

Evie

Last week, I went home after college graduation and my insane dad offered me \$3,000 to leave my boyfriend Max 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. Max 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 doesn't have a clue, stays hiding from life in bed most of the time. But you know, I hate to leave my two younger sisters, especially when

my crazy brother is missing again. I'm in love and it's time 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."

Dr. Waxen opens the door, comes in, sits on a stool in front of me. He says, "Hi, Char 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 being pregnant and why couldn't I tell my boyfriend, MAX.

I took it one question at a time, telling him how I felt terrible about being pregnant. I didn't want to lose my child, now the size of a pencil eraser. I'd figure something out.

Not that I wanted to start a family. Christ. Mine was a disaster. 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 Max's arms and we drop together into a canyon of bliss.

So, that's how I ended up pregnant. I can't lay this baby on Max now. 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 Max, 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 MAX will take me, but it's better than that one.

Dr. Waxen is saying I should get good rest, eat well, take some vitamins. And well—good luck. Yah, yah. I won't need my diaphragm to have sex at least, the useless thing.

I look around at Castle Rock emerging like a flat top haircut, dusted with snow. 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 doctor's visit. I didn't tell Max about that.

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. 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 taught body pulsating, winging through lightness. Never landing, ever flying. Wouldn't that be great if it lasted forever.

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 Max 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 Max 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 work barely paid for basic living plus tuition through college. I'm used to this. 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 have to 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 successful novelist.

A good chunk of the \$2000 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. I drank my water bag dry two hours ago. This is what I mean by disagreements. I need regular food, water, and rest. Everyday. OBVIOUSLY! But with Max, 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. Max 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. I tell Max 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.

Inside the drainpipe, 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 down between my legs. A few red drops spot the ground. Huh? Then a red gush lands in the dirt. Looks like a crash scene. I feel dizzy. I remember sex last night. 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. I look at the red mud on the ground, trying to see something. I turn from the cool darkness toward light and bust up the bank. A green pickup idles, a sandy haired, middle-aged guy looks at me from the driver’s seat. Max 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. Max’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, lives in Aspen, so he says he’ll take us there. Rick’s wife just left him so he says we can stay with him in a wood and glass house on Woody Creek, just down valley from Aspen. How cool is that? Rick owns a camera shop.

“Do you sell Minoltas?” I ask him. Still kinda dizzy, I take a swig of water and check my crotch to see if any red is happening there. I’m clear.

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

Max 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.”

Max raises his camera to the snow-capped mountains above the Leadville Pass. Rick asks him about f-stop and film ASA; Max chats back about focal length and shutter speed. I knew all that stuff before Max 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 Max says.

Even Max 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. Max 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 all the way to Aspen as Rick and Max chat about camera stuff that I know about. Max worries about me being safe. If a driver did show a creepy interest in me, Max 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.

Actually, he 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 Max as a salesman. Within a few days, I'm not dizzy anymore. I get a great job in an Aspen bookstore. Kind of prestigious if you ask me. The owner is Irving Thalberg's daughter, the movie magnate. I walk into the work for the first day and the only thing I can think about is that the baby isn't with me. Gone. Left in a drainpipe. I should have kicked some dirt over her. Him. A burial, sort of. Whatever.

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 but only got to ski the lifts twice before they closed. So, Max decides to walk up, over the melting 200-inch base. Back east a 200-inch base doesn't even happen. 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 9,000 to 14,000 feet to take one long run down. Our telemark skis are strapped to our back packs.

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 Max, 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 told us it was too late in the day to get started to the top of Ajax Mountain. But Max thinks he can do anything, and he must do it his way.

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 Max said we'd be careful. How exactly is one careful in an avalanche?

Max 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 hutzpa, my college writing teacher told me, which is some kind of 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 14,000 feet of elevation, double time. Max is the one person I've ever met who has more hutzpa 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 the child would have been like him.
