Cowboys in Missouri

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The mechanic took one look at the engine, diagnosed the problem immediately (and with not a little disdain), and charged us nothing.

“It’s a rental,” my boyfriend said sheepishly.
We were on our way. Our son seemed relieved to be moving. He watched the carousel of images out his window with great interest. I watched him watching, and my boyfriend watched the road.

Kentucky was distractingly pretty. I’d been prepared to hate the state, but Kentucky wouldn’t cooperate in its unrelenting greenness. The hills layered green on top of green, so as soon as I thought I understood color, a new shade interrupted. In the distance, everything was a blue that grew lighter the higher it climbed. There were no clouds. The sun shone high and bright in the sky the way it shines in children’s drawings. It was only missing sunglasses.

What else did I see? Corn fields in Illinois. Soybean fields, maybe. The odd abandoned—or perhaps not abandoned—barn collapsing gently into an overgrown field. I developed an outsize interest in these large—they were uniformly large—reminders of an earlier pastoral moment. Not infrequently, they were half-torched, so the inside was as visible from the highway as the out. There was something suspicious about the barns, as if they were strategically placed to remind people of a past we’d bulldozed but not forgotten. Progress might demand interstate commerce, but this didn’t mean we needed to leave behind our agricultural roots.

Or something. I didn’t actually know what I was talking about. I wasn’t even talking. We drove in shared silence. This allowed me to listen to the car, though there was nothing to hear. It really was fixed! If only problems could always be solved so easily. Or, if not easily—I didn’t want to discredit the mechanic’s expertise (I’d been accused of similar crimes)—then quickly. I’d been accused of being a problem too. How did one go about fixing me?

Or, more specifically, my attitude. That was the real problem, not that I had a bad attitude—of course I had a bad attitude—but that it kept me from doing things I wanted to do. I tried to remember if this had always been the case. It seemed possible pregnancy was melting my brain. But I didn’t want to start blaming the baby before arrival. There’d be plenty of time to blame the baby later.

The four months after my son was born I didn’t sleep. You might think you can’t go four months without sleeping, but you’d be wrong. Instead of sleeping, I fed the baby. Sometimes I just watched him. The truth was he’d put a spell on me.

I’m not talking about the way their heads smell. Everyone knows that. When it’s three in the morning, and you’re neither asleep nor awake, all sounds muffled or weirdly sharp, you forget where you begin or end. The total helplessness of your baby seems unremarkable then, so obvious is it he belongs with you. He knows this too, and you sit in shared comprehension.

You take everything else. I’ll hold onto that feeling.

“They’re calling,” my boyfriend said.

“You want me to get it?” I asked.

I didn’t hear anything. The phone must have been on vibrate.

“I don’t think so,” he said.
“I can

We were a long way from Montana. It satisfied us to have a destination, though I was frightened about what would happen when we arrived. Going somewhere is easier than being somewhere.

Then there was the manila folder. The moment somebody looked at the papers inside, things became real. I preferred things the way they were, somewhere short of real. But we had to open the folder at some point, had to reach Montana—there’s only so much country—and we’d have to make decisions about what came next. I didn’t mean the baby. I knew what to expect there, or thought I did. I meant what we’d do when we didn’t have a destination to reach, how we’d fill our days. Of course, people use babies for that, but a baby doesn’t answer a need. A baby creates a new need you didn’t know you had.

At least, that’s how it was for me. My boyfriend didn’t say much. He was thinking about everything we hadn’t yet done.

I didn’t know how to think about death. Was I grieving? Something was happening. For my boyfriend too. He drove more cautiously. He drove like he had something newly precious to protect.

“Why don’t I call them back,” I said.

“No,” he said quickly. “We’re almost to St. Louis.”

What did St. Louis have to do with where we were going? All I could think of was the arch. I wanted to drive through it. Probably everyone does.

“Why St. Louis?” I wanted to know.

“It’s on the way.”

“Is that all?”

The back of his head did something. Was he shaking his head no, or was he confirming? It didn’t seem worth asking, especially with our son asleep. His head nodded too, or more accurately rolled from one side of the car seat to the other, though we were driving admirably steady. I considered praising my boyfriend on his steady driving.

I needed to do more deciding. I had, with the baby, the opportunity to be a different person. Or, at least, a different mother. Not that I was a bad mother. Or person. It was hard to think about being somebody different when all I could really think about was not being at all. Is that grief?

Then, as if to usher my thinking and rethinking away: St. Louis.

It looked, disappointingly, like any city. Or my idea of any city. There were buildings of various sizes, some sort of stadium. I was relieved the lights towering over the stadium were dark: it didn’t seem like any time for a game. The roads downtown were empty. It must have been the weekend. Without realizing, I’d stopped keeping track of the days.

“Where do you want to stop?” my boyfriend asked.
“To do

“For dinner,” he clarified.

Has there ever been a less hungry pregnant woman? I couldn’t imagine eating. What I wanted was a bed. It was clear that everything would make sense once I slept eight to fourteen hours.

“Let’s check in first,” I said.

I knew he’d agree. His philosophy was that it was easier to give me what I wanted, so long as I didn’t want too much. This philosophy was truer when I was pregnant. But I also knew we were in St. Louis, as opposed to around it, because he had an idea of something—a dinner, the arch?—that would only be possible here. I heard his phone vibrating with these possibilities. (His phone alerted him when he neared things—mine only delivered messages and, infrequently, calls.) I didn’t want to deprive him of such a simple thing. I looked, greedily, at my son’s sleep. I poked him, knowing it wouldn’t matter, and it didn’t.

It wasn’t long before we reached the hotel, which was as lousy as the others. Maybe lousier for what it wasn’t. The lobby depressed me in a way I decided to keep to myself. The sooner we paid the bill, the sooner I was asleep. Our son slept relentlessly in his car seat through the transition from the car to the room.

Inside the room, there was no pretending we’d do anything but sleep. My boyfriend lay on top of the comforter that hotels never wash while I assembled the foldup crib. Nobody turned on a light. The radiator was loud and powerful. I pulled the blanket to just below my son’s chin.

“He’s such a good sleeper,” I said.

But my boyfriend was already asleep. He hadn’t even taken off his shoes.

I tried to sleep. It was all I wanted, which may be why it didn’t work. I couldn’t stop thinking. I thought: how can he sleep so easily? Then I thought: why isn’t he more worried? It wasn’t that I wanted him to worry, only that I didn’t want to worry by myself. I considered waking him, but his sleep was so total, deep, and ugly that I knew I couldn’t do that. I looked at my phone. It was fully charged. It told me it wasn’t even eight o’clock. I should eat. For the baby.

I took one of the hotel keycards, as well as the car keys, which had fallen from my boyfriend’s pocket. I closed the door gently on my way out and checked to make sure it was locked. The hallway looked even worse than the lobby. (I hadn’t gotten a good look at the room.)

Inside the rental car, I debated where to go. Given the luxury of total choice, I froze. I moved my seat closer to the wheel. I adjusted the side mirrors, though I rarely used them, and the rearview mirror. I looked at the clock, though I knew what time it was. Besides, the time didn’t matter. The point was I was gone.

In theory, anyhow. In reality, I was alone in a parking lot. When I turned on my headlights, I could just see the edge of the lot. That was enough. Once I was on the road, I realized I didn’t care where I went. I opened the windows, slightly. I thought the night air might invigorate me, but it turned out I didn’t need invigorating. I stopped at the first restaurant I saw. It was impossible to miss. A cowboy, maybe ten feet tall, glowed outside it. There was no name attached to this restaurant, just the
Are there cowboys in Missouri? I didn’t see any inside the restaurant. All I saw was a woman, maybe forty. She didn’t glow. She drank a glass of whiskey. She wasn’t giving the ice any time to melt.

“Do you mind if I join you?” I said to my surprise.

The woman looked around the empty restaurant. “I have to warn you,” she said. “I may not be one-hundred-percent sober.”

“I’d never presume.”

“Closer to five or ten.”

It was a two-person table. On the empty chair was a large white bag. When I reached for the handles, the woman placed the bag on her lap. She had to push out from the table to do so.

“The mozzarella sticks are good,” she said.

“I’ll get the mozzarella sticks.”

“Messy but good.”

The word *messy*, for reasons I couldn’t understand, made her laugh. Then I started to laugh. That was all it took for us to be friends.

“I’ll tell you what I tell everyone,” she said, and I knew she was full of shit. “Don’t let people get you down.”

“No, of course not.” I didn’t mind that she was full of shit since it allowed me to be too. “Only how do you do that?”

She raised her hand, and a waitress appeared. The waitress dropped a laminated menu onto the table before turning her attention to the woman.

“One more,” she said. “And one for my friend.”

“Do you have mozzarella sticks?” I asked.

The woman looked to the front door, though nobody was coming.

“A bunch of those, please,” I said.

We watched the waitress walk to the kitchen before anyone spoke.

“About the drink,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” she said.
“I’m pregnant.”

This news seemed to annoy her.

“You know why I like this bar?” she asked.

I knew the answer. “It’s not a bar.”

“So nobody treats it like one.”

When she turned her head, I noticed a purple streak in her hair. I thought—to my own annoyance—that she was a little old for that, though I couldn’t name the age at which a streak of purple became desperate, rather than playful. Instinctively, I felt my own hair. It would be thicker soon, one of pregnancy’s strange tricks.

“One drink won’t kill the baby,” she said.

“Probably not.”

“I’m not a murderer, you know.”

It was at this point that the waitress emerged with a drink in each hand. The drink brightened the woman’s mood, temporarily. I found myself staring at her face. It was suddenly very important to know what she thought. Up to this point, I realized, I’d been doing little more than amusing myself.

“Something terrible happened,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

She eyed my drink darkly. She seemed unwilling to say anything more until I began drinking. Obediently, I lifted the glass to my lips. I said something stupid. I can’t remember what. She looked at me with pity. It was the pity that made her talk.

“This is exactly the sort of place my mother would never go to,” she said. “On her own, I mean.”

“I don’t understand.”

The woman leaned forward. “My mother is with us.”

I thought she was being spiritual. I’m not a spiritual person. Worse, I distrust people who are. That sounds judgmental because it is. But in this instance, I was wrong. She was being literal. She waited, patiently, for me to realize this.

“I’ve been bringing her everywhere,” the woman continued. “I can’t bring myself to leave her alone. It’s making me a little crazy. More than a little.”

“For how long?”

“When did she die? Or when was she cremated? It’s actually the cremation that I remember better, if you can believe it. When I picked her up, she was in this box. That’s what I remember.”
I nodded.

“I’ll tell you my plan if you promise not to tell.”

“I promise.”

“The arch, but there are problems. First, the observation deck is completely sealed. Second, it’s against the law—I don’t know that for a fact, but it must be. Third, it—she, I mean—is heavy. Imagine lifting her above your head!”

I watched her imagining. She lowered her shoulders, as if relaxing her muscles for strenuous activity. At the same time, her eyes narrowed, focusing on the task at hand. I didn’t understand why she’d want to do such a thing, or for me to see it. Maybe she didn’t. She hadn’t planned on my being here any more than I had.

She looked to the bag on her lap. It was hard to think of it as a bag, knowing somebody was inside. Or what used to be somebody. I didn’t want her to be upset. I wanted to help this woman carrying her mother’s remains.

“Did your mother tell you what she wanted?” I asked.

“She didn’t tell me anything! We barely talked.”

“I can see how that might complicate things.”

“The thing is it’s not complicated. Or it shouldn’t be. She’s dead. I don’t have to worry about her anymore, except I do.”

“She’s haunting you.”

The woman shivered. I thought maybe we were getting somewhere. Then I thought about the extent to which I was haunted by my own mother, that terrifying, unflappable woman. I thought when she died that I’d think about her every hour because for a while that was true. Then, imperceptibly, it wasn’t.

People kept offering to help, but they didn’t help, not really. It wasn’t their fault. They didn’t know what to do. Certainly, I didn’t tell them. Maybe I was bad at death the way other people are bad at loading dishes in the dishwasher.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” I said. “I think I’m bad at death.”

“Who isn’t?”

“Some people are good at crying.”

“That’s true.”

“And some people know what to say, or what not to say. I’m not one of those people, obviously.”
“I’m impressed neither of us is crying. I don’t see the point, personally.”

“Crying has no evolutionary function.”

“Is that right?”

It was clear neither of us knew.

“I did cry when it happened,” the woman admitted. “A lot, actually. I surprised myself.”

“I didn’t cry. I wanted to, but I didn’t.”

The woman played with the handles of the bag. I recognized the tic. She wanted a cigarette, but I didn’t have one to give her. Plus, the baby.

“I need to use the restroom,” she said. “And maybe to stop drinking.”

I nodded. That seemed like a good idea.

She moved from the table to the restroom in a more anguished fashion than I would have guessed. She seemed older. I thought, mournfully, of the streak of purple. It took her a long time to reach the bathroom. I felt relief when she disappeared behind the door. I looked, immediately, for somewhere to jettison my drink. I shot meaningful glances in various directions, hoping the waitress might materialize, but she didn’t. I never entertained simply drinking the thing, obvious as that solution might be. I kept waiting for the drink to leave the table. Eventually, I walked the drink to the empty counter, where it stubbornly remained beside the cash register.

I stared at the woman’s glass. I wondered if she’d used the same glass all evening, or if the waitress kept bringing new glasses. It was only a matter of time before I opened the white bag. Already I was eyeing the ropey handles. They wanted to be pulled.

I smelled the mozzarella sticks before they arrived and realized how hungry I was. For a few happy moments, they were my only focus. They reminded me of being sixteen in a chain restaurant with my friends, everyone delirious with her own improbably imminent future. We would have sex, go to college, ride on airplanes. All of those things would happen—to us!

But first this strange delicacy, both crunchy and gooey, which you dipped into a communal cauldron of marinara sauce (I think it was marinara). I looked at the little bowl before me and missed those friends, whom I never saw anymore, never even thought of, unless some shared website insisted on it. The girls—women—were married in predictable numbers (one, I think, divorced). They looked like themselves, except for the ways they didn’t. I could detect in their online pictures the ghosts of people I knew. I considered these people superior, more genuine, closer to the best version of themselves.

Of course, that was irrational and self-serving. That didn’t bother me. I wanted to invite those girls to dinner. All we needed were mozzarella sticks. I missed the girls’ cynicism, which was so different from what I felt today, a cynicism that extended past day-to-day interactions to politics, past politics to climate change, that truthfully was about the end of the world. That was what felt imminent now: the apocalypse. Not so for the girls, who understood the importance of a slight, who nurtured
grudg
immediately before us, the disappointing boys and disappointing classes and disappointing albums. How we loved to be disappointed! How we loved to elevate the tiniest misfortune to tragedy.

Not now. I didn’t need to look hard for tragedy today. It was sitting opposite me. It was taking forever in the bathroom. I wondered if I should be worried. I’d finished the mozzarella sticks, scarcely a crumb on the plate. I was eating like a pregnant woman, finally. I wouldn’t have consumed more than three when I was sixteen.

I waved for the check, but there was nobody to see my hand. I stared at the bathroom door, willing the woman to materialize, but she refused. I wanted to check the bathroom, but I didn’t want to leave the bag. Would it be wrong to bring the bag? I already had it in my hand.

With my other hand, I pushed open the bathroom door. There was one stall, closed. I pushed it open. There was nobody there. I stepped out of the bathroom and looked around. There I saw the narrow hallway that ended in a door. I pushed open this door too and saw the vast parking lot on the other side.

At first, I couldn’t accept what was clear, that she was gone. It must have been a horrible mistake. Surely, she’d be back any minute. I returned to the table, placed the bag in a chair, placed myself in another chair, and waited.

Eventually, the waitress took my plate and left a check for the mozzarella sticks and woman’s drinks, not as many as I would have guessed. The check strengthened my belief that she’d left by accident. I began to rehearse in my head the conversation we’d have when she returned.

“I knew you’d come back,” I would tell her.

“It was a horrible mistake,” she would assure me.

“I paid the check.”

“You weren’t worried?”

It would not be hard to lie.

She didn’t come back, though. I waited until not only the waitress but also the kitchen staff leaned over the counter, willing me to leave. The bag felt heavier this time.

And it felt colder outside. I held the bag close to me. My car was the only one in the parking lot. The people who worked there must have parked in the back, where the woman escaped.

She hadn’t planned it this way. She came here, after all, to be alone. When I placed the bag in the passenger’s seat, a light glowed on the dashboard, telling me the airbag was disabled. The sensors were unsentimental about what is and isn’t a person.

I drove through St. Louis for a long time. At every light, I looked to the white bag, thinking she deserved better, wondering what kind of person she was, what kind of mother.
It was

it. I lifted the lid off one can and placed the bag inside. I never opened the bag. I said a prayer,
awkwardly but earnestly in case there was somebody to hear it. Then I drove to my boyfriend and
son, who were moving through their unknowable dreams, just where I left them.