

What would later be dubbed “the night of the stagnant traffic light” was Wednesday, September 17, 2008. I was a summer out of graduating from Creighton University. While my friends were settling into their new homes and new jobs, I was unemployed and living at home. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday were spent interning at my hometown newspaper, the East Concord Tribune. Tuesdays and Thursdays dedicated to my job search. Saturday nights consisted of playing *Grand Theft Auto IV* on PS2 and waiting for the UFC main card to start. Tonight’s event was special—and not just because it was a Wednesday. *Diaz v. Neer* was the first UFC event ever to take place in Nebraska, and Nebraska’s own Houston Alexander was on the card.

I can’t stress how much of a part UFC had in getting me through this transitory time in my life. I could never put it into words until 2018 when I watched the documentary *Fighting in the Age of Loneliness*. Directors Jon Bois and Felix Biederman did it for me:

“We hope that so many of us aren’t beaten down by circumstance that they can remain in the fight, and we hope that those that are can at least can have some slightly less monstrous healthcare system or something that can help us escape, even just for a few hours on a Saturday night...The magic was elsewhere. The magic that we wish we saw everywhere else was in the cage because it was conjured by people who were just too fucked up to make it in the dull, constantly disappointing world outside. In a world where everything seemed to get slightly better then slightly worse at a constant rate, at least there was a place where unthinkable things actually happened.”

I majored in English because I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do for a career, a totally understandable thing for a 19 year old. It took until my teach-abroad internship in Prague in the summer of 2007 to realize that I wanted to work in journalism. Down the line, I wanted to be a travel journalist, someone who could make money for traveling the world. I would never feel the need to retire.

I worked for The Creightonian my senior year. I also took Introduction to Journalism fall semester and crammed three journalism courses into my spring schedule to get the minor. While most people in my graduating class were partying and rearing up for their adult lives, I was

playing catch-up. By graduation, I had a minor, eight months of journalism experience, and a decent portfolio under my belt. It wasn't a lot, but it would get me in at a starter level...or so I thought.

After two months of whiffing, I reluctantly took an internship position at The East Concord Tribune, my town newspaper. The staff consisted of middle-aged protestants, not exactly the fit for an ambitious young man fresh out of college, but it would do. The Tribune paid interns minimum wage, and it was surprisingly well-respected among local newspapers. I set out to do my time and, when the internship ended in November, take off and never look back.

Taking the internship felt like an acceptance of defeat of sorts. When the summer started, I thought I would be out of this town in September at the latest. Now, it was September, and, at this point, my departure was in November at the *earliest*. The goalposts were being moved, and I didn't even want to consider the possibility of spending New Year's 2009 at home with my parents.

Cue UFC. While my friends were moving to Chicago and St. Louis, it felt reassuring that Nebraska was getting some recognition in this fight night. It almost made me feel like I was on the path I was supposed to be on, not a bastardized version that had snapped me out of collegiate reverie. I was feeling good, but there was one thing that was missing: alcohol.

I was cutting it close; I'll admit to that. It was 9:45, and the liquor store was about five minutes away. But I did everything perfectly. The way I got my jacket and shoes and put them on. The way I closed the door on my way out. The way I put on my seatbelt. I had a pit crew-like definiteness to every movement. I was in the car and out of there by 9:46. Then, there was the winding, woodsy Mountain Road. I blew past that by 9:47. The last thing was the traffic light that sat on the corner with Route 80, one of the few traffic lights in East Concord.

I wasn't feeling worried, even as the seconds passed and as the light stayed red. The road was desolate, but a "no turn on red" sign kept me from legally turning. That was fine. With the time I was making, I would be able to catch the start of the broadcast, let alone the start of the Alexander fight, and that was the first fight on the main card. As each minute passed though, my state went from worry-free to optimistic to nervous to anxious.

I checked the clock to see if my suspicions were right, and, yes, they were. It was 9:51. Four minutes had passed since I got to the light. The liquor store was only a few minutes away, but I was cutting it close. I decided I was going to turn right if the time hit 9:52. When it did, I turned.

It was 9:55 when I got to the parking lot. The lights were on, and customers were checking out. I made it. I wanted to peruse, but time was short. I just had to grab a six pack of Bud Light, pay for it, and get out. I got out of the car and walked to the doors. I tried to open one of them, but it was locked. The other one was too. I knocked on the glass, but it was as if the clerks intentionally had their backs turned to me. They must have closed the door to new customers at a certain time. I didn't have time for this anyway. I just wanted to get home and watch this fight.

I sped home. The Route 80 light was still green when I turned back onto Mountain Road, and I'm not sure if it had changed since I had gotten there at 9:47. There were also two cars waiting at the red as I turned. It was only 10:02 when I got back home. I missed the beginning of the presentation but would make the beginning of the fight. I ran through the backdoor, through the living room, and bolted to the stairs.

"Eric," my mom said. She was in the kitchen doing dishes. I ran back to her.

"What's up?"

“Can you take the trash out?” she asked, looking at the back door. There was a tied-up trash bag there. I must have walked right past it.

“Can I do it after this UFC fight?”

“Is USC more important than your mother?” I didn’t have the time to argue with her logic—or correct her spelling. I took the trash out and ran upstairs, climbing two steps at a time.

On the tv in my room was Houston Alexander being arm triangled by his opponent Eric Shafer. Houston tapped out the moment I sat down. Herb Dean called the fight with seven seconds left in the first round.

I was mad. I was mad at the liquor store for closing their doors five minutes before closing time. I was mad at my mom for making me take out the trash. I was mad at Houston Alexander for not waiting those seven seconds to let the round end. But I was mad most of all at that traffic light. I kept this anger all the way to bed and mentally cycled through everything I was mad at as I struggled to fall asleep. Finally, I decided I was going to take action about this traffic light. Only then did I drift off.

I didn’t know what to wear, so I decided to go formal. I put on a shirt, tie, and slacks. I was walking out the door when my dad, who was on the recliner drinking beer and watching Monday Night Countdown on ESPN, stopped me.

“You going to a job interview?” he asked, as if job interviews at 7 PM were totally normal.

“No,” I said. “I’m going to the weekly township meeting.”

I was overdressed. Even the men on the board didn’t wear ties. Citizens in the pews were wearing t-shirts and jeans. The only well-dressed person in the gallery apart from myself was a high school-aged girl in the back corner wearing a blouse and a sports coat. She was writing

down notes in a notebook. I took an aisle seat toward the middle on the right side of the courtroom.

The meeting was as tedious as I expected it to be. There was even an air of “why do today what you can put off until tomorrow?” to the court. The board was talking about things they would like to do in the future without any course of action that encouraged me that they would actually get anything done. Maybe our politicians never changed much from when they were in student council.

The citizens in jeans were there for speeding or parking violations. The girl in the blouse wasn't called upon, and it didn't seem like either her or myself would be for the duration of the meeting. I had to take it upon myself. I spoke up when it felt like they were about to wrap up.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Hi. I've been here the whole meeting, and I have a matter I'd like to bring up.”

The whole board, including Mayor Tammy Mills, wearing a blouse but no cardigan, looked up at me in shock, as if no one had ever wanted to voluntarily come to a meeting.

“Do you have a traffic violation we haven't brought up yet?” Mayor Mills asked.

“No, except it is related to traffic. I was on the corner of Mountain Road and Route 80 Wednesday night, and it took more than five minutes for the lights to change.” I hid the fact that I turned on red; this was a courtroom after all.

“Any lights involving highways are the responsibility of the state,” she said. I felt embarrassed. All these townsfolk saw me sit through the whole meeting just to see me find out that I didn't need to be here in the first place. I couldn't blame them though. How did I not realize that it was the responsibility of the state? The town wouldn't choose to have a no turn on red, nor would they choose to have a no left turn onto Mountain during rush hour.

“How can I go about contacting the state then?”

“You can call the East Concord Police Department, and they’ll write a letter to the state if they think there’s something wrong.” The embarrassment gave way to indignation. How would I know this? I would have just called the state if I didn’t ask that follow-up.

The meeting ended a few minutes later. I made my way to the exit, but the high school-aged girl stopped me.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Hi. I’m Camila García.” She shook my hand. I took a glance at her notebook. The pages were filled with outline-formatted notes in blue gel ink. “I work for The Bison, the East Concord High newspaper. I wanted to see if we could meet over coffee sometime this week to talk about your traffic light predicament. I think it would make a fascinating story.”

It felt bizarre that this situation would make a story for high schoolers, let alone anyone who wasn’t myself. It was like saying that my trip to the DMV was story-worthy.

We made plans to meet at the town Starbucks Friday afternoon. I didn’t have my internship on Tuesdays, so I called the police station the next morning. It sent me to a directory. I didn’t know what to choose, so I chose the closest department I could find: zoning.

“Officer Stu Hughes,” a gruff voice said.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m calling about a stagnant traffic light. Is this the right extension?”

“No, but what’s the problem?”

“So Wednesday night, I was on Mountain Road about to turn onto Route 80, but the light stayed red for over five minutes.”

“You said this was on Route 80?”

“And Mountain Road, yes.”

“All lights that include highways are the responsibility of the state.”

“Yes, but I went to the township meeting last night, and Mayor Mills said to call the East Concord police station, and you would send a letter or something to the state if you saw fit.”

The officer sighed. He knew this was his responsibility now.

“What intersection was this again?”

He said he would send a guy out to take a look later that night. He asked me for my phone number. I gave him my cell. He called back the next afternoon when I was at the Tribune.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Yes,” Officer Hughes said. “Is this Eric Pratt?”

“This is he.”

“Hi, Eric. So we sent one of our guys out to that intersection on Mountain and Route 80 last night, and it took 17 minutes for the lights to change.” I was blown away. I could imagine maybe 7 minutes, but 17? Imagine if I waited 17 minutes that night.

“That’s crazy.”

“We sent over a letter to the state, so hopefully they’ll send someone to fix the light by the end of the week.”

“Perfect. Thank you, officer.” I left the office of the East Concord Tribune that day on a high.

Friday was a beautiful day, one of those last flashes of summer, even though the autumnal equinox happened on Tuesday. Camila was sitting inside, going over what had to be her interview notes in that notebook. I texted her on Wednesday telling her that the situation was resolved, but she said she still wanted to talk.

I went with a cappuccino. She went with a black coffee. I didn’t drink coffee until sophomore year of college. I offered to grab a table outside, and she accepted.

“You know you’re not supposed to drink milk in the afternoon in Italy?” Camila said, looking at my drink.

“What grade are you again, if I may ask?” I asked.

“I’m a sophomore.”

“I’m not gonna lie; I’m pretty jealous. I wish I started my journalism career as early as you did. Maybe I wouldn’t be in this town still, complaining about a stupid traffic light.”

“Well, maybe we can network down the line. Does the newspaper do internships for high schoolers?”

“Does anyone do internships for high schoolers?”

“Just let me know. You have my information. Maybe I can help you out down the road.”

“Looking forward to it.”

The questions weren’t as investigative as I might have thought. Some biographical information. Clarification on what I said in the courtroom and on the phone. For the most part, it seemed as though most of her story was pre-written. She just needed to fill in the blanks with my answers, something I wasn’t totally sure was good journalism. When she appeared to have run out of questions, she shook my hand and told me she'd email me the article for review in a few days.

The turnaround was quick. I checked my email Sunday afternoon after the Rams game, and Camila had sent me a PDF of the article.

Local Hero Calls Out Stagnant Traffic Light

By: Camila Garcia

The traffic light on the corner of Mountain Road and Route 80 has been modified after 22-year-old East Concord resident Eric Pratt made a complaint at the weekly township board meeting last Monday, September 22. Pratt said he was on the corner of Mountain and Route 80 Saturday night when he noticed the light hadn’t changed in over five minutes.

"I wanted to hit the liquor store before UFC Fight Night started," Pratt said. "I was making good time until I got to that light. After it finally turned green, that was it. The liquor store was closed, and I missed the fight I most wanted to see.

Although the streets were quiet last Saturday night, a "no turn on red" sign prevented Eric from legally turning. This sign, in addition to a "no left turn" sign onto Mountain Road during weekday rush hours, implies a priority on the state over the township.

East Concord Officer Stewart "Stu" Hughes was the one responsible for sending the letter to the state that got the light fixed. "All lights that involve a highway are the responsibility of the state," Hughes said. "I sent one of my guys out there, and he found that the light stayed green for 17 minutes before it finally changed. I sent a letter over the next day."

This gross negligence on the state's behalf has finally been rectified, but who is to say this is not happening to other small towns in Nebraska right now? While this act on the part of Eric's could be construed as a grassroots movement of performing one's civic duty, Pratt does not see it that way. "Speaking up at the town meeting that evening was purely a self-centered move," he said. "I didn't want my light to stall, so I did something about it."

While the motive may have been personal, it's an important reminder—especially in an election year—that playing an active role in your community is just as important—if not more—than voting for your commander-in-chief. Whether or not this intersection has any importance to you, take from it the lessons that we learned.

I knew Camila sent this article to me to make sure I was being represented appropriately, but I wanted to give her notes. First of all, the 17 minutes aspect should have been in the first paragraph, if not in the headline. Something like "East Concord Traffic Light Stalled For 17 Minutes, Says Officer" would be more appropriate.

Next, this plays out as much more of an editorial piece in the latter half. This is supposed to be a straight news story, yet Camila is making it a call to arms. It's not even a successful one at that. The final line felt like she didn't know how to wrap things up. "Whether or not this intersection has any importance to you, take from it the lessons that we learned." What is that?

When I gave it some time, I concluded that I was projecting. I wanted to feel superior to Camila in some way since I was jealous that she had a head start on me in her career. This was only a high school article. It wasn't like this article was going to help me at all anyway. The high school newspaper is just a résumé builder for budding journalists.

I used that to get more involved in my internship, making sure all my articles were perfect. I was getting the attention of Donna, my editor-in-chief. She kept giving me positive notes on my work, work I would usually get neutral feedback on. My internship was ending in November, so, if I impressed her enough, maybe a full-time job offer would come out of this. It wasn't my dream to work in East Concord, but my dad always said "it's easier to get a job when you have a job."

I must have manifested something because Donna called me into her office on Tuesday, October 8th, a month before my internship was to end. As she led me to her office, I visualized what my course of action would be. Get an apartment somewhere. Try to move up the ladder. Network through my job. That visualization stopped, however, when I got into her office and saw a copy of *The Bison* on her desk. It was Camila's article.

"I didn't know you were a subscriber," I said. We sat down.

"I don't know if you know this, but this article has been the talk of the East Concord journalism community."

"I didn't know there was an East Concord journalism community."

"This author Camila...did you know she was only a high school sophomore?"

"Yes, I think she mentioned it."

"I mean, this is an impeccable piece of journalism. The coverage. The call to arms. The talent this girl has at such a young age. She could be the Tiger Woods of journalism."

“I hope not.” Okay, it’s one thing to give her the benefit of the doubt, but to hail this thing like it was the next Watergate was pushing it.

“I want us to capitalize on this, Eric, and I think you do too. I see the work you’ve been doing around the office, and this could take you to the next level. What we’re going to do is I’m going to give you 1000 words. Use those words to write down your experience with this traffic light. I want to get the Eric Pratt perspective. Get it on my desk by the end of Thursday. We’ll put it on for the weekend edition. Understood?”

This wasn’t a promotion meeting, but it might as well have. It kind of made me frustrated at the job seeking process that a silly flub like this would get me farther than 10 applications would. Then again, it was an election year, and the housing market had just crashed. People were charged up. If there was any time I needed job security, it was now. Needless to say, I wrote the shit out of that essay.

It was tough to write candidly because such a big part of that experience was my inability to get a job, meaning I didn’t consider this internship a job and that I wasn’t committed to the internship if a job came up. I was seriously considering going the virtue signaling route and claiming it was a grassroots political movement, but Camila’s article already included the quote about my self-interest. I just went down the middle and went more the route of a proto-*Fighting in the Age of Loneliness* without giving any specific frustrations about my career.

Things took off from there. Just a few days before, I was annoyed at Camila. Now I was grateful for her. She and I were interviewed—sometimes together, sometimes separate—in several newspapers and news broadcasts in Nebraska. The East Concord Tribune had never gotten so much buzz, and I was at the center of it. The biggest thing that came out of this though was a call from Adam May.

Adam May was a legend at East Concord high school. All-state varsity left fielder and serial womanizer, Adam was a role model for all the boys who lived in town. He graduated in 2003, went to the University of Nebraska, and we didn't hear much from him until the spring of 2008 when he announced that he was running for mayor.

The irony that the guy who ran the senior prank was going to try to run our town was not overlooked. While zero evidence ever confirmed this, a rumor went around that Adam's campaign was the result of a lost bet after drunkenly asserting that Nebraska was going to win the Big 12 football conference in 2007. That rumor was quickly dispelled though when he started his campaign. To much of the people's surprise, Adam had a thorough understanding of American history dating back to his high school days when he took AP U.S. History. Channeling political trailblazers like Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, Adam swiftly adopted the archetype of the young outsider role who would challenge the establishment pick in Tammy Mills.

Adam called me and invited me to his apartment to have dinner with him and his girlfriend Lauren. I was expecting the place to be a mess, a desperate last grasp at adolescence, but it was as well-arranged as a standard apartment could get. There was barely any clutter which allowed for more space, and the powerful lights let off a soft glow.

We had chicken marsala and wine. Adam had cleaned up. He was sporting a beer belly, but that night it was obfuscated by a dark red dress shirt and gold tie. Lauren was stunning, a blonde bombshell taken straight out of a beauty pageant. Her type wasn't often seen in Nebraska, so it made sense when she said she was from Texas. She also had an introversion and left-brain intelligence that complemented that of Adam's.

We started the night talking about our backgrounds. Adam finally broached the opportunity to me after I finished my first breast. Normally my stomach shrunk with nervousness when I ate at someone else's house, but Adam, Lauren, and the cabernet sauvignon put me at ease, and the food was delicious

“So Eric,” he said. “I’m not looking for too much commitment. I know you have your job at the newspaper. This is only nights. I’m going to be doing various speaking engagements over the next month, and I’d like you to introduce me.”

“That’s a wonderful opportunity,” I said. “I do want to reiterate though that this whole traffic light thing wasn’t some grassroots political movement.”

“Trust me, Eric. I’ve followed you so much in the past few weeks that I could be your biographer.”

“He’s not lying,” Lauren said.

“Your whole self-interest angle,” Adam said, “that’s exactly what I’m looking for in an opening speaker. My motto is ‘don’t ask what your country can do for you, *and* don’t ask what you can do for your country. Ask what you can do for your country...for you.”

In spite of his convoluted platform, he got me on board, if not from the wine then from the incentives.

“If we lose,” he said. “I can be a reference. If we win—and I think there’s a legitimate shot for us to win—you can work for me full-time.”

In just a few weeks, I went from having no job prospects to having two job prospects—both in East Concord but job prospects nonetheless. While the craze over the traffic light was dying down, my life was no less busy at this stage. Sometimes I would be working at my internship, all day, scarfing down dinner at home, and speaking for Adam at night.

By the time the weekend before the election came, our estimates showed we were up about 200 votes on Mills. My arrival seemed to put a jolt to Adam's marginal underdog status. The fact that I myself faced off with Tammy Mills at that township meeting seemed to antagonize her more in the eyes of the people, even if she herself didn't deserve any real blame for the matter.

Adam threw a party for us that Saturday. It wasn't officially a pre-emptive victory celebration, but everyone silently acknowledged that it was. It was also personally a celebration of my finally getting a full-time job. Adam and Lauren invited the campaign staff and a few close friends. We drank until 2. Adam paid our driver Peter to abstain from drinking and be our designated driver for the night, so he got to drive us home.

I woke up the next morning with the lights on and a headache. My phone was ringing; it was still in my pocket of the pants I still had on. I usually put my phone on silent before I went to bed, but I also usually turned off the lights and changed into gym shorts. The past night was an anomaly.

On caller I.D. was our P.R. person Cassandra. I cleared my throat and sat up. Big rush to the head. I picked up.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hey, Eric," she said. "Did you hear about the news with Adam?"

"What news?" I wondered if he got alcohol poisoning or something. He drank a lot at the party.

"The Omaha Journal apparently has sources saying that Adam is having an affair. They're gonna put it on the front page of their Monday paper." Can you have an affair if you're not married?

“Are you serious?”

“It’s not good,” she said. She felt resigned, not so much for the fact that they would lose but for the fact that Cassandra wouldn’t be able to keep the P.R. job if Adam lost. I felt bad for her before I realized that applied to me too. “Just don’t make any comments about this right now, okay? Who knows? We could still win. These things play out differently on the local level. But yeah, if we lose, do what you want.”

Like clockwork, I got a call from the Omaha Journal asking about the allegations. I said “I cannot comment on this time” and hung up. Thank God Cassandra called me first. I didn’t know how I was put on the spot like that.

Cassandra texted me later. “Emergency meeting tonight at Adam’s apartment,” it said.

When I got there, Adam’s free-wheeling charm was gone. His face was worn, and his button-up was wrinkled. Lauren was absent. We all took seats in the kitchen and in the living room. Adam spoke to us as he stood by the door.

“I don’t want to waste a second more of your time,” he said. “That’s why I’m dropping out. If you guys have any questions, I’ll answer them to the best of my abilities.”

“Are you going to confirm the allegations?” Peter asked.

“I am.” This sent a chill through all of us. Who are you if your idol turns out to be a fraud? “As you may have noticed, Lauren isn’t here, but she wanted me to tell you she’s grateful for all the work you’ve done.”

“I have a question,” I said. “When you had us over for the party Saturday night, did you know that story was going to come out?”

“I guess that’s something you’re just going to have to come to your own conclusions about.”

I could feel the atmosphere change around me at the Tribune when I went into work Monday morning. Donna held a meeting for us all. We had spent the past month endorsing Adam. Now, with election day a day away, we had to recede. One of the first changes that came with that was taking me off of writing “indefinitely.” I had become the mouthpiece of Adam for the Tribune, and it was time for me to lay low. Luckily, my internship was ending at the end of the week, but now that a job offer—or even a reference—from Adam was no longer in the cards, getting this gig was more essential.

Adam lost by 20 percent, but getting 30 percent while dropping out was still impressive. Maybe Cassandra was right about Adam’s chances. He probably wouldn’t have won, but it would have been close if he had stayed in. That actually made me retain at least some respect for him. Some politicians go kicking and screaming until a lost election finally takes them down. Adam didn’t even feel like seeing how the election would play out. He ran on the basis of honesty, and he dropped out on the basis of honesty. Not to mention, the possibility he threw that party not as a pre-emptive victory celebration but as one last hoorah before he was taken down had this tragic poignancy to it.

Things had finally settled down at the Tribune on Friday. I didn’t want to push Donna, but I needed to see her about this opportunity at some point. I approached her at her cubicle in the corner of the room late Friday morning. Her face was as worn as Adam’s was Sunday evening.

“Hi, Donna. Can we talk later today?”

“About what?” she said, as if this were a standard Friday for me.

“About the end of my internship.”

“Oh right,” she said. There was the flicker in her eyes. “Your last day is today.”

“Well that’s something I wanted to talk about,” I said. “I know we’ve talked before about transitioning me to a full-time role.”

The flicker went out.

“Follow me,” she said. She went into her office.

When we both settled down, she took a deep breath. “Eric, do you know how many town newspapers endorse their local representatives?”

“Probably the bigger ones, I’d imagine.”

“And are we one of the bigger ones?”

“Like compared to the Omaha Journal?” She winced. “No.”

“There’s no privacy in a small town. We’re gonna have to spend the next few weeks—maybe even months—regaining the trust of a powerful faction of the community. Even if none of this was your fault, it’s not beneficial to the newspaper to tout you as one of us.”

“But what about editing? You told me that was a way for me to lay low. I actually think I may want to pursue editing as a career. I can do it full-time.”

“I’m sorry, Eric, but there’s no reason why bringing you on full-time would be beneficial for the Tribune.”

“What about your product? Shouldn’t you have the best people you can have on board?”

“I hate to do this, Eric. The best thing I can give you is a reference.”

Just as those both job prospects appeared, they disappeared. I was unemployed in the worst time economically in the U.S. since 1987. Funny how I was born in 1986; I was doomed from the start. The next evening, I found myself as I had every Saturday the past six months: playing GTA IV and waiting for UFC. I was furious. I needed a drink.

At least the traffic light got fixed, I thought as I approached it. It was only 9:30 too. Even if it stopped me for 10 minutes, I would still get wine before the liquor store's pre-emptive closing period. I had no intention of waiting 10 minutes though. I was impatient after one minute. There was no one on the road anyway. I turned right. It felt like there was a tripwire on the road or something because, as soon as I made the turn, sirens flashed behind me. I pulled over.

After a couple minutes, Officer Hughes approached my car.

"Eric," he said, crouching down to rest his forearms on the cavity of my door. "How's it going, buddy?"

"Hi, Officer Hughes. I'm sorry for turning there. I shouldn't have done that."

"Don't worry about that. I'm really just on patrol because there's been some threats of vandalization to this light here," he said, looking back at the light. The light on Mountain Road was green for a second until it got to yellow and red. "Apparently some people haven't taken too kindly to what's been going on in this town." Great. Now I had detractors.

"Well, I appreciate what you're doing here."

"Of course." He stood up. He was about to head back to his squad car when he did a double take at me. "Hey, Eric. Are you okay?"

I spent the next week immersing myself in my book and sending out half-assed applications. While I had hope that my celebrity status would still get me a job somewhere, it seemed like Nebraskans had already moved on. The whole Adam May scandal put a sour taste in their mouth too.

You know that expression "it's always darkest before dawn?" That was true at the dinner table on Wednesday, November 19. I decided to let it all out there. Tell my parents about

everything I was thinking. No filter. I avoided eye contact because I didn't want to see their reactions in the moment. Then the phone rang. My dad stood up and got it.

"Hello?" he said. "This is his father. Who am I speaking to?" His eyes got wide. He muffled his hand over the speaker. "It's the governor's office," he told us. My mom and I exchanged a look. He got back to the call. "Sure thing." He held the phone out for me. I stood up and got it.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hi, Eric," a woman said. "Connecting you to the governor now." The phone rang, a vibration that reverberated to the pit that was forming in my stomach.

"Hello. Is this Eric Pratt?" It was Dave Heineman.

"Yes it is, Governor Heineman."

"Eric! It's good to finally meet you, son."

"Likewise, Mr. Governor."

"I don't like to do much business on the phone. Hey, what are you up to these days?"

"Well, my internship at my local newspaper just ended, so I'm in the middle of a job search at the moment." I looked at my parents; they were hanging on to every word.

"Perfect. How 'bout you come to the state capitol next week? I can have someone pick you up. Where do you live again?"

"East Concord. Do you know where that is?"

"Of course. I'm the governor, aren't I? I should know about every town in Nebraska." He laughed. I laughed too.

"Fair enough," I said.

“So just talk with my Jill, my secretary. She’ll figure out all the details with you. All I’ll say now is hold off on accepting any job offers for the time being.”

Despite all the disillusionment I had experienced over the past few months, I knew this was going to lead to something special. Governor Heineman turned out to be so impressed by my writing and speaking skills that he hired me as his speechwriter on the spot. Piece by piece, my life started to come together. I moved into an apartment in Lincoln about a 10 minute walk from the capitol. I started getting a steady, plentiful paycheck. I started dating a girl on the staff, a deputy chief counsel who graduated from Creighton three years before I did.

I worked as the governor’s speechwriter all the way until the end of his tenure in 2015. I had some great moments in this time of my life, but the best were on the road. I may not have been traveling the world, but Nebraska was good enough. Whenever we had to travel, we would get on the bus and become spectators to the beautiful cornhusker state. The citrus sunsets over the plains will be etched in my memory forever. Cruising down an empty, one-lane highway, I knew that nothing could stop us.