

## GAUZE

The wind whipped off the Columbia and across the highway causing Eli's four-wheel drive Subaru Impreza to swerve and thump on the perforated speed strips on the shoulder. He held firm, eased into it, steadied the car, slowed to fifty and turned down the radio, as if that would somehow help.

He'd bought the car because of its durability and the four-wheel drive factor which his boss, Armstrong, touted as one of the reasons for sending him on what he referred to as 'a mission.' Because of the dips and rises in elevation, ice on this stretch of route eighty-four was unpredictable. Had the mission not presented itself, he would have been fine with avoiding the pass entirely.

Along with the ice, the wind made the Columbia the supposed best wind-surfing stretch of river in the world but the drive awful, even moreso because of the semis that barreled down the road as if in high speed retreat from the city of Portland, which, in Eli's estimation, wouldn't have been far from fact.

A semi, passing on the right, not only pushed a wall of water over the car but harnessed the wind and caused the car to shudder but he had antilock breaks and new tires that had been rotated and it was able to glide into it and remain steady.

There was real estate out here, which was the business Eli was involved with. A huge swath of land has just been brought to market. It was big enough that it would be chopped into lots both for high-end residential and commercial, mixed use, that would be what he was looking into. The company, Namaste Development, was owned by Armstrong, as he chose to be called rather than Jason which never made a lot of sense to Eli but he didn't pry for details.

It seemed as though the sellers, son and daughter of the last line of family to inherit the ranch had sat on the sale until the weather turned so that they could really make things uncomfortable for any potential buyers.

Eli imagined them doubled over in laughter as windblown curtains of rain swept over the car. He turned up a podcast about a murder in Berkeley around the same time he had gone to school there. He chose this over music. Music had been Sara's thing. She dragged him to venues around town where she would force him to dance and talk to her hipster friends about inane topics that she loosely defined as culture while he drank whatever beer was on tap and tried his best to not check the Giants or Warriors scores on his phone. Maybe it was because Sara left him for a musician replete with late model car painted over with rust, scraggly beard as if he was too busy to shave, that made music distasteful for him. He had tried to call Eli, to soften the blow that he had stolen Sara away, but Eli had ignored him. He owed him nothing but silence. It had been six months and he still found himself spitting angry about it.

This truck, hauling chickens, their red tiny broken legs like gum sticks poking between urine-colored down, nearly pushed him off the road. He yelled and cursed. That was why Sara was vegetarian. It was a mobile deathcamp, and had nearly killed him as their freezing, twisted bodies heaved down the conveyer belt highway, he felt the car give and coast over the white line until he guided it to a widened shoulder where it slid to a stop.

The rain turned to sleet. Heavy splats of it pelted the car like slugs. How could anyone see anything? This stretch was the worst, the river an iron band off to his left and to his right, a cliff, clearcut by bulldozer or fire, a bouldered incline where water gushed and spilt onto the shoulder in a chocolate froth.

It must have been, maybe five minutes. He wasn't counting. He had time. The weather was supposed to be worse tomorrow so he got himself a room in Hood River, figuring he'd check out the riverfront breweries. He felt his phone buzz. It was Armstrong signing off for the day and wishing him the best, assuring him of the importance of the mission.

Eli had just about gathered himself, just about steadied his nerves enough to flick the blinker and watch for the trucks, that barreled by as if they'd come untethered from a mountain, when he saw something that made him turn his head again. Out there, past the silver streaks of

sleet, and the torrent of mudwater that tumbled down the hillside, was a pair of lights, just barely visible, like eyes peeking out from the gloom.

Eli sat and waited, expecting them to turn around or blink or shut off. It wasn't a long drive so he wasn't seeing things. Sure, the rain was thick, leaden braids of ice-slick rain that lashed down like he was under a willow's canopy of it. He checked his phone, as if that might offer some kind of answer. It was almost four-thirty. Surely, after dark had finally settled in, someone would notice.

Or maybe not. It was far enough off the road, fifty yards or so and the elevation dipped into a thicket-shrouded ravine. At first someone might think it was a cop. It wasn't. Even the most duty-dodging cop wouldn't hide here. Someone must have come off the road.

Eli put the car into drive and moved forward, watching for the potholes that might have been beaten into the ground with meteorites but now were filled with sludge and there, what looked like a log with some sort of jacket or tent draped over it. He managed to maneuver to where some rocks created a sort of natural guardrail and there, right beyond the trail of rocks, were two tire marks that traced back to the road. In the headlights he could see amber shards of plastic that must have been the lens for a blinker and, glass, a confetti of glass, like jewels on the surface of rain.

Now, he couldn't ignore it. He contorted himself to get the keys from his parka. He should have worn boots. He had the perfect boots but was wearing these shoes Sara had bought him that were made from recycled plastic bags compressed into a burlap-like canvas. The decision to wear them might have vexed him but he couldn't dwell on it.

The tire marks of the car had been swallowed by water but he could see there was a trail eaten into the brush. Down a gradual slope was the car. It was red, which made it even stranger that no one had noticed. It was also tiny, a small boxy thing that the wind might have just swooped right off the road and into oblivion.

He walked carefully at first but nearly slipped on leaves which pushed him forward until he fell just short of the car. Several cracks had made a spiderweb of the windshield that was glazed with ice. A stick still lay impaled in it as if laying claim in some way. The passenger side door was opened, possibly from the force of impact.

Parting some branches with his forearm, Eli pushed himself forward until he was staring down at a woman, still trapped in her buckle, a ribbon of blood etched from her hairline to her chin. One of her eyes was swollen, a fist sized knot of flesh from her jaw up under her eye that was already purple.

“Hey,” Eli shouted. “Can you hear me?”

He thought she moved. It was possible. But, when he shouted again there was nothing. Not a nod or a blink, just her slumped over as if she had too many the night before.

The door was locked. He jiggled the handle anyway which made him fall back against a tree. He cursed himself, the tree, anything that would listen.

In anger, he threw an elbow into the window but, this glass was tough and pain shot up his arm. And so he searched for a rock. This one was too heavy and that one too small until he found one the size of a softball that he used to punch the window.

It cracked but didn't give. He heaved again and again until the glass splintered and he used his sleeve as a glove to pull it out. He was bleeding but didn't notice and now the woman had come to, her eyes jolted open as if she were a marionette and someone had pulled a string. “It's okay,” he told her but she was panicked and patting her body and frantically mumbling. “Listen, I'm going to undo your belt and pull you out.”

She might not have known what happened. She surely didn't know who he was and so when he leaned over and fought with the belt buckle, he could feel her tense and freeze. Her shoulder twitched. Her arm might have been broken. The airbag must have caught her at an angle and shifted her body, tearing her arm back.

When he touched her arm, she cried out, startling him so much that he hit his head on the ceiling. He assured her that it would be okay and after a minute or two, as his own faith in his statement had slipped, he found that she might have passed out.

“If you can understand, I’m going to pull you on three,” he said trying to lift her from the tangle of her seatbelt. He wrapped his right arm around her waist and then his left around her other side so he held her in a sort of bearhug and counted down. On three, he tried to pull her away but lost footing and they both landed in the mud, her on top of him.

He had to drag her through the mud on his own. As it happened, it occurred to him, that this was something he was meant to do.

The whole thing must have taken a half hour. The sleet had turned to ice which made the night seem stuttered like a newsreel he was watching. And whose blood was this anyway? He opened the passenger’s side door, loaded her in, lifted her feet and planted them on the floormat.

Much to his amazement, when he opened his own door, she had managed to get the buckle down and latched herself and was now looking down her front in a shocked appraisal. “I’ve got to go back for,” she said before going blank. Her head knocked against the window and, she was gone.

He pushed the ignition and, before he could think of anything else, the car fishtailed through the ice, knocked into something, something, the log possibly, that he pushed over like a speedbump that crunched and cracked as he ripped over it. . At least he had he hadn't gotten a flat, he thought. “We've got to...” she muttered quietly and then was out again.

Eli flicked the highbeams and set the defog blasting until he was sweating. The car slid down the road but he was able to steer with both hands gripped so tight that he felt grafted to the plastic.

He kept the wheel to the white line. It was all he could think of other than checking for bars on his phone until one, just one, flickered and appeared. He typed haphazardly until he just

yelled, “hospital, find hospital. Connect bluetooth,” and, as if summoned by something beyond his reach, there were directions on the console warning him about weather conditions and telling him that the exit was fourteen miles ahead.

It was like a blackout. That’s how he might describe it later. He was driving and then, somehow, he had made it to the hospital. It was six o’clock which meant nothing really but it was something he might remember. That, and the hospital smell and the man with his pants on backwards staring at him until he was escorted away by the police.

It seemed like hours before someone spoke to him. He had helped a nurse load the woman onto a gurney and they had whisked her away. They were checking for internal bleeding. Most likely, there would be surgery.

Another nurse with a clenched face had seemed wary of Eli even while handing him gauze and telling him how to wrap his hand despite the bleeding having stopped. Two overdoses and four car wrecks. The first ice storms were the worst of the year. No one heeded the warnings. Vacations were more important than common sense. Eli almost told her that he wasn’t on vacation, but, realizing what he was there for, made him think twice and so he wrapped the gauze until he couldn’t clench his fingers, taped it shut and told the nurse he wanted to wait for the woman. Until emergency crews were able to identify the car, there was simply no way to tell who she was which made him feel responsible. She was about his age. Or, more specifically, younger by a few years, late twenties or so with a simple, muted beauty that reminded him of Sara. This had him thinking in all sorts of extravagant ways about what Armstrong had called serendipity which he likened to anything fortuitous that naturally might occur.

The television had gone to infomercials. Eli found himself making note of a massaging device that also softened skin and prevented callousing.

Finally, a nurse woke him and led him down a beige corridor. He noticed she was wearing two different socks, one with pink lace on the brim, one with blue. She must have been busy, he supposed and didn't say anything until he was in the back and she was taking vitals.

"You were just driving by and saw her?" She said.

"No. I had to pull over. The ice and wind. It was causing me to swerve. And, I saw her car out there in the trees. She must have come off the road and no one stopped, or noticed."

It seemed there should have been more of a reaction but she yawned and said she'd seen that before.

"So this isn't unusual?"

"Unusual, yes," she said. "It doesn't happen often but it does happen."

"Can I see her?"

"You cannot." There wasn't any pretense. It just wasn't going to happen. "It's a matter of safety. It would really be best if you leave her be."

The thought of it appalled him. Leaving her alone, after everything they had been through...For all she would know, he was the uncaring maniac who had done this to her.

This might have been the most exciting...no, that wasn't the word. Neither was *thrilling* or, *exhilarating* but later, when he lay in bed, itching at his wound, washing down one of the three Vicodin they had reluctantly given him, he couldn't come up with the appropriate adjective. He had the television going and could hear the traffic out on the freeway slurp by like pages of a newspaper turning.

The little sleep that he did get was an anxious sleep in which he dreamt of sliding off the road. He woke with a gasp and a fist clenched to his pillow until it was light out and he was dialing the hospital to tell another tired nurse his story. Yes, she knew about it. No, the woman wasn't awake yet. Did he want to leave a number? No, that was okay. He figured that if he left his number and she never called that would be the end of it and he just couldn't do that.

The meeting was cancelled. The two other prospective buyers couldn't make it. How had he made it anyhow? "It wasn't fucking easy," he told the man over the phone. "I nearly fucking died trying to get here."

Fifteen minutes later, Armstrong called. Eli didn't answer then or when he called back five minutes after that. Instead, he got up, took off the bandage, cleaned the wound the best he could, re-wrapped his hand, and kept it raised while he showered off blood that had crusted to his elbows.

He had already decided he was going back to the hospital. It didn't matter that they said the woman was still unconscious. He needed to go.

The freeway had closed. Nothing was coming in or out unless he were to drive south and somehow circumvent Mount Hood which probably had waist-high snowpack by now.

Eli thought about calling Armstrong who he could imagine wearing Patagonia slippers in the office. It would be just after his morning meditation and he'd be sipping chamomile tea and watching the weather channel on a sixty-four inch monitor that usually streamed waterfalls.

Locally, the roads were plowed and Eli did manage to get down to a waterfront brewpub, opened up the company Amex and ordered salmon chowder along with a double-hopped IPA.

The texts began to arrive somewhere around the third beer as the sleet turned to snow and the river was mottled with ribbons of foam and moved with such ferocity it seemed to spin the land in its wake. Armstrong had seen the freeway was closed and understood how Eli was distraught. It would be stressful for anyone. Was he safe? How was his mental health? That was how the texts began.

An hour later, as Eli was on his fifth pint and the dinner crowd, fresh off the slopes from somewhere, wrapped in pastel gortex began to fill the tables as if they had been assigned to them. Eli received a text reading *so you've gone full Kurtz, should I send an errand boy for you?* Eli had seen *Apocalypse Now*, had even read Conrad's book in college, and he almost



thanked Armstrong for suggesting that he had somehow 'gone native' because it admonished him, made him feel righteous for abandoning his mission.

He left the brewpub feeling buoyant, his phone clutched in his hand, waiting until he trudged across the freezing ground, out to his car where he calmed himself before calling the hospital again. While it rang he calibrated his voice in case they could detect the beer that sloshed around his gut and made him talk too excitedly.

He imagined telling her about this moment. Inevitably, this would be something to share, to rally around. It would put anyone else's chance encounter story to shame. It would be commonly known as the best worst day of their lives. They would clink glasses and lament her car that was small but mighty. She had survived and that was what mattered.

The man who answered told Eli that she was awake. And yes, someone had passed on the message and yes, she would be willing to see him tomorrow. But, the nurse added, "she has just come out of surgery, so don't expect a lot."

Eli wasn't sure what that meant. But, it didn't matter.

The snow kept coming. It ticked at the window and behind Eli's eyelids. He woke up every hour or so, regretting the idea to buy a six pack on the way back last night, drinking four of them and ordering pizza that never came. Now there was a dull grinding in his stomach and his focus was stuttered and pained with the metronomic tick of the snow, the ceaseless snow.

He turned on the news which was based out of Portland and little help. He checked his phone but there were no further updates. Finally, around eight in the morning, he pushed himself out of bed, stumbled into the shower and began the task of trying to put himself together with only one functioning hand.

After spending ten minutes in front of the mirror, Eli did consider the absurdity of grooming himself before going to the hospital to see someone fresh out of surgery but he also thought about first impressions. Was this even a first impression? Had she remembered anything?

His phone buzzed. It was Armstrong, telling him that he had smoothed things out but they were insistent on in-person meetings. He had said that handshakes were important to people like this. Another text was almost an apology but came off proverbial, it said: *all men find themselves lost, it is great men who achieve being found.*

Eli ignored it, threw on his parka, stuffed his phone into his pocket and opened the door to the great white world.

The hospital was only three miles away but might as well have been thirty. It took Eli nearly a half-hour while trucks pummeled past him.

When he arrived, the parking lot had been plowed but there were still thigh-high drifts that crumbled into small avalanches over his shoes.

He thought someone would remember him but here was the same nurse he must have talked to on the phone, looking as harried as Eli felt with the beer from last night like battery acid in his insides. He should have eaten something more than a single-serving box of Cheerios and oat milk.

"I was in the other night," Eli said. "I brought in the woman who slid off the road?" He realized this might inflate his importance but the story was remarkable.

"Right," the nurse said.

The nurse gave him some paperwork to fill out concerning privacy and security that busied Eli for an hour. When he was finished with that and the nurse made another phone call to verify that this was okay, he directed Eli to another wing of the building. She had been discharged from the ICU and was now in a different unit.

The building seemed empty. There was a constant hum and warm, sedating air that made Eli felt like he was being slowly churned inside a clothes dryer. When he finally found the unit, he had to check in again at the nurse's station and was presented with a badge to tuck under his collar. The unit nurse wore a red streak in her hair and eyed Eli like he was a suspect,

or an ex, or a suspect that was an ex. She glared at the gauze around Eli's hand and told him he really needed to change it before pointing towards her room.

Her name was Ashley Moore, he read off the door, cracked enough that he could see the blue glow of a television suspended from the ceiling. A comedian was joking about the news, followed by laughter, which he thought was as good a moment as any for him to wrap the door with his knuckles, announce himself and realize that he should have bought flowers. That was what people did; they bought flowers and here he was, unshaven with soiled gauze and the hangover making his mouth taste soapy.

This was the biggest moment that he could remember. How many times in life does something like this happen? How many people make such an exaggerated, dramatic entrance? There were moments that felt inflated, like they might combust into oblivion because they could only hold so much until something gave. And here it was, the expanding moment that he could inevitably poke with a needle.

In his pocket, there was Armstrong sending a text, something about the meeting and how important it was, how every moment distinguished itself and this afternoon would be Eli's. Life was complicated and short and on and on. Some of the other potential buyers were en route, renting elevated trucks, plows, whatever so that they could get here and take the deal that was so rightfully theirs. "Fuck him," Eli said out loud before he heard Ashley's voice.

Her face was swathed in bandages from the top of one ear to the bottom of her chin. The heat hummed and the snow ticked against the window. She wasn't smiling. She wasn't really wearing any expression at all. She turned to him, just barely. He could tell it strained her. Her neck was in a brace. Despite the pain meds she was surely on, she did try to see him.

He hid his wound. The part of her face that was showing to him, the part that was still alive was beautiful because he could see beyond the bandages, could see what she was without the gauze. "I'm really happy you're okay," was the first thing he said.

“Okay?” she said. “I’m alive if that’s what you mean,” Her voice was weak and fragile yet resigned in some way.

“Bad choice of words. I’m glad that you’re alive.” He pushed a chair back and put himself into it. “That was some night. I mean, I’ve gone over it in my mind a thousand times now. I can’t think of anything else. Everything else...the volume is turned down and doesn’t seem to matter.”

“I don’t remember,” she said. “You dragged me out of the car?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that was me. The wind and the ice, I skidded off the road right around where you did I guess. What are the odds?”

“I remember going off the road,” Ashley said. “And I remember Chris, Chris was hurt really bad. But he crawled out because I couldn’t and was going to wave down a truck or something. He had our flashlight.”

“Chris?” He said out loud. “Who’s Chris? I didn’t see anyone else.”

“My husband,” she said. She snorted and then began to heave lightly. Her eyes clenched and her thumb drummed down on a button. “Did you see him? Did you see Chris?”

“No,” Eli said. “I didn’t...I didn’t even think. The other door, was...” He remembered now, the other door was actually opened. “There wasn’t anyone around.”

“They found him twenty feet or so from the freeway. Someone ran over him, ran over his leg..” Her face was buried in pain, the misery of the whole ordeal causing her deep physical torment. But the tears were stifled. It hurt her too much to cry. “He would have lived if...” She stopped there. “But you didn’t see him. You didn’t see him I guess.”

“I didn’t see anyone,” Eli said. “I didn’t see...anyone.” And he hadn’t, had he? Between the sleet and the darkening sky and the situation and...he hadn’t seen anything, nothing but her, and him and getting out of there...and, that thing he had run over, that...log with the jacket. A great wave of nausea overtook him.

“I know, I wanted to thank you for saving me but I also feel like I should tell you, I wish I would’ve died there. I can’t think of going on living anymore.”

He thought about apologizing but just sat there. Anyone would have done what he had, wouldn't they? This wasn't at all what he expected, what he had built to himself. What could he say?

"I shouldn't be telling you this," she said. "Here I am burdening you with something that you can't control."

"I um, don't know what to say." What Eli wanted to do was leave, get as far away from here as he possibly could. But, instead, he brought out his hands, put them into the light, turned them over so that he and she could both see the blood. "I wanted to save you."

"There isn't anything of me to save. I lost an eye." she raised her hand like she was going to touch her face but couldn't. Her hand just hovered there inches from the bandaging. "And I'm going to lose my house after this. We were fighting on the way back here about the rent and, now this, this is going to make it so I'll go bankrupt."

He couldn't tell her anything else. Instead, he just said, "I'm sorry again. I just wanted to see you."

"You've seen me now," she said. "I'm sorry I'm not that okay."

He hung around a moment longer. He wanted more. There had to be more. But, the snow was getting on and he thought about his car, and about the deal and about calling Armstrong back. He thought about all of this, and told Ashley once again, he was glad she was okay, for what it was worth. She was alive. That's what was important.

As he excused himself, he shut the door behind him.

The nurse who had given him the badge extended her hand, asking for it back. She eyed the gauze on his hand and handed him another spool. She clearly wanted to say something to him but he wasn't going to hang around to find out what it was.

He handed over the badge, nodded to the nurse and began to wrap the gauze around his hand. He could feel her watching him as he walked down the hallway, pulled the phone from his pocket and clicked on the last message that Armstrong had sent him. Yes, he would tell him,

everything was alright. It was a momentary lapse of reason. Maybe, he would explain further one day. Until then, send him all the information he would need for the mission. He was close to a hundred percent. Maybe even beyond that. If anything, he was sure now, that he would be able to close the deal.