

“Speed”

Swatches of peach, amber, and gold band the San Juans, layer their hues on the rugged flanks. The sky descends, dips into the valley. Blisters smear open on my heels. I can feel the raw, wet skin, and I stop walking. “Haven’t seen anyone for awhile,” I raise my brows at Nathan and he just shrugs. “Someone will be up the pass eventually.”

Memory is an elusive flower, morphing with incredible speed. It blooms when the conditions are right, then withers into oblivion. I took a swig of water. Nathan’s rust colored overalls rode up his legs when he adjusted his pack. I remembered seeing him in the redwood mist, years before, slogging through duff and mud, his eagle-like nose poking out from under a floppy brimmed hat. But I couldn’t remember how he ended up in my tent or in my life for five more colorful years. “Nobody’s coming” I sighed, placed my hands on my hips, and chewed the inside of my cheek. Dusk landed. A turkey-vulture circled above our heads and a chill crept under my sweater.

“I’m going to live on the reservation with the Dineh.” Nathan was standing beside the bed, his hands clasped around a ceramic mug of tea. He couldn’t be serious. Did we really need to have dialogue about this latest confounded idea? I was already late for work. I shook my head, threw on my jacket, and left the room. He left my life three days later.

We saw the car simultaneously. It was hauling pretty efficiently, considering the elevation. Our last ride was hours ago, back on Wolf Creek Pass somewhere. I had peed by the waterfall, and watched a family pull over with two little boys so they could stretch their legs. “Hey, do you two happen to know how far the resort is from here?” the driver

asked, and I motioned north. “Not far. Maybe a half- hour.” Nathan had worked there as a liftee last winter, and used to come home with frost-bitten toes and a head full of weed.

The car decelerated as it approached us on the side of the road. Nathan had his thumb out, and flashed a friendly smile as the car eased to a halt, gravel crunching under its tires. Our last hitch hours ago had been in an ice-cream truck, of all vehicles. I had never felt so tall or so anxious descending switchbacks on Red Mountain Pass. Luckily, we didn’t flip like some of the other vehicles traveling on the fine layer of snow dusting the road. I pursed my lips and wondered what this ride would be like.

“You two been waiting a long time?” He had a weird haircut. It was parted on the side and uneven. His eyes weren’t cold, but his face was marked with a rigid frown, and a scar on his nose made it difficult not to stare. “Yeah, man. Thanks for stopping,” Nathan had already thrown open the back door, and hoisted his pack inside. “Let’s go lady,” he smiled and I rolled my eyes.

It wasn’t that I disliked hitch-hiking. In fact, it was quite the opposite. We had hitch-hiked most of the California coast, and probably a third of the Colorado mountainside in the last decade. Our rides had been battered pick-ups, decked-out SUV’s, sputtering hatch-backs, and yes- even cartoonish ice-cream trucks.

I learned how the mountains were formed on these rides, was educated on their geologic structure, and was mesmerized by their exuding serenity and metaphysical essence. I discovered that strangers were kind, and that they usually expressed a sort of nostalgic endearment towards us. We were relatively young and traveling the open road. Sheep herding on a Navajo reservation hadn’t crossed Nathan’s mind at that point.

“So I take it you two are heading into Durango,” the man gave a wry grin as we settled into the car. Nathan had taken his hat off and was running his slender fingers through tangled hair. Durango was just over the pass, and we were lucky to have gotten picked up before sunset. Otherwise, it may have been a sleep-over in the church down the road.

I couldn't tell what it was about the man that made me uneasy. Aside from the haircut and the scar, there was nothing remarkably strange about him. That was, until I leaned forward and noticed that he had no legs. My mind traipsed as I rubbed my shoulders. Was he born like this? Were they chopped off in a wood-splitting accident? I gazed out the window and noticed the landscape was blurring. We were moving fast.

On the wide open roads, it's easy to speed without really noticing. I grew increasingly uncomfortable. My heart-rate spiked. Nathan seemed unaffected. He reached into his pack for some almonds, offered them to me, offered them to the man. Then like a child who had forgotten his manners, he blurted “Jesus, man. What happened to your legs?”

I covered my mouth and shook my head. Candor is an admirable quality, but sometimes it can be taken too far. “I was in a car accident,” the man said, eyeing us in the rear-view mirror. “Speeding.”

I wanted to evaporate into the atmosphere. My palms were sweating now, and I contemplated telling him to pull over. If I did, and if he let us out, in the dark, we'd be stranded because now it was anyone's guess how far away that church was. I never liked anything that was fast. Fast-food, fast rides, fast men.

I thought about the man and envisioned his accident, a fiery wreck with no survivors, albeit one man with no legs. Then I wondered why, if he'd already lost his legs from a speeding accident, he chose to drive 95 mph on a Colorado highway. Nathan was, in the interim, telling him all about us- how we'd met in California, how we broke up a year later, how we got back together.

I wrung my hands and tried not to eye the speedometer. I decided that praying would grant us the ability to remain in one piece. The mountains were dark, blended in an ashen shadow, and the man finally slowed down at the Las Animas exit. I let out a deep breath. Fog crept into the night.

He stopped to let us out, and Nathan grabbed our packs. We walked to the man's door. "Thank-you," I smiled. "You're more than welcome" he said. "And here," he reached into his pocket and pulled out a hundred dollar bill. Then he ripped it in half. Nathan and I stood with quizzical expressions. "Here's half for you," he placed one in my hand. "And here's half for you" he gave the other to Nathan. "Make sure you two stick together," he smiled, and then sped away.