

Highway Prison

Eytan and I were kindred spirits. We met in college in Illinois, first united over a shared affection for things that collect dust: rocks, fossils, the Oklahoma panhandle. As we came to know one another, we found more fundamental commonalities: a certain contempt for conventionality and delight in simple pleasures. We both wanted to see beauty in unexpected places, and we shared a general willingness to squint sideways and delude ourselves until we saw it. Perhaps that accounts for why, as we teetered on the precipice of break-up, we began to plan a road trip through the heart of Dust Bowl country.

Our relationship coincided with my junior year, a chaotic, white-noise time in my life. Looking back, a love as exhaustingly fractured as ours was all I could have expected. Everything about that time seemed to pick me up and sweep me along - school, friends, romance - and, more or less happily, I went. I was in the midst of some sort of renaissance, discovering a depth of passion and intellect I hadn't known I possessed as I pitched myself headfirst into my major area of study: geology. Studying geology gave me more than just endless tidbits of cocktail trivia and rock puns; it gave me a personality. For the first time in my life, I grasped that I could be *good* at something, that I could care deeply about things far beyond the social fluxes that, to this day, control so much of my life. Eytan was more than a boyfriend to me; he was a mentor, a fellow geologist several years my senior with a seemingly impressive résumé and unending, child-like love for the science. He modeled for me what it means to enthuse about an academic discipline better than anyone else I've ever known, and the intensity of that connection fueled everything in my life. I saw so much of my future self wrapped up in him, both romantically and in the type of person I thought I wanted to become. If this sounds like a recipe for disaster, it was.

Things started going south in that second semester, and we both knew a split was coming. We were similar; we were *too* similar. It wasn't long before those similarities began to collide. As the months wore on, I felt like I was constantly fighting a losing battle for ownership of my individuality. There was a tremendous amount of intuition between Eytan and I, but that intuition came at the price of our egos, and it was back-breaking work to love like that. Our likenesses overlapped and expanded until they ballooned into arguments and there seemed no space large enough to contain our personalities. I would like to think that that was why we went to the plains, in search of space for ourselves. In reality, though, what agreeing to the road trip came down to for me was mingled fear, goodwill, and self-interest. If a week of forced automotive confinement sounds like a bad idea, it was.

Midway through the semester, Eytan had been offered admittance to graduate school in Texas, and I wanted so badly for him to go. Despite his overwhelming love for geology, he

hadn't gained traction in any academic program until around the time we met. So, I wanted him to follow through on something. I wanted him to do what he was passionate about. And with all my newfound sense of self, I wanted him to not hang his life on mine. He initially accepted the offer, but as the summer came on he seemed to backtrack, saying that he might not go, that he might prefer to stay in Illinois and "wait for me." Maybe this was a measure of his commitment, but by that point our relationship had grown so tenuous that the idea of him staying bode ominous to me.

It has been difficult to put words to exactly what was so broken in our relationship. We argued, sure, but what's so uncommon about that? But I had never, and have not ever since, argued with someone in the way that we did with one another. We were each other's sole agitators and comforters, a toxic combination, and every misguided attempt at making up after an argument only drove the hurt deeper. There's really nothing like the experience of being worn so thin by a person that you're driven to tears and vomit, only to have the very perpetrator of those ills come to cradle your head in their arms, stroke your hair and say they want to marry you. Our patterns were manipulative and suffocating. Small disagreements that had once been merely frustrating became something else entirely: unease transformed into distrust which morphed into something akin to fear.

I was looking for a way out, and the natural separation that would be created by his leaving town seemed easier than laying out all our cards face to face. The way I saw it, not going to graduate school would have been a missed opportunity for him, and a thorn in my side as well. As I encouraged him to go, he must have suspected my intentions, and these conversations could be fraught with accusations of infidelity. Still, the suggestion that I could drive down with him and help him get settled seemed to abate the tension and bring him some peace. And so, with brittle cheerfulness, we began to plan our road trip. We would head west out of Illinois, touring our way through the remnants of hard-hit Dust Bowl towns in Kansas, Oklahoma, and northern Texas before making our way into Houston. The making of the drive into a "vacation," rather than a straight-arrow long-haul, was a last-ditch attempt at normalcy. I can never be sure if agreeing to that idea was an act of love, or cowardice, or simple placation. Maybe it was the ultimate, "Here, let me show you to the door!" Let me show you *all the way to Texas*.

The trip was at turns heartening and terrifying. There were moments I almost reconsidered my foregone decision to end things, promptly, as soon as I'd put a couple hundred miles between us. Like when we left a black smear of tire burn on the highway because we finally spotted the roadside fruit stand that we'd been searching for since Kansas City. Or the expressions of disbelief at our own good fortune that we exchanged when we woke up at the Black Mesa B&B in Kenton, Oklahoma. We'd arrived in the middle of the night, in a trance after a hell of driving, and hardly knew our surroundings before we were fast asleep in a chicken-

coop-turned-guestroom. But when we arose the next morning, someone was cooking pancakes and we all said grace and passed the prickly pear syrup.

But nothing could have saved us. The arguments were bitter and petty at first. Then they began to feel dangerous. He never hit me. But when our arguments went from shouts to the sharpest of whispers, that's when I'd see his fists and jaw clenching, his arms twitching, shaking with self-restraint. I would shrink and quiet myself and try then, and only then, to smooth things over. These moments were scary enough on home turf; on the road, they were nothing short of petrifying. My brain spun in a pool of paranoia every time he got behind the wheel after a fight: Would he run us off the road intentionally in a fit of rage? Would he lose control accidentally? His hands would leave the wheel as he rummaged through the console for cigarettes, his "stress-relieving" vice that he needed increasingly often, and the car would wind towards the ditch. Angrily, he'd jerk it back to centerline, and I would mash myself into the smallest volume of space I could possibly occupy in the passenger seat and breath only in long intervals. I would try to say nice things that might make him happy. Every night we'd check into a hotel, he would turn the lock, and I would brace myself for whatever was coming next.

All of this was how I found myself trapped, scared shitless in his car in a mounting hailstorm in western Kansas. There was nowhere to go: I was in highway prison. I flinched and held my breath as ice banged on the roof and hood and prayed that the noise of it all wouldn't wake him from the passenger seat. I prayed that my relationship wouldn't shatter the windows as it exploded. I knew I had a bus ticket home in a few days' time, but in that moment, I couldn't imagine making it out of Kansas alive. There was no way I could have fully understood the urgency of the phrase, "Get out of Dodge," until I'd been there, desperate, with a sea of barbed wire unfolding around me and the road like a tightrope beneath me. The trick to surviving, I understood in my blood, was to keep my eyes straight ahead, to not look down, and most importantly, to keep moving. I don't know how I kept the road; I couldn't see beyond the hood, but I guessed it stayed straight and sure enough, it did. Most of the rest of the trip is a blur of arguments that I can't recall the heads or tails of; motels; humidity. In the blink of an eye and a different lifetime, I was licking my wounds on a crippled old Greyhound limping its way towards home.

In the years following our road trip, I have learned the habit of I-70 well, the way it dips and curves and rises out of Denver, then steady like a heartbeat through Eastern Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, slowly bearing down towards the Mississippi, and I could drive it blind through Illinois. Every time I drive that road, that sensation, *keep moving*, haunts me. The Plains, the Flyover States, that unsexy part of the otherwise rugged and scenic West: they are a place that I tend to speed across at 80 miles an hour, usually with some sense of overwhelming personal emergency that compels me from one life to another: West, Midwest, and back again. The Plains are a bridge between the life I've created here in the Front Range, and the jealous pull

of my first home. They remind me that I am not as settled as I would like to pretend. They embody an in-betweenness and dissatisfaction that has become emblematic of these past few years of my life, as I've found myself always coming, always going, never staying. That way of living, much like the Plains and all their vastness, is at first inveigling and then deeply disappointing, when emptiness loses its sheen of possibility and turns out to just be, well, empty. Perhaps more than anything else, the Plains to me are a ticker tape of my early adulthood, every mile recording some memory, some worth dwelling on, others not. And the road, confusingly, graciously, pointing towards home in either direction.