

## Barren Highway

Saying I never had orgasms always got a man excited to try to be the one to come out victorious. Adam was no exception.

For two months straight we pumped and grinded down the bedsprings to the annoyance of the other boarders in the Water Street house and neither of us came, his lack of show by design and mine by inability. I didn't make it to Cancun for spring break. That wasn't my style. Adam was a rabbit intent on the carrot, just the same. During a visit to Marquette Hospital's psych ward in the spring to bring me clothes, he even climbed into my sterile bed in another attempt until I pointed out the camera boring into his back. The nurses winked at us from behind their station when we came out of my room. Adam couldn't join our next group, controlling anger, or was it grooming group? The groups become muddled in my mind. I only know you must attend them all if you want to have any chance of leaving the hospital.

When I was healthy enough to leave, he picked me up and we drove straight to an A-frame cabin on Lake Michigan, the kind of place my family and I would have picnics at when I was a kid. When we thought the owners were away.

"This was my grandfather's place, but now all of the kids share it," Adam said.

"It's nice. I like the décor." I turned a large plastic green ball, I had picked up from the corner under the mounted buck's head on the wall, over and over in my hands. We were alone and when Adam put on his glasses I couldn't help but think this might be another one of the doctors' tests. When was the last time a child had been here?

“He was my favorite grandpa,” Adam said. “Died one floor below yours at the hospital, of cancer.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know how to console him and pulled my paisley scarf farther up my forehead. Maybe my shaved head was bringing back bad memories for him. I turned the ball again, losing myself in memories of the mentally disabled clients I used to supervise at Vocational Strategies Inc., all sitting in a circle and catatonic until the big plastic ball was passed to them and then voila they would awaken with their reflexes. Sometimes they would even laugh or smile. “It’s kind of chilly in here, don’t you think?” I hugged my shoulders and looked up to the loft.

“We just need to get moving.” Adam hopped up and rubbed his hands together, then blew into them. “Come on. Let me show you.” He led me to the garage where two immaculate seventeen-foot sea kayaks hung from the rafters. “Grab the other end. They’re fiberglass so don’t let them touch the ground.” I lifted the rear end and walked over the snow to Lake Michigan.

“There are still big ice chunks in the water. What if I flip?” I asked.

“You won’t flip. They’re nearly impossible to roll.” He laid the front end into the water and motioned for me to come back to the garage to get the second one.

I hadn’t been in a kayak since I was eight and that was a small sit-on-top. This was tippy and with each stroke farther from shore I could feel the icy water drop off the paddle’s blade onto my chest. Adam cut through the waves with quick and graceful ease while I used all the strength in my biceps to propel me forward. I looked back at the A-frame, a dot on the shore surrounded by little icebergs.

“I don’t think I can turn around,” I said.

“Pick a side and paddle with that arm only or back stroke with the opposite side if you have to and turn,” he said, his voice made small in the wind.

“The waves are going to broadside the boat half-way through the turn.” I continued to paddle straight out, confronting the waves.

“Not if you do it quick enough, like this.” Adam turned beside me. I plunged the paddle into the water and the wind sent my head scarf after it. I reached after the scarf behind me and plucked it out of the water. The shifted weight of my body tipped the boat and I overcompensated rocking it back and forth. The paddle slid off to the other side and bobbed on the surface. If I went into this water without a dry suit my body would go into shock. I grabbed the paddle and dug in hard on the left. The boat rocked a little mid-turn, but nothing serious, before the next wave which sent me surfing back towards the shore. Back on land, I felt my body go into mini convulsions and my shirt was soaked.

Adam wrapped a towel around me and set about boiling a couple of large stock pots of water for a bath. It took a couple of rounds of heating water before I could stop shaking. We lay down on a handmade quilt of patchworked flannel. Rather than stopping before coming, he pulled out and I could feel the hot liquid hit me. He reentered and I imagined him watering a barren desert. I don’t know what he imagined, a cancer patient? My scarf was soaked and unavailable. But for all his months of effort, my back arched and I released an ecstatic cry previously only known to me from the Skinemax channel. It must have been the heat of his come on a frigid body. It was something. It was amazing and sperm holds such promise.

“Maybe we should get hitched,” Adam said a little breathless and ran his fingers along my scalp.

“I don’t come with a tow package.” I said and he laughed.

It was time to visit his folks.

I knew I was in for it when I saw a white picket fence surround the house. A small poodle yipped at us in the window and a little pig-nosed and stout woman stepped up behind him, smiling and waving. She stopped mid wave. Adam rang the doorbell of his own home and his mom threw open the door. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and then started grabbing Adam all over like she was intuitively checking his body mass index. A sweet aroma of stuffed cabbages and squash washed over me the same as her bubbling excitement.

“Mmm, it’s so good to see you, it’s been what? A month. And you have a friend with you.” The mom cocked her head to the side and smiled in my direction, the corners of her mouth tightening.

“She’s one of my roommates at the Water Street house.”

I extended my hand not without noticing that I hadn’t cleaned my fingernails in a month. However, they were painted thanks to grooming group. But I had been too afraid to cut and clean them. I was paranoid of leaving evidence in the wastebasket which could be planted at crime scenes.

“A pleasure. Where’s your laundry?” His mom looked back to Adam and around and behind him searching for the unseen basket.

“I took it to the Laundromat,” Adam said.

His mom arched her eyebrow and flipped her hair when the poodle came flittering into the kitchen. “Tickles, look who came home.”

Adam opened his arms wide. “Did you miss me?” but Tickles, all curls and drool, was too busy sniffing at my ankles and up the insides of my jeans. The dog licked my knee where a hole bared my skin. I bent down to get a closer look at his or her eyes. I couldn’t tell if I was dealing with a boy or a girl dog, not that it mattered. Tickles was immediately drawn to my crotch as all dogs were. At least this one was too small to try to hump my leg.

“Where’s Dad?” Adam peered high and low. I expected his Dad to be crouched under the sink hidden behind the cupboard.

“You know your father,” his mom said. “He’s in the living room with your sister and the TV. Why don’t you take a peek and see what he’s watching.” I let go of Tickle’s jaw that I had clamped shut and sauntered after Adam. “Bill, honey, look who came home,” his mom called from the kitchen. His father stood up when we came in and smoothed the crease in his chinos. The two of them hugged and Adam jumped over to where his sister was on the floral couch and sat with his thigh touching hers. I sat on the far end and pondered the complexities of incest. I smiled and nodded when I thought it was appropriate and turned my attention to *Jeopardy*. I remembered it was always blaring at senior citizen apartments when I went collecting pop cans at the complex for spare change. I was mouthing, *Who is Kierkegaard* when Adam’s mom called out, “Time for supper.” Somewhere she rang a bell. It sounded like a brass one found in a Buddhist temple, but on a smaller scale. I tightened the scarf behind my ears and slipped the silk fabric up off my forehead. It was becoming a nervous habit, but there was no way I was going to let them see that I didn’t have hair. In the center of the dining table one lone fish swam in circles

in its bowl looking out at the dishes. The fish was a deep purple with bulging eyes that looked like one I wanted as a child in the pet store, but had cost six dollars so I ended up with a hermit crab instead.

“Wow, this beats dumpster diving any day. I mean this lettuce is crisp.” I held up the salad on my fork and a tomato wedge flopped back onto my plate.

“Dumpster diving?” Bill asked.

“Yeah, it was a way for me to feed myself when I ran out of money, hitching. You wouldn’t believe how much perfectly good food grocery stores throw out just because it’s one day past the expiration date –produce, bread, deli foods, even fish.” The fish had stopped its circles and was peering at me through the glass.

“Hitching, so you hitchhike, too?” Bill was either interested or feigning it.

“Not so much anymore,” I said.

“Isn’t that a little dangerous? I was watching a *20/20* program the other night and the anchor said that even if someone has a gun and tries to get you to enter their car that your chances are better to try to run and weave rather than getting in. They have complete control of you if you get in and essentially you’re a goner if they want to hurt you.” Bill was mauling his baked potato. I took it as a sign that he was indeed interested.

“Love, you’re going to scare her. It’s hardly dinner conversation. Guns, can you imagine.” The mom turned to her daughter and rolled her eyes towards her husband. The daughter giggled while Adam picked at his cabbage roll. He couldn’t cut through the over boiled

skin. I made a passing note of his mounting humiliation but couldn't contain myself. I had to let these people know I wasn't average. I had experienced extraordinary things.

"It's not that hard to imagine," Bill said. "Lots of people in this country have guns. The cherished right to bear arms."

"That's for hunting, not traveling," the mom said.

"I'm sure not everyone who picked her up were Christians or had the best intentions." Bill wasn't even bothering to wait until he chewed his food.

"Maybe she doesn't want to talk about it." The mom's cheeks were puffing out and turning crimson.

"She's the one that brought it up." Bill sat back in his chair and put his hands on his thighs. "What do you mean she doesn't want to talk about it?"

"Okay, fine! I was just providing an out. Excuse me." Her chair scraped the wood floor as she pushed it back to stand. She returned with a gin and tonic. I could smell the faint woody odor. The ice tinkled the glass as she brought the drink to her lips.

It was my duty to rescue her. "I've never had a gun pulled on me, a hatchet once, but that still wasn't my scariest ride." I said and plunged headlong into a story of hitching from Colorado to Oregon up the coast with one of my boyfriends. I stressed the boyfriend title hoping they would catch on that I wasn't new to the arena of dating. I was in the middle of reenacting the hitchhiker's scarecrow we had set up on the side of the road with a straw hat and some sticks and the excited fervor in which we piled into a nice Lexus when I noticed everyone's wide eyes. This was nothing. Hitchhiking is all about talking with strangers and telling them what they want to

hear, or listening to what they want to say. I wasn't in anyone's car right now so I decided to tell them what they might not want to hear. "The driver said, *my name's David. I'm just flying out of L.A. The whole place is burning up. The whole city filled with witches and demons.*" I imitated David's voice the way it was fast and excited, recalling how he carried Rye Crisps in the backseat and claimed to be fasting and how his plates said he was from Arizona not California, which made me skeptical of his whole story.

"Why didn't you just fly to the west coast?" his sister asked with the tone that said she thought I was an idiot.

"I didn't have the money and you don't learn as much sitting in an air conditioned plane." I surprised myself at the general cool air of the reply though she didn't really deserve any reply. She obviously hadn't been listening to a thing I said. I continued my role-playing. "We passed a hotel with an empty parking lot and a no vacancy sign. David started yelling. *You see that. It's empty because it's filled with angels staying there.*" I explained my terror when he let go of the wheel and with the Rye Crisp hanging out of his mouth made a falling motion from the sky with his hands waving them down to the lot. He put his right hand over his face, up and down really fast and his face contorted.

"Have you ever seen the Three Stooges?" I asked.

Bill leaned back in his chair again and patted his belly. "Curly does that."

"Curly? I thought it was Larry." I looked across the table at Adam, who shrugged. I wasn't exactly cougar status yet, but he was a few years younger than me, which at our age seemed truncated. I didn't want to lose steam and began prattling some more about David taking off his shirt, closing his eyes and driving blind down the road. "*The Father, Son, and the Holy*

*Ghost will guide me.*” I was busy mocking David and making gravel crunching noises with my mouth when Bill interrupted.

“Why didn’t you get out of this guy’s car?”

Adam’s sister shifted her weight in her seat and was using her nail as a toothpick. They weren’t so civilized after all. I didn’t think I needed to explain that this guy was on the brink so any sudden movement might not sit well with him along with requests to drop us off in the middle of nowhere. Also I thought these were good Christian folks who knew the value of trying to help someone in his time of need. “I thought we could protect him from himself in the throes of his manic delusional state,” I said. Bill was practically a dashboard bobble head, he nodded so much. “My brother got sick like that once. That’s how I recognized it,” I said and started counting the seconds off. One-one thousand, two-one thousand. Just to see how long it would take the good family to connect the dots of a genetic and hereditary illness, manic depressive with delusional features to theirs truly. I thought I saw the wheels turning in the heads of the mom and dad. They looked at each other on two and a half. Not bad.

“I see,” Bill said.

I was really going to have to get to the point now that I had been disrobed. I explained how the talk turned to the Bible and the driver, David, was throwing quotes from all over, even quoting the book names and passage numbers. Samuel this, Revelations that. He happened to throw out one that I knew, but he twisted it, so I called him on it. He jerked the car off to a rest stop and pulled out a copy of a Gideon Bible he’d most likely lifted from a hotel. Somehow he flipped to an exact passage that had his name and a skewed version of my own. “He pointed to it and said, *Because she rebuked David, God made her barren.*” I said and explained how at that

point he had slammed the book shut. I looked to Adam's mom to see what sort of effect the 'b' word had on her. Every mother's nightmare or blessing. I guess it depends on perspective. How easy of a time they've had raising their own. I worked at a daycare when I was younger and always wanted kids, so the thought of being barren touched home.

"Did you leave him at the rest stop?" Bill couldn't fathom the logic of it.

"That would have been the logical thing to do but then faith has no logic," I said. David kept driving and I was happily ticking off the miles on the speedometer, that much closer to our destination. It was getting dark and he continued with alternating driving blind and driving as Curly. Finally we had to get some gas. David came back from inside of the store with a strawberry and nut ice cream bar, two of them, one for me and one for him. "As I started to tear open the paper I noticed the label—I love Good Humor." I hoped Adam's family would see the terror in this. He gave me such a big smile, a sane one. It gave me the goose bumps. I told Jonathan, the boyfriend, to grab our packs.

Tickles was begging at my hip and I leaned down to give her a little potato when my scarf fell off. I reached on the floor to retrieve it and saw Adam and his sister playing footsie with each other under the table. Playful jabs and pokes. Incest is indeed complex. I let out a big puff of air and smiled when I resurfaced. I had always thought this hitching story highlighted my courage.

Adam's mom started to clean up the plates and bring them back to the kitchen. She pointed at my full plate. "Do you need more time to finish that?"

"Yeah, sorry. I got so wrapped up, but I'm starving. It smells delicious." The table got pretty quiet after that. The sister kept looking over her shoulder back at the TV, at some popular

show based on talent and singing, a modern version of *Star Search* from what I could tell. Adam raised his eyebrows at me from across the table. Sometimes I wished he would talk just a little more and save me from myself. It wasn't a good sign that he was becoming adjusted to my antics.

Adam waved the pie away that his mom was trying to set before him. "Thanks so much for dinner, but we have a long drive back."

"True," I said. "I can't wait to get in a hot bath. I'm still chilled from kayaking." His mom stopped scrubbing with the steel wool on a crusted pan.

"Kayaking?"

"We went to the A-frame and took out the boats for a little while." Adam coughed. The mom and dad locked eyes between the kitchen and the dining table.

"Thanks for letting us use them," I added. "It was my first time out on the water in one of those." Bill nodded and clapped his hands together.

"No problem. It was a pleasure meeting you." He shook my hand. "And you drive safe. Keep your eyes on the road and watch for deer okay, kid."

"Yes, Father, I will."

"What do you do if you see one?" Bill pointed his finger at him.

"Honk and hit. No swerving." Adam said as if he'd heard this a thousand times before.

"Right, I knew you were a good listener." He patted Adam's back.

When we got home Adam was insatiable, and he stopped using any sort of protection. A couple of months into this and I noticed that I had missed my period. After drinking my favorite beer, Third Coast, I got up the nerve to tell Adam. We went to Wal-Mart and bought a home pregnancy test. I left the bathroom feeling dizzy and showed the results, positive. We hugged in the kitchen. We were alone, the other boarders gone to class or selling firearms. The geology major had a side hobby besides just tumbling rocks.

“I think we should get a second one,” I said. “Just to be sure. These home ones aren’t the most valid.” We went back to the store and bought a second test and it was negative. I did a little jig and celebrated by finishing the rest of my half of the six-pack. I awoke to Adam in the doorway of my room, bright and early with a third test, bags under his eyes.

“Why again?” I asked.

“Come on. Two out of three? You don’t have to be a scientist.” Adam waited outside of the bathroom door and inspected the line on the stick himself.

“Everything will be okay.” I touched his shoulder with the caution of breaking a fragile work of art. “Life will be different, but we can do this. I can still finish up school. Maybe we can even get married.” My voice lifted at this last prospect.

“We can’t. You can’t. This can’t happen. You don’t understand.” Adam began pacing around the kitchen rubbing his face. The floors needed to be swept, little lint balls collecting by the baseboards.

“I don’t understand! I had all of those party-colored condoms from campus, and you stopped using them. What did you think would happen? Don’t you know how babies are made?” I walked back into my room and flopped onto the bed on my back. I threw the condoms from the nightstand onto the floor.

“You told me you were barren. That’s what you said.” Adam pushed his finger into the flesh on my chest.

I laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Some crazy guy who picks me up hitchhiking tries to curse me and you believe him. I thought you wanted to have a baby.” I pointed to the picture of my friend Sara’s newborn stuffed into the corner of the mirror over my bed. I thought the picture was inspirational for Adam. Though I had to admit the newborn looked a little like an alien. “I imagined that’s what you were up to this whole time.”

“I was up to trying to make you feel something and not using those condoms worked.”

“The promise of a baby. That’s what worked.”

“You’re crazier than I thought. We can’t take care of a baby. And by we, I mean you.” Adam straddled me and started shaking my shoulders hard like he was trying to wake the dead. “You have to have an abortion. You have to.”

My head hit the mattress. He kept shaking and didn’t stop. I remember seeing a billboard in Wyoming of a Harley guy in leather and a bandana holding a baby. *Don’t shake the baby*, it said. Really, do you need a public service message for that? Isn’t that common knowledge?

Adam left the Water Street house and went home to visit with his parents and sister before he started working in Ohio on a co-op. He came back to see me once before leaving and

he brought me to a Lake Superior beach. I stripped down to my string bikini and dove in but he continued to run sand through his fingers, not really paying attention to how good I still looked. I shook the water out of my ears into a towel.

“I ran this whole beach,” I said, “barefoot, last week. I made it all the way to the end.” I pointed to the far end of the bay where a pine tree leaned from the shore, hanging over the water.

“I need to get going,” he said.

Adam had a beaded bracelet I made for his birthday around the stick shift in his Saturn. I sat on the hot leather seat welcoming the sting, opened the window, and threw the bracelet out onto a pile of rocks.

He didn't say anything and we passed wild blueberry fields, filled with stumps and covered with a fine layer of ash. A farmer let a controlled burn go wild and spread off of his land. The fields turned into a small lake with wild rice growing on its edges that the road hugged. Adam drove along the curves and asked me if I knew the name of the lake.

“Rice Lake,” I said. “Four letters and four letters, hmm, what else has four letters?” I didn't give Adam any time to do anything beyond shifting into fourth gear. I spelled out three four-letter words the memory of which hurts.

The car stopped and I lurched forward in my seatbelt. “Get out.” Adam pointed to the side of the road where I was supposed to stand like I'd done for hours, days, nights and for weeks on end. But it was always my choice.

“No,” I said. “I'm pregnant.”

I had the baby. Two in fact, by different men. One more and my own father said I could make the *Jerry Springer* show. And both of these men, the fathers, and only these men were able to bring me to a climax. I'd like to think that it's because they planted the seeds and psychologically I could only give myself to a man who was using sex for its original intention, reproduction. But these men also have one more thing in common, they were both mechanical engineers. My body needed to be jump started and then maintained with frequent oil changes, serviced and greased.

My six-year old son's favorite place to fish is off of a dock at Rice Lake. He caught a small Sun Perch and baited his line with it. When his bobber dipped beneath the surface he reeled in a twenty-two inch Northern Pike. He carried it home in a cooler and filled up his kiddie pool in the backyard with water from the garden hose then he smiled for my husband's video camera and held the Pike's mouth up to the camera. The Pike's mouth opened and closed gasping methodically without any real panic, self-aware.