

GOING SOUTH

GOING SOUTH

C has beautiful teeth. C is tall and well-proportioned and keeps his brilliant white hair neatly combed over his collar, his full beard trimmed close to his skin. C dresses fine and loves fast cars. He calls his Porsche his “Silver Mistress” and takes it to the race track on weekends. He wears kidskin shoes to better feel the pedals.

C used to make me laugh so hard, I cried. We had so much in common: traveling and sports not the least of them. We both skied. He’d trekked in Cambodia; I had spent two months traveling through Vietnam. We talked about a camping trip down the gulf coast of Baja California since nearly the day we met. It was 2021, and Covid restrictions had loosened. People were peeling their masks away and the world around us had a new life. We talked excitedly of all the places we’d visit, San Felipe, Loreto, all the remote campsites along the way, the hot springs, how we’d pack our two dogs in and hike with them along the ocean shores. Even the journey held its promise of wonder: Zion National Park, Valley of the Gods, The Petrified Forest. We were going to be gone a month.

C had another name in his former life. Chris. The name his mother had given him. After his wife of twenty-six years divorced him, he decided to add more letters and make it Christoph. Then he added an “e” to shed what he did not want to remember. His wife filed a protection order against him and had him arrested. “Do you know how humiliating it is to be handcuffed with neighbors watching?” he asked. He said she only did it to get his money. I believed him. I understood the “e” then, the reason for it. But I don’t call him Chris, or Christophe, anymore.

He burst through my door our first date, arms wide, smiling to light up the house. “This is our time!” he said. Later I asked what he meant. With innocence grinning from ear to ear, he said, “I want to give you all of me! I’m not going to hold back anything, not this time.” In that moment, I thought, *this is the one*. And I believed myself.

GOING SOUTH

My return from a Christmas vacation with my family in the Dominican Republic should have been my first clue. C and I had met only months earlier, and there was still magic between us. Every day I was in the DR, he sent me texts saying sweet things like, *If I only could hear your voice. Just once. I'd be the happiest man.* [Heart emoji with sparkles] When I called, we melted into long, whispering conversations.

But then something unforeseen happened. The seven-hour flight from Punta Cana to Denver had a layover in Minneapolis. After boarding the connecting flight, all the passengers were suddenly instructed to deplane once again. There was no pilot. And, we were stuck in that city with fifteen-below temperatures for three days—three days in which my daughter, her husband, my granddaughter and I contracted Covid, although we didn't yet know it. On the second day of our lay-over, I phoned C to tell him how sick I felt. "It's probably not a good idea for you to come over after all," I said.

He wouldn't hear of it. He'd be at my home when I got there, nothing was going to stop him. He'd have a fire blazing in the wood stove, a sushi dinner and a bottle of wine waiting. *I just want to see you!* he wrote. *That's all!* [Double-heart emoji; lips emoji]

The day we landed in Denver was the day the Marshall fire raged through Boulder County, destroying 2,000 homes and businesses within only hours. The winds were howling at over 100 miles an hour, and a tree had fallen across my driveway. When I walked into my house, achy with an illness I still didn't know what it was, C was there waiting for me. He didn't say, so good to see you! He met me at my door, frantic. "I had to move the fucking tree!" His chiseled beautiful face looked like it was about to break into a violent sweat. His next words came soft and kindly, "I've drawn a bath for you. Go ahead in; I'll bring you a glass of wine."

My body hurt everywhere, even my scalp hurt, and I was exhausted. "I don't want a bath," I said. "I don't want anything right now." I sat on the couch and leaned my head back. "Do you really

GOING SOUTH

think it's a good idea to be here?" Chances were good I had Covid, and I knew he visited his 92-year-old parents, often. This was risky, wasn't it?

"You're kicking me out before you even get in the door?!" he stood erect, his face washed with exasperation. "All I wanted was to welcome you. How do you think *I* feel?" He emphasized the "I" with fingers jabbing himself in the chest.

"I'm not sure," I answered.

"You're so lovely, Kerstin," he said, letting out a huff, something that must have passed in his family as a compliment, while he handed me the Covid test he'd bought. He backed away and glared with anticipation, while I wondered about his demeanor. *Is he just stoned?*

The Covid test result was practically instant: two pink lines confirmed that, indeed, I had the coronavirus 2019. The feeling in the air, nevertheless, was that I had ruined everything: "I wanted to ski with you. You said you would. Now you say, no. I guess you're not that informed, are you? Your homecoming presides yourself." His face darkened to something like crimson.

"I'm not sure what all that means. But I'm just a little under the weather? Can we table it till the morning?"

He grumbled more about skiing alone, then stayed in my guestroom. I slept for two days.

Over the weeks to come, odd things occurred that I should have noticed. He mumbled under his breath that I had watched a show without him—"One more thing you're doing alone now"—and complained that my kitchen didn't stock his favorite breakfast food, Kirkland granola. Then his face would break into its magnetic gleam, and all would be forgiven.

It wasn't until we left for the Baja that things started to go south. Our first night in Mexico was at a campground on the edge of San Felipe. We parked next to a young family with children and a grandmother living in a homemade green plywood camper. Heather proudly told me Darwin had built it in a day and showed me how the beds folded up for storage. They were also from Colorado

GOING SOUTH

and we fell into an instant camaraderie, promising to have margaritas later that night—my new neighbors and I, that is. C stayed to himself.

I had a Zoom call scheduled with my writers' group that afternoon; C, too, had a call he needed to be on. Mine lasted two hours and when it was done, I felt energized and walked back to our campsite ready to tackle the fajitas we were going to make over our camp stove. C was sitting at a picnic table and watched intently as I approached. His eyes matched the sea behind him. The light of the lowering sun made a halo around his head. *A beautiful man*, I thought, and waved with the anticipation of a relaxed and pleasant evening ahead. We were in Mexico!

But he didn't respond with the enthusiasm I expected. He was agitated. "You were gone a long time," he said, wryly. "How was it?"

I didn't have an answer. Rather, I asked if he'd feed Kingsley while I prepared dinner. He answered, "I don't touch gray food."

What went through my head: Weird.

"Can you prep the steak?" I asked.

"I don't touch red meat."

What went through my head: Weird, again. He certainly didn't mind red meat the many times we grilled it at my house. "Can you wash the dishes afterwards?"—something his grunt let me know he'd do, maybe.

He didn't eat, however; he said the meat was too rare. When I told him to put it back on the grill, he put his arms across his chest like an angry child. Then he disappeared into the night.

I ate alone, then grabbed my glass of wine, thinking, *give the devil his due*, and joined my new friends at their campfire. There, we talked long into the night. I told them about the book I had written; they told me how they met. Heather from Vermont had been in the Peace Corps; Darwin from Ecuador took one look at her and knew exactly what he wanted.

GOING SOUTH

C, meanwhile, was gone for hours. When we were about to put out the fire and say goodnight, he emerged from the darkness, chatty and full of charm. He sat next to Darwin and together they talked campers, his laughter belting out often and loud. Snatches of their conversation included C saying what a great storyteller I was and how much that meant to him. Later that night, he held me close and as we drifted into sleep, I erased all that had happened. You could say I had nowhere to put it. After all, we were in the Baja! *Don't sweat the petty stuff*, I told myself and remembered a joke I'd told him, the punchline being: "Pet the sweaty stuff."

The next morning, I found the dishes, rare meat and all, tossed into a cardboard box.

I started to call them "under-the-table-fuck-you's." He refused to pack the camp toilet and refused to bungee the coolers down. Kingsley could no longer lean his head on him when he drove. Me, the navigator, could no longer give him directions correctly, or quickly enough.

People asked, didn't you see the signs? Sure. But it was like a pointillist painting. A single dot means nothing. But stand back and take it all in, you'll see an image and then a scene, a still life. Munch's "The Scream." Any one of C's moments were trivial, alone, and I dismissed them. Yet added together, they painted a picture that at times was baffling. A few of those times, they terrified me.

In Santa Rosalia, we picked up a 30-foot camper that C had left in Mexico before the pandemic. Not long after, one of the tires blew out. Then, when we got to Loreto, we discovered someone had stolen his battery. Add to that: when we opened the slide-out, it got stuck half-way and wouldn't budge back in or fully out. These things could stress anyone, but we were camping. "Stuff like this happens," I tried to be encouraging. C's face clouded over, and I began to notice more dots on the canvas.

When we got to Loreto, the plan was to spend the day working. I had a manuscript to edit and I was behind, but that plan did not go well. I set up my computer, then asked C where an outlet

GOING SOUTH

might be. My computer had died. He showed me a surge protector at the opposite end of his camper, to which I asked if there wasn't one closer to where I had spread out my papers. The next scenes were like freezeframes from a B-rated movie: his red bloated face too close to mine, perspiration beading across his forehead, spittle flying from his mouth, his flailing arms. "You *diminished* me!" he shouted. "You *disrespected* me!"

The neighbors outside looked on, while I froze.

Then, in a controlled, tender voice, he explained that he had kindly shown me where to plug it in, and then, as if something inside his head snapped, he snarled once again. "Apparently you can't accept that!"

C glared at me, then walked out. I sat on the bed, bewildered, while my tongue found the sore place in my cheek that I'd been chewing all week. I told myself, *focus*. But I could not focus. I got up to wash the two coffee cups in the sink, but even that was not helping. C shouted through the window, "Stop it! The water tank leaks!" His voice thick with control.

Meanwhile I tried to slow my breath that was coming in hard and nearly choked me when the tears welled up. I had a bottle of Xanax, something I always travel with, yet something I rarely ever use. For all I knew the prescription had expired long ago, but this moment seemed to warrant some help, if for no other reason than to calm my desperate attempts at pulling in air. After swallowing a tab, I took nerve and I stepped outside.

"Do you know I took a Xanax just to calm down? A Xanax!" I said.

Mockingly, he stroked his cheek as if petting a kitten. "Oh, poor little Kersti-poo! Had to take a *XA-Nax!*"

I couldn't put words to how for-real weird this was. *This man is not well*, I thought as I backed away. "We need to separate," I blurted. I didn't know that's what I'd say. I just did.

GOING SOUTH

The storm in his head seemed to cause him to stand, violently. “You will not DICTATE to ME what YOU are going to DO!” His clenched fingers hammered his chest, a gesture that had become familiar by now. He then moved as if to slap me, but seemed to decide against it. Instead, he sat back in his chair, picked up his vape pipe and lit it.

The smoke rising from his o-shaped lips formed a cloud above his head while my heart pounded so hard, I thought it could be visible through my T-shirt. “I have my peace!” he shouted. “You, evidently, don’t have yours,” pointing with his pipe. “You. You’re just an old woman. That’s all!”

I have come to realize that madness can sometimes lead to truth and that his vengeful and short-wired logic was not entirely wrong. I was old on a scale of something closer to the end date than to the start of my life, but the fact of it held no meaning in the context of this moment. Simply understanding this fact, though, I felt I had some ground. I walked over and squatted before him. I placed my hand on his knee. “You know,” I pleaded, “we’re in this together.”

Not in a rush, rather calculated and precise, he inhaled through his pipe. Then he did something that surprised me—he wept. He dropped his face to his hands, and when he lifted it, it was wet. “That’s all I wanted!” he cried. “To be touched!”

“I understand,” I said, but didn’t really. It was not over, I knew, and I said as gently as I had the wherewithal to do, “We should separate anyway. I need to get some work done; you need to get the camper fixed...” to which he nodded in slow agreement.

I leashed Kingsley, said, “I’ll be back,” and walked into town.

At a restaurant in the square, I first phoned my children. I told them I was safe, but I was scared. That the man I was with wasn’t who I thought he was. That I thought it would be best to get my own place, and they begged me to download an app they used with their own kids, “Life360.” They wanted to be able to track me wherever I was. I laughed and said I hoped it wasn’t going to

GOING SOUTH

come to that. And yet I wondered, *would it?* I mean, was it that scary? Or was I fooling myself? Maybe this was just one of those things. People fight. And yet. And yet I didn't feel safe. I resolved to leave for a few days, four maybe, or a week at the most. Then I'd come back. Of course, I would. We'd work things out. I was sure of it. Besides he had the van and I needed to get home again, somehow. Of course, we would.

I next went through the names of everyone I knew who knew someone in the Baja, asking if they had a place where Kingsley and I could stay a few days. An answer came through almost instantly: Steve in La Paz, a four-hour drive south, welcomed me. With a sigh of relief, I ordered a margarita. I at least had a plan.

Meanwhile, C's texts pinged every few minutes:

You need to realize I plan to leave here and head home regardless of the plans you are making for yourself

...

Just so you know, Keratin [sic], I am planing [sic] on heading north ASAP

...

your plans and mine are not meshing!

I have been considering my options...I may not wait, so the time you think you have may indeed not exist...

At one point, he sent a recording of his mother's gravelly voice saying she hoped he was having fun. It was followed by his note:

What do you say to a mother's love Kerstin?

Coming from a living mother who loves me

Your behavior presides yourself

Geeze, I thought. *What the fuck does "presides yourself" mean anyway?*

GOING SOUTH

I did not respond. Instead, I googled “rental cars near me.” An agency happened to be right across the square from where I sat. I paid my bill, walked over and reserved a van. The act, its simplicity, surprised me. I wondered even: Was this even necessary? Was I just being reactionary?

When I returned to the campsite, C was still in his chair. He looked pitifully up at me. “Where did you go?”

“Lunch,” I said and forced a smile.

C stood and took me in his arms. “I’m truly sorry I made you fear my loud words,” he whispered. “I wish this stuff that has never worked before would disappear. I wish I could rise up with the peace I know exists.”

I wiped his cheeks with both my hands and said, “We’ll get through this.” I explained I had rented a car; I had found a place to stay where I could write; I’d be back in a few days.

It was afternoon by now and I wasn’t going to make a four-hour drive on a two-lane unlit road all the way to La Paz in the night. I decided not to leave until the next day, but I was not going to stay in the camper, either, and I told him that. Miraculously, he said he understood. He even offered extra phone chargers and a sleeping mat. “Be safe,” he said and kissed me softly on the mouth, then my cheek, pushed my hair away from my eyes and handed me a Bota box of cabernet. “You might need this,” he said, his bewitching lips forming the words seductively.

Down a sand street and through a shanty neighborhood on the outskirts of Loreto, I drove out onto a spit of land that reached into the sea. There, I found what would be my campsite for the night. iOverlander reviewed it as “can be noisy on weekends, but the sunrises are killer.” I let Kingsley out to chase herons while I opened my journal and poured some wine into a Solo cup.

The higher the moon rose, the louder the beach became. Music, laughter, a toddler running after the waves, his daddy close behind. *I’m in Mexico*, I laughed to myself. *This is what they do in Mexico*. Later, as I lay in the van with my sixty-pound puppy by my side, the light of the full moon

GOING SOUTH

rippling across the water, screeching children and howling music in the background, it occurred to me how stupid my circumstances had become. *I'm old enough to have grandchildren*, I thought.

Grandchildren who wouldn't even be this stupid. How did I get here?

At 3:15 in the morning, the noise done and nothing but a breeze humming across the beer bottle-strewn sand, Kingsley suddenly began to bark. I thought it must be a stray dog running on the beach, and I told him, stop! But, up on all fours now, Kingsley did not let up. I finally pointed the light of my phone into the night, and before me stood a woman, staring as if hypnotized. I wanted to watch my hand go straight through her, like a ghost, but she was real.

“Que pasa?” I asked, forgetting anything more to say in Spanish.

What she did next was not move.

Her face was puffy and round as a pie, red as if reflecting my taillights. I thought she might be badly sunburned. Or, she'd been beaten.

“Que pasa?” I said again. She continued to say nothing and did not move.

I went to the front of my van to pee, then came around and walked up to her face. I asked, *“Ayuda?”* Do you need help? Or perhaps it was, are you here to help me? I didn't know how *ayudar* conjugates exactly. I only knew it was the infinitive of “to help.”

Her head then dropped in slow motion and, equally as slowly, she lifted it back up. Then nothing. I expected her to hold out a hand, do something more, but she only stared. Her eyes, like small buttons, followed me.

I decided Kingsley would protect me if she tried anything, and thanks to the wine, I was too sleepy to worry, so I lay back down. After some time, Kingsley stopped barking, and I shone my light after her one last time. She had turned and was walking away. I noticed that her billowing skirt was in fact a pair of pants, and the inseams down both legs were wet. She moved solemnly as

GOING SOUTH

though following a funeral procession, her shadow stretching long behind her. She seemed to be floating, her pants a wide arc around her.

Once my light lost her, I assumed she'd crossed to the beach on the other side of the berm. I assumed she looked up at the moon. How could she ignore such a flood of midnight glory? But what I did not assume, what I knew to be true, was that she began to sing. It was a soulful, haunting melody. Whether the words were Spanish or not, I could not tell, the sound more animal than human. Was it about redemption, a lost lover? I did not know, and I did not know why our lives intersected in that moment, the woman with a face like a wounded cherry pie, no words, and flowing wet pants.

That she came to me, was nothing if not an omen, I thought. What else could explain why it would happen to me, now, on a beach, full of moonlight and uncertainty?

In the morning I texted C, asking if he'd like to have breakfast before I took off, to which he responded, *Yes. [Double-heart emoji; lips emoji; praying hands emoji]*

We met in the town square at a foody sort of place. His face was a pleasant thing to look at once again, his smile, his sparkling teeth captivated me, as always. There was fondness in his eyes as they rested on my lips, my dress, my eyes. His long lean hands lay placid beside his plate. I said something, then, with a strength I did not know I had. "I think your default setting is anger, Christophe. I don't mean this to be criticism, but you go there awfully fast, you know. You should dig deeper. I think there's something more there. Like fear."

His eyes widened, and he proceeded to tell me something I'd never known. In his family of seven children, he was the second, and he, alone, was given away. "I never knew why...I always thought...I always believed...that I did something wrong. I tried and tried to be good..."

We sat a while with that. Our silence was more a heaviness that hung in the space between us than an absence of words. "Maybe this was my Come-to-Jesus Moment," he said.

GOING SOUTH

“You know you won’t have a second chance to do that,” I said.

He looked at me with resolve and said, “Yeah. I know.”

I hoped (but in hindsight doubted) that this was true. I still hoped I’d have a safe, and happy, journey home with him. I probably knew this idea would never come to fruition, but it was too frightening to think that far ahead. I’d come this far. He apologized. He’d called it his Come-to-Jesus Moment. He even said he understood that all I wanted was a few days to myself.

We left that breakfast, each of us feeling good about our near future. “You know I don’t text when I work, right? I’ll call you tomorrow evening?” I said.

He nodded, “You’re a wise woman.”

Within an hour, his messages started to ping:

How is it going? [Palm tree emoji]

Fifteen minutes later:

Did you make it OK? [Lips emoji]

An hour later:

I guess you may not want me to know where you are...

Then:

I am just feeling a bit anxious that you haven’t responded to my inquiry about your safety

And:

It would be a very kind gesture on your part to settle my concerns...thank you Kerstin [Starburst emoji, shrugging hands emoji, A-OK-sign emoji]

Was he back to his angry self? Or was he really concerned? I sent a text to say everything was fine; I had arrived in La Paz. I promised to call him the next evening, after I’d rested, and after I’d gotten some work done.

I awoke the next morning to one more text:

GOING SOUTH

*Buenos Dias [Sun emoji]
Not wanting to interrupt your creative energy...I want to talk about some plans
that have come my way sometime this morning would be perfect...just let me
know? [Shrugging hands emoji]*

Nothing about this told me things were going to be simple.

I wrote:

I'll call you tonight around 8:00. [Smiley-face emoji]

It did not go well.

“How is your writing going?” he asked when I phoned.

“It’s going fine. How’s the camper?”

From the silence I knew he had done nothing. Which I’d feared. I feared this whole thing was more about keeping me contained than getting things to work. So I went straight to the point:

“What are your plans?”

“I want you to come back to Loreto. I want you to return your car. So you don’t need to keep paying for it, of course. Then I’ll drive you back to the house where you’re staying...”

I knew it. He has no plans. What he wants is to contain me!

“And?” I said, my voice now shaky.

“So you can write! To your heart’s content!” There was an uncomfortable pause that rang like tinnitus in my ears. Then he said, “I’ve decided to go south after all. I’m going to La Ventana to windsurf and have my vacation...”

“But you said you were going home...My children are worried...How long?”

“Oh! So, you’re trashing me to your kids now?” His voice became familiarly hostile. “How long? HOW LONG? That’s MY BUSINESS!”

He was so loud even Steve could hear. Steve, who kept circling his finger around his ear, *The dude is crazy!*

“You have NO RIGHT to tell ME WHAT YOU WANT!”

GOING SOUTH

“Stop screaming.”

“YOU are NOT going to take MY PASSION from ME!”

“I’ll hang up if you keep screaming.”

“YOU WILL NOT CONTROL ME!”

“You’re still screaming...”

I hung up.

There were 43 more texts after that, nearly all had bold headlines.

I can not [sic] except [sic] your rudeness...

You are good

I am good

Both our precious dogs are good

Do I not deserve some opportunity for what fills my spirit?

Some were garbled:

=?UTF-8?Q?

I_will_not_forsake_you_Kerstin_=E2=9C=8C=EF=B8=8F=OA=)AI'm_sorr?==?UTF-

8?Q?y_your_choices_are_not_what_you_planned_but_they_are_entirely_y?==UTF-

8?Q?our+and_no_amount_of_sorry_can_take_back_that...?=

I adopted the habit of second-guessing myself. Did I invent the idea that he wanted to contain me when, in fact, he sincerely wanted to help? After all, he never hit me.

Well, once. But it didn’t hurt. I remember it clearly. We had rented a hotel room. It was in Yuma, a chance to take a shower and repack our things. Besides, the cooler with half our food had been left in his garage and we could now eat in a restaurant. He had wacked the back of his hand against my arm. He was angry. I didn’t want sex with him. “It’s hard,” I told him, “To feel attracted when you’re so angry so much of the time.”

Maybe this is what people do: they sling things at each other, mean, vicious things and wack each other’s arms. And then they make up. Maybe my silence was my personal weapon, my way of being right. I grew up in a family where violence was an all-too-familiar occurrence. Walls shook,

GOING SOUTH

mirrors splattered with blood, screaming, irrational insults that could kill: my mother in the hospital with a miscarriage after a beating; my sister moving to her teacher's home to stay safe; my youngest sister sleeping night after night behind the La-Z-Boy, hiding from the wrath of my father.

What added to my second-guessing was the good stuff, how it was when we first chanced a togetherness. The times the heat of his body surrounded me like a cloak. Sex was blindingly intense. One move dissolved into the next, barely leaving time to breathe, often springing from nothing at all. A casual pass by his chair where he was reading the news, me in my yoga pants and a mug in my hand. His long fingers reached for me like music. "Where're you going?" Before I had an answer, we were both on the floor like animals, our clothes dropping around us like bath towels.

He gave me a set of wine glasses for my sixty-ninth birthday that were hand-painted to emulate the light inside Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, because he knew I loved architecture. He showed up at my door with flowers and took me to restaurants that each in their way were unique. Tapas and wine on a quaint patio beneath a heater and twinkling lights. You could say he swept me off my feet. I did sometimes feel as though I were swooning. My daughter thought he was nice. Indeed, that's what everyone said. *He's really nice...He's so nice... You look nice together...*

I stopped wanting sex with him even before we left for Mexico. A familiarity had spread over us like a fungus. He brooded often and disappeared to distant corners of my house. He took off for bed one evening during a movie we were watching, muttering something about me caring more about my writing than him. Meanwhile there were still the dinner dishes to clear, the house lights to be turned off, the dogs to be let out. The heat turned down. Ordinarily, his lanky body naked under my sheets would be the triton's call, but on this night, I was abhorred. His face peering out from the edge of the blanket showed teeth that now looked tiny and impotent. It would be the first of many nights that I crawled into my side of the bed and rolled over the other way. I could be an asshole that way. I had no words for why. Just a sad, angry feeling in my gut.

GOING SOUTH

I told him I wanted to reel the story back. I wanted us to have magic again. One night, while trying to explain all this, I said, “We’re like an old married couple with nothing left to say. There’s such a disconnect between us when it comes to evening. Is it just the pot?”

There was something about the way he looked when pondering his next move, squinty eyes giving his surfer-boy face that hurt expression of someone who feels he’s been wronged, again, but who finally has the attention of an adult. His eyes glistening with tears, he stopped packing his vape pipe into its box and said, “I’m a really good listener! I really am!”

Then he walked off to bed, saying he’d leave in the morning, while I finished the dishes.

He didn’t really leave the way I’d asked him to leave. He didn’t exactly go home. He told me he had appointments near me and ended up staying at my house another week, a week in which I did not want sex. It was always the same anyway: whispering madness, the way he treated my dog, yelling, “Kingsley, NO!” Then cooing to his dog, “Oh, Saaddie!”

“I can’t do this anymore,” I finally said. “Can we go back to friends only?”

He said, yes. He said it was a good idea. He said he felt it too. But we never really defined what that meant. To me, it meant having no expectations of sex. If I were honest, though, I hoped it would get back to that. He used to love seeing me in strappy lingerie, and I packed some for our trip, hoping it would go to use. It never did. We never did get back to those hot times when he’d say, “What’d you got under that?” and we’d fall into a hot nirvana.

We would go it alone now, Kingsley and me. We were alone anyway. But, all the same, it was function time. I needed to figure out how to get home. Since the pandemic, no airline would put a dog in the cargo compartment. I was going to have to drive. And that left me with no idea how to cross the border. “You’ll figure it out,” the rental agent had said, but had no further advice. One fact was clear, I would not be able to drive a Mexican car all the way to Colorado.

GOING SOUTH

“I have more integrity wrapped around my little finger than you have in your entire being!” he said to me once. He was telling me how Julio, the man in Santa Rosalia who’d been keeping C’s camper the last two years while Covid took over everything else, had cleaned it and had sent photos of all that he and his wife had done: made sure the faucet worked and the floor was scrubbed. I said, “Don’t you want to get down there first and make sure it’s all running like you want before you talk about his integrity?”

“I know about integrity! I have integrity!” he shouted, thumping his chest with his fingers. Then he added that his integrity was the only thing that was keeping our trip functioning. I should add an exclamation point here, because that’s how he said it. Should I have responded? Ask him at least how he knew to measure integrity so well?

It took several days of driving through nothing but sand and saguaro cacti, no houses for hours on end, to get to the border. Being a woman, alone, on this desolate road was one thing, but the idea of breaking down somewhere out there held me in heart-pounding fear.

Meanwhile C’s texts were relentless. Occasionally I wrote back, telling him how frightened I was and could I please get the code to his garage. I still had a few things at his house that I wanted back. He answered:

Fare is fare [sic] nothing less and nothing more

...

Your chickenshit behavior only insults me

I wrote:

Can I get the code to your garage?

C:

You are the ugly one here

...

How complicated is honesty Kerstin?

Me:

[I did not respond.]

GOING SOUTH

It was late afternoon when Kingsley and I arrived in Mexicali. After checking into a hotel, I googled “rental cars, Arizona.” Two things I understood immediately: Hertz Mexico and Hertz USA had nothing in common but a logo. And, there were no cars available anywhere, anyway, not in Calexico, not even in Yuma, a city in Arizona an hour east. Later, after a glass of wine and another try at the computer, I finally found a van. It would be in three days’ time and located in San Diego. Google Maps: 2-1/2-hours in the opposite direction, west. I could do that.

I had relatives there, a niece and a nephew, both of whom were all too happy to take me in. My plan: Leave everything, including Kingsley, at Ingrid’s for the day. Meet Mike who, as a former police officer, had special border clearance. Drive with him to Tijuana. Return my car. Cross the border. Get home. Somehow.

When the car was returned and all felt done, the horizon of the US looking so near I could almost touch it, Mike suggested his favorite taco joint in TJ before we left Mexico. Tito’s was, to be sure, a dive—concrete floors and no walls, paper plates slapped down in front of us. The food smelled so good, though, I wanted to order every item on the menu. I realized, then, I had not eaten since the night before.

“Mike!” I said, after my first bite. “These are the most delicious *tacos de camarones!*”

He laughed and told me a line in Spanish I’ll never forget: *Mi alma devolvió a mi cuerpo*—my soul has returned to my body. I thought, *no truer words have ever been spoken.*

There was one more hurdle. I was going to have to walk into the US. Mike’s security clearance wasn’t going to help after all. I wasn’t exactly a client, and so I’d have to cross like everyone else. Mike drove me to the “ped line” and stood with me a while, while we observed what was before us: people upon people holding babies and pulling suitcases, bags over their shoulders, a line that snaked along for what looked to be beyond the horizon. What I also saw was the line was barely moving. “You’ll be fine,” Mike said, winking, just like his dad.

GOING SOUTH

It began to rain. I put on my down jacket and prepared to wait. There was nothing to do but watch: people with missing limbs begging for money, hawkers selling *churros* and trinkets, other waiting border-crossers.

An hour passed. The line, by now, had moved far enough to see, way up ahead, what looked like the border gates. From the distance I figured it would still take an hour to get there, so I kept on studying what I had to look at, people. When we moved once more, a row of tents appeared. They looked like they could be a homeless encampment, except they were uniformly alike—beige, green and yellow—and they were arranged in neat rows. A generator buzzed nearby. Did the workers sleep here to get to work on time? I couldn't figure it out.

We pushed forward again. I now noticed people sitting in chairs underneath a large canopy. Women were talking with one another; one of them wore a fashionable wrap around her head. Occasionally, they laughed. Beyond them were some men and children, and at the opposite side of the canopy were two long folding tables holding food. Not meals, exactly; more like Cokes and donuts and cookies. A woman ducked under the canopy and placed a dish on the table, removing its plastic wrap. *Are they refugees*, I wondered? They seemed so calm. But then, how would I know what refugees would look like, or do?

A man in the group stood. He was well over 6 feet. The boy with him had blond stick-straight hair that he kept pushing out of his face. I noticed, then, that some of women were also blonde. In an ah-hah moment, I turned to the man behind me and asked, "Ukrainians?" He nodded. They had arrived three days ago. They were here, hoping to get asylum in the US. The war had begun less than a month ago, and this was a story big enough that *The New York Times* wrote about it the next day.

I sucked on my teeth and worked to comprehend this scene. These women: Were their husbands back home, fighting? Had family been killed? The woman with purple hair looked like she

GOING SOUTH

could be a hairdresser. Had her salon been destroyed? Suddenly my troubles seemed so easy. I had some bad memories, sure. Some camping gear I still hoped to recoup. But I had family and a home to go to. I was American. What did they know of their future?

The line moved once more and the asylum-seekers were now behind me. I was so close to the passport checkpoint, yet these women still had a hold on me. I turned to look one last time. One of them had stood. She wore an orange knee-length coat and each of her ears had a row of piercings. She, too, looked at me, and for that instant, our eyes locked. What I didn't see was fear. I saw, instead, recognition, one woman to another. And there was hope in her eyes. Somehow, what she told me then, was what I knew definitively—there is a tomorrow.

After thirteen days on the road, I finally arrived back in Boulder. I still worried I'd acted irrationally. I should have given him a chance. I should have responded to his texts more often.

But I knew I did right by leaving. And remembering that gave me strength. It also allowed me to forgive. Not to say what he did was okay. Rather, I will stop letting it kill me.

My soul had, indeed, returned to my body.