

Sidetracked

Last week, I went home after college graduation and my insane dad offered me \$3,000 to leave my boyfriend Jack and go to New York. My grandmother had just died and left him some cash, or he never would have made that offer. On my way out, he yelled, "Don't call home until you work at the New Yorker." I laughed. I'm used to his jabs.

When I was a teen, I learned to play tennis by hitting balls against the side of the house, bought my racquet at Kmart with babysitting money, and wore jean cut offs. As I left the house to play against kids who wore whites and took private lessons, he'd yell after me, "And don't come home a losing bitch!" Figures, he expected me to waltz into the New Yorker Magazine, snap my fingers for a job with only a B.A. in French to my name and no experience unless you count dreams to be a writer.

Losing bitch, losing bitch, losing bitch. Dad's two decades of criticisms reverberated in my brain, and I got angry. Someday his mean words, piled on top of meaner words, will emerge from my cells, rise up, and create a complex PTSD monster to ravage my life, but for that moment, the anger gave me the courage to laugh.

Little did Dad know, but I already have plans to go somewhere. Jack has hitchhiked 35,000 miles all over the U.S. since he was 17 and found his way through college in time to drop a violet on my desk after he came late into the French Grammar class three months ago. Now, we've both finally graduated, and the violet is pressed into my Petite Larousse Dictionary, packed in a box. We hitchhike to Colorado next week, to figure out life together.

That day, I told Dad to go to hell. My mother pulls an old wool blanket with the tattered satin trim, unravelling, that had been a wedding gift decades ago, over her head and

hides in bed, as if she can't believe she's in such a place with four children, a raging husband, two dogs and a cat, and barely means to provide for the pets. But you know, I hate to leave my two younger sisters, especially when my crazy brother is missing again. I'm in love, I've just graduated from college, President Carter signed SALT II, China invaded Vietnam, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and it's time for me to get going with life. To get out of Podunk upstate New York. But before we do, I just need to take care of this one thing.

So now I'm in a clinic office, shivering in my johnny, seated on a plastic chair. The gleaming steel stirrups extend from the end of the procedure table next to me to the wall, pointing at a poster.

“Planned Parenthood, Ryder, New York, Mission. Since the landmark 1973 Supreme Court decision, we are committed to providing a woman with a safe choice in the event of pregnancy.”

The words on the poster sink in. “What choice? “I think. “I have no choice, I gotta do this.” But thank god, anyway, thank you very much Roe v. Wade.

Dr. Waxen opens the door, comes in, sits on a stool in front of me. He says, “Hi, Mari you feelin' OK today?” and then leans toward me, his elbows on his knees. His freckles sprinkled across his black face stand out more than mine from my white face. I want to reach out and touch those freckles which look so friendly and nice. He asked me all the tough questions yesterday – how I was feeling about an abortion, what was

the genetic family history that convinced me never to have children, and why couldn't I tell my boyfriend, Jack.

I took it one question at a time, telling him how I felt terrible about the abortion. I didn't believe it was right to kill a child, even one the size of a pencil eraser. But I also didn't believe it was right to bear a child that might suffer schizophrenia like my brother. Or die by suicide like my cousin. Or be a paranoid tyrant, like my father. No way. The bad genes weren't going anywhere on my watch, I told Dr. Waxen, and he nodded.

In high school, my brother used to cry, curled in his bed in the middle of the night. I came from the room that I shared with our two sisters to kneel beside him. "What's wrong?" He never answered. But he did end up in a psych ward. Every time they let him out, he lost his shit, threw away his wallet and keys, abandoned his car under some bridge, and took off. My mother would get a call from a cop who found him on the streets in North Carolina or Michigan. I got so damn mad about that. Being angry pushes aside the sadness and worry in my mind that chases after me like boulder rolling down a mountain. I'm running, running, to keep from getting flattened. These days, when I feel the that rolling rock of sadness after me, I tuck myself into Jack's arms and we drop together into a canyon of bliss.

So, that's how I am pregnant. I can't lay this abortion on Jack. I barely know him. He's a wild guy. Such a character. He has ice blue eyes, fine brown hair that falls across his forehead and down to his ears, and thighs with sinewy muscles that wrap around me at night.

With each kiss from Jack, I erase another road in the old map of my future, the map for women of my generation and what society expects us to do. Turn here to find a mate.

Arrive at your destination in this two-garage four-bedroom house with 1.2 kids for the next 45 years. I'm not sure where the new roadmap with Jack will take me, but it's better than that one.

Dr. Waxen is saying I should rest after, avoid using tampons, and that it's possible to become pregnant very soon. Yah, yah. I got a diaphragm now. That won't happen.

I look at McIntosh Mountain that emerges like a flat top roof, dusted with snow, and a chimney on one side. There's no town in sight, up or down this Colorado highway. It's hot and a pickup truck is coming, a mile away on this straight desert road winding toward the foothills of the Rockies. It's been six days since the abortion. I didn't tell Jack about that, but just said I had a bad period. So, no sex. It was hard for me to wait. Last night, we lay down in sweet, cool grass next to a reservoir, under some pine trees, not too far from the interstate. He wrapped his arms around me, and he smelled so good. His fingers softly traced down my neck. I decided I was OK. There were so many mosquitoes, we had to hunker down in the mummy sleeping bag and there wasn't much room to maneuver. But I managed to flip him underneath me so I could get the best ride. Sex makes all our differences disappear, the problems we have, the disagreements. There's only my taut body pulsating, winging through lightness. Never landing, ever flying. Wouldn't that be great if it lasted forever. The negative space of his emotion leaks through in his songs and I listen to him pick guitar and sing every night.

*To what I know
And what I am
Things will show.*

*I will keep on moving
To a place only I know
To perfection, something more
To a place only I know where to go.*

*To allow to discover
To follow where I go
And let me recover
All the things I've learned.*

I am a little sore today so maybe it was a too early, but it was worth it. I blink and look up into the sun behind that approaching truck. It passes without picking us up and I drop my thumb.

I check with Jack on how much money we have. "A few dollars," he says.

Most people would think that's risky, to be going who knows where for who knows how long with just a few dollars. But me and Jack are not most people. I've never had more than a few dollars for anything, all the time growing up. It was the same for him. Then my waitress tips barely paid for basic living plus tuition through college. I'm used to this; assumptions that never become absolutes. I like it. It's a feeling of power to be able to do anything, go anywhere you want, with not much. We want to go west, so we go. Sell our musical instruments, books, and a few pieces of furniture and take off, thumbs out. That's freedom: to know what you don't need and not caring when you must get rid of everything that doesn't fit in a backpack. It's living on next to nothing but with a twist. Gotta have the twist or we'd just be vagrants. A summer during college, I lived in a five-room apartment with five girls and worked at a medical library, surviving on apples and eggs. I saved enough money to study a semester in Paris last year. Freakin' Paris – that's the twist! I hitchhiked across Europe, also Belgium, Netherlands, around Great

Britain. Took the Eur-rail train pass all over Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. And all the while, I daydreamed of coming back some day as a writer, a spectral prospect.

A chunk of the \$2,000 from the library paychecks I saved bought me a Minolta camera. I took pictures of chestnuts on the yellow chairs in the Tuileries, of the dawn light on the doors of Notre Dame. Artsy stuff. Like right now, the heat makes waves off the road and swirls up into the air in shimmers that make the distant mountains dance. I pull out my camera for that.

I haven't had anything to eat today, our fifth day of hitchhiking, since my stores of peanut butter and crackers ran out. I drank my water bag dry two hours ago. This is what I mean by disagreements. I need regular food, water, and rest. Everyday. Sounds reasonable, right? But with Jack, I fight for those basics because he just wants to keep going hiking, skiing, or hitchhiking. No stops. Just get there. He doesn't want to interrupt the juju, the gris gris of the journey. Those are Voodoo terms for flowing supernatural power. Jack cooked on a tugboat off New Orleans and the Cajun crew taught him about voodoo. I just love to say those words – JU – JU! GRIS! GRIS! Maybe I can capture a Ju Ju spirit and make my dreams come true.

But I'm still hungry. I shift my pack on my hips, which hurt. We walked five miles yesterday – no rides - and I got chafed. WE

We'd been on I 70 since Columbus but some local-yocal took us off the main drag down to Montrose where he had a trailer, and a rack of guns. He wanted to teach Jack to shoot at beer cans and Jack tried to be polite, but he hates guns and the gun stock knocked him backwards the first time it went off. He did manage to nick a beer can after

a few shots which made the kid, about 19, short-haired, red-rimmed eyes, with crusts in his lashes, very happy.

This kid made a campfire, pulled out a strip of LSD and we both took a tab, but I spit mine out, behind my hand. I've always been afraid of going crazy on a trip; even being stoned has a slippery, sensory spaciness that feels like lack of control over variables. Jack took a trip and heard violins in the wind and when the kid slumped over onto the dirt next to the flames, we grabbed our packs and sneaked away down a dirt road to a secondary road, in the middle of nowhere so that's how we got stuck out here.

I tell Jack I have to pee. "You're such a girl," I stick my tongue out at him, jump off the interstate shoulder into a ditch where a drainpipe can hide me from view. I discern the surroundings, the corroded rust on corrugated metal, the gnats caught in spider webs, the dried rain wash bed that hasn't been rinsed in a while. I conclude that no one who knows where they are going or has a plan would be in a drainpipe. But there are moments, even stretches, when my fear is neutralized, now by the excitement of love. I've always been on the fringe thanks to my weird family, so why not step onto the edge with Jack. I'm sure I can find my way back if I want to.

In the hollow of metal, coolness sweeps over my sweaty face. My calves are sun burned from the long walk yesterday morning with my back to the east. I pull down my jean shorts and squat. I look at the dirt. A few red drops spot the ground. Oh well, it was too soon. But I remember with a smile that I had pushed up on my elbows, arched my

back and came like a dolphin riding waves. I run my fingers over the red welts where my pack waist straps dug in.

“Honey, we got a ride. Hurry up.”

I scramble into my shorts, heave the pack high off the welts, yank the straps, come out of the cool darkness, and bust up the bank. A green pickup idles, a sandy haired, middle-aged guy looks at me from the driver’s seat. Jack throws our packs and his guitar in a soft case in the truck bed, and he hops in, smushes over next to the driver. I climb in, take the beagle who is on the seat in my lap, and slam the door. Jack’s Canon SLR camera, hanging from his neck, sticks into my side. He grins at me, shifts the camera into his lap, reaches his arm around my shoulder.

Rick, the driver, has been visiting a rancher friend and is headed to I70 and to Aspen so he says he’ll take us there. He says we can stay with him in a wood and glass house on Woody Creek, just down valley from the glitzy town. How cool is that? Rick owns a camera shop.

“Do you sell Minoltas?” I ask him.

“Not those pieces of crap.” Rick glances at Jack’s Canon. “Those are only slightly better. We sell Nikon and Leica.”

Jack is fishing for a job. “I’ve done commission sales for years. High end musical instruments to professional musicians. And I speak French.”

“Not many Frenchmen around. Come into the store tomorrow and we’ll look at what you got.”

Jack raises his camera to the snow-capped mountains above the Leadville Pass.

“What’s your f-stop and film speed?” asks Rick.

“F14. ASA 100.”

“Depending on focal length, try opening it up and shorten shutter speed. The peak is far enough away to avoid blur from the moving car.”

I knew all that stuff before Jack did, but I know better than to edge into the conversation. I keep quiet, fold my arms, look out the window, pet the beagle around the ears who has jumped to the floorboard, and get pissed off.

The male drivers who pick us up always either ignore me or try to put a hand on my leg or squeeze my shoulder or make crude comments. Unacceptable, end of story. Women’s lib needs to do more. Sure, there’s the right to vote, duh, and now activists and protesters jockeying for equal rights and pay. But I still get treated like a sex object. And they still don’t think what I say is worth as much as what Jack says.

Even Jack doesn’t always listen. Our first night hitching, we got dropped off late with no chance of getting another ride, so we looked for a place to sleep. It started to rain. Jack swore. I saw a ledge, high up off the road, away from where water would puddle. I pulled on his arm, pointed to the ledge, and started up the slope. “That won’t work,” he said. “Yes, it will,” I hollered over my shoulder and kept going. Turned out it was a perfect spot.

And another thing – I’m the reason he graduated from college. I corrected the French in all his final exam papers which he finished writing at 5 am, last minute as usual. He’d wake me up at dawn, and I’d work on them until 8:00 am, when they were due. Only reason he passed. My papers were finished a week ahead of time.

Despite my superior assets, I don't get a word in edgewise, as we climb the traverse ridge road through Leadville, an awful name and old mining town, but amazing snow-covered peaks up the pass and down the other side. The pine trees on the lower slopes grow so straight and the mountain streams flow with milky water from minerals. Jack never lets the conversation flag for long as it's the hitchhiker's job to entertain or keep the driver awake, if need be.

"So, you got family in Aspen?" Jack is conversational.

"My wife just left. That's how I have room for you two. She couldn't take the isolation and didn't dig the Aspen lifestyle." Rick looks at Jack's hand on my thigh.

"You two been together long?"

"Since April 26 when he bought me coffee after French class," I pipe in.

"I would have bought you a coffee too, little girl," Rick chuckles.

"We studied French film, the last one we analyzed was about Victor Hugo's daughter in the French tropics who falls into unrequited love and goes mad. A true story," I say.

"Did you see the new Star Trek – amazing," interrupted Jack.

Jack worries about me being safe. If a driver did show a creepy interest in me, Jack would wait for 30 miles or so, then invent a reason to get out, cheerful, no problem, just get us out of there. Rick is OK in that department, but Jack gets him going on Star Trek just in case.

"Oh cool, the V'Ger alien cloud and special effects out the ass..." Rick forgets about me..

Jack was enthusiastic, then asked about the ski just-finishing ski season.

“Great sunny days, lots of rich people with dough to burn. Over 200 inches this year, so among the best.” Rick glanced back at the eastern cross-country skis with no edges that Jack and I have strapped to our packs. “Those won’t do much around here. Telemarking is just coming back, and you need wide boards with metal edges. “Next season we’ll invest,” promised Jack.

Actually, Rick turns out to be a great ride because he stops at a restaurant before going home. I get a huge plate of barbeque chicken and fries, a shot of bourbon and two beers.

Next day, Rick hires Jack as a salesman. Within a few days, I get a great job in an Aspen bookstore. Kind of prestigious if you ask me. The owner is Irving Thalberg’s daughter, the old movie magnate.

I think working in a bookstore is la crème de la crème, better than cleaning houses or waiting tables. Until, after only two weeks, I find out it’s boring. As the new girl, I check in books. Box after box. Open the box. Dust off the books. Check them off the list. Pile them on a book cart. All day long. I didn’t go to college to do this menial stuff. I want to be something important. If I chicken out at being a writer, at least I plan to be successful in business. So maybe this is a start, working in the book business? I reconsider my boredom. Maybe I’ll start my own bookstore. I start daydreaming about that.

The experienced staff wait on customers. John Denver, Jimmy Buffet, Jack Nicholson, Barbara Streisand. They all come in! Unbelievable, to be here in Aspen with the stars. I’m kinda nervous to talk to them, but Nancy, who I work with, says you get used to it. I’m loading books on a cart, fresh from the boxes when Julia Alvarez comes near me. I

want to scurry into the back room, but I square my shoulders, straighten my spine, and hand her the new essay collection by Seamus Heany, fresh from the box. And I get bold and tell her about a poetry reading by Robert Bly, when he wore elaborate masks for his different poems and voices, in a basement in New York. And she says she heard Isabelle Allende speak recently. And I tell her I love magical realism, where the extraordinary is perfectly natural, and isn't the last Gabriel Garcia Marquez short story collection the best. She smiles at me.

We've been in town for ten days in spring, and McDonald's has introduced the Happy Meal ,but the chain is not permitted to open a mansard roofed place in high-brow Aspen. With a few May powder dumps, we got to ski the lifts twice before they closed, and the snow was so deep, up to our waists. We learned to carve decent telemark turns on our edgeless skis by just floating the back leg in the fluff, and to step the front ski down the mountain, an impossible technique on eastern hardpack.

So, Jack decides he hasn't had enough and wants to walk up, over the melting 200-inch base. We set out mid-afternoon, because of course we fooled around all morning; six times in a row which is our record so far. From the base of the mountain, the summit is out of sight. It's warm. Must be 60s and we start hiking hard, walking up from 8,000 to 11,000 feet to take one long run down. Our skinny eastern skis with no edges, woefully inadequate for these conditions, are strapped to our back packs. The new ski skin technologies aren't out yet, so we hike up and plan to float in down in soft snow, warmed to slush by the sun.

I look up the mountain pitch, so steep I can only see one third of it. For the first three hours, I keep up. Then I start to lag." I gotta rest, have some water," I yell to Jack, ahead of me. He turns back to look at me, his grin as wide as the Continental Divide all around us. He shucked off his shirt in the heat and looks great bare-chested. "Can't, it's gonna get dark", he says. "We gotta get to the top and get down." He winks at me for encouragement.

Rick had told us it was too late in the day to get started to the top of Ajax Mountain. But Jack doesn't see the sun getting low over the mountain, or feel the chill air start to seep up from the snow as the heat recedes from above.

I stop, dig my boot sideways into the steep pitch of corn snow, and take a slug from my water pouch. I see the summit now. I'm a little dizzy, lightheaded. Rick said to be careful of elevation for the first few weeks. I look across the Valley to Red Mountain and see a snow slide down a scree shoot, loose rock broken up by ice and water. It takes out a few trees at the edges. Rick said there might be avalanches this time of year, but Jack said we'd be careful. How exactly is one careful in an avalanche?

Jack has started up again. His one boot toe digs into the soft snow, then the next. I watch the muscles on his back, glistening with sweat. Man, he's driving up the hill, making it look easy. He's a pure force of will on the mountain. I'm stronger than most women and even a lot of men. I have chutzpa, my college writing teacher told me, which is crazy confidence. Sometimes that fails me though; just seems to fall away and leave me naked. So, I substitute anger or stubbornness and I push through anything - a slap across the face from my father, the winning shot in a tennis game, and now hustling up 3,000 feet of elevation, double time. Jack is the one person I've ever met who has more

chutzpa than me. I haven't seen him falter. Yet. Wonder if I will somewhere up the line? I squint in the sunlight in thin air up the slope and watch him drive upwards. I wonder what makes him so monomaniacal about getting somewhere, anywhere, higher, farther, keep going no matter what. I wonder if some time I'll blurt out something, object to or invalidate his mode of operation, that we won't recover from. I don't want to investigate the confessional spirals of whether our relationship is orgasmic or some exorcism of my disorganized and repackaged past. And whether I can see myself in us.