard. Then you sat down on the ground next to the car for a long time.

The next day we went to another garage, like the one where I got clean, but this time there was no line, just me. We pulled into the garage and a man was smoking inside and he told you to come back in an hour. So you left. The man took a big piece of glass and he and another man put it where the old window was. “There's still some pieces in the

well,” the second man said. “Does it rattle?” the first man said. The second man shut the door, hard. “Not much,” he said. “Then fuck it,” the first man said.

That night we went to see the girl. When we got to her house we parked under the tree and you sat for a minute. “Jesus,” you said. “What’s wrong with you?” you said. You weren’t talking to me. You were talking to you.

You went up the steps and the girl came down. I couldn’t hear but her eyes were wet and you hugged and she came to me and you showed her the window. She put her hand over her mouth and she touched your arm. She put her fingers on the new glass. Her nails were painted green. You said something and she laughed and you laughed and you both leaned against me for a long time. You had left me on but I tried not to make too much noise.

It was spring and everything was sunny and quiet. We went to the building where the children were and they came and went. We picked up the girl every day and we went to your house. You kept me clean and one side of me smelled like her again. That was her side.

It was like that for a long time: summer, fall, winter, spring again, quiet and clean. Then one day you and your friend came out and moved me to a different spot. It was in a parking lot but there were no other cars. You took some pens that were different colors and put them on my hood and then other people came. It was sunny. The people were your friends. They took the pens and they wrote things on my hood. They drew pictures of cars and the sun and clouds and roads. The girl came. She took a yellow pen and wrote “*Happy 50,000th, Excalibur.*” That was me. She even took the ribbon from her hair and tied it around my antenna again. All of your friends ate and drank and leaned on me and

the sun shined all day and dried the ink on the hood and when it got dark you and the girl and I went back to the bridge. In two days it rained and the ink ran off into the street.

One day when we parked at home your phone rang. You looked at the screen but you didn't answer it. It kept ringing. “What?” the girl said. You showed her the phone. Her eyes got big. “Oh my god,” she said. “Answer it!” she said. “Hello?” you said. Your voice sounded small. You listened. Your face was red and your hand was on your neck and you were smiling. “Thank you,” you said. You hung up. You looked at the girl. “I can't believe it,” you said. “Believe it,” she said. She was smiling. But not in the same way as you.

You got out and you yelled a lot. Then you and the girl went away. You came back later when it was dark. You were singing and she was laughing. You fell down and she laughed some more. When you weren't looking at her she had the same smile as before, the different kind.

One day after that we went to the building where the children go. You came out with a lot of boxes and bags. People helped you get them inside. Then we drove away. We honked and you waved and when we got around the corner, you said, “Okay. Okay.”

That night we went to the girl's house. I had stayed there before and was parked under the tree but a few minutes after you went up you came back. Your face was wet. You were quiet. Sometimes when you're quiet we go fast but this time you got in and we went very slow. We went around the corner and then came back and stopped in front of the tree again. You didn't get out. You looked up and then out the windshield again and then we went away.

In a few days it got very hot and you and your friend came out and put things in the backseat. You hugged him. He kicked my tire. “Take care of him,” he said. He was talking to me. You laughed. Then you got in and we went fast. We got out onto the highway and you had the music loud and the sun was going behind the trees. It was warm and you put the windows down but you didn’t yell. After a while you turned the music down.

We went on new roads. They were flat and smooth and we went fast all day for three days. There weren’t many cars on the road and at night we parked in parking lots and you put the seat back and slept. All around in the parking lot there were crickets and they were singing. In the mornings the crickets were quiet and you rubbed your eyes and we went.

On the third day we stopped in a new place. There were many trees. You got out and went to the mailbox and pulled out a key and you took all your things and brought them into a building. This was your house. I stayed under a big tree. At night it was warm and the wind blew and little green leaves fell all over me.

We stayed here for a long time. It got cold and warm and then hot and then cold again. Sometimes it snowed. I stayed under the tree most of the time. One day, a little girl came up to me. Her mother was walking behind her. The girl saw the ribbon. She came up and pulled on it. I tried hard to move but I couldn’t. She pulled the ribbon off and looked at it. “Ew,” she said. “This is old,” she said. She dropped it on the ground and went away. Her mother picked it up and tied it back on my antenna.

You got older. Your hair got long and then you cut it and it got long again. Sometimes we went and picked people up. Sometimes you took me to a place near the water where it was very quiet and there were birds in the water. You took bread and put it in the water and the birds came up and ate it and one time I thought that they would come up to me but they always stayed in the water.

When it was cold it got harder for me to start. You understood and you waited and tried again but sometimes I still couldn't go. One day we tried for a long time. It was cold and a little snow was falling on the windshield. I clicked and clicked but couldn't start. You got out and put on your hat and locked the door. Then you went away.

The next morning I could start and we went to a new place. It was a parking lot with many cars. Some were old and rusty. Some were clean and new. You got out and spoke to a man. You shook hands. He pointed to a spot far away from the road where the parking lot ended and a field began. You parked me there and he walked over. He put his hand out. You didn't move. “Can I have a minute?” you said. He looked at you with a strange face. He shrugged and went back through the parking lot.

You got out and looked at me. You looked at me for a long time. You walked around and touched all over. You kicked the tires. Your eyes were watery and then you were crying. You went around to the antenna and you touched the ribbon. It wasn't yellow anymore. It was white from the sun. You put it in your pocket. Then you walked away.

I stayed in the parking lot near the field. This is my home. There are big trees around and animals in the grass. At night they come out and go near me. People come and walk around the parking lot. They shake hands with the man and they get in cars and then they

go. I stay in the parking lot. In the winter it gets cold, but I don't have to try and start. In the summer it gets hot. Sometimes there is thunder. Sometimes it sounds like heavy things on the bridge.