

## *Luck and Trouble*

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Grace might be running out of luck and into trouble. It's what she thinks suddenly, watching Wayne's stubby fingers as he reaches over to twist the Catalina's radio dial.

The radio is just AM. The AC doesn't work. Lumbering up hills, the engine sounds enraged, but Grace knows it's more just that the muffler has a hole in it.

Wayne's old Catalina is the wan unnatural green color of the wavery bottom of the stamp-sized swimming pool at some un-Triple-A approved interstate motel they might have already stayed in or might be headed toward tonight. The back seat is as big, almost, as a bed, and that, in fact, is what Wayne used to use it for, before his contract working maintenance at the lodge started, when he was still just killing time, hanging out at the beach in San Diego.

Now it's the two of them, and they can both fit back there, but it's a squeeze, because Wayne is a big guy. The floorboards are strewn with socks and grimy t-shirts that still smell of sweat, and Coke bottles with the plastic labels picked off and the tops screwed back on to hold in a half inch of grim-looking liquid, soda and spit and tobacco and a single cigarette butt floating for good measure.

They've been driving through a wasteland of talk shows. The listeners who call in are both plaintive and irate. "I didn't vote for the dope from Hope," a voice assured them, back fifty miles or so. Wayne doesn't really listen, he just likes the voices. He, himself, doesn't have that much to say.

But now Grace has found some music, a country station that trembles in and out of range, tinny. *I am running out of luck and into trouble, I love her, the drunkard's daughter, bartender, slide me down another double.* It's what it sounds like to Grace although she knows it can't possibly be true. The Catalina shimmies and rattles, there's the thrum of the muffler every time Wayne presses his foot down on the accelerator to pass, and the front tire on Grace's side has a piece of gravel lodged in it from the last time he pulled over to the shoulder to let her pee.

"You tired, baby?" he asks her. He doesn't look over from the road.

"Yeah," she says. "A little." At first she liked it when he called her baby, like something from a movie, but now she doesn't know.

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Wayne has folks past Memphis. He says folks like there's a passel of them, but really it's just his mother. His father died a long time ago, in a barroom fight. Wayne is taking her home. Wayne has big plans. Cherry picking back in Washington outside Yakima next May, potatoes over in Idaho. "Cept that's in September," he points out. "There might be snow."

Grace leans back against the seat and closes her eyes. “By September I won’t be in any shape to pick fucking potatoes.”

“Don’t say *fucking*, baby,” Wayne says mildly. “We’ll think of something.”

Wayne’s pious streak bugs Grace. He says *frigging* instead of *fucking*, which seems, in her opinion, more obscene. He drinks and smokes though he was raised up Mormon, and the first time they were together he refused to wear a rubber. What’s the point, she wonders, of refraining from saying *fucking* after all that? Now she knows she should have made him or pulled on her clothes and walked out of his cabin. She can taste bile in the back of her throat like anger. Is it him she hates, or something else? “Pull over,” she says. “I got to puke again.”

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Grace had never been out of Port Orchard hardly, until the beginning of the summer. “You mean you’re seventeen years old and you’ve lived here all your life and you’ve never even been to Seattle?” Melinda, the waitress she roomed with, had asked her. “When it’s only three hours away from here, and that includes waiting for the ferry?”

Melinda was in college, from somewhere back east, working at the lodge for kicks, just for the summer. Like the rest of the waitstaff and most of the housekeepers, too. They hiked and smoked dope and coupled up and come Labor Day they’d all be gone. It was Grace’s first forty-hour job and she was homesick, even though she didn’t know for what, and besides, she could get back to Port Orchard on her days off, on the bus, if that was where she really wanted to go.

She yanks at the door handle and leans over, gagging. The shoulder of the road is reddish dirt and shiny rocks she doesn’t recognize, which means, she guesses, that she’s a long way from home. Also bits of tinfoil and the pull-tabs off of cans of beer. She can hear Wayne hit the Catalina’s gearshift into park; out of the corner of her eye she sees him fumbling under the dash to pull the parking brake. Then he leans over the seat, his big body awkward.

He comes up with a t-shirt and scoots over on the seat beside her to wipe off her face skillfully.

“Baby, baby, you look all wore out,” he says soothingly. “Know what I’m gonna do?”

“No,” she says.

“Gonna spring for a motel room.”

The t-shirt smells of him; it’s almost as if she can pull certain things out of it: his sweat, the smell of cigarettes, the lodge’s no-brand laundry detergent. For a second it feels good, the way his hand’s pushing her hair back. He scrubs at her face and slides back across the seat.

“You eat those crackers I bought, your stomach won’t feel so upset,” he

instructs.

She pulls the door to, hard, and slams it. He's shifted into drive; the Catalina jolts a little, up off the shoulder. She stares out at the highway.

"Guess you got experience at this," she mutters.

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Working at the lodge had been just supposed to be a summer season's worth of pay stubs, nothing very serious. The two boys from the University of Oregon who cleaned the lodge rooms with Grace smoked dope in the thick-trunked firs behind the laundry room, and then they came inside while she was sorting sheets and went to sleep in a nest of towels they'd rigged up on a shelf in one corner. They chucked the slivers of soap guests left behind in shower stalls out the cabin doors into the woods. On their days off, they picked up girls in town and snuck them into any vacant room. Everybody partied; they drove out to the reservation at La Push to drink beer around the driftwood fires; they skinny-dipped in the lake on mushrooms.

Wayne was old, but he was sweet. Like how old? Over forty. Although he didn't look it. "You got pretty hair," he had said to Grace, early on in the season, sometime back in May. They were all crammed into one of the dishwasher's rooms, somebody passing around a water pipe, while someone else stood look-out at the window for the rangers. They drank gin and tonics: one of the wait-staff guys had set up a bar on the flimsy nightstand next to the bed. Grace had never had gin before, just beer. The gin tasted bitter and sweet both, as ice-cold as lake water. She decided that she liked it. She was sitting on the end of the bed and Wayne was sitting on one side of her, the dishwasher on the other. But she already had figured out that the dishwasher was just like her, he was from over by Forks, only twenty miles away, and if he wasn't working at the lodge for his room and board and a little bit of paycheck, he'd be nothing but some scuzzy shake boy, waiting for the logging trucks to come trundling in, breathing in the familiar scent of sawdust and of fresh-cut lumber. But Wayne was different, he was from someplace far away.

"You got pretty hair," Wayne said again. "You want to let me brush it out?"

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Some nights since they've left the lodge behind, he pulls the Catalina into a rest stop and they sleep right there. Although he warns her it's nothing she should ever do, if she were to drive alone. "I knew this girl," he tells her. "She was driving from Bakersfield up to Missoula?"

Wayne always tells his stories like they're questions and when he stops and looks at Grace she always nods her head. "Had a VW Bug. She pulled over at a rest stop in Idaho somewhere." He pauses and lifts up the soda can he keeps between his

legs and spits tobacco in it in a furtive practiced motion. “Well,” he says. He draws the word out. “They never found her. Never found nothing. I mean, they found the car and all, still parked there at the rest stop, but they didn’t find her. Disappeared,” he muses. “It’s a good thing you’ve got me.”

But has she really got him? Or does she want him, anyhow? “Maybe she just walked away,” she says. “Maybe she didn’t want no one to find her.”

Wayne shakes his head. “Baby, baby,” he says. “You know that’s not the way the world works. You know her body’s out there somewhere still. Some woods or some ravine. Waiting for some hikers or a fisherman to find it.”

“I won’t let nothing happen to you,” he tells her, hands tight on the steering wheel, staring out at the road.

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Other nights he springs for a motel room and before they go to sleep he helps Grace pull back the sheets to see if they’re clean. For a second, looking at him over the expanse of double bed, she can convince herself that nothing’s changed: they’re still at the lodge, she hasn’t slept with him yet, and all she knows is that she likes him.

The first morning after they’d stayed in a motel, she stripped the bed and bundled up the towels and made sure, before they locked the door and left, to put two dollars on the nightstand for the maid. But now they’ve been on the road almost a week and she feels too tired. Two dollars won’t do anything for the maids, most of whom don’t even speak English. The rooms will remain dirty no matter what she does.

“At least,” Wayne had said the first night they stayed in a motel, looking at the bed, “we don’t got to worry about you getting pregnant.” This was supposed to be a joke, but Grace didn’t laugh. “Don’t touch me,” she said. “I think I might throw up again.”

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Early on, they’d stopped at Canyonlands and paid for a campsite. They slept in Wayne’s sleeping bag laid out beside the car. He isn’t like most of the kids they worked with at the lodge, with their rain-gaiters and Gore-Tex boots and two pound tents; he doesn’t have any equipment, other than an army surplus canteen and an old and heavy sleeping bag. The other kids at the lodge all worked wait-staff and they made tons of money; Grace had seen the rolls of bills Melinda shoved into her dresser drawer after she worked dinner shifts. They could afford to waste it on fancy gear. But Wayne was just the maintenance man, and even though he’d worked parks for years, he still only made \$4.45 an hour.

But for a little while, when they stopped at Canyonlands, it seemed to Grace

like maybe she and Wayne weren't all that different from the college kids, who all planned to pack up their cars at the end of the summer season and road-trip through every National Park in the lower forty-eight. In the morning, after they woke up stiff from sleeping on the ground, they took time for a hike before they got back on the road. Grace shaded her eyes and looked at Wayne's broad back as he hiked steadily in front of her, the landscape on either side of him still and as unfriendly as the surface of the moon. He was hiking fast and his face was set and grim, as if hiking was a task for him, like something done in boot camp on maneuver.

"Wayne," she called toward his retreating back. Her voice was thin and brittle in the face of all the distance that surrounded them — all that sky and all that hard-toothed rocky ground. "I can't keep up," she said. "I'm sorry."

He turned and stared at her, then looked back up the trail. He started walking back toward her and Grace knew the sound of her voice had hooked him, made him remember, and that, once again, what the two of them had done so thoughtlessly back at the lodge had reeled him in. He looked at her as he came closer, and tried to arrange his expression into solicitous lines, but she recognized that it wasn't in his nature. "Maybe a shower'll make you feel better," he said. He wasn't even out of breath. "We'll stop at the visitor's center on the way out and you can take one there."

"That would be good." It was all she knew to say. "It's been a couple days since I had a chance to wash my hair."

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After the shower, she had stood in front of the visitor's center and let the hot sun dry the slick length of her hair. She'd had to put her clothes on damp; although the back seat of the Catalina was full of lots of stuff, it didn't include towels. And both she and Wayne were loath to steal them — once he'd worked a motel where, if the guests stole towels, it was taken out of the housekeepers' pay.

She walked over to read the message board outside the visitor's center door, keeping an eye out for him, because he'd disappeared while she was in the bathroom. Most of the messages tacked to the board were simple: *Garner party — we are in C-12 campsite. David and Sheila Reynolds: meet us at the visitor center at 4:30.* But one had been written out in what seemed to be a hasty, confident scrawl. *Pete — I'm in the back country. I'll meet up with you in Vegas. Sahara on September 25th. A gamble. Maria.*

Grace sat down on the bench beside the water fountain and tilted back her head toward the sun. It was nothing she could do, to leave that kind of note. She was not that kind of person. She wondered if her roommate Melissa would stop through Canyonlands on her way back to Virginia from the lodge. She could leave a note for *her*, but she knew it was unnecessary: everybody had known why she and Wayne broke their summer contracts, even though neither one of them had breathed a word. All Wayne had done was pull the Catalina around to the lodge's kitchen door

once he'd finished packing their stuff into it. He left the engine running and Grace in the car and went inside to interrupt the manager's second cup of coffee to tell him they were leaving. *It happens all the time*, he soothed her just before he went in. *It's just a summer contract. Breaking it don't mean shit but that we can't work at this park again. There's plenty more to work at. Besides, Chuck probably already knows why we're leaving, this place is so damn small. He knew that first morning when you'd stayed over in my cabin — why do you think he scheduled our days off together, when neither of us ever asked?* His voice was loud and Grace had leaned away from him, back against the door.

When he came back from the kitchen and slid behind the wheel, he tossed a handful of plastic-wrapped crackers from the dining room salad bar on the seat. *Coe said goodbye*, he told her. Coe was the head cook. *Said some crackers might be good if you start feeling sick.* He didn't say what else Coe had said, just put the Catalina into drive, and like that, the lodge was left behind him.

And now, no matter where they stop, it doesn't make any difference: when Grace lies down, it feels like whatever's underneath her is the car, still moving steadily along the highway. *I am running out of luck and into trouble, I am still the drunkard's daughter, I am with a man who's old enough to be my father*, it seems like the broken muffler sings.

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Wayne used to have a Caddy with curb-feelers. Virgin-cherry red, he told her. Back when he was twenty-one or twenty-two, just out of the Navy, dealing drugs and feeling flush. Back before he started to go bald. Wayne's former life seems to Grace like a movie about the seventies that they might have driven the hour into Port Angeles to see early in the season, when Wayne would come by the rooms she was cleaning and watch her bend across the beds. *Sweet Grace*, he would say. He'd take the toothpick out of his mouth and study it. *Sweet Grace, how about a date?*

Wayne has had girlfriends and more girlfriends. Both before he started working parks and after. Grace can't keep track. She listens to him talk about them but it doesn't even touch her. Even though he's telling her about his past, it doesn't seem like he is talking about anyone she knows.

Three years ago, when he was working grounds around the lodge at Yosemite, he'd hung out with another seventeen-year-old.

"What happened to her?" Grace had asked him, leaning over to finish making up a bed.

"Next season she went to Sequoia but you know, man, I didn't want to go. I got a contract at the North Rim. I tried to call her for a while, but it was a dorm employees lived in up there at Sequoia, so it was awful hard to get a hold of her." He shrugged.

Wayne has scars on the knuckles of his right hand, from getting into fights.

He fucked his back up fighting fires the year Yellowstone burned. He's flipped motorcycles over in Florida and worked the midways of state fairs in Iowa and Minnesota. He's got broken legs and ribs but they healed up just fine, you can't even see how they were broken, but he's got scars all over, even on his balls.

And he's got a daughter somewhere, two years younger than Grace. "Don't you ever see her," she asked him when he told her, halfway through the summer. "Don't you at least send her money?"

"Her mom didn't want me around," he said. "I just lost track."

It doesn't seem possible to Grace, but maybe by the time you're forty there's a lot of stuff that slides right by, the way the states they're going through just slide right by her window.

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Sometimes she sleeps a little in the car. Never very much. Because as soon as her eyes close and her head jerks and she slides a little sideways on the seat, it starts to feel like Wayne is letting the Catalina wallow all over the road. But when she opens up her eyes to look, it's just sailing smoothly down the passing lane and he's staring forward placidly, a toothpick in one corner of his mouth.

"You hungry, hon?"

She shakes her head, because the wind blowing through the Catalina feels too hot and her face is sticky and her throat hurts. Ashes from the open ashtray float around her head like gnats.

"Well, we could use some gas," he says, squinting at the gauge.

He always lets the tank slide down past empty before he stops. "I know this car," he explained to her early on, and it's true, he does. He lets the needle dip past E like he's wringing something from the car, like he's putting something over on someone, and in Wyoming they had had to coast down an access road to the nearest station, but he has never pushed the Catalina further than it'll go; he has never left them stranded.

"Let's us get something to drink," he says.

"Okay." She pushes the sweat-damp heavy hair back from her face. "A big glass of orange juice. That would be good."

"If that's what you want, hon."

They're somewhere in Arkansas, a state Grace has never expected in her life to be in. The interstates all look the same now that there aren't any high hard mountains to pull at her eyes. A billboard rears up, big and blocky, blue, on the highway shoulder. The Fina gas emblem is painted in one corner, a cartoonish-looking man high up in the cab of an 18-wheeler on the other. CARL'S TRUCK STOP — the words are sandwiched in the middle. THE FORMULA OF THE FUTURE announce more words beneath the drawing and the emblem, and at the

very bottom of the sign is written, almost as an afterthought: STEAK, TATERS, AND GRAVY.

“You think the formula of the future is steak, taters and gravy?”

“No, baby, Fina gas.”

“Well, I know that,” she says. “It was just a joke, okay?”

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Carl’s Truck Stop spreads out beside the highway like a tiny, dirty city. Eighteen-wheelers idle restively in the washing bays and are parked across the wide gravel lot.

“You ought to pee,” Wayne tells her when they pull up to the pumps. “Don’t want to stop again until we find a good motel.”

“I know that,” she says. “I’m not a baby.” She fumbles on the floorboards for her purse.

Inside, there’s a big wide boxed-in counter, the overhead cigarette dispenser hung down with hand-lettered signs, and aisles of things she doesn’t look at. At the back, there’re double rows of booths and a grill; a TV set bolted high up on the wall.

“I seen this movie,” the waitress standing in the aisle is telling a man sitting in a booth as she walks by. “I seen it twice.” Up on the TV screen, a woman is in labor in the cab of a semi while a panic-stricken trucker weaves between lanes of traffic on a highway.

There are two vending machines inside the bathroom. Grace eyes them while she washes her hands. If you deposit fifty cents, one machine rewards you with a little book. The other one, of course, dispenses condoms.

When she comes back out of the bathroom, Wayne is sitting in a booth with the same guy the waitress had been talking to.

“This here’s my girlfriend, Grace.” He stands up. “Slide on in here, honey.” The man’s eyes are on the TV screen, where the woman still has not produced a baby, but he lets them drift down and settle on Grace’s face for just a moment. They are speculative and hard. She ducks her head.

“Looks like you two haven’t been together *long*,” he says.

“Well, no, we haven’t, that’s a fact,” Wayne replies.

“There’s laws about that, in this state.”

For a second Wayne looks disconcerted. “Aw, naw. She’s just got a baby face. She’s legal.” He and the man put their heads together across the booth and the man shakes a cigarette out of a pack of Winstons, then pushes them toward Wayne.

“White crosses,” Wayne says in his urgent voice, and the man smashes his cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray.

There’s a pay phone at the back of every booth, behind the catsup and the salt and pepper shakers. Grace studies the instruction card propped up on the table,

trying not to hear their conversation. She reaches for the receiver and holds it to her ear, listening to the dial tone and behind it a soft sigh and crackle, like the sound of highway, or the sea they've left so many miles behind them.

Wayne and the man turn and look at her. "Who you calling, baby?" Wayne asks.

"Nobody," she whispers, replacing the receiver.

"Now, I don't got a needle right now," Wayne warns the man. "All I want's some pills."

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*You're tiny*, Wayne had said to her with surprise, the first time they ended up in bed. *Hardly bigger than a minute*. His hands were big and callused, but he moved slow. His room was clean and Army-neat, a nubby white chenille spread filched from the lodge's laundry on the bed. Yellow scotch broom scratched against the window and headlights swept across the blinds, the boys from Oregon coming back from the La Push beach, where they went every afternoon after they got off work, their three cars topped with surfboards stringing out along the highway in a caravan to catch the late strong tide. A baby bird Wayne had found while he was mowing the swatch of lawn behind the lodge and had brought back to his room and made a nest for was in a cardboard box on one corner of his desk. Grace figured it would die the way all the others he'd already rescued had, but she still thought it was nice: the way he peered hopefully into the box when they walked into the room.

He brushed her hair for over an hour and there was the sound of frogs down in the creek. She felt sleepy, like a cat. When the birds Wayne rescued died, he tossed their bodies into the woods that hugged the employee cabins in a tight close ring. He snuck stolen salmon, thawed from the lodge's deep-freeze, for the cat somebody had dumped off at the side of the highway, but then the very next weekend he'd disappear into Seattle for two days and return unshaven, his sweat smelling like scotch, and the cat, whose belly had filled out a little, would be washboard thin all over again because she wouldn't eat what anybody else tried to offer while he was gone.

Grace *knew* these things, she knew these things already. He had a daughter almost her age in Modesto; he did not pull through. But as he brushed her hair, he told her about a dog he'd had when he was seventeen, and his voice got sad. He had so many reasons why he had to leave it, so many reasons why he had to leave everything. Grace was so sleepy that they started to make sense. It was not that he left anything abandoned, it was just that he had to go.

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When Wayne and the man slide out of the booth, Wayne says *get yourself a Coke or something, I'll be back in a second* and then she's watching them head out the door and walk across the gravel toward what must be the guy's rig; she can see it through the smeared glass, high-up and oily, with silver Playboy bunnies profiled on the thick black mudflaps. But the waitress never comes back by so she gets up, thinking she'll look at magazines, and then she stands in front of them; all shrink-wrapped in plastic, brown paper hiding everything except the names: *Ultra-Sex* and *Wet, Wet, Wet*. She looks around, but there's no one to see she's embarrassed. She pushes through the door and walks back out to the car, still left in front of one of the gas pumps, even after all the time they've spent inside. The car smells comfortingly of cigarettes and oil; she curls up on the seat and leans her head against the window. Carl's Truck Stop seems like the only thing left in the universe and Wayne is nowhere to be seen.

The slamming of the driver's side door jerks her awake. Wayne has got a twelve-pack of Hi-Life on the seat and he doesn't even wait until they're pulled back on the access road to shake the white pills out of their baggie. They roll there on his palm like seeds; he plucks up three, one after the other, and washes them down with one long swig of beer.

"Next stop," he says once they're back on the interstate and the first green and white mileage sign has flickered past them. "Next stop is Memphis, Tennessee." There's a southern inflection to what he calls the city; MEM-phus; it sounds mushed and hard-edged both, like something from a song, and for a second Grace feels a tattered corner of the excitement that got her in the Catalina with him in the first place. *Someplace I've never been before. That's where I'm going to go.* But just like that, the feeling's gone, as cleanly as if it blew right out the window, and all that's left is dull brown shoulder and gray asphalt, and Wayne, fumbling on the seat and unwrapping a stick of gum.

"Memphis wasn't even on that sign," she tells him. "It must be pretty far."

"A ways," he says, then: "But we'll get ourselves a motel room. It'd be nice if you could have a good meal and a shower."

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*But that's murder,* he'd said when she told him. *It's a sin.* He was sitting on the king-sized bed in the lodge room she had just finished cleaning, and his big hands dangled down on either side of his knees. It was right after work; when Grace bowed her head she breathed in the smell of cleaning chemicals, still soaked into her t-shirt.

*So?* she said, looking up. *You got no right to say that.* She felt sharp-headed; all her thoughts were clear. Later on was when she got pulled down. It was dark and quiet there, she couldn't even struggle; it was like a dream. *I'll pull my weight,* he said. *You know I love you.*

What else had she been waiting for? Wasn't it supposed to come to this?

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It turns out there's a video camera in the well-worn lobby of the Admiral Benbow Inn on Union Street in Memphis, a few blocks down from Sun Studios, where Elvis hit the big time. Just like a convenience store. After Grace signs the registration card, the clerk shifts her gum from one cheek to the other and tells her that there's an extra five dollars tacked on for key deposit.

"You get it back when you check out," she explains.

Grace looks up at her image on the video screen. Her face is white and moon-shaped, tired, and her hair is straggling down. She looks across the counter at the clerk.

"I got to go out to the car and get more money," she says. "I'll be right back."

She can hear the music from the Catalina's lousy speakers as soon as she walks out the lobby door. The parking lot of the Admiral Benbow is full of signs reminding anyone who parks there that the management will not accept responsibility if their car gets broken into. The Catalina's nosed into the first handicapped parking space, coated with a thick greased layer of a country's worth of highway dust. The license plates are California and now they're several months expired. Wayne's arm dangles from the driver's side door, the muscles in his biceps almost big around as her thigh. A cigarette trails from between his fingers and as soon as she gets up next to the window she can see it shaking.

The inside of the car smells like beer and he's drumming on the steering wheel with both hands.

"I need more money," she tells him.

"How much?" He's lifting himself up the seat and reaching for his wallet. Thumbing through and dropping bills onto the floorboards. "Man," he says, and he has to shout over the radio. "I am flying *high*. How much?"

She hesitates. "This," she says and reaches in the window. She plucks a hundred-dollar bill off the seat. "I'll bring you your change."

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The room assigned to them is stained and grubby and the spreads on the beds, as well as the rug on the floor, don't feel much like fabric anymore; as soon as Grace takes off her shoes she can feel the grit. The first thing Wayne does is turn on the television and stretch out on the bed. He hasn't brought anything up from the car except his twelve-pack; a Hi-Life he just cracked open already nestles between his

thighs.

“Come on over here, hon,” he says, patting the spread beside him.

“In a minute. I’m going to wash my face.” She reaches for the pack of cigarettes on the nightstand.

“Winstons,” she says. “When’d you get these?”

“That guy back at that truck stop left them on the table.”

The telephone on the nightstand by the ashtray is caked with the grime of hundreds of hopeless phone calls. She walks over to the sink and lays her cigarette against the scarred Formica, exactly in the burn mark where somebody laid one down before her. The wrapped bar of soap beside the sink is waterstained and dingy.

When she turns back around, wiping her face, Wayne’s off the bed and crouched in front of the TV set, flipping through the stations. “Shit,” he explains, looking over at her. “And more shit.” He pauses, staring at the screen. “But this might be okay. Come here.” He stands up and takes the towel from her and tosses it on the floor. Pulls her back to the bed, and once she lies down, toward him.

The sheets are probably left over from the last people who stayed in the room, but things like that don’t matter as much as they used to. Wayne sits up and twists his t-shirt over his big shoulders. He looks over at her, his face both sweaty and guileless and drapes his arm across her stomach.

“Yeah,” he says. “What do you say? This is all right.” He reaches across her to switch off the bedside lamp. The tattoos on his biceps are black and homemade looking, and on the screen at the foot of their bed, the contestants of a beauty pageant are being interviewed; the emcee is commenting sternly that this section of the pageant is critical, the girls are being judged on poise.

“Wayne,” she asks, “have you ever been in prison?”

He switches off the lamp; the room is left bathed in the TV screen’s hard glow. He looks at her; he hesitates. The pause is minute and absolute, no longer than the time it takes for a pair of wipers to sweep back and forth across the rain soaked windshield of a car that’s on an interstate, perilously caught in a canyon between two eighteen wheelers. No longer than it takes to whisper either *Luck* or *Trouble*. No longer than it will take her to spend the purloined hundred-dollar bill.

“Don’t rub your hands against your eyes like that,” he says, and Grace knows the answer to her question, as obvious and unchangeable as the things that get girls like her out on the road. He clears his throat. “You keep rubbing your hands against your eyes like that,” he says, “you’re going to end up wrinkled before you’re twenty-five.”