

ROAD CONDITIONS

Just after Lexie lost her job at the power plant, a runaway automobile crashed into her apartment. She wasn't injured, just temporarily homeless. Could I be any more of a cliché, she wondered? She'd been sitting at the kitchen table, sending an email to her boyfriend, Brandon, who was in Afghanistan, when she heard the high, keening shriek of an engine, followed by an explosion that shook the whole building, knocking her to the floor. A huge hole gaped in the living room wall where the hood of a silver Toyota, radiator still smoking, protruded just inches from Brandon's ratty recliner. Her one piece of nice furniture – the Tiffany floor lamp she'd found at an antique shop – lay in glittering pieces on the carpet. The odor of burnt rubber pricked her nostrils, mingling with the dusty smell of drywall and mortar. Bricks were scattered around the floor. She could taste the dust settling around the shattered windshield of the car. A limp hand dangled over the steering wheel like an empty glove.

It took her a moment to realize someone was screaming – “MommyMommy” – in a collision of two long syllables. A teenage girl with sleek black hair was struggling to get out from the passenger's side of the car, a violin case clutched to her chest. It was the Japanese girl who lived across the apartment complex parking lot with her mother.

Lexie was trying to help the girl out when Quentin, a neighbor from down the hall, burst in the front door.

“Oh my god, Lexie, are you okay?” He helped her and the girl over to the sofa and then pulled out his cell phone to call 911.

Later, as she sat in Quentin’s apartment trying to hold a cup of herbal tea in her shaking hands, Lexie realized she didn’t even know the name of the girl or her mother. Hot amber liquid sloshed over the edge of the cup, scalding her. Quentin took the cup from her and got a cold rag from the kitchen.

“That poor kid,” she said, pressing the rag to her hand. “What’s she going to do? I think it was just her and her mother.”

“Maybe she’s got relatives here,” he said. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“When am I ever going to be able to get back in my apartment?”

“Don’t worry about that now. Maybe there’s an empty apartment you can move into for a while. Or you can stay with me if you’d like.” He rubbed the dark stubble on his chin, head tilted to the side as he looked at her. She stared at the cleft at the tip of his nose that matched the one in his chin.

“I’m not having sex with you again, Quentin.”

“Of course not, Lexie. I wouldn’t expect you to. I’ll sleep on the sofa.” He smiled and she marveled anew at how handsome he was.

They’d both gotten drunk at a New Year’s Eve party one of the other residents had. It was right after Brandon’s national guard unit redeployed. She’d been angry—at the government for sending him over there again, at Brandon for joining the National

Guard in the first place, at herself for putting up with shabby treatment at the power plant. Quentin calmly listened to her rant but didn't attempt to offer any advice. At one point, she asked what he thought about "this shitty war," and he just shrugged and said he didn't really know much about it. He never watched the news, which he'd been addicted to in what he called his "former life." For years he'd suffered from migraines, he told her. But after a month or so of his swearing off newspapers, the internet, radio and TV, the headaches left, never to return.

"I got the idea from my students," he explained. "They don't have a clue what's going on outside the sphere of their own lives. They have enough to contend with as it is. They don't need the evening news." He taught at a school for troubled boys, many of whom had lost their parents or been abused. "It's a way of avoiding the global aspects of suffering," he added. "It allows me to concentrate on individuals."

Lexie sort of wished she could feel the same. "I love humanity. I just don't like people," she said, half jokingly. "But I'll make an exception with you."

A few days after the accident she could move back into her apartment, but it didn't feel like home anymore. She moved slowly around the three rooms in her bare feet, wearing only a T-shirt and panties, not bothering to empty trash, throwing everything from used tampons to chicken bones on the floor beside overflowing wastebaskets. Her contacts got knocked from a pile of makeup on the back of the commode into the toilet bowl, so she jammed on an old pair of over-sized glasses with pink tortoise-shell frames. She ran out of shampoo and used Tide to wash her hair.

Brandon told her she needed to get out of the apartment and start looking for another job. They were Skyping and his big square face seemed to take up the whole screen. “Hell, people are getting killed over here all the time. You can’t let it get to you, Lexie.”

“You drive a truck, Brandon. You’re not in combat.”

“Neither are you so stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“What did you say, Brandon? I can’t hear you. Oops, something’s wrong with the screen. Now I can’t see you.” She hit the escape key and the screen went blank. She felt a little mean. What if he got killed by a drone or something? But he ought to know better than try to give her orders. It was bad enough when he was a civilian; now it was even worse.

She did get out of the apartment the following day but not to look for a job. She went to the funeral for the woman who had been driving the Toyota. It was held in a local Methodist church that had special services in Japanese. The daughter sat on a front pew with an older Asian woman and several younger ones. Lexie hoped they were going to take care of her.

Driving away from the church, she suddenly became aware of the steering wheel in her hands, the accelerator beneath her right foot. The accident investigators had said the woman’s Toyota might’ve been defective. The girl had told them it shot forward as soon as her mother put it in gear and wouldn’t stop even though she kept pressing the brakes. Lexie held her breath all the way to her apartment, going barely ten miles an hour. She went to her computer as soon as she got home and Googled “sudden acceleration in automobiles.”

Several examples flashed up on the screen, among them, a 2010 Camry like her neighbor had been driving. But the chronicle of malfunctioning automobiles didn't stop there. She scrolled through dozens of narratives about accidents – from wheels suddenly breaking off on the freeway to seatbelts strangling passengers they were meant to protect. Ralph Nader got it right in the sixties, she thought – *Unsafe at Any Speed*. Her 12-year-old car wasn't listed among the renegades, but the fact that it was also a Toyota bothered her. Even though her bank account was dangerously low, she bought a bicycle, telling Brandon it was for exercise and saving gas for short trips to the grocery store. Somehow, she didn't mind telling Quentin the truth, that she was giving up riding in cars.

"This is like quitting smoking, or you not watching the news," she said. "It's just one more thing I can control in my life."

When she decided to leave town for Christmas, she handed him the keys to her car and asked him to crank it once in a while, or even drive it if he wanted. He planted a chaste kiss on the forehead and wished her a merry Christmas.

"You, too," she said. "How are you celebrating?" She realized she didn't know anything about his family, except that he'd been married once and was divorced.

"Oh, you know, go to midnight Mass, work in the soup kitchen Christmas day, stuff like that."

"So, you'll just be sleeping in and ordering Chinese?"

"Pretty much."

"Well, if you'd like some company, come on down to my aunt's in Mississippi."

She didn't know why she'd said that. Now he was liable to think she had a crush on him.

Did she? On the long bus ride, she ruminated over that question. And her future with Brandon. When she stepped the bus in Mount Vista, the town where she'd grown up, she still didn't have any answers.

Her Aunt Bess was waiting for her in the same Buick Skylark she'd driven for fifteen years. She couldn't understand why Lexie hadn't driven and now refused to get into her car.

"First you say you're taking the bus home, now you tell me you don't ride in cars a'tall? Is that how they do things up in Kentucky?" She grabbed Lexie's duffel bag with hands as sinewy as grapevines, throwing it in the back seat of the Buick. Her iron-gray ponytail was draped over the shoulder of an old green parka.

"Do you realize, Aunt Bess, that hardly anybody in New York City drives a car? They take the subway or a bus. Plus, in Europe, everybody has walked everywhere for centuries."

"Well, shoot, some of those countries probably still don't know what an automobile looks like." Aunt Bess got into her car, creeping alongside Lexie, who stuck to the shoulder. It was less than a mile from the bus stop on the highway to her house, and Lexie had fully intended to walk if she had to no matter what time the bus arrived. But after spending nearly eighteen hours on the road, she really wasn't up to a discussion about her rationale for swearing off cars.

"I'll give you all the gory details tomorrow," she promised her aunt.

As she walked up to the door of the white stucco house where she'd spent most of her childhood, she saw that the same ugly Christmas wreath her aunt left up year-round -- like the courthouse clock on the square that always said four o'clock. She

vaguely remembered their picking the wreath out at the Ben Franklin store during an after-Christmas sale years ago. The red Scotch plaid bow had long since faded to a sickly pink; the plastic holly leaves had been stripped of all but one or two flattened berries.

“Aunt Bess, don’t you think it’s time to get you a new wreath?” she asked, pushing open the unlocked door.

“It’s time for a whole lot more than that,” Aunt Bess said, her deliberately oblique tone inviting a response. But Lexie ignored the remark, figuring it was an allusion to a mysterious “gentleman caller,” a Mr. O’Cain, whom her aunt had mentioned in several previous letters. She was too tired for that conversation, too.

The familiar burnt-wood smell from the fireplace greeted her as she walked into the darkened house. Shaking off her navy pea coat, she hauled the duffel bag to her old room, which faced the street. It was virtually unchanged except for a few touches added during her summers home from college. She smiled at the symmetrical arrangement of the miniature ceramic shoe collection on the maple dresser and the artful pile of round and cylindrical-shaped pillows on the yellow plaid bedspread she’d made in high school home ec class. Through the years the room had been a refuge, a place where she could come to zone out and feel safe – whether for a few days or a few months.

After she said goodnight to Aunt Bess, Lexie looked around the room again and realized there was something she had to take care of before she could fall asleep. She scooted the dresser aside and then shoved and pulled the double bed away from the windows facing the street to the opposite wall. She wasn’t taking any chances on a kamikaze car intent on destroying itself and anything in its path.

The next morning she rambled around in the closet where many of hers and Uncle Doc's old clothes were still stored and pulled on a masculine-looking purple bathrobe she'd never seen before. In the bathroom, she splashed cold water on her face and tugged a comb through the tangle of dark curls. Aunt Bess was clomping around the kitchen in pink fuzzies and gray sweatpants.

"How do you manage to make so much noise in those things?" Lexie asked. Aunt Bess paused in her relentless counter scrubbing to stare at Lexie as if trying to place her. Was it the bathrobe, Lexie wondered? She couldn't imagine her aunt getting sentimental over a garment – or anything else for that matter.

"Talking about noise, what was all that racket in your room last night?"

Lexie poured a cup of coffee and took a careful sip before answering. "I just thought I'd sleep more comfortably with the bed pushed up against the opposite wall." She put the coffee cup on the front page of the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Too cold for you?"

"Actually, it was the cars. The traffic, you know, on the street right outside the window."

Aunt Bess sat down with a plateful of toast cut into triangles. She dipped one into her coffee, carefully tapping off the excess liquid on the edge of the cup, and raised one eyebrow quizzically at Lexie.

"Oh, I know it sounds weird," Lexie said. "But you tend to think about little details like the position of your bed when a machine that belongs on the road comes barreling

through your living room wall.” Then, as briefly as possible, she told her aunt about the car crashing into her apartment.

“I’m just guessing, but does this have something to do with you avoiding cars altogether?” Aunt Bess asked.

“As a matter of a fact, it does. You should see the stuff I’ve printed out from the computer, stories that would curl your hair. The worst one to me was this little kid. Eleven years old. He was sleeping on the living room couch and was run over by a pickup truck of all things. His sister’s boyfriend left it in gear. Just stepped out for a minute and boom – it took off all by itself and went right through the wall.”

Aunt Bess cradled the coffee mug in her hands and studied a squirrel trying to reach a bird feeder on the limb of a cedar tree outside the kitchen window. “Little boogers eating everything I put out. Just because you read about bad things happening doesn’t mean they have to happen to you.”

“But that’s just it, Aunt Bess. Something bad did happen to me. Or at least, almost happened.”

“Maybe you ought to go to a headshrinker about this car thing,” Aunt Bess suggested, getting up from the table to freshen her coffee. “I read in a *Reader’s Digest* about all these people afraid of this and that? Why, one man was even scared to death of toasters.”

“See? It isn’t just me,” Lexie said.

“Now you take my friend Mr. O’Cain that’s in his eighties and with cataracts? Does he let that stop him from getting in a car and driving a hundred miles on the four-lane to see me once in a while? Not on your life.”

As hard as it was to imagine her aunt with a gentleman caller, Lexie realized it was time to at least acknowledge Mr. O’Cain’s existence. “Yes, you mentioned something about him in your last letter. Something about going on a cruise? I was a little, I don’t know, surprised.”

“Yeah, well, that makes two of us. I wasn’t exactly looking for any man. I guess you could say we’re friends, maybe a little more.”

“How’d you meet?”

“We went to high school together. Didn’t I tell you? He always did like me back then, but after he went off to the service, me and Doc got together. When he saw in the paper about Doc dying a couple of years ago, he held onto the obit and finally got the nerve to give me a call. He’s been coming down from Memphis now since May, regular as clockwork.”

“So, does he, like, make the trip, in you know, one day or what?”

“If you’re asking does he stay all night with me, the answer is no. That is one thing you don’t hurry at our age.” Lexie couldn’t help noticing the way Aunt Bess avoided her eyes. Suddenly she realized who the purple robe belonged to.

A couple of days later, Quentin surprised her with a call. “Everything’s fine here,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you my news. You’re not going to believe this. I went out today and bought a second-hand TV and got a subscription to the paper.”

“Whatever possessed you to do that?”

“I don’t know. I guess, I figure I should be able to handle that sort of thing better – news, I mean. Plus, I got interested in this woman’s lawsuit.”

“What woman?”

“The sister of the dead lady. You know, the one who crashed into your apartment. I guess there’s some kind of class action suit against the company that made the car. I thought you might be interested.”

“Well, I’m not. I came here to get away from that stuff.” She hadn’t meant to sound so abrupt, but she was disappointed that he’d just called to tell her about a lawsuit.

“So does this mean you’re going to be riding in cars again?” He said this with a little laugh. She could picture the lopsided grin, the rapid blinking of his eyelids behind horn-rimmed glasses.

“I don’t know. I’m not making any decisions any time soon.”

After several days of watching TV and surfing the Internet, Lexie decided to walk downtown to visit Uncle Doc’s drugstore, where Aunt Bess still worked a few hours a week for the new owners. An old orange VW van was rattling by the house as she stepped outside. It was the kind that used to be called a “hippie van.” An elderly man wearing a cowboy hat was at the wheel. He smiled and waved at Lexie. People did that around here, smiling and waving from cars, assuming they knew you or just being friendly.

She hardly recognized the drugstore even though Aunt Bess had prepared her for the change. The new owners had torn out the soda fountain with its red vinyl barstools and shiny chrome counter to make room for several rows of shelves, offering everything from canned goods to cat food. Aunt Bess thought it was a big mistake.

“They can’t compete with Walmart,” she’d told Lexie. “Fools don’t have enough sense to realize nostalgia is in. Baby boomers just love soda fountains.”

The pharmacist’s platform at the back still looked much the same as it had that summer day more than twenty years ago when Lexie first came in with her mother. The scene had been described to her so often she never knew whether it was her memory or someone else’s: Uncle Doc, the pharmacist, looking down at them, jokingly asking Lexie’s mother, “How much would you take for that young’un?” He was trying to cheer them up – the thin, filthy child and the gaunt-faced country woman. But she’d just stared back at him, unsmiling. A week or so later, she returned, same dark-haired child in tow, cheeks scrubbed clean. Then, every Saturday for the next month she showed up, sometimes with two or three other children scrabbling around her legs. She said she was just looking around but never bought anything. If one of the children reached out for a comic book or a candy bar, she slapped its hands. Finally, one day, when no one else was in the store, she approached the platform, Lexie clutching the hem of her dress, and said softly, head down, to Uncle Doc, “Mister, I reckon we could let you have her for a couple hundred if it’s not too much.”

Aunt Bess, who was filling a telephone order for nerve pills, as she called them, joked about wanting to pop a whole handful when she heard what the woman said. “Of course, we couldn’t hold with buying somebody’s child,” she told Lexie. “But you and your poor mama looked near about starved to death. She said she and her husband were trying to scrape up enough gas money to drive to Texas and pick grapefruit. I thought to myself, what if they go and sell that pretty little girl down in Old Mexico?”

Aunt Bess had always wanted a little girl but had never been able to get pregnant. So she and Uncle Doc agreed to keep Lexie that spring, just until her parents returned. Fatten her up, Aunt Bess explained. Give her a good bath, buy her some clothes and a few toys. They gave the parents three-hundred dollars with the understanding that the arrangement would just be temporary. Six months later they hadn't returned. Lexie turned four in the white stucco house and soon stopped crying for her mother. She continued to call her adoptive parents aunt and uncle and even thought for many years to come that she really was their niece.

"Can I help you, young lady?"

Lexie, startled, looked up at the pharmacist and realized she'd been standing in the middle of the floor. Her mother would've been about her age, maybe even stood in that very spot. You can just walk in, hear a chance remark, an idea is planted and there's no turning back.

"Oh, no thank you. I'm just waiting for my aunt," she told the man.

Aunt Bess emerged from a backroom. "I guess you came to see me to my car," she said to Lexie, "although it sure would be nice if you were to ride along. Looks like it's fixing to sleet or snow, one."

"I wanted to get out for a little exercise," Lexie said, clutching her parka at the neck as they walked out into the stiff, cold wind. "Say, Aunt Bess, I was just wondering. You told me once how my parents and the rest of the kids left town for good. Are you sure none of them ever came back?"

Aunt Bess shrugged. "Sure as I can be of anything. If they were around, they'd of probably come by asking for more money."

Lexie slipped her arm through Aunt Bess's, drawing close in the frigid air. "It's funny. Like they didn't really exist in real life, just in stories. But I always felt like they were around, like I'd turn the corner one day and there they'd be. Only they wouldn't recognize me. I still remember her, you know. I remember watching as they drove away, waiting for her to turn around and wave. I didn't know why she was leaving me there. I wanted to run after the car, but I just stood there. She never did wave."

Aunt Bess patted Lexie's arm with a mittened hand. "I know, I know," she said. As she opened the car door, she looked up a little sheepishly. "Speaking of strangers, I hope you don't mind that I went ahead and asked Mr. O'Cain to eat with us Christmas. He may or may not be able to make it, depending on the weather."

"Of course I don't mind," Lexie said, trying to sound sincere. She watched the big green car pull away, wondering where she would be spending next Christmas if her aunt married Mr. O'Cain and moved to Memphis or Florida.

It was snowing lightly on Christmas Eve when Lexie went to Jitney Jungle just across the highway to pick up a few last-minute items for Christmas dinner. She stood in the checkout line behind a beefy looking man in a grease-stained denim jacket. The cashier coughed into a wadded-up tissue as she rang up the carton of generic cigarettes he set down.

"Sounds like it's still hanging on," the man commented to the cashier.

"Yeah, I can't get rid of it," the woman said.

"I got something I can't get rid of myself," the man went on. "Blowing out blood at both ends."

"Well, you better get that taken care of that, hon'."

As Lexie walked across the parking lot, careful to avoid patches of ice, she wondered how the clerk would react to a revelation that Lexie had burnt her driver's license. It was probably easier to deal with bloody stools. When she was a few houses away from Aunt Bess' she noticed a red car sitting out front, the motor running. She stood in the middle of the sidewalk, hugging the paper bag of groceries against her chest. Quentin stepped out of the car.

"Hey, little girl. Need some help?"

"Quentin, what in the hell are you doing here?" She didn't move as he took the grocery bag from her. His cool dry mouth brushed her cheek.

"Hell is where I've been, I think. At least I went through parts of it on the way down here."

"How did you find us?"

"Surprisingly enough, you do appear on some maps." They walked up the steps to the front door. "Actually, I figured I'd take you up on your invitation to join you and your aunt for dinner. You were serious, weren't you?"

She couldn't answer that question. Instead, she said, "You'll have to sleep on the couch, you know."

"No problem. I just don't want to drive back alone. It's awful lonely in that car with nothing but NPR to keep me company, and I couldn't even get that south of Memphis."

Aunt Bess opened the door. Her pale blue eyes seemed pushed together, lips drawn inward. "He's gone," she announced, turning away. Lexie didn't have to ask "who."

"Was it a wreck?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Worse. He’s history.” Aunt Bess plopped down on the chintz-covered sofa, staring at the Christmas tree in front of the window. “He tried to say it was road conditions. Too slippery to drive, he says. Doesn’t have four-wheel drive, he says. Ha. I could tell he’s just looking for a way out.”

Lexie sat down beside her aunt. “You scared me to death. I thought he was dead or something. The roads are bad. Just ask my friend, Quentin. He drove down from Kentucky.”

Aunt Bess looked up, noticing Quentin for the first time. “Looks like tonight is full of surprises,” she said. “Don’t pay me any mind, Quentin. You’re welcome here, being a friend of Lexie’s and all. Look at you, driving all this way, and here’s a man acted like wild horses couldn’t keep him away from me, won’t even step outside for fear of falling.”

“Actually, there were a couple of times I thought I wasn’t going to make it,” he said. “Good thing I had Lexie’s Toyota for the traction.”

“Funny, isn’t it,” Aunt Bess said, “how that vehicle got down here in spite of her? Maybe it’s a sign.”

The next afternoon, after Christmas dinner, the sat around the tree opening presents, drinking the Bailey’s Irish Cream Quentin had brought and playing Pictionary. Lexie sat beside Quentin, his arm draped on the back of the sofa behind her. Outside, the weather had warmed up, as pleasant as an early autumn day, the roads wet with melting patches of snow.

When it was her turn to play Pictionary, Aunt Bess drew crude pictures of ships going down beneath waves and stick figures on desert islands. “My luck, and he’d of

booked our cruise on the Titanic anyhow,” she grumbled. When the phone rang, she jumped to her feet. Lexie took her arm.

“It’s probably Brandon,” she said, glancing at Quentin who was absorbed in his drawing. “He was supposed to call today.”

She’s already decided she would tell him Quentin was there. He could make of it what he wanted. But he apparently couldn’t imagine Lexie would be interested in another man.

“Great,” he said when she told him. “I’m glad he brought you your car. Now maybe you’ll get some sense and drive it back.”

He didn’t come down here to bring me my car, she wanted to say. He came because he wants to fuck me. Again. And you know what? I want him to.

They talked for a few more minutes about the minutia of their lives. When Brandon said “I love you,” Lexie didn’t reply.

“You know, Aunt Bess,” she said after hanging up, wondering if the seasonal goodwill was making her too sentimental, “the highway runs both ways. And the roads are looking good. It’s still early enough, we could pay a surprise visit to your friend in Memphis.”

“We? You planning on driving?”

Lexie shrugged. “I don’t know. But I figured you might not want to go alone.”

“It looks like to me you got a backup driver.”

“See what you started,” Lexie said, nudging Quentin.

“Me?” He grinned slowly and looked down at her, one eyebrow cocked. She knew he hadn’t set out to seduce her back into an automobile or, for that matter, into

bed. With Quentin, life just happened. Like the weather. Get into a borrowed vehicle that might or might not have a loose bolt somewhere and point it south to a spot on the map. Who knows what the ride would be like or where the road would take you. Maybe she couldn't control fate or the weather, but she could decide a few things about road conditions. She looked at the two of them and smiled.

“I'll do the driving,” she said.

End