

# Wheels

## 1: Donner Pass

There's no easy way to get out of Nevada. Either you scratch through the badlands or climb over the mountains. My way was mountains. There was snow in the pass. Highway Patrol wouldn't let me by without chains or four-wheel drive. On the shoulder, three covered men were ready to rent me chains for fifty plus a deposit. As I slowed, they went at my wagon like a NASCAR crew. The cute one with the wind-burned face and sun-bleached soul patch, tapped at my window. I rolled down. He said: "Cash or Visa only, doll."

I gave him cash. His fingers were brown from rust. I heard the chains knuckling at my wheelwell. Someone said, "Jesus shit!"

Soul patch said, "You need a receipt?"

"For my deposit," I reminded him.

He nodded and almost smiled, still counting ones. My tip jar take.

Snow fell like confetti, the sky the color of stainless steel.

My mother had said on the phone: *He just kneeled down, Rainy. Like he was about to pray.*

They'd been working the line, grading oranges, she said, and Dad's collapse was nothing more than that: a sudden kneel. She worked across from him. Everybody thought this romantic. Until a few months ago he'd been a foreman in the groves. After his third faint, they put him on the line.

It pissed me off, how he and Mom had let it go on without checking.

Soul-patch handed me a damp slip of paper. Rusted fingerprints. He smiled. I wanted to lick his chapped lips.

“You do this all day?” I asked.

He renewed his smile: “You gonna tell me to quit?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I said.

I thought of my live-in, Kai. He wanted me to quit giggling: *Nobody does the road like that anymore, Rain. It’s cliché.*

I’d wanted him to say: *You’re too good, babe, you deserve more.*

The cliché was how we related. Whenever I needed him to be better than me, I could predict every wrong thing he’d say.

Soul-patch said, “Think about it. I’m saving lives, you know.”

I thought I heard him say, *You don’t have to drive through snow.*

So I said, “I don’t?”

He raised his snowy eyebrows at me.

Then I heard at last what he’d said and I felt my face grow hot.

I was twelve when we visited Donner Pass on our way to a week in Reno. The Donner family ate everything they could--harnesses, shoes, tree bark--before they started eating each other. As I lay by the motel pool that week while my parents played the slots and my brother watched cable, I thought of the Donners, and asked myself: *Would you have done any better?*

Soul-patch cleared his throat. I’d been staring.

“Sorry,” I said.

He seemed to shrug without shrugging.

Then I raised the window. Someone thumped my trunk. I got a final chain-fit, then rolled away, clanking. Glancing in my rearview, I saw nobody waving.

## **2: Exeter, CA**

“He’s sleeping,” Mom said. “Don’t make a sound.”

She pecked me on the forehead. The screen door creaked as I edged past. Her porch was crowded with plants, plastic tacked over the screens. I wanted to explain why I was parked on the front lawn. She smelled of cinnamon and something else. Maybe beer.

“I’m not asleep,” Dad called.

He was lying in his recliner, the TV murmuring a few feet away.

I said, “You scared me, Dad.”

“Serves you right.”

He was smiling—or trying to. The left side of his face was frozen.

“Don’t get up,” I said.

“I’m not.”

I tried to kiss his cheek but he squirmed and I got his ear instead.

He was wearing white wool socks, corduroy pants that were worn at the knees, and a gray sweatshirt that said in pink script, *Get it now while it’s hot!*

“You must be exhausted,” Mom said to me. “How long’d it take?”

“Not that long,” I lied.

“I saw there was snow in the pass.” Dad gestured to the TV. He was watching the weather channel.

“It’s February, Dad.”

“Smarty pants.” He tried another smile.

I realized I might not get used to the way his face looked. It was like staring at a cracked mirror.

“I’m about to make some pork chops,” Mom announced. “You want one or two?”

I turned to see if she was joking. I’d been a vegetarian since high school.

Mom was looking at me--enthused and hopeful--like I was her younger sister. A few years ago this would have infuriated me.

“Sweetheart, she wants a salad.”

“We’ve got salad in a bag,” she offered. “And five kinds of dressing.”

“Thanks.” I sat on the battered ottoman next to Dad’s recliner. “So, what’s the latest?”

He turned down the TV with the remote. “Your mom’s learning to cook.”

Dad did all the cooking when we were growing up. Mom washed the dishes. He cleaned the bathroom. She did the laundry. That was their deal.

“I’m not supposed to move,” he added.

Mom leaned away from the stove to show herself in the kitchen doorway. “He moves plenty.”

I heard the sizzling of meat. A moment later I smelled it.

Dad said, “You were giggling in Elko or was it Winnemucca?”

“You need to give us your latest CD,” Mom said. Smoke poured from her pan.

"It's just a club band," I said.

"You don't have a CD?"

"No."

"Well, what do you play every night?" Dad asked.

"Old covers."

"You like that?" he said.

"It's a job."

Squinting through the smoke, Mom stabbed at the meat with a long fork. "Are you going to change jobs?"

"Drumming's a hard business," Dad said solemnly.

"Every job is hard business," I said.

"You can always drum on the side."

I looked at them, back and forth, as if to say, *How many times have we been through this?*

Then the smoke alarm went off.

### **3: Frozen Oranges**

"You quit your gig and go home and this is the first I hear?" Kai was complaining.

"I can go back if I want."

"But you don't want, right?"

I was in my parents' front yard, my cell to my ear. It was nine or ten and frosty already. Inside, Dad was sleeping on his recliner, the TV on. Mom was sitting on the couch nearby, afraid to wake him. Or watching to see that he was still breathing.

"It's cold here," I said.

"Leaving is quitting," he said.

"Are you *scolding* me?"

I heard him sigh. Then: "How are we gonna pay the bills?"

"Tell me you're joking," I said. "Please."

"One of us has to be practical."

"You've been begging me to quit for years."

"How many years?" he said. "We've been together for only three."

"Seems like longer," I said. When he didn't answer, I said. "I couldn't stay out there anymore. You don't know what it's like."

"Sure, I do. You tell me all the time."

"Motels feel like tombs," I said. "And the desert--"

"Didn't you, like, *grow up* in a desert?"

"The San Joaquin isn't exactly a desert."

"You've got rattlesnakes and road runners and tarantulas in the Valley. That's not a desert?"

"It's where I grew up."

"So what are you telling me, you're going to live with your parents?"

"I couldn't do that even if I wanted to," I said.

I'd introduced Kai to my parents only a year ago, at my brother's wedding. What did that say?

"I'm confused, Rainy. What the fuck do you want?"

"I hate it here." Phone to my ear, I walked to the middle of the street. Exeter has the widest streets of any small town I've seen. There's no explanation for it.

This was a neighborhood of shotgun shacks and bungalows, most built for workers between 1920 and 1940. Modest folk like my parents. Nothing here was made to last.

I said, "I love it here too."

"Kind of the way you feel about me, is that it?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"I love you too," he said. "Come home and we'll argue for real. Maybe you'll lock me out of the apartment again and I can spend the night in your van, using a cymbal for a pillow."

"You won't ever let me forget that, will you?"

"It's love, Rainy. It's all good."

"I haven't heard from you *in a week*, Kai!"

"Not true. I texted a few days ago."

"Oh, yeah: 'working on a new recipe'--isn't that what you wrote?"

"I thought you'd want to know."

"The least you can do is give me an update on Harriet." My Basset Hound.

"Right, I could have done that."

"She's okay?"

"Of course. You miss her more than you miss me, *n'est-ce pa?*"

“Don’t force me to pick a favorite,” I said. “What have you been doing besides cooking new recipes?”

“Selling your CDs on Telegraph Avenue.”

“For real?”

“It’s pocket change but it keeps me afloat.”

“Don’t be cruel, Kai.”

He howled, imitating Harriet.

I slapped my phone shut.

In the distance I heard the turbines start up. They’d churn the air all night to keep the freeze off the oranges. Valencias this time of year. In the old days, hands had to go into the fields to light the smudge pots. When small, I used to sing those words to myself: *smudge pots smudge pots smudge pots!*

My cell chirped. It was 2007 and I was the only musician I knew who didn’t have a music download on her phone.

“I’m an asshole,” Kai said.

Behind him the TV blared.

I said, “You know my Dad nearly died?”

“Nobody told me anything!” he said, as if I were blaming him. Then: “Shit, Rain. How is he?”

“Half his face is frozen. It’s weird.”

“How long you gonna stay?”

“I don’t know.”



“You got money?”

“Do you?”

His program director had given him a six-month extension to finish his dissertation, which was a year overdue. I admitted to myself that it'd bug me if Kai didn't finish.

I said, “I got enough to hold me a month.”

“So you're getting out of the music biz?” He could have been talking about the weather.

“You got suggestions?”

“I would *never*.”

“Smart man.”

Then we were silent.

Kai said: “You know I'm fucked up when you're not here.”

I listened to the TV behind him and, behind me, the props motoring above the orchards.

“Then you must be fucked up a lot.”

“Isn't that what I've been saying?”

This was the best he could do. Why did I want more?

“I'll call you,” he promised.

“I know you will,” I said.

#### **4: Bloody Cuticles**

Mom was still up when I came in.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Me?” I said. “What about *you*?”

“You know what I do.”

“Ignore the painful truth?” I regretted my words immediately.

She didn’t blink. “What would the truth be, Rainy?”

*That you’re dreaming if you think Dad’s going back to work. That from now on, your life is going to be harder than you’ve ever imagined. That I don’t make enough money to help you and I can’t bring myself to move back to Exeter—and I feel like a fuck-up for it.*

I sighed. “I probably shouldn’t have quit the band.”

She played along: “You can go back.”

“I could.”

“Is this an integrity thing?”

A few years back I’d explained to her the difference between an “integrity band” and a “factory band.” The first plays music that matters. The second plays music that pays.

“Integrity or not,” I said, “musicians like me are a dying breed.”

“That’s why you love it. You’ve always driven against the traffic.”

“That sounds like an insult,” I said.

“You wanted to talk about truth.”

“So I should go to college, get a degree, and join the hive--like my big brother?”

“Mark is happy.”

“Mark is miserable.”

“He just got married, Rainy!”

“He’s gay, Mom!”

“You don’t know that.”

"I feel for him, I really do. If only he'd come out."

"He's the *manager* of a *division*!"

"He'd rather be managing a greeting card shop in the Castro. You just wait."

"The Castro?"

"In the City."

"What city?"

"San Francisco. What other city could there be?"

"Sacramento. Fresno. Visalia. Modesto?"

"Now you're depressing me."

"You take such pride in turning your back on the place you're from," she said sadly. "You *loved* it here when you were a girl!"

We'd race our bikes through the dirt tracks of the groves, wheeling over fallen oranges, their rot a sweet punky smell. In spring, their white blossoms would rain over us like lumped flakes of tumbling snow. Concrete irrigation ditches, ten-foot-deep, would flood with green-black water, sluice-fast and roiled with eddies. We'd toss in our flip flops to watch them twirl madly and float away.

After high school, I couldn't get away fast enough.

"I'm not a girl." Suddenly I was very tired.

"You're all of twenty-nine," she said sadly. "And trying so hard to grow up."

I hated being twenty-nine. Wasn't something important supposed to happen by thirty? What, exactly, had I been doing all these years?

"I should go to bed."

Quietly she said, "I'm glad you've come home."

"I can't stay long."

"I know that." She smiled her Mom-loves-you smile.

More than anything I wanted to tell her how scared I was.

Instead, I said: "When did you start biting your nails?"

"Is it that noticeable?"

"Bloody cuticles, Mom. *Yeah*, kind of!"

She shrugged. I expected her to start bawling. But she got up, went to the fridge, opened it, then stood there for the longest time looking in. When she turned around finally she was holding a strawberry cr me pie. "It's store-bought," she said. "I thought you'd like it."

I decided to take a piece and pretend to be very happy about it.

## **5: The Hot Seat**

Mom and Dad had no insurance for a by-pass operation. Mark said he'd save for it. You bet he felt guilty because he worked for a big insurance company.

I felt guilty too. The least I could do was buy Dad a wheelchair. After three hours of arguing--"Make me happy," I told them. "*Indulge me*"--he and Mom agreed to let me.

I drove Dad to Visalia. It was overcast, the sky like an old mattress. The Valley would stay that way until spring. Only then would you see the bold purple silhouette of the Sierras. I'd been home three days.

When we got to Medical Supply and Therapy, a low whitewashed cinderblock building next to a used car lot, Dad refused to get out of the van.

"I called ahead," I said. "They've got wheelchairs."

He was slumped in the passenger seat. I hadn't turned off the engine, the radio tuned to old country. Bob wills was singing about the San Antonio Rose. Dad glowered out the window and said: "I can't go in a place like that."

"It's not a frigging funeral parlor, for Christsake."

"It's old," he said. "All the equipment's gonna be old. Forget it."

I let the van lurch away. Someone behind me leaned on the horn.

"Watch it!" Dad said. "Where you going in such a hurry?"

"Hell if I know."

"If this is too unpleasant for you, you can take me home."

"All I want to do is help," I said.

"You're helping."

"Not if you won't let me buy you a chair!"

"I'll only use it for a while," he said. "Save your money."

"They're not expensive. Not unless you want a motorized one."

"Now that would be depressing."

"All right," I said. "So let's get you a racy one with skinny bicycle tires."

He brightened, half his face rising. "I've seen those."

I pulled into the lot of Trekkers bicycle shop. As I helped Dad out, he leaned into me. I'd remembered him as small-boned but now there seemed to be a lot of him. Reeking of lemon-lime cologne, he was wearing his usual outfit, only today his sweatshirt was bright orange. It said in black block, "Exeter Gold."

Still gripping my arm, he gaped through the window at the racks of bikes. “They got chairs here?”

“Sure,” I lied. I’d only wanted to get out of the van.

Our salesman was a tall guy with no whiskers, a sunburnt nose, and sleek black hair pulled back in a ponytail. He gave me a look-over, his brown eyes pausing at the top of my hands, where a couple of tattoos came to an end: drumsticks.

Then he turned to my father: “Don’t tell me, *hombre*. You want a tandem?”

“Actually,” Dad said, “I want a submarine. You got one of those?”

Why do men feel compelled to joke like this?

When Mr. Tall played along, shaking his head in amusement, his ponytail did a little dance. The lean lovely look of him made me wonder if I could handle a bike freak.

I told him what we needed.

He surprised me by saying: “We have one, *hermana*.”

I wheeled Dad around in it, then he took a spin alone. Dad had good upper arm strength. Mr. Tall stood close by and watched. He said, “*Creo que es feliz*.”

*I think he’s happy.*

“*Bastante*,” I said.

After we put the chair into the back of my van, he gave me his card. It said, *Alejandro Bikestand*.

“You can call me Ale,” he said. Somehow he prevented himself from winking.

“Right,” I said, “Ale Bikestand.”

“*Claro!*”

Dad waved to him as I drove us away. “Nice boy,” he said. “His eyes were all over you.”

“Lucky me.”

He glanced to the back. “Thanks for the bike, Rainy.”

“It’s a chair, Dad.”

“I’m gonna call it a bike,” he said.

## **6: Packing House**

Dad wheeled himself into the packing house. It was fridge-cool inside the barn-sized building. Noisy too, the conveyors rumbling. The graders were at one end, all of them women. Dad hadn’t minded being among them. “You kidding?” he joked. “Me and all those white-gloved women?” They wore cotton gloves to protect their hands.

“It’s a dying skill,” he reminded me, as if he were giving a museum tour. Machines had taken over but weren’t good enough yet to do the most careful sorting.

I hadn’t been inside the House in several years. I’d forgotten that the conveyors—where the graders stood--were raised nearly six feet above the concrete floor. That meant Dad couldn’t get up there to surprise Mom.

“You want me to fetch her?” I asked.

He was peering up at them. “She can’t leave the line.”

Flushed-faced, no-necked Boo, Jr., the foreman, was ambling our way. We had been in the same high school graduating class. I didn’t know he’d taken over his father’s job.

He tipped his Oaks baseball cap at Dad. “Look at you, old man!”

Dad grinned his halfway grin. “Rainy bought me this bike.”

Boo looked at me the way he'd always looked at me: like I was a mystery. I said, "Hey, Boo. Dad's training for a race."

"You back, Rainy?"

"Visiting."

"Convince her to stay, Boo."

He said to me, "You should stay."

"You need another packer, is that it?" I joked.

He glanced to the line above us. We were almost shouting to be heard. Then he looked again at me, his eyes as blue as a winter sky. "If your dad's not coming back, sure."

When I turned to see how Dad took this remark, he was pretending he hadn't heard. Mom noticed us finally. She tossed me an orange. It was an orchard run, the lowest grade.

"Watch it!" Boo called. He sounded irritated.

I said, "Lighten up, Boo."

He fixed his blues on me again: "You want a job, you come see me." Then he leaned down to squeeze Dad's shoulder. "You rest easy, old man."

The minute he was gone, Dad said, "Asshole."

Mom came down to join us. "I've got five minutes," she said. "Where'd you get the bike?" She pecked Dad on the forehead.

"It's a *chair*," I said.

"It's got bicycle tires," she said.

"That doesn't make it a bike."

"Will it hold up?" she asked. "It looks spindly."



"It's as light as excelsior," Dad said. He wheeled a small circle.

"Don't exert yourself."

"Mom, he's fine."

"I know he's fine."

"We just came by to say hello," I said. "Tonight I'm ordering us some take-out."

"To celebrate my racy bike," Dad said.

"Sure," I said. "And to send me off."

Mom frowned. "You're leaving already?"

"It's not like I'm moving to Alaska," I said.

"Mark will be here this weekend," Dad said.

"Kai's waiting," I said, "and I've got to get a gig."

"I thought you quit," Mom said.

"Didn't we agree it's a lousy business?" Dad added.

I laughed. A lousy business? There we were, shouting over the thrum and clatter of the belts, where Mom stood eight hours every day sorting oranges.

"I'll be back," I promised.

"For my funeral," Dad said glumly.

Mom and I looked at him abruptly. He waved us away, as if to say, *Stop it*. Mom was pale. I glanced to the tips of her gloves for pink stains. She said, "I've got work to do."

"And I've got wheelies to practice," Dad said.

Mom climbed up the steep steel steps. I stood there waiting for her to glance back and wave, but she kept on climbing and was gone. When I turned around, Dad was already yards away, wheeling for the door.

## **7: Last Supper**

“There’s a good Cary Grant on tonight,” Mom announced.

We were eating vegetarian Chinese on trays in front of the TV. “Alien III” was on cable. Watching horror movies was almost all Mom and Dad did when they were dating. Mom didn’t know they gave Dad nightmares until after they were married. He’d wake up screaming.

“I can’t watch black and white,” Dad complained. “It gives me a headache.”

“You grew up watching black and white,” Mom said.

“Rainy, what do you think?”

“I want to see the Alien blown to a billion bits,” I said. “But I don’t want to wait for it.”

Mom switched channels with the remote.

Wearing a white lab coat, Cary Grant stood on a scaffold next to an exhibit of a brontosaurus skeleton.

“Dinosaur’s inaccurate,” Dad said. “Tail shouldn’t be dragging the ground.”

“The movie was made, like, a hundred years ago,” Mom said.

A bit of egg foo young slipped from the frozen side of Dad’s mouth. Mom snatched it from the carpet and placed it on her paper plate.

“You got a good day for a drive tomorrow,” he said. “No snow.”

“We never get snow,” I said.

When I was a girl, I resented this. The whitecaps of the bluish Sierras, twenty miles east, seemed a taunt. I imagined rich, childless couples skiing all day, then drinking hot coco around crackling fires. And laughing at us living in the Valley.

“If you stayed an extra day, you could see Mark,” Mom said.

“I’ll see him another time.” I dreaded seeing Mark, he tried so hard to look happy. *Just come out*, I wanted to tell him. *It’s okay*. But he was married now and *the manager of a division* and hopelessly over-invested in the dream Mom and Dad had never realized.

After Kate Hepburn made Cary Grant fall into the dinosaur skeleton, which collapsed in a heap, Dad said, “I could never live with someone like that.”

“Lucky you got me,” Mom said.

“Best grader on the line.” He tried to wrinkle his nose at her but it didn’t work.

Mom helped me clean up while Dad finished watching *Alien III*. She dumped the food into a single Tupperware container. “I like it mixed up,” she said.

“Is Dad’s wheelchair gonna be okay on the front porch?”

“This is Exeter,” she said with a smart-aleck smile. “Not the *city*.”

That night I dreamed of racing Dad in his wheelchair. I had one of my own. He was surprisingly fast, faster than me. When I was done, I slumped forward, gasping, my heart pounding in my head. Then I looked up and saw Dad far away, still wheeling fast. I wanted to call out to him but knew my voice wouldn’t carry that far.

When I woke up, I was hoarse. Outside, the fog was so thick we couldn’t see the houses across the street. “You can’t go out there,” Dad said. Seated in his “bike,” he was turning circles in the living room—practicing.

Valley fog is the worst, responsible for pile-ups on the interstate every winter.

"If it's really bad, I'll come back," I said.

"What's wrong with your voice?" Mom asked suspiciously.

I was drinking her instant coffee. It didn't taste like coffee, but it felt good on my throat.

I was hoping it'd give me a buzz.

Mom was frying cholesterol-free eggs. "Why bother if they aren't really eggs?" I asked.

"It's what your father likes," she said. "Sit down and eat something."

I poured a bowl of Cheerios and ate them dry. When I was seven I lived for nearly a year on nothing but cereal.

"I'm telling you, you're not going anywhere," Dad said.

"I hope that's not a comment on my career," I joked.

We were seated at the kitchen's tiny table.

Dad poured imitation maple syrup over his scrambled eggs. "A career is a *path*," he said.

"At the end of that path you'll find--"

"The Wizard of Oz," Mom said. She sat down with a mug of coffee.

"I'm in the company of comedians," he said.

"*Comediennes*," I corrected.

"See how smart she is?" he said to Mom. Then to me: "You could go places, sweetie."

"Though today, apparently, I'm not going anywhere."

"You really shouldn't," Mom said.

"If it's really bad, I'll come back."

When I graduated from Exeter High, I'd won a scholarship to the College of the Sequoias, in Visalia. That's where my parents met. Neither graduated because Mom got pregnant with Mark. When I told them I wasn't going to Sequoia, they looked at me like I was speaking in tongues. "It just doesn't make sense," Dad said. For weeks he kept saying this.

Now I heard it again. "It doesn't make sense, your leaving in this fog."

I was in my van, the window rolled down, the fog so thick it was almost a drizzle. "I'll be back," I promised. I realized I kept saying this every time I saw them. Ten years earlier I had left in the same van, in almost the same way. It was eerie. Is this what children do, haunt their parents? Nearly everything I owned was in the van, my drums piled in the back. I needed my dog in the seat beside me: a forever-happy friend who's eager to go at a moment's notice. Maybe Kai was right. Nobody dreamed like this anymore. I was a cliché.

"You call us," Mom said.

Dad was shaking his head in dismay. I waved as I drove into the fog. They waved back, two oldish people with dwindling prospects and a daughter who couldn't leave them and their Valley fast enough. The fog was so thick I couldn't turn on my headlights. It worried me. I had to crawl out of there. It took hours. At one point I passed four cars raised up onto each other, like giant bugs caught humping. The ambulance's red strobe pulsed through the fog, reminding me of my own drumming heart. The fog didn't lift until I gained elevation at Altamont. That's where the wind farms are. Sleek, white windmills stand in rows that rise and fall with the hills, stretching miles across the sun-stunted grasslands. Kai said they're responsible for the deaths of more than a thousand eagles, hawks, and owls every year because they stand in a migratory flight path.

I didn't want to think about things like that, especially since it was clear nobody was going to take down the windmills. I imagined they made noise, those giant props, but not enough to warn the birds as they flew into them. Then I thought of the noisy turbines churning over the orange groves while my parents slept in their tiny house on their too-wide street and suddenly I wanted to turn around, as if I could warn them of the danger ahead.