

The Low Cloud Reflex

a short story by smallthings@troped.com

A line is tension. Drawn anywhere and infinitely thin, razor lines divide. They separate. There is a line where the ground cuts through the sky. There is a line drawn by a closed human eye. There is a proverbial line in the sand, a mental boundary, or even an organic Fibonacci line, that gorgeous sea shell shape spiraling into forever. A line is always tension, without width or thickness, stretching out forever in that boundless way that only mathematics can show us, for a true line is not real. A geometric line is tension in its motion, in its incorruptible path. It is tension in its completeness and that it can never be completely seen. Vanishing into infinity, a line describes immortality moving as it lengthens, lengthening as it moves. Sometimes though, a line, when placed within the realm where we all exist; that line becomes a vector — a line with some end. And a vector ends — abruptly. It is a line that stops.

A hundred yards or so east of the line that is highway — in Georgia in the United States, two crows occupy a small patch of ground in a grazing field. From a distance, it is difficult to make out what they are mechanically pecking at, heads stabbing at the ground and bobbing back. In the muted light of a covered sun these two bodies seem as black as holes in the pasture. Above two birds, a low lying plane of gray clouds rolls, tilled and furrowed like farmland in the sky. The desperate grass around the scavengers is a November brown that beneath the cold and tungsten sun seems more gray — a hundred thousand strands of ash ready to be

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broken, crushed, and dispersed. Nothing but two crows, in the whole of this landscape, is moving.

Still, off from these winged holes and their pecking, through the stillness, wind, and the hum of the line of the highway a little ways away, there comes a long drawn squeal of rubber tires being smeared across gray concrete. The scream increases in its volume, louder and longer, almost as though it might never end. The two crows cock their heads. There is a crash a shattering of the distance. Then silence. The two crows fly away.



“Good morning.”

Enwrapped in the gray of a sun unwilling to pierce the clouds, unwrapped in an elegy of the light in his room, Allen rubbed his eyes. He wasn’t speaking to anyone just remarking on the lateness of his waking:

: . He stared past his feet and the end of his bed to the dresser against the far white but for the moment gray wall. There was a warm vibration of pain just behind his eyes as he sat up in his bed and tried to remember how he’d gotten home. The first images of the night before came back to him in his reverie: Clay handing him a beer and hollering over the music, “It’s been a while, man!” Noise. Errant thoughts about Jodie. At one point he had cracked a joke and several people around the red neon bar and the bartender, himself, had laughed hard. Allen’s smile had been flirtingly awkward, but his heart had leapt a bit and he absorbed the laughter gently. He had never been used to, but had always enjoyed, being the source of entertainment. He and Clay and John had done tequila shots. There was a

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bad game of pool in there somewhere. How the hell had he gotten home?

Turning to his nightstand, Allen rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, using his fingernails to pull out the painfully stuck crust in the corners. He blinked for a moment. Everything was on the nightstand; his wallet, keys, and a half empty glass of water. *That explains why the hangover isn't so bad.* The memory of the cat comes to him in just one flash and he knows that he walked home because he was never dreaming of stumbling to the side of a sidewalk to pet a cat. The cat meows again in his mind, its voice strangled and dry, somewhere behind a damned irritating pain behind his eyes. He had pet it, scratched it behind the ears and felt the knotted patchiness of the fur. He does not remember tumbling into bed or taking out his contacts or brushing his teeth though it is all obvious enough. Everything was on the nightstand. Having produced an audible groan, and so forced a laugh at the grizzly sound simultaneously, Allen rolled his spine down on the bed, feeling where his body had warmed the sheets in small indentations.

The clock refused Allen the luxury of sleeping longer than he had. He would even liked to have believed that had there been no clock, he could have rolled over easily and relieved himself of the last of the tilt of his hangover. But whether the quiet hum of electricity or some other psychosomatically trained instinct kicked in, the clock's numbers buzzed like guilt. Allen lay on his side with a look of pity on his face that some entity might cut the power line to his house or blow a fuse and leave him in darkness. There in the sheets Allen shut his eyes tight to the point that he knew no sleep would come but from that of exhaustion or loss of blood to his brain. Moment after moment passed as the red fluorescent stick numbers emanated a maniacally blocky grin every time he opened one eye to check if he might have another fifteen minutes or even ten or five anything really. He moved his toes against each other almost

spastically in some attempt to alleviate himself of wakefulness or energy. In fact, he even contemplated this motion of his feet in the hopes that the meditation might put him back to sleep. : . Allen rolled out of bed.

Brushing his teeth in front of the mirror, Allen saw that he had not slept well. There were no disturbing images of dreams to remember. There was nothing but a vague darkness beyond the petting of the cat a consciousness of being unconscious. Allen's thoughts drifted toward death for a moment; that it must be an unconsciousness of being unconscious. Then he brushed his tongue, the bristles tickling him, to get rid of the leftover taste of tequila. The taste was enough that he brushed hard and for a moment and had to lean over the sink and cough in a gag like way because he had pushed the toothbrush too far back. Wiping the tears of the gag from his eyes, he smacked his lips and stuck his tongue out flat to examine a million bumps and curves and crevices. Mint tequila. How pleasant.

Standing with his wiry arms bent at the side, Allen's glance drifted to his chest. He took a modest pose, looking over the contours of his pectorals, and decided it had been too long since he'd been to the gym. Gradually though, his logical thought became an unconscious pose and he shifted slightly toward the dramatic, flexing. He grit his teeth and elicited a growl. "Oh yeah." Turning sideways, he flexed and posed again. "Oh *yeah*," he said with more emphasis, intimidating himself in the mirror. "You want some?" he said to his reverse self, approaching the mirror threateningly, toothpaste tacked to the corners of his lips. He relaxed and laughed at himself. "No, I don't, thank you." Leaning back in aversion with his hands up in surrender, he said, "No really. Please. No more," and washed the toothpaste off his face.

Allen went back to the bedroom and packed a gym bag with some workout clothes. Just beneath the bag, sitting at the foot of his bed, was

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an envelope of pictures. It was a moment before Allen realized where they had come from, for at first he had thoughts of blackmail for no reason other than last night had been indeed adventurous. Without opening it, Allen set the pictures of he and Jodie at the botanical gardens, on top of his dresser. As he did so, he knew where the photos had come from. *She must have left them behind last weekend.* As an afterthought, Allen picked the envelope up off the dresser again and sat on the edge of the bed to flip through them. Most of them were just pictures of interesting flowers. Allen thought no more of them than that, although something new within him newly adored how Jodie had thought they were mesmerizing. He took pause at each flower whereas before he would have tucked one and another of the photographs away behind each other looking for the truly important photos of people. Of these flowers, there was little he could see. There were no names. He knew nothing of the numbers of petals they held or what their pistils and stamen were for. There was nothing to recognize except odd seconds when he had been walking in thought of some kind and Jodie had hollered after him, "Wait up! Look at these gorgeous Dendrobium Orchids."

Several of the pictures though, were photos of Allen smelling, holding, caressing flowers. In every flat image, he was mugging the camera, his smiles exaggerated, his eyes wide. Allen found one picture that Jodie had taken without his knowing. Upon glancing at it he saw himself beside a pond, lost in thought a thought he remembered at that moment, a decision he had to make. His face looked relaxed, the distant horizon in the photograph printed next to his nose.



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From the back of his brown Saddlebred, a weathered cattle farmer checks his heavy silver braced watch as a matter of course. With rain coming, he knows most of the herd has already made its way down back towards the creek bed. To be sure, he knows they began moving there two hours ago at : . The dew from the cold morning was long gone, but where the ground is wet, it has been mashed by hoofs and the clay is still damp and dark. Frank Frederick still thinks in military time because of his days in the Navy. He glances to his watch again. His vet will be out to meet him in thirty minutes or so. He clicks his tongue and pulls Leland, his horse, back to the left to make their way down toward the creek bed. Dr. Turner will figure out where he went.

A noise turns Frank's head like a dog jerked on a leash. The sound's beginning leaps out of the calm silence and then rolls over the low hills in a lazy tide not a sound that would jerk the head of a man who is used to being in the wilderness alone. A moment passes and Frank's mind begins to put the pattern together. He can't see anything; the highway is up and over the next hill about a half a mile away. As the sound rolls on, Frank squints his eyes like a holy man in the face of evil, as if to blind himself from what he expects to hear next. A second short percussive smash follows the screams of the tires, and Frank lowers his head in admission. Seconds pass and Frank is only left with the sound of the wind curling in the back of his large ears. Still he waits, listening for more some voice to explain what he has just heard, the nature of the tear and break.

He slips a hand into his flannel vest and pulls out a small hand held CB Radio. It cackles for a moment as he adjusts the squelch and then presses the call button. "Marilyn?"

There is frustrating silence for a moment as the wind settles, and

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Frank chews his lip and adjusts the squelch knob again, checking his watch again right afterwards, to be sure of the time. "Marilyn?"

"Yeah, hon?" a voice calls through the static.

She still sounds irritated from this morning an argument about insurance. "There's been an accident. Call the highway patrol. I'm gonna' go take a look."

"Ya' didn't see it?"

"Nope. Heard it though. Didn't sound good."

There is silence for another moment before the wind comes rolling in low again, pressed for space by the thick gray clouds. His hat shifts in the breeze. He's not sure but thinks he can hear a low whine coming to his ears just beneath the hollowness of the breeze. He wonders if it is the branches, an unruly wash, or the sound of a wheel on a bent axle scraping against the inside of a car's fender. Before he can decide if it's his imagination or not, the radio cackles to life again.

"All right. I'm callin'."

"I'll come in as soon as I take a look. Ask Doc Turner to sit a spell."

"All righty. He won't be in for a bit yet. You be careful."

Frank smiles. She doesn't sound mad anymore. "Yes ma'am."

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Rolling over a curved and tense bicep, a bead of sweat traced a line from the top of the muscle to the crevice at Allen's elbow. It rolled to where the tension was kept and seemed to disappear as it spread out and dispersed. Allen watched this bead of sweat and others as he held the weight in front of him, his arm extended at a forty five degree angle enough that the weight pulled toward the ground instead of resting on the

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joint. A tension in Allen's face matched his muscle as he stared at the mirror in front of him waiting for the moment to stop, the moment when he would decide to stop.

He showed his teeth to the mirror, his lips pulling back in a grimace, and felt his arm begin to shake. He waited for the moment when the limit of his physical potential was breached as opposed to letting his mind tire first. Something in his face slipped as he closed his eyes and let his arm fall, exhausted. This was the way he always worked out, challenging his body and his psyche. It was usually his psyche that needed the work. He could lift a weight repetitively but when he just held the weight, there was the added benefit of the extension of time. When Allen began working out, he found that doing something over and over again took away from his attention. His mind would drift away and time would slip by without his notice. He became mechanical. Holding, waiting, thinking, let him feel the presence of time in its fullest, thick like meat. Every second passed within a millisecond, within a nanosecond, a heavy bearing as he strained. The more the strain, the more divisible time became, taking seconds of minutes and increments of seconds and fractions of increments.

Turning, he set the dumbbell on a rack beside him, listening with satisfaction as metal of the weight rang against metal the metal of the rack. He dabbed his forehead with a white gym towel hanging on the weight rack and decided he was done. Looking to the clock sitting over the mirrored gym walls, Allen saw: 10:15. He'd only worked out for twenty two minutes as opposed to his normal forty five, but it was definitely time for brunch. Allen usually worked out before he ate. He changed in the locker room, signed out, and strolled to his car, the wind from the cool day feeling cooler on his damp skin. Normally he would have showered, but on a Saturday when he had no one to see and nothing to do, he didn't feel like making the effort. Smiling as he walked across

the parking lot, Allen mused that he actually enjoyed his own stink. He smiled even more brightly when he remembered a time when Jodie had told him that she liked his stink too. *Shit. What was am I still doing in town?* A warmth came over him, turning to goose bumps in the cool air butterflies. He should drive down to see her. They were far beyond the inconvenience any surprise of presence could cause. She would be happy to see him, and it was only an hour or so drive. Allen nodded slowly with a verbal, "Oh yeah" when he remembered that Jodie would be working today. She wouldn't get off work until five o'clock.

Allen took his keys out of his gym bag and unlocked the door to his old brown Buick. It was a heavy solid car with a certain dash of personality that made Allen always glad to see it. He had it since he went to college probably close to seven years now. Still, even though he had the money to replace the car, he had not "gotten around to it" just yet. It was one of the only lingering possessions he had of a bygone era his friends and drinking and an unquestionable time in a cradle. He wasn't quite ready to give the old car up just yet as he tossed his gym bag in the passenger seat and took a deep breath to smell the car's interior, a strange mixture of velvet and mildew.

If Jodie was getting off at five, though, he could see her then. He pulled out of the parking lot and scanned the restaurants across the street for brunch possibilities. One used to be a Jimmy John's Subs. Now it was the Westside Cafe. Not that it looked like a cafe. It didn't look any different from Jimmy John's except that it was white when it used to be green with yellow trim. *What exactly makes a place a cafe? The decor? Probably the prices.* Allen decided he would ask Francine on Monday when he got to the office. She was a wealth of information about such things. She once told him that human beings only have one more chromosome than a potato. It was not the kind of information that was necessarily

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useful. Were such facts true, what the hell were they supposed to mean? Allen assumed that people didn't ever lose chromosomes, namely because he'd never heard of anyone turning into a potato. The whole humans have x chromosomes he couldn't remember: ? ? was obviously more complicated than was meant to be understood by a loan officer.

Francine made an exceptional secretary because she could remember facts any facts. If he had an appointment and couldn't remember exactly where the client's office was located, one short call on the cell would have the question answered in the most accurate detail "Turn right at the white fence it's missing a couple of posts. About three hundred yards down you'll see a fire hydrant and short one way street: Halfway Lane." etc. etc. Oftentimes Allen realized he had never seen Francine anywhere but the office. She was there when he came in. She was there when he left. And yet she possessed this encyclopedic knowledge that never reasonably came near her desk.

Allen had to stop his musings long enough to concentrate on making a left turn onto Lexington. The traffic was light. Not many people were out.

Lexington was a wide road and mostly flat; four lanes, without too many buildings on either side. For the first time, Allen noticed now the impenetrability of the sky. It was thick and moving quickly northeast at a low altitude, almost distracting at the speed the gray contours were galloping, more typical of the water clouds were made of. Allen leaned forward in his seat to see past the car roof for a more expansive view. Then, sitting back in his seat, he rolled down the driver's side window to let a breeze into the car. The air was just on the pleasant side of cool, making the dampness of his skin more evident and the cabin of the car less stuffy.

He came to a stop at the intersection of Lexington and Oconee,

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shifting the transmission into neutral. For the last two weeks, the old Buick had been idling funny, and at a stop, letting the car rumble in neutral kept it from vibrating. Near a telephone pole by the side of the road, idling as well, a homeless man was leaning. He wasn't looking at Allen just staring at the ground. Allen felt as though he were avoiding a glance, maybe his own, and tried to stare at the traffic light, waiting for it to change. Normally he felt secure in his car, but every slight movement made out of the corner of Allen's vision had Allen feeling an urgency to look. The man didn't return the glance, didn't move toward the car. Allen looked around the intersection. There was no one else but him and this shadow of a man beneath a heavy sky. *There shouldn't be shadows on such a cloudy day.* For a moment Allen considered rolling up the window, but didn't want to offend the old man. It was a silly concern. Why worry about the feelings of an old bum he already dismissed? The drunk was obviously no threat to anyone.

The light turned green and Allen shifted from neutral into first gear. A heavy truck sped past Allen in the right lane and drove on through the intersection. Allen glanced one last time toward the old man as he lifted his foot off the clutch, a genuine look of concern on his face. The old man was staring directly at him now, his visage long, drawn, and unsympathetic, as if to whisper, "What is yours is now mine." His large eyes were cold white spheres in a seemingly hollow, withered, dark skinned face. Allen drove away, muttering, "Fuckin' ..." and shook his head without knowing why.

Driving just under the speed limit, Allen made his way over the Broad River and up the hill towards downtown. He passed through the rim of warehouses that seemed to surround half of downtown like a fortress wall just above the river. They were old and rotted, surrounded themselves by chainlink fences and barbed wire, their metal sides rusted at

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the edges and in the corners. Empty black spaces of doors seemed to peer out more glaringly in the smoke colored day; the whole scene ever more empty for the lack of anything moving. A few cars were on the road beside Allen, but they were no more than bodies swimming alongside him in a salmon flow.

Continuing uphill, Allen could see the rolls of gray still moving as fast as ever, but with no end in sight on the horizon. Not a shred of blue pierced the lid. *They must go on for miles* he thought, taking another craning glimpse out his windshield, his nose touching the glass and smudging it. As he looked on, a neon blue and green charade of a satellite weather map came into his head. Right over Northeast Georgia was a fat, giant smudge of gray. Everywhere else on the map in Allen's head appeared sunny and clear, as though the clouds were hanging over him. He shrugged, deciding it was perfect weather for driving to Atlanta. The shades of blue and gray made looking at the world easier on the eyes. Allen laughed to himself.

Pulling into a parking spot on Broad Street, Allen reached over, got his wallet out of his gym bag, and hopped out of the car. He made his way up the sidewalk just a few yards to the Five Star Cafe. Another cafe, he thought, this one different from the last. The taste of an omelet had crept into his mind behind all the background noise of aimless thinking. He actually started to salivate at the potential taste of salt and green peppers, butter burned mushrooms and onions. Even the color of the food, bright imaginings against the day's backdrop, seemed attractive. The door jingled open with a light tug and Allen made his way to the counter. He glanced over his shoulder to see if the bell that had rung was a real one. It was a small silver one just above the hinge side of the door.

"Could I get a vegetable omelet to go?"

The girl behind the counter nodded once, a strand of red hair falling over her eye. She blew at it while pecking at the register. "Is that

all?”

Allen nodded.

She totaled the order. “Five dollars.”

Fishing through his wallet, Allen plucked a five from some ones and ATM receipts, making a mental note that he would have to stop at an ATM on his way out of town. He tried to think of how much gas was in the car but couldn’t remember.

“It’ll be a couple of minutes,” the girl said and carried the order away to the kitchen.

Seating himself at a table near the counter, Allen looked around at the other patrons without much concern. He was thinking through the list of things he would need to take to Atlanta with him. He might need to check the car’s oil. The fact that it was idling so low bothered him not that it was an emergency. The car had been doing it for a month now. If he had time, there was some paperwork that Bill needed. That could wait until Monday though. He folded his arms in front of him and decided to just enjoy the weekend and let work wait. After a moment, his smell drifted up to his face and he realized he should take a shower before he left as well. Outside of that, his checklist, his mind was blank. There wasn’t anything pressing today not even a good game on TV.

Allen stared blankly out the window at the trees across the street, losing their leaves. He saw the name of the restaurant spelled backwards on the glass and wondered briefly again what the hell a cafe was supposed to be. Considering his record, after the workout and eating a meal, he’d pass out in his armchair for a little while. He laughed to himself as he thought of the time Jodie found him doing just that. The “old married man” jokes persisted for several days much to Allen’s chagrin. He didn’t like it when Jodie joked about marriage as an open ended possibility, as though he could just end up marrying anyone who came along. A picture

perfect horizon memory from the botanical gardens came to Allen. Summer was far behind him, but then the smell of honeysuckle and the green that laced the view of a pond, Allen had found himself wondering when to ask Jodie to marry him. He wondered if she had seen the question in his mind, so obvious to him, when she took his picture. November made the question more obvious days like today were made for company for companionship. *Who would want to be alone on a day like today?*

His thoughts were interrupted by the young girl at the counter entering the room with a Styrofoam box in hand. Allen assumed it was his since everyone else was already eating. He got up, took it from her, received a pleasant smile and gave one back. "Say. You don't know what makes a cafe a cafe do you? I mean the difference between a cafe and, say, a diner or something?"

The girl paused. "Uh... no."

Allen nodded politely and the girl seemed slightly dissatisfied with her own answer. She liked Allen's face. "I mean, like, I guess a cafe doesn't have waiters maybe it's supposed to be outside or something."

Allen nodded again. He was mostly in agreement, although neither of the qualities she mentioned seemed to be cafe constants.

She smiled again.

"Thanks."

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Gary Travers hears a really good joke about short women with large breasts on the CB radio. He laughs hard for a minute. It's really funny. He has to close his eyes he's laughing so hard, and in the next instant realizes he must slam on the brakes. He does so. Had he been

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driving a car, he might have stopped in time. The eighteen wheels of his shipping truck do not respond gracefully as the rubber tread halts and digs into the concrete of the highway, smoking, screaming, leaving a trail of parallel black lines until finally an old brown Buick halts the progress of the heavy truck, absorbing the leftover momentum into its metal shell as it is hurled forward down the road on its side.



“Of course I do,” Allen said.

“Okay. It just seems like you do all the driving,” Jodie replied.

She was keeping her voice down because she was at work and the owner of the shop was in.

“What are you talking about? You drove up last week.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Incidentally, you left some pictures at my place.”

“I did?”

“The roll form the botanical gardens?”

“Oh yeah! I totally forgot about those.”

Allen thought about keeping the picture of his reverie almost afraid now that it would give the secret away if she looked too closely.

“Anyway... I have nothin’ to do today, and I wanted to see you.”

“Yeah?”

Allen laughed a little, the phone crackling. He liked it when Jodie baited him, and he could almost hear her smile through the receiver because she knew he knew. “I love you,” he said instead of taking the bait and smiled, staring at the Styrofoam carton that his brunch had recently

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occupied.

“I love you too.”

There was a moment of silence as the pair enjoyed the warmth.

“Listen, I gotta’ run.”

“Okay. I’ll see you at five.”

“You sure you remember where it is?”

“Yup.”

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

Allen laughed again. “Bye.”

“Bye.”



Bailey’s name isn’t Bailey it’s James. James had to be in the humane shelter for more than two weeks after November . But since he was such a beautiful Irish Setter, there was no question among the volunteers at the shelter that he would eventually be adopted. They did a good job of keeping his long hair shiny and clean and he was a genuinely happy dog. That’s why Linda Davis adopted the dog whose name isn’t Bailey and named him James: he was a beautiful and genuinely happy dog.



ca • fé ka • fa´ n. a coffee house; a restaurant, usually licensed for the sale of light refreshments only.

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"Well, there you go," Allen said and set the dictionary back on the bookshelf.

At three o'clock, he had enough of poking around; he decided to leave. And then he decided to get a dog. Whatever the leap of logic was, it seemed reasonable that because he was going to be in Atlanta an hour before Jodie got off work, he should go to the humane shelter and get a dog. The truth was, actually, Allen had been meaning to get a dog for some time. But every time he went to Atlanta, it only ever occurred to him to go see Jodie. Whatever she wanted to do, they did not that Allen minded Jodie was the native. She knew everything fun in Atlanta to do.

She took him to the botanical gardens and he had been skeptical of whether looking at flowers for an afternoon would keep his attention. Jodie never stopped talking though, which was amazing, considering that she worked at a flower shop. How in the world could she look at flowers day in and day out and then on her weekends too? It amazed and intrigued Allen. If someone asked for a tour of his loan office, he would rather shoot himself. In a way, it made sense to Allen that Jodie loved flowers so much. They were kindred she belonged among them. He smiled at the thought and that he might have enough romantic courage these days to tell her that when he saw her today.

While he was putting on his shoes he thought about getting a dog again. He couldn't believe he was serious, but he was. He was completely serious. He was thinking about what kind of dog he would want. Whenever he thought of dogs, it was always that generic yellow American dog that came to mind. That wasn't the kind of dog he wanted. He wanted something more dashing. It was strange too, that he didn't want a puppy. Most people wanted puppies. Allen really just wanted a dog already trained and mature.

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Packing an overnight bag, Allen decided that he wanted to get the dog without Jodie. He wanted to already have the dog when he drove up to the shop, partly because he thought it would be an interesting surprise, but mostly because he wanted it to be his dog. She would still get a big kick out of it at any rate. He could already see her brilliant smile when she came out of the shop and saw a big dog sticking its head out of the back window of the Buick. She would probably laugh in that explosive daffodil way. He should probably take a blanket for the back seat too. The dog's name would be Bailey regardless. Allen could never remember where he'd heard the name before, but it was a great name for a big dog. Definitely a big dog and not a small one. At least it had to be a Bailey sort of dog. But then, most dogs were pretty Bailey like. Allen zipped up his overnight bag and laughed at his train of thought.

He swung the bag over his shoulder and strolled around the apartment to get a blanket and look for things that needed to be turned off. He unplugged the television. If the clouds decided to storm he didn't want the television blown out by lightning. He didn't really think they were storm clouds, though. The sky was just napping in that November way it always did.

Turning the lights off, Allen looked around the apartment one last time. Even though it was midafternoon there was very little light. With a contented sigh, he walked out and locked the door behind him. The afternoon air was fresh and growing cold. It felt good in his lungs. Walking down the stairs, he breathed in deep through his nose. For some reason, the air smelled like snow. Allen loved that smell whatever it was moisture, winter air, maybe there was just more oxygen than usual.

He got in his car and tossed his bag in the passenger seat. Putting the key in the ignition, a feeling of levity came over him. After the workout, brunch, calling Jodie, he felt at his peak. He shifted from first

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into reverse and then took a moment to lock the doors. Pulling out of his parking spot he paused again to roll down the windows, turn the radio on and push in his favorite Steppenwolf tape. There was nothing he wanted to do more than enjoy the drive down to Atlanta. He sang along to the tape and made his way out onto the road.

Down Baxter Street and on through town, Allen made his way onto Highway the downtown thoroughfare. He preferred riding through town over driving on the loop connecting to . Driving through town, past all the recognizable and familiar features, reminded Allen of his favorite spots. He liked to see them all before he left. More than any place he had ever lived, this town always felt like home to him. If gone for even a day or two he found that he missed his spots, his roads, even his work. It was always nice to come back on Sunday evening and find that things were still the way he left them. He wondered, as he turned left on the short back road that would take him out to the countryside and , what he was going to do about Jodie. As much as he enjoyed the remarkable sense of freedom they shared on the weekdays, the anticipation of seeing one another, the longing at a distance, he could not help but dislike her absence most of the week. Weekdays were when he desired her presence most after a long day's work. Most of the time he just desired her presence.

The subject had yet to come up in four months of conversation, but its presence was obvious. During quiet lulls of happy conversation about work or family, the air between them spoke: "What about us though?" Allen recognized all the necessary rational premises that would lead to some conclusion about who ended up packing like evaluating a loan. Moving to a smaller town was more difficult than moving to a city in terms of getting work. The living situation seemed clear enough: they would live together; or maybe not. Jodie had indicated reservations about

such arrangements in her discussion of past relationships. That was fine with Allen—ten minutes was fifty minutes less than an hour. But outside of that, Allen had pretty much decided for the both of them that he was moving. His job inherently carried more mobility and even the potential to make more money in Atlanta.

As Allen came out onto the long expanse of , a rolling line over low, flat hills of pastures, he made a mental note of the two things he wanted to tell Jodie that night. She was a flower and he was moving. It was remarkable to him that two such irrelevant thoughts could fit together like puzzle pieces. A warmth charged through Allen's stomach and a smile broke through the surface of his cloudy gaze—butterflies. He still got butterflies thinking about Jodie's shoulders and neck, the touch of her lips.

He came up fast behind a coupe driving in the left lane and flashed his brights. The driver of the other car didn't take notice right away, but eventually meandered out of the way. Allen shook his head and sped up. He failed to understand the logic of people who drove in the passing lane. Fifty yards past the coupe, he turned on his right blinker, switched lanes and drove on, still muttering to himself.

The clouds seemed to work against the forward progression of Allen's Buick. They were moving against him. He checked his speedometer and was surprised to see it registering seventy miles per hour. The feeling of stillness was more than the clouds or the pace of his driving, Allen knew. Thoughts of permanence and Jodie made him feel old. It seemed to Allen that he grew suddenly older in these short moments of recognition; he grew older in bursts. In the mirror he had been twenty three for the last four years. The world outside Allen's eyes reeked of a comforting congruence—the shape of his loneliness to the shape of a lonely planet. A cloudy day was a cloudy day, not different from the last

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and the last one he couldn't even remember. The weekend had become any weekend. A day at the office was no different from any other day at the office. *I have loved before*, he thought, countryside pouring through his peripheral vision. Deep somewhere within him, butterflies said he had not known it, because change lately seemed more ... like change. In moments of inspiration around women before Jodie, "I love you," meant "I have known you for a while. I like having you around." *You are something I am pleasantly used to.* It was an expected thing, not discovered. He had taught himself to say it because those women had said it to him. He hadn't known then that love was not always reciprocal. He was afraid of Jodie because it might not be and he felt silly for his fear because she was so excited when she said it. It would bust out of her mouth and often she would look around as though she had not known where it had come from.

The dying wildflowers in the median, an easy late season purple, still stood in contrast to the November gray onslaught of the sky and they reminded Allen of Jodie. Where once flowers had just been pretty, now they served as a constant reminder of her. A new and unused reflex stirred within him. He was about to thrust himself into the nakedness of a love like the sky he was driving through. Without explanation and at any moment it could break open; cracked by her sunlight and blue sky. It might blacken and rain, a downpour to soak you even when protected by a roof, a rain that drenched the soul. But which one was love or were they both? Allen felt unprepared.



"Thank you. Have a nice day," Jodie says and brushes her hands on

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her apron to get the dirt off.

The customer nods politely and takes his newly acquired fern out of the shop with him. Jodie smiles after him because he seems so tickled to have bought a plant. He is older, maybe sixty, and she wonders if it is a plant for him or if he bought it for his wife mostly because she wanted to believe that was the case. It was unusual to see someone so happy for buying a plant not rare but uncommon.

Ron Jameson taps Jodie on the shoulder and Jodie comes out of her stupor in front of the cash register.

“All right,” he says. “I’m getting out of your hair.”

Jodie is relieved but smiles. “That’s okay.”

“Honestly, I just feel like I’m in your way when I’m here.”

“You’re not.”

Jameson laughs. He preferred to just use the shop as a place to dicker around in someplace other than his house. He was glad to have Jodie running things, even though he knew he irritated her with his constant inquisition about tasks. He was really just trying to help or at least not feel useless. The two of them did what they could to accommodate each other. “Well, at any rate, I’m leaving.”

“Okay.”

“You’re all right?” Then he feels stupid for asking.

“I’m fine.” She laughs and gives him a light push on the shoulder.

“All righty. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Have a nice day.” Jodie smiles as Jameson leaves through the back door because she is halfway tempted to tell him that customers aren’t supposed to use that door, or something like that.

She spruces the stock a bit, waiting for the next customer. Despite the weather, a number of people had been in and out. Then again, maybe it was the weather making people want a little bit of life and color.

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Glancing out the shop window to the street, she looks at how gray everything is. At least the temperature was nice. It had stayed around sixty five all day. She knew it was bound to get colder. Looking to the phone, Jodie has the sudden urge to call Allen and tell him to come now since Jameson is gone. Allen could keep her company and maybe if there was a lull in the steady stream of customers, he could "help" her in the stock room. Jodie stares at the azaleas as she smiles mischievously. She decides that patience is better though. She wants to build the suspense.



On November 11, in the entire state of Georgia, only two people die. Just two.



"Shit." Allen had completely forgotten to check the gas before he left town. As luck would have it, the gas gauge was down to the last quarter. Of course, Allen was relatively sure that the next station was only a few minutes away. He had noticed just in time. It all depends on how you look at it. If he missed the next station though, he wouldn't make it to Atlanta; that much was for sure. The stations along I-75 were sparse at best.

Last night's debauchery had left Allen feeling very relaxed, as though there were no Monday coming, as though he didn't have to worry

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about his job. Some element of what used to be mild youthful abandon became total abandon at this point in his life. Allen found himself wanting a cigarette for driving through such a drab and sad landscape. He had not smoked in a good while – a year and a half probably. The night before he had found one in his hand. The memory of the cigarettes he had smoked the night before persisted in a dryness in the back of his throat. As long as the trend had already been disturbed, he might as well have one or two for the drive. Jodie wouldn't like it, but she wouldn't have to know. Even if she did know, she would probably understand. Above all else, he knew everything he was thinking was rationalization because there was nothing he enjoyed more than a cigarette on a road trip.

A gas station appeared in the distant with surprising convenience. As Allen approached it, and slowed the car, he saw that it was new. Sod had been laid down around the perimeter – he could still see the seams in the grass. The white metal of the signs and the sides of the station – although desaturated because of the sky – were evidently new and reflective without scratches. He pulled into the turn lane and coasted in to the station on the smooth new white concrete.

He filled the Buick with a certain level of anticipation, knowing that when he paid for the gas, he was also going to buy a pack of cigarettes. It excited him. He was about to do something he hadn't done in ages, and had wanted to do for a while apparently. As he listened to the gas pour down into the car and the air escape the hose, he could already see himself coasting down the road, cigarette in hand, hair in the breeze. It was a simple pleasure and he was glad to have it. The handle clicked off on the gas pump and Allen gave a couple of cursory squeezes just to make sure. The tank was full.

Allen laughed as he walked through the gas station door and made the identical jingle of the Five Star Cafe. He had never noticed the

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similarity before today, though he had been in this particular gas station and the Five Star Cafe three or four times each. He meandered down the aisles of the store for a moment, looking for some snacks or something to take with him. The cigarettes were all he could think of, and after perusing the candy section for a minute, he grabbed some mints and headed to the counter. "These, pump number , and a pack of Marlboro's." The attendant reached above his head and took down a red pack of cigarettes, setting them next to the mints. He almost totaled Allen's purchase before Allen said, "And a lighter."

The attendant turned around to the back of the counter and asked Allen without looking at him, "What color?"

"Oh. Uh... black, I guess." That was neutral enough.

The attendant turned around with the black lighter in his hand and tossed lightly it to Allen.

... ..

Leaving the attendant's calloused and oily hand, the lighter began its arc sideways twisting in more persistent rotations as it moved through the air and over the counter, its black color sticking out like a hole against the white of the counter, the lights, the colored packs of cigarettes.

... ..

Moving upward and outward the lighter made its way across the counter cash register and continued up past the smudged and dirty glass where beyond and out of focus, Allen's Buick sat waiting. With each one hundred and eighty degree rotation the lighter moved both up and forward, blurring its oblong shape into an out of focus circle, spinning rapidly and persistently.

... ..

A black blur left the attendant's hand and moved toward Allen as a semi truck drove past in the window behind the attendant's head. The

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truck rushed by in a seventy mile an hour blur, wind invisible and all around it pushing backwards from the cab in tight pulled lines and dispersing at the end of the truck spiraling and flying off in a thousand chaotic directions; noise vibrating behind a thin black line bent into the infinite single side of a circle turning and spinning and hurling toward Allen.

... ..

Shifting his weight to his right foot, Allen stepped slightly left, the sole of his shoe dragging lightly across the tiles on the floor of the store, and rotated his torso a few degrees to the left and back. His left arm, hanging by his side, bent simultaneously at the elbow and shoulder moving in low towards the counter. Twisting his wrist outward from his chest, Allen's hand moved toward the circle moment of the lighter as his finger's opened and upon feeling the impact of the lighter...

Allen's fingers wrap around the lighter and a smile breaks out on his face a matter of pride. He glances to the gas attendant who nods politely. He puts his money on the counter, gets his change and his mints and cigarettes and leaves the station.



Last night I held Aladdin's lamp / And so I wished that I could stay

The cigarette is light, slim and still awkward in his hand. It is as he imagined, though the details are more numerous. The wind's resonance is greater than perhaps he had at one time suspected. The vibration from the engine of the Buick is present where in the daydream the ride had been perfectly smooth.

Before the thing could answer me / Well, someone came and took the lamp

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away

Still, the wind tousles his hair and the smoke of the cigarette teases his nose while drifting lazily in the cabin of the car before the road racing by sucks it out the window. It's not as if in the daydream he thought of wrapping his dry lips around the filter, but given and known, the actualization of it is something better than the daydream.

I looked around, a lousy candle's all I found

And so the details filter in piece by piece, unremarkable and alone. Here in the moment, each is easily welcomed. Allen never dreamt the vibrations in his car at seventy two miles per hour, but now right now he could not do without them. A single cigarette in a day a heavy cigarette after working out and eating leaves him very lightheaded and floating. And while Steppenwolf blasts through three shaky speakers one of four of them broken, Allen knows that his imaginings of a carpet ride of any kind would suffer from a turbulence that would somehow take him to the seat of that ride and make it real.

Well, you don't know what we can find / Why don't you come with me little girl...

...on a magic carpet ride



Is he okay? That was close. He's stopped. Move over, move over!
Rearview mirror. *Always means clarity? Shit. Hold on. Oh God.*



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A new vibration is behind his eyes not unlike the irritating headache from this morning but more fevered a leftover buzz of having been missing in the darkness the unconsciousness of being unconscious. Something is pinched in his neck, tugging at his shoulders. Black slowly becomes gray and the vibration recedes. There is no pain, though his neck is at an odd angle as though he were standing on his head and then fell asleep. His feet are suspended beside him. A new feeling comes over Allen: an urgency to open his eyes. Everywhere cold objects are pressed numbly against him, or rather warm objects are pressing the cold that is him. The shift stick is pressed into his thigh. The steering wheel is wrapped around his left arm like a paperclip. His back is still against his seat.

Dizziness begins in his stomach and the urgent need to open his eyes becomes a sickness that overcomes him. His stomach shifts and he feels a warm liquid run down the side of his face and the length of his right arm hanging weightlessly in midair. One eye opens halfway and the darkness turns to a white haze. The other eye is glued shut. His left hand comes into focus through the one eye, resting limply against the steering wheel and the horizon's line inexplicably running vertically. The clouds push like a bulldozer against the roadway vanishing sideways. Allen tries to move his left arm, move a finger. It feels as though he's been sleeping on top of it, empty of blood, heavy and immobile. As though he were lifting a weight at the gym, it is trapped in mid lift. This time he cannot let go. His psyche is not involved in the struggle. He cannot relax the muscles and as he tries a pain shoots up his arm, through his shoulder and clutches the side of his head like a vulture.

Something gives way and Allen's head slides down off the seat back against his right shoulder. A pale light warm with ultraviolet rays washes

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over his open eye. Clouds drift by in the driver's side window. Black contoured shapes of the mirror, the door handle, the eerily bent shape of the shattered door, frame the blanket of sky. The smell of winter moisture mixed with gasoline and blood tickle Allen's nose. He tries to breathe in deep and the vulture's claws ravage his chest and neck. Allen's left hand spasms as the pain washes over him and he loses the feel of it completely, his reflexes catching some imaginary lighter hurled from his mind.

After a moment, Allen can't feel the tension of his seatbelt or the presence of the shift stick anymore. He is unsure if he is there and closes his eyes, disappearing into himself. Something gives way a second time and Allen feels his chin pressed into his chest. He can feel his shallow breaths coming more slowly and more costly, as though his involuntary reflex to breathe were winding down. He has to seize every breath he takes. He can neither stop nor start them, each one becoming a wash of consciousness, each one pounding another thought into his brain. *I'm going to be late to pick up Jodie... Humans have forty six chromosomes... I forgot to unplug the stereo... These clouds are stratocumulus... I'll have to get the dog tomorrow... Is tomorrow Saturday?* All these thoughts are heavy with numbness. How long does each one take with each breath...

Hey!

A new voice calls to him though it sounds like it is passing through water.

Through a thin line of haze Allen sees a black shadow's head peering in the driver's side window, the gray sky racing above it, flattening it. "Hey!" The voice is closer. "Hang on, partner. The police are on their way... all right?"

Allen believes he nods though he cannot know if he does. There is no need for what he hears in the voice, he knows. No worry. No fear.

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In a moment of ambiguous desire Allen tries to move his left arm toward the shadow, to comfort it. *Patience*. The shadow sees the gesture and speaks. "I ... know. Stay ... ut ... right? You ... ay put." Some response makes its way from Allen's distant mind to the world but can find no mouth through which to travel. It lingers and disappears. Allen does not know that he smiles.

...at's ... ight ... put.

Looking from the shadow to the clouds, Allen can see their lines more clearly now. The light from the sky is dimming. Curves and knobs and dents and wrinkles and bends and forks and valleys float above him, barely moving? A third time, something moves and Allen feels his world roll around him, his head, his eyes, all rock back without resistance. The world and the sky spin away as Allen's vision sweeps across the dashboard and his leg to the passenger's seat where his gym bag lay resting on the concrete below him. He suddenly feels desire again, desire against pain, to look at the clouds again, to look up.

... o no no! comes the shadow's voice. Allen can see his vision reversing in a nauseating disorienting blur, feels his head turning, something grasping him ... the shadow. "... eep your head up, okay?" The shadow has reached for him, grasped his cheek, and between the silhouetted arm and head, Allen can see the sky again. His mind relaxes, something inside his chest caves and a sad, sad joy the last joy washes over him. He wants to thank the shadow for helping him see the sky. For a brief moment he can feel the man touching him and the cool wind of winter spirals down the man's arm and pours across Allen's face. Still, the colors desaturated, blurred Allen opens his eye to the clouds. The world becomes a white plane of clouds, empty and bright as if the sun were beneath him. The effort drags Allen's one eye shut and darkness encompasses him again.

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The pressure of the sky comes into Allen's heart and softly embraces him like Jodie. It sleeps with him. For a last moment, Allen wonders if he *is* the clouds before he drifts away.



As the two crows move from the ground to the sky with heavy long flaps of their wings, a raindrop disturbs an ashen grass blade. Another drop falls, and then another. As the minutes pass, and the crows become small black points in the gray furrowed sky, the rain steadily increases. More and more raindrops fall until the sound of a rush is upon the field. It rains heavy until the crows are far out of sight and then for several minutes more.