

Planes, Pain, and Automobiles

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Three hours and fifteen minutes until I am home.
Twenty-two hours until I am putting on a black suit
and driving to Church of Grace off of Redbank Road.
Twenty-four hours until I am carrying the casket down
the front steps of the church.

An orange light blinks in front of me. “Ladies
and gentlemen, when the seat belt sign illuminates,
please fasten your seat belt. Insert the metal fittings
one into the other and tighten by pulling on the loose
end of the strap. To release your seat belt, lift the
upper portion of the buckle. We ask that you keep
your seat belt fastened throughout the flight, as we may
experience turbulence.” The flight attendant’s soft-
spoken voice slowly sings me to sleep as the orange seat
belt sign above my head begins to blur. I close my eyes,
but all I can see is fiery hair.

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Golden eyes and caramel hair. She sat across the fire
pit swaying to the music I produced with a pick and
old guitar. In a quiet voice, she sang along to David
Wilcox’s “Eye of the Hurricane,” and her eyes were
glued to the flames that stood between us. As I played
the final chord, she cracked the slightest smile and held
her gaze on mine just a bit longer than she intended
because her cheeks turned red as she returned her eyes
to the flames.

My best friend Daniel invited a group of friends up
to his family’s cabin at Caesar’s Creek State Park for the
night so we could celebrate his birthday. It was pretty
much our rec soccer team and a couple of kids from his

youth group. His parents put three cases of Miller Light
in the cooler outside and told us they would be upstairs
if we needed anything. Needless to say, Daniel and I
had a drink, tossed a football, and waited for everyone
else to arrive.

When the sun went down, we all gathered around
the fire and I played my mini acoustic set for anyone
that cared enough to listen, and when I finished, I met
Daniel by the cooler.

“Who is that girl over there? Brown hair, yellow
shirt.” I asked.

“That’s Alyssa. She’ll be a Junior. I met her on
our West Virginia mission trip two weeks ago. Super
sweet. She’s a little shy at first but super nice.” I had a
name and that was all I needed, so I grabbed a beer from
the cooler and turned to walk back to the fire. Daniel
quickly interrupted me, “Carter, ah. You probably
don’t want to take that over there, assuming it’s for
her.”

“What’s wrong with offering her a drink? We are all
staying the night anyway.”

“Yeah. That’s not the problem. Come here.” In a
hushed tone, Daniel told me, “Her dad is a recovering
alcoholic, and she doesn’t really drink. She won’t get
mad if you offer her a drink, but I figured I’d spare
you both the awkward moment of you trying to start a
conversation after she rejects your offer.” Daniel took
the cold aluminum can from me and patted my shoulder
to let me know that I was free to go.

I sat down next to her and introduced myself. She

complimented my mediocre music abilities, and we talked for another hour until everyone was ready to turn in for the night. Before she left in the morning, I mustered up enough courage to ask if she would want to hang out sometime, and luckily received a yes.

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My train of thought is interrupted when the old man next to me asks, “Where are you going, son?”

“I uh—I’m headed home for a funeral, sir.”

“I am sorry to hear that. God bless you. The name’s George.”

“Carter, and thank you, sir. What about you—where are you headed?” I ask.

“I am on my way home from my sister-in-law’s house. My wife passed away four years ago—breast cancer—so every year on the anniversary of her passing I spend the weekend with her sister in our hometown.”

“I am sorry to hear about your wife sir. How long were y’all together?”

“She was my high school sweetheart. This summer we would have celebrated our fifty-seventh wedding anniversary, but it seems like just yesterday I was asking her to our high school dance.” He lets out a small chuckle, and a smile stretches across George’s face as he talks about his wife. “I showed up at her door with flowers, but I was too damn nervous to ring the bell. I was about to walk away when I heard her voice call my name, and she was walking up behind me. She looked at me and said, ‘It’s about time, I thought I was going to have to ask you myself.’ She was the love of my life.”

The flight attendant’s voice interrupts our conversation. “At this time, set your electronic devices to airplane mode until an announcement is made upon arrival.” My screen lights up as I swipe to press the airplane icon on my phone; I swipe down and catch her gaze. I haven’t changed my lock screen since we took that picture. Wavy brown hair drapes over her shoulders while I support her weight on my back. We both have smiles that illuminate our faces. She wears her favorite white t-shirt and baggy jeans. Not that she

remembers, but it was the same thing she wore on our first date; the night I realized I could love her.

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It was late summer as the gentle sound of a cover band floated through the crisp air of downtown Carroll. We sat at the dinner table for an hour after we finished our meals trying to learn as much about each other’s lives as possible. She told me about her job at a small coffee shop, and how she cannot lie to her mother, and the nights she eats ice cream and dances around the living room to old Disney movies with her sister. I told her about my dad who taught me how to work with my hands and the way my dog likes to sit on me whenever she gets the chance, and that my friend had to drive me to meet her because my car broke down that morning.

Eventually, we made our way out of the restaurant and down the walkway illuminated by strings of lights. We walked slowly down the path until we stopped to listen to the cover band playing in the park. When I asked her to dance her cheeks turned red, and she warned me that she had two left feet, but she took my hand and swayed to the music. The warmth of her body pressed against mine, and I wished that song would never end. For a moment I forgot about the crowd of people around dancing, talking, and enjoying the music. When the song came to an end, she looked at me with a grin across her face and took my hand.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked.

“C’mon. I want to show you one of my favorite places down here.”

“Okay, but Daniel is coming to pick me up in fifteen minutes. Don’t have a car, remember?” Man, how I was kicking myself for not having a damn car.

“Well, if you want to stay a little longer, I can take you home.” So, I followed her down the path that led to the river. We walked up the bank until the trees opened up into a small grass plain. “Here we are. If you lie down here it is one of the best views of the night sky.”

I lowered myself next to her and directed my attention above while she pointed out the major

constellations.

“I like to come here when I need an escape, you know? Like when my dad sometimes falls off the wagon and I don’t know how to explain to my siblings why daddy has to go away for weeks at a time when he is in rehab.” She must have seen the look on my face because she immediately followed up with, “I know Daniel told you. It’s okay. I’m not ashamed of it, I just try to hide it from my younger siblings. They’re still so young and they still think the best of their father. He deserves the chance to try and live up to that one day.”

In my three years at Mariemont High School, I wondered how I hadn’t met her sooner. There I was, a guy who had no idea what was about to happen, lying next to a girl in an old white t-shirt and torn jeans, staring at the sky.

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“That girl on your screen. She’s quite beautiful. Reminds me of my wife,” George says as my phone screen goes dark.

“Yeah. She is. I really love her,” I reply as a small smile forms on my face. “But I lost her.” There is a slight burning sensation in my eyes as I fight back the tears. I shut my eyes tightly and take a deep breath. This is not the place to get emotional. Humming from the plane engine tunes out the various noises from restless passengers around me. January air after a fresh snow blows in my face from a small vent above me. Chills roll down my spine as I twist the nozzle trying to stop the cool flow of air. Why are airplanes always so cold?

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Snow piled up overnight in early January, enough for school to be called off for the day. At 11:00 am Alyssa walked through the front door with hot cocoa mix in hand, looking ready to sit and watch movies for a day. Halfway through the show snow started to fall, and Rudy jumped into Alyssa’s lap to let her know that she was ready to go outside. Rudy’s golden tail wagged back and forth, and she whined until we finally let her outside to play. The bitter cold of the snow nipped at my toes

through the fabric of my tennis shoes while Alyssa and I watched Rudy run through the white powder that coated the yard. *Puff.* A snowball collided with the back of my jacket and Alyssa stood behind me trying to look innocent. Before I knew it, snow was flying across my yard and Alyssa jumped on my back, taking us both down into the cold powder. I had not heard her laugh in weeks. After Christmas, her dad hit a slump and was struggling to stay sober, and Alyssa was stuck trying to support him once again.

When we got inside, we both stripped out of our wet clothes and threw them in the dryer. I tossed her old t-shirt and grey sweatpants that were two sizes too big, and we quickly threw the dry cloth over our freezing skin. Before I realized what was happening, she grabbed the towel I was using to dry my hair and set it aside.

“There is something I should tell you,” she said in a soft tone.

“What’s up?”

“I uh, I love you Carter. And don’t feel like you have to say it back, I just needed to get it out and—”

For weeks I had been trying to find a way to say those three words, but it never seemed to be the right time. My lips collided with hers and my hands found her cheeks that burned warm enough to melt the outside snow. When I pulled away, I looked into her eyes and said it back.

“I love you too.”

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There is a clunking sound in the aisle, and I open my eyes to see two flight attendants dressed in purple with their hair perfectly tied back rolling the drink cart towards me.

“Can I get you two gentlemen anything to drink?”

“Could I have a ginger ale please?” The short blonde pours my drink into a plastic cup half-filled with ice and hands it over to me. “Thank you so much.”

“I’ll have the same,” George responds. With some force the flight attendants move the cart to the next pod of seats, only disturbing a few sleeping passengers on the way.

“Cheers.” George and I clink our plastic cups and take a sip. “You said that you lost this girl of yours, but if you love her like you say you do, maybe you haven’t really lost her.”

“Believe me, I am too late.”

“It’s never too late to start fighting.”

“Thanks, George,” I solemnly reply. Being careful not to spill, I take a sip of my drink and place it on the plastic tray in front of me. Silently, I watch as the bubbles stuck to the side of the clear plastic make their way through the golden liquid and surface for air.

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It was a Friday night, February twenty-eighth to be exact, when I opened the letter. I mean, I had gotten the email the day before letting me know that I had been accepted, but this was different. In my hand, I held my ticket out of Carroll, Iowa.

“Dear Carter Lakin,

Congratulations! It is with great pleasure that I offer you admission to the Penn State University class of 2019.” I sped through the letter searching for any indication of financial aid, and there it was. “You qualified for our Discover Penn State financial award of \$28,000 over four years. There will be a—”

Alyssa threw her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. Both of my parents joined in the hug and then my dad popped a bottle of champagne. Alyssa poured us each a glass and got herself a cup of water. We raised our glasses of bubbling golden liquid to the sky in celebration of the past four years finally paying off in the best way possible. Penn State had been my dream since freshman year of high school, and at that moment, it became a reality.

As the celebration died down, my parents turned in

for the night, and Alyssa and I walked back to my room. The excitement started to wear off because we both realized that this letter meant we had a big conversation in front of us.

After I closed the door, Alyssa wrapped her arms around my neck, looked in my eyes, and said, “I know we need to talk about this, but before we do, I need to tell you that I am so incredibly proud of you.”

We sat on my bed that night and talked through all the possibilities. She told me that I had worked too hard at this opportunity to pass it up now. I suggested that Alyssa could apply to Penn State next year when the time came around, and then it would only be a year of long-distance, but she told me that she needed to stay close for her family. Her dad had worked too hard to stay sober for her to leave. Long-distance was an option, but neither of us knew how we would afford the plane tickets, and by the time one of us drove to the other we would have to turn around and drive home. We talked through all the options, and then we cried a lot. Come August, we would have to say our goodbye.

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“Ladies and gentlemen, as we start our descent to Des Moines International Airport, please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on luggage is stowed in the overhead compartments or underneath the seat in front of you.” The flight attendant’s voice echoes throughout the plane, and the two ladies walk up the aisle checking that everything is clear.

I look over at George, with his grey hair and wrinkled skin. He seems so happy, despite losing his wife. “George, what did you do in your life? Like, where did you work?”

“I served in the army for twenty years before my wife and I decided to put down roots in one spot. It wasn’t fair to keep moving her and our daughter around

all the time, and it wasn't fair with me being gone so much. So, I went back to school and became a history teacher. Taught history at a school outside of Des Moines for thirty-five years."

"How did you do it? How did you make your marriage work when you were gone so much?"

"Well, we always had a plan to end the distance. I would serve for twenty-five years and at that point we would have saved enough money to settle somewhere. When my second child was born, I decided that it was time to leave earlier than I thought. My family became more important. I loved my wife and children, and I fought for them every day, and that was enough."

I loved Alyssa, but I did not fight for her. I walked away.

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My eyes burned from the tears as I dug my head into her shirt. I could feel her heart beating fast and her breath shortening. She was crying too, but I could not bring myself to look in her eyes. In that moment, I was breaking her heart as well as my own because it was the easy way out for us. No flights back and forth, no trying to find time to talk, no constantly worrying about the other. My chest felt like it was closing in on itself and my throat tightened so I could not get a word out of it.

Eventually, I lifted my head from the tear stain I formed on her shirt, and we sat across from one another in the same spot she took me to on our first date. Her hands were warm as they cupped my cheeks. Gently she wiped the tears streaming down my cheeks and she kissed me for the last time.

I couldn't stand to see her like this, so I told her, "If I stay here any longer, I am just going to keep crying, so I think I need to go now."

She looked at me with a red face and her golden, puffy eyes and said, "I understand. You are going to do such amazing things, and I am so proud of you. God, I love you so much."

"I love you too," I said as I hugged her one last time.

When I got home that night my mom held me in her arms, and I cried until there were no tears left. My heart ached inside my chest, and there was nothing I could do to make the pain go away. The next morning, I got in the car and headed east.

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"George, do you regret it, being with the same woman since high school? I mean, do you ever feel like you missed out on anything?"

George chuckles and responds to me, "Not one thing. My wife was and still is, the best thing to ever happen to me. I wouldn't trade one minute of the time we had together for the world."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I say, knowing that all I want is another minute with Alyssa. "Thanks."

My stomach drops as the plane gets closer and closer to the ground. When I step off this plane I can't run anymore. The wheels make contact with the ground beneath us and the plane rattles as it speeds forward. I plant my feet on the floor like it will make a difference. This piece of metal is rolling at full speed and if it doesn't stop, well then it doesn't stop. Maybe then I will know what it felt like when her car hit the barrier on the side of the highway. Maybe then I will understand what she felt before the car flipped twice, landing upside down in the middle of the road. By the time the ambulance showed up, it was too late. They said she died on impact.

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It was 1:30 am when I got the call. I was celebrating with the swim team after we won our first meet of the season the previous weekend. A few drinks in and I was not thinking straight. Never would I have said those things to her sober, or at least that is what I told myself. For

the fourth time since I started school, she was calling me, and the first time was the only time she was sober. Each call hit a little harder than the last. It was mid-October and we were still breaking each other's hearts. I swiped across my phone screen to answer her call.

"Alyssa, what's up? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I'm totally fine," she said in the high-pitched voice she used when she was excited. "I just wanted to say that I really miss you. When are you coming home?" The words rolled off her tongue in a jumbled mess.

"Have you been drinking?" My friends back home told me that she started going out and drinking with them after I left. At first it was fun, and she was everyone's new favorite pong partner, but then her dad relapsed. All of a sudden, she went from drinking for fun to drinking to blackout, drinking to forget. The girl they told me about was not the same girl I left behind, and I could feel my heart ache for her each time she called. All I wanted to do was hold her and tell her that everything was going to be okay, but I couldn't. I was just another guy who disappointed her.

"I still love you."

"Alyssa, you can't call me anymore. I met someone else." *Click*. She could never lie, even when she was drunk, but I could. I put my phone back in my pocket and took another shot, hoping it would erase the phone call.

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The plane starts to slow down, but not enough for me to feel comfortable. My entire body tenses and my throat feels like it is closing in on itself—the same reaction I had when I got the call. My friends told me that she stormed out angry and crying, and she didn't tell anyone where she was going. What we know now is that she got in her old Passat and drove west on I-75. Her speedometer read 85, then 90, and the red dial kept turning until it hit 105. Then it was over. She swerved off the road and into the concrete barrier wall on the

side of the highway. No one knows where she was going, but it was not too hard to figure out; the accident happened two exits away from Caesar's Creek. The place we met. Why else would she have gone east, when her house and friends, and the rest of her life, was west?

I press my feet harder into the ground like it makes a difference, and I shut my eyes to hold back the flood of tears welling up behind my eyes. Maybe this is what I deserve. If this plane doesn't stop then I don't have to get off and face the truth. I won't have to walk down the streets of downtown Carroll where we spent our weekends or stand in the room where I told her I loved her. I won't have to face our friends, and I won't have to face her parents. If this doesn't stop, I'll get what I deserve.

"What's the girl's name? The one you're so torn up about?" George asks.

"Her name's Alyssa."

"Ah—Alyssa," he repeats with a gentle smile across his face. "That was my wife's name." George lets a sigh escape his lips and continues, "Now remember what I told you son: it's never too late to start fighting. You get off this plane and you tell Alyssa that your new friend George says hi, okay? And then you tell her that you are still in love with her, and you fight for her this time. You hear me?"

The plane continues to slow down. I take a deep breath.

"Yes sir, I will."