

## 7. The Midwest and the New Oregon Trail

As she lay on the slowly deflating air mattress on the cold basement floor listening to the humming of a malfunctioning central gas heater she remembered all the promise life had once had. She'd been so young and full of energy, ready to take on the world. Well she took it on and it seemed to have kicked her ass, but the battle wasn't over yet.

There was a time when she was set to inherit the family farm. She felt sick knowing all the family's wealth was gone and with it any chance of going to college. She could get grants through FAFSA for a two-year degree but no amount large enough for a four-year degree and she never knew from month to month what her situation would be; whether she'd have transportation, a place to live, food, and FAFSA couldn't cover that. And the staff at community colleges were typically indifferent and unhelpful; "You can do that for yourself online," they'd respond to every question, which left her stuck not knowing what to do or how to do it.

She genuinely wondered sometimes why she hadn't just killed herself. If she was truly realistic that would be the only way she could ever get out of poverty. She'd put blade to wrist before; a utility knife she'd bought for work. She'd begun to cut into her left wrist and watch the blood bead and drip forth. She'd begun to run the hot water in the bathtub. Locked in that bare, white, cold room with the rusting, creaking pipes, alone on a rare day off work, the profoundness of the finality of death and how effortlessly her whole life could be sucked into an oblivion of nameless nonexistence had really hit her. She'd decided to put the blade down and wait. Just wait. Put peroxide on the cut. Patch it up and keep going. She didn't want to just cease to exist. She wanted a chance for her life to actually matter, at least a little, although it plainly didn't. She could die today and no one would care... except for her dad. And she'd hate for him to be completely alone. He could live as long as she was still out there, living. There was no other hope in his life anymore. But the fight for life was so painful and the struggle to find work so stressful that hanging on was agony; sometimes she wished she could just let go. But she always thought that maybe, just maybe she could pull herself out of this pit of despair known as poverty that she'd been born into. She tried to rest her mind long enough to stop worrying and actually get some decent sleep for a change.

She got up early, adjusted her cross necklace back in place, pinned back her wavy dark auburn bob, grabbed her arm weights, and her Samsung smart phone and headphones. She was determined to start the day off right with PJ Harvey♪... "Oh Lord, be with me tonight..." She walked up the stairs from the basement and up another flight of stairs to an empty guest room and sat on the comfy carpeted floor to do stretching and strengthening exercises, keeping herself fit and toning her abs to support her back, as the music ran out♪.

She stopped in a rare moment of quiet to pray about her situation, although her belief in any god had been waning, and she'd never felt like she was a model liberal Christian, whatever that

would even be, despite her family's—especially her mother's—best efforts to strictly drill the vague and elusive concept into her.

When she went down to the kitchen to refill her water bottle she saw Shawna was already in her pink nurse scrubs with her dark blonde hair in a bun sitting at the kitchen table over a cup of coffee with a blatantly forced pleasant smile frozen on her face. She sat across from her mother-in-law Rhoda, who was glaring at Bridget through her wire-rimmed glasses and long dark hair with the silver and gray roots showing. “Are you going to clean up that bathroom Bridget?” Rhoda demanded in a slight Minnesotan accent, with the drawn-out o's.

“What bathroom?” Bridget said with confusion in her blank Yankee accent.

“That bathroom is filthy and needs to be cleaned up! Shawna has to go to work, *she* has a job, she shouldn't have to clean it up,” she said as Shawna sat benignly, not looking at either of them.

“I have a job too,” Bridget said as pleasantly as she could force herself to be, “it's called electrician, remember? Just because it isn't traditional for my gender doesn't mean I'm doing nothing.”

“Well I don't know how you could be a real electrician,” she said, demandingly.

“Because I took Oregon Tradeswomen Inc.'s eight-week pre-apprenticeship training then did a junior apprenticeship for two years with Electric Steel and...”

“If that's true why aren't you working with them now?” Rhoda barked at her.

“I told you, they went of business with the economy. But I'm almost fully trained to...”

“What are you going to do about the bathroom?!?”

“What bathroom?”

“What do you mean what bathroom? That bathroom over there,” she said, pointing to the main floor bathroom.

“What about it? It gets dusty. I wiped the dust up a few days ago.”

“The toilet overflowed and it's wet everywhere! When are you going to clean it up?!”

“Why would *I* clean it up? I wasn't here all day yesterday while you were all having a party. I don't clean up after parties I haven't attended. Now I have to go get more exercise,” she said and left the room.

In the basement she put away her water bottle and weights. She got the dog leashes and ran the new puppy and the older dog around outside, since no one else was walking them.

Afterwards she went to the kitchen where she ate granola cereal. After brushing her teeth she went outside.

She raked the large yard, putting the leaves into a special kind of plastic bag, which was odd to her since in Oregon people generally raked them into a pile somewhere in the backyard behind a hedge and left them there. This yard, however, had no private areas. Afterwards she mowed the lawn, spread grass seed on it, spread a fall-time feed on it, including one bag of stuff she had bought to be nice. Then she watered the entire yard. She knew this would all be better to do in spring but they'd wanted it done now and she wanted to do her fair share of the chores.

When she went in for lunch there were some leftovers of a sausage and egg thing Rhoda's adult son Phil had cooked before returning to the couch in his sports jersey with a can of coke. She looked around and could see that everyone else had eaten so she helped herself to the rest. She stood at the counter eating while Rhoda sat rigidly typing at her laptop at the dining table at the end of the kitchen. "You can sit over here Bridget," she said while glancing back at her.

"Really?" she said uneasily then slowly went over to the edge of the table and sat down as far from Rhoda as possible. She noticed that Rhoda's other grown son's children were in the front room, so she must have driven down to the other side of the next county that morning to get them. She always found it odd how far Midwesterners would drive before they considered it a long way.

Rhoda typed away while having coffee and cookies that Bridget had bought for everyone before Rhoda had shown up.

"So..." Bridget began, gauging if Rhoda could be interrupted and trying to keep the tone of things friendly, "are you grading papers?"

"Oh. No," she said as she continued to stare rigidly at the computer screen while Bridget leaned over slightly to glimpse what was on the screen.

"Oh, is that poker? I hadn't thought of playing cards on a computer."

"I do it all the time."

"Yeah, it was on Aunt Priscilla's—your mom's—computer when I was in Bemidji," Bridget said quietly as Rhoda continued to stare rigidly at the computer or the TV across the living room that Phil was blaring some sports game on. Her other son's kids went out to play on the back porch, which Bridget liked because kids were typically very noisy and irritating, especially since most parents wouldn't teach them to have respect for the fact most spaces are *shared* spaces.

She finished lunch in silence then put her dishes in the sink with soap and water. She saw that the dishwasher was running so she left them there and turned to leave. Rhoda was right behind her.

"Why are you leaving dishes in the sink?!" Rhoda said, somehow using the same force as yelling without being noisy enough for anyone else to hear her. "I had this sink cleared!" she said and went to pull open the dishwasher.

"It's already running," Bridget said and made sure the door got closed again so the washer would go back into its cycle.

"I just did a load of dishes and now you've made more dirty dishes!"

"Yeah, and I've done roughly five dishwasher loads a day since I got here because no one here seems able to clean up after themselves."

"So you just thought you'd help yourself to some of the food?! And what about that bathroom?!"

"What about it? I wasn't here and you all were so one of you should clean it. I don't clean up messes I don't make."

"Well there's a lot of laundry that needs to be done!"

“What laundry? Not my laundry. I do my own laundry, no one else does. I don’t do anyone else’s laundry so...”

“So you don’t want to help out at all is that it?!”

“Uh, excuse me, but I thought working in the yard for three and a half hours was helping out. I know you all saw me doing that, but what, because I’m a woman you don’t—You know what? You just seem to want to have a problem with me no matter what I do.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I’ve just been avoiding you all day because I have better things to do than get in fights like I might have when I was an immature teenager,” she said evenly and began to leave the room.

“YOU KNOW WHAT!” Rhoda said as if trying to spring up from her dwarfish height, “YOU STAY AT PEOPLES’ HOUSES AND EAT THEIR FOOD AND DON’T WANT TO DO ANY WORK!”

“I don’t want to fight, but you know what, you all act like I’m doing nothing when I mow the lawn and do other things not traditional for a female and...”

“Oh yeah?!”

“Yeah, and you act like I’m doing nothing with my life because I’m not some baby-maker on welfare like you and your mother after your divorces, acting like you had it hard when you just got paid to sit on your asses or could just show up and tell a sob story anywhere you wanted to get a job. The rest of us women actually have to earn what we get. So how’s about that lady?”

“What?!”

“Yeah. You people are all like that. Like how your mother has a display case of trophies from sports boys in your family did but only one notice of participation in a sports event for one girl. No one in your family gives females any status unless they have a baby.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Like Shawna’s daughter Delilah has loads of talent at music, singing, writing, math, and every other subject in school but she’s encouraged to watch *Twilight*, which focuses on boyfriends and babies but no education, and...”

“That Delilah is a little bitch!”

“That girl is just trying to survive in an impossibly misogynistic environment.”

“She’s a little spoiled bitch who has an easy life!”

“You know this reminds me of what my friend Jenna wrote me about when she’d just graduated Navy boot camp and was waiting to go to her A School in Florida to be an airplane mechanic. She said she’d gotten sent to the Separations compartment to escort some young women to the multi-religious ‘chapel’ and...”

“What does that have to do with this?!”

“She said most of them just planned to go home, get married, and have babies because the one thing they’d ever tried hadn’t worked out so they’d just given up on themselves and life entirely and were just going to be wives and baby-makers rather than have real lives.”

“It is a real life!”

“Not when you do it for the wrong reasons or too young! She said only one or two planned to go to college, one to culinary school, and maybe two to the Army, out of 100 in the female SEPS compartment.”

“So what?!”

“It’s being raised by women like you that makes that happen, and you’re a school teacher. I’ll bet you poison all the girls you’re supposed to be encouraging!”

“I WORK HARD AT MY JOB! YOU DID NOTHING WHEN YOU WERE AT MY HOUSE ON THE INDIAN RESERVATION!”

“I was very sick with a strain of the flu the vaccine didn’t protect against so there was no way...”

“THAT’S NO EXCUSE! YOU SHOULDN’T HAVE GOTTEN SICK! I NEVER GET SICK!”

“So clearly your ancestors were exposed to more viruses than mine so you...”

“YOU WERE WELL ENOUGH TO RIDE THE ZIP LINE!”

“Not really but I couldn’t resist the fun. You’re just mad because I’m the only female who’s been brave enough to ride it over your creek gulley!”

“MY RIVER! MOM SAID YOU DID NOTHING THE WHOLE TIME YOU WERE THERE!”

“It’s a creek. Go to Oregon and you’ll see some rivers. Anyway, that’s not even true! I raked the leaves, mowed the lawn, put up blinds, beat rugs, cleaned out the gutters...”

“SHE SAID ALL YOU DID WAS PUT UP ONE BLIND AFTER 9 P.M. WHEN YOU WERE IN HER RENTER’S WAY!!”

“NO! The two blinds were put up in the middle of the afternoon when the renter was at work!”

“GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!!” Phil called as he glared at his mother from the couch, and they shouted at each other for a while, then she rushed out.

“Hey, sorry about that *Bridge*,” Phil said. “My fucking family I tell you. They always fucking want to shout and shit and I’m not like that at all,” he said in a calm voice. “I always try to handle things calmly. What started that whole fucking thing anyway?” he asked and Bridget explained. “Oh, that bathroom? That shit happened during the night and no one’s copped to it. We didn’t even know she was coming to the party last night. She just showed up at fucking 10 o’clock with a hot dish and shit and slept in the spare bedroom. And I think it’s an argument going back to your dad’s mom.”

“Back to grandma? What about her? She’s been dead for years.”

"Well, my mom and grandmom never liked her since they had to borrow money from your grandma, and she made sure they paid it back. And that was some kind of argument. I don't know. I just try to stay out of it."

"Okay, that makes sense."

"Ya know, my family criticized my taking you in, and I'm like yeah it would be nice if she paid rent but hey, she's hardly able to find any work even with her freelance *handy-person* ad in the paper and on Craigslist..."

"And we agreed I wouldn't pay rent in exchange for helping with household projects, but you never get around to..."

"And yeah it would be nice if she helped out around the house more, with the cooking, cleaning, vacuuming, and all but hey, at least she doesn't start fights, ya know?"

"Yeah... thanks," she said as she began to wonder if the whole argument had been staged to try to get her to do more housework.

Shawna ran in and started yelling at Phil about "the incident" again where his son-in-law had been in her daughter's—his stepdaughter's—bed without permission.

"...BUT NOTHING HAPPENED!"

"BUT HE WAS IN HER BED!"

"BUT HE WAS DRUNK!"

"THAT'S NO EXCUSE!" she said then suddenly turned to Bridget, "What do you think?!"

"I've... got a job interview," she said and rushed to the basement to change into her blue jeans and midnight blue work shirt then rushed out of the house, not wanting to get involved in the whole "he said/she said" dispute that made it look like both of them were exaggerating the facts of what did and didn't happen—one downplaying, the other up-playing. She wasn't there when something did or didn't happen and she had problems of her own anyway.

She got in her dusty white beater Ford truck and drove away. She found Coon Rapids Boulevard and drove five miles through the flat green plains and many small, nameless lakes to a one-story office building just off the main road. She walked in, filled out an application, and briefly talked with a woman in her back office with her two medium-sized black dogs. It worked in her favor that she got along well with dogs. She was set up for telemarketing in a small room with three other new employees and a seasoned angry black woman. After six hours she decided that it seemed like this was an operation that constantly turned new people in unpaid training over to get free labor so she grabbed her things and left.

In exhaustion and boredom she retreated to a dinner at the nearest Perkins Restaurant & Bakery, seven miles away on University Avenue in Fridley, even though she really couldn't afford to. After dinner she made one cup of coffee last as long as humanly possible then slowly went back to the house.

When she returned she walked past the front door, sitting room, and dining area to the kitchen to see in the backyard that Phil was bob-catting again. He was tearing up the backyard with

his small piece of construction equipment as his son Jackson stood nearby, clearly irritated. Jackson's girlfriend Kylie stood in the kitchen grinning. "You know he didn't put boards of plywood on the yard when he rolled it back there so he wrecked the whole lawn."

"Yeah, that sounds like Phil. He was haphazard when he had us move the fridge out and put a new one in, and the oven, and another fridge after the first one stopped working. Every time I turn around I want to start singing Imelda May's 'Mayhem'."

"Yeah, I know," she said almost laughing as Bridget leaned on the kitchen table and looked down at the mail between her right hand and Shawna's purse.

"A baby magazine addressed to Delilah?!" she said.

"Oh really?" Kylie said with a country girl smile that matched her confident stance, blue jeans, and sweatshirt with her long brown hair.

"She's only 16!"

"Yeah, that's not right. My dad said no babies until I've graduated college and my mom gave me a good talking to about those things so I know, you know, what I need to protect myself."

"Yeah, that sounds like my mom."

"It's so weird that Shawna would let her get that."

"Uh... yes and no. My mother was showing me her books on caring for babies when I was four yet she didn't start teaching me to read until I was seven, and then only because I had to get ready for school, basically by law. I pretty much had to teach myself to read. It's weird but sadly not all that uncommon."

"Really?"

"Well, the first week I was here Shawna and hers threw a baby shower for a 19-year-old and no one was talking to the young woman or the man about getting job skills or anything. And when I hinted that I thought it was a bad idea to celebrate a teenage pregnancy Phil just got mad at me and said, 'They're not teenagers—they're both 19!'" she said as Kylie laughed. "You know when my friend Jenna was joining the Navy to get job training, the GI bill for college, health benefits, world travel, and so on many women practically ran up to her to preach about what a mistake they thought she was making and how they didn't understand how any female could join the military."

"Really? These days?"

"Yeah, and when she graduated Boot Camp and later her A School she didn't get any Hallmark cards or anything to say 'congratulations'. But girls in my hometown that got pregnant in high school got cards, baby showers, the works. We didn't even get cards for finishing high school. Women really get nothing for any accomplishments that don't involve motherhood. Even weddings are celebrated mostly because everyone thinks babies will come from them."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Yeah, there's Mother's Day, there's no Professional Career Woman's Day or Female College Graduate Day or anything like that."

“There’s Father’s Day but no Career Man’s Day.”

“No one needs a Career Man’s Day, working men and men’s education has never been a problem,” she said as Jackson stormed in and off to his room.

“Uh-oh, time to go be supportive girlfriend, he’s my ride to school,” Kylie said and followed him. Bridget smiled and returned to the basement.

The next morning she got up early and tip-toed by Phil in the front room sleeping on the couch and snoring loudly. She slipped through the living room and into the kitchen and began making breakfast as quietly as possible. She looked around for her eggs, cereal mix, and other food and couldn’t find any of it. “Oh no,” she said under her breath, “he ‘re-organized’ the kitchen again, just like his mom when I was staying with her—*oh my god!*” After searching for her food for several minutes she shrugged her shoulders and ate whatever looked like something she would buy.

After breakfast she rushed to the upstairs bathroom as Shawna came down and Phil began waking up. She brushed her teeth and showered then rushed back down to the basement as she heard them fighting again. She rushed out the garage and down the driveway to her truck and drove 10 miles and 20 minutes to the nearest temp agency, in Spring Lake Park, and walked in to the front desk.

“Hi, it’s me again. Do you have any work this week?” she said with a half-convincing smile.

“Uh... no. We might have a little work next week,” the receptionist said.

“That’s what you said last week.”

“Well that’s how it is. You know we have a lot of men coming in here with qualifications. Excuse me,” she said and walked some files into a back room as Bridget threw up her hands in frustration, exhausted by the futility of trying to accomplish anything in a world where sexism and classism defined everything in her life and chose her future for her.

She drove back to the house with her mind already made up. She checked the oil and added a quart then checked the water and antifreeze by sticking a small tester into the radiator then added half a gallon of water. She turned the engine on and ran it hot then turned it off and checked the transmission fluid and added half a quart.

She entered the house casually and used their computer to check her e-mails by the light of the lamp she’d bought. She went to Google Maps and printed out a couple of pages with the ink cartridge she’d bought then made some notes in her Rand McNally map book, since internet coverage between large cities was spotty at best. As Shawna and Phil continued to argue in the kitchen as they passed each other between cigarette breaks, his on the back porch and hers in the garage, Bridget tried to ignore them. She went back downstairs and tidied up her loose things into her two suitcases, two backpacks, and laptop bag.

She went back upstairs and began looking for her food and gathering it in two brown paper sacks then shoved them into a cupboard as Shawna and Phil brought their argument in again. They wound up asking her about things and she counseled them once again, nearly quoting

psychology and counseling books she'd read over the years to help her family, and her parents as they began to split up, and took to her as family counselor, despite her being the last-born, though, by how she felt, never the "youngest" of the family. Not the "baby", the one who picks up everyone else's entitled slack. She sympathized with both of them; Shawna for her dad never being around and her mother being an alcoholic, Phil for having an abusive stepdad and a terrible mother who was impossible to be around, then bit her tongue before she'd say too much again, but she already had. He walked off and pranced around giving her the silent treatment. He'd never done that before. It made her wish he and his family had done that all along. Between their cigarette breaks she snuck her bags of food out to the truck, then her two suitcases, and then her two backpacks and laptop bag. She started the truck and drove off in a rush.

She drove through Anoka County and into Hennepin County then drove into Saint Paul to take in the pretty Twin Cities one last time. She drove through Saint Paul and its comfortable neighborhoods and classic buildings with nice architecture, across the Mississippi River on First Avenue Bridge into picturesque downtown Minneapolis with its bright tall buildings silhouetted against the dusk sky. Then she hit I-35 West and went south for two hours while listening to her mixed Bach, Tchaikovsky, and Mozart CD's to relax. When she could she pulled over to get a fleece blanket and a towel to put over herself since the heater was broken.

The night was dark, the sky heavy with clouds as she drove ever lower and reached beyond the shadow of the clouds. Hours later on a desolate stretch of open freeway the truck's engine began having problems. She turned off her music. She checked to make sure the gauge wasn't in the red and it was fine. Even still she pulled over and stepped out of the towel and blanket into the freezing windy night to check the radiator. She slipped under the engine with a flashlight to make sure the new freeze plug she'd hammered in was still in place and it was.

She got back in and the engine wouldn't start. She pumped the gas pedal when starting and that made it go for a while, then it shut off again and she coasted onto the shoulder of the freeway. After a few tries she got it going again just to have it shut off and she coasted onto the shoulder again. Then it wouldn't start at all. She popped the hood and went outside. The engine was making a hissing noise but she couldn't tell what was wrong. She knew it wasn't electrical but that was about all she knew.

She got back in the truck and bundled up again. She didn't know if she was in Minnesota or Iowa since state borders in the Midwest weren't marked as well as borders in the west. She breathed deeply then sighed. "Well," she said to herself, "at least I'm not still stuck with those crazy people in Minnesota," and she meant it. They reminded her of The Verve Pipe lyrics, "The only thing you ever gave were bad directions/ I'd say it to your face but I can't find you." Out there she felt relief because if she was on her own she could handle whatever came up because she could remain calm and drama-free. The nearest city lights looked about 20 miles away but so be it, she would think of something. She wanted to take a nap but it was too cold for sleep. She thought about putting on her heaviest jacket and piling clothes over her legs when a state trooper pulled in behind

her. She slowly got out and walked towards the back of her truck with her hands raised and in plain sight.

“Are you broken down then?” he said.

“Yep, sure am. So do you know if I’m in Minnesota or Iowa?”

“You’re in Iowa,” he said and gave her the exact mile marker.

“Thanks, I can take it from here. I’ve got AAA full cover and a cell phone,” she said.

In under an hour a AAA-approved tow truck arrived to tow her anywhere within 200 miles. The driver was a tall slim but sturdy man with black hair, light tan skin, and an infectious smile. As he drove her to the nearest auto shop with her truck in tow they talked about trips they’d taken; she’d driven that truck around the West Coast, up to British Columbia, Canada and down to Baja California, Mexico, hitting Seattle, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas in between. He’d driven his old Camero to the East Coast, Ontario, Canada, and Coahuila, Mexico. They talked about trips by driving, by Greyhound bus, by Amtrak train, and by plane. They loved travel and would scrape together whatever money they could to escape to anywhere new. She talked about dance classes she’d tried: Rumba, Tango, Waltz, and the hot dance instructors—tall muscular men, a blonde Russian woman, and a married couple fighting that she didn’t get into it with. He talked about fishing and camping. “You don’t go?” he said, “You seem like the type.”

“I grew up on a farm. I helped my dad and brothers hammer up barns and work sheds. I had enough of that and just want city life now. In fact I’ve been meaning to go to college so I could get supervisory or managerial work, you know, not real work,” she said and they laughed.

“I’m Miguel Diaz by the way,” he said in a plain Yankee accent.

“I’m Bridget Reilly, nice to meet you.”

Eventually they pulled into the nearest AAA-approved auto shop, in Clear Lake, where she left the truck. Miguel took her to the nearest AAA-approved hotel and waited in line with her to make sure she got the AAA stranded discount, knocking 30% off the price.

In her room she took a hot shower then fell into a warm, soft bed. She picked up her phone and thought about calling her friends for some support but felt awkward knowing how much more together they all were so she just put the phone down. A while later there was a knock on the door. She answered it to find Miguel, freshly showered, shaved, and wearing nice slacks and a casual wool sweater. He smiled warmly and said, “Would you like to go to dinner?”

“Sure, just one moment,” she said and closed the door. She popped out of her old Lara Croft *Tomb Raider* T-shirt and boxer shorts for bed and into tight jeans, a T-shirt, and a leather jacket, couldn’t trouble herself to put on make-up or jewelry, then went out with him. They walked to the nearest Perkins and had a nice big meat and potatoes meal followed by a home-baked pie for dessert. Then they walked back to the hotel.

“You know, there’s a great view from my room,” she lied, “do you want to see it?”

“Sure,” he said, playing along, and they ran up to her room. Within five minutes they were kissing and had their hands all over each other. They turned off the overhead light but

left the bathroom light on for some soft lighting, took out some condoms, stroked, licked, and sucked each other ready, and had fun taking turns on top. They cuddled for a while then separated so they could sleep soundly.

In the morning she awoke early, left him in bed, and went downstairs. She ate two complimentary continental breakfasts before she started working on the situation. She sat down in the lobby with their black coffee and spent the next few hours making phone calls and sorting everything out while Sheila, the middle-aged blonde woman at the front counter, helped her out as much as she could.

She found out the truck's engine was beyond repair but the mechanic knew a guy who might buy the deadweight vehicle so he could put a new engine in it and sell it. There was a U-Haul nearby but AAA offered discounts on Penske truck rentals. She only needed a pickup truck or smaller but the smallest truck they had at the moment was a 24-foot Mack truck and it wasn't cheap. The woman on the phone worked out as many discounts as she could, even an AARP discount because Bridget had previously been on her dad's AAA policy and he was with AARP. Then she just needed to find a way to get to the Penske place in Mason City, seven miles away. Sheila handed her a phone book and there were a few cabs listed. When she called, one was out of town, one was sick, one might be able to be there in several hours, and one was busy but could pick her up in an hour.

She waited for the taxi while drinking more coffee and appreciating how very nice everyone in Iowa was. They had small town values and goodness in their hearts.

It was a 15 minute ride to Mason City with two pleasant working class women listening to classic rock on the radio. They chatted about the weather, music, and the fact Minnesotans were crazy—though some she'd met and asked a few questions were fine; the ones that weren't related to her actually seemed nice—and their road systems made no sense at all whereas Iowan roads made perfect sense.

"They're always building new overpasses to employ their crews," the driver said. "But in Iowa, we just have straight roads."

She handed them a \$20 bill then walked into the Penske place with her three credit cards in hand, hoping that they'd approve or take pity on her.

20 minutes later she was driving back to Clear Lake using a small map Sheila had given her, while muttering to herself instructions on how to drive stick since she hadn't in years; *clutch to bite, off clutch on gas, off gas on clutch to 2<sup>nd</sup>, off clutch on gas....* At the auto shop she talked with the shop owner and handed him \$50 then met with his friend, an older man, and shook hands on a deal to sell her truck for \$500. She handed him the title and he handed her the money—her gas money for the trip home.

She moved her things, slightly driven nuts as ever at the amount of possessions even one person seemed to need; two suitcases, two backpacks, laptop bag, bicycle, helmet, tool set, spare tires and inner tubes, various truck engine supplies, jack, five-gallon gas can, wool blanket and first aid kit, and everything else from the pickup into the Penske truck then ran into Miguel.

They walked to Perkins again and he bought her lunch, then they walked back to the auto shop. He led her into the back room to an office that was comparatively nice, with a leather couch, so they could have sex again. Half an hour later they smiled and waved at each other as they drove their separate ways.

She drove to the I-35 and headed south for about 113 miles and 1 hour and 40 minutes to Des Moines while she blasted herself with heat, an incredible luxury by then. Fords had good heaters, when they worked, but they often didn't. But she still felt she should be loyal to a U.S. brand, which she was beginning to think was misguided. She put on one of her mixed Garth Brooks CD's, then a mix of Irish folk songs with "Rocky Road to Dublin", "Whisky in the Jar", "Lannigan's Ball", and others, then one of Luciano Pavarotti's greatest hits CD's. It was so black outside that all she could see was well lit freeways and the fact she was driving through a very flat expanse of land.

In Des Moines she took an exit onto I-80 west. The rest of the nearly 140-mile and two hour and 10 minute drive through Iowa was uneventful. She snacked on food she had rather than stopping for food and peed in the grass by the freeway. She stopped in gas stations marked with green for diesel fuel availability and used those bathrooms when she needed to. The gas tank was huge and the cost stunning. She knew the \$500 would be used up by or before she reached Oregon and she might have to start charging gas on one of her three credit cards and hoped to find a job to pay them off.

As she entered the late night she drove into Omaha, Nebraska, a place that looked full of freeways and tons of big rigs. Industry. Up until then Nebraska had been like the state that didn't exist, just as Wyoming had been before she'd gone through it a few years before. It was flat just like Sheila had said, but she was always happy to be anywhere new.

Somewhere in Nebraska in the dead of the black night she pulled over for a snack and a big rig smashed off the driver's side rearview mirror as it passed at 65 miles per hour, the freeway speed limit in that state for big rigs. The metal frame smacked into the windshield, cracking it. Given that it was night and she was in the apparent middle of nowhere she decided to keep going until morning then sort it out. She could see approaching vehicles by their headlight glare and there were very few other vehicles anyway. She thought in the morning, as soon as she saw a big enough city, she'd call Penske about a replacement truck and hope they'd let her transfer to one without having to pay any more money, since she had none, and since she'd bought the top insurance.

She continued to drive, stopping for black coffee at gas stations when she filled up. The freeway was a straight line along the nearly 500 miles and eight hours it took to cross Nebraska with everything from Evanescence to Creed to Metallica playing. As she felt drowsy she began remembering textbook driving lessons: you should be moving your eyes every two seconds; front, rear mirror, side mirror, front, side mirror, front. She thought of how Rhoda had said she'd driven from Minnesota to Colorado while watching a DVD on her laptop. She'd seen her talk and text on the phone, and open mail and read it while driving. Bridget had grabbed the mail from her and told her to watch the road and Rhoda had laughed saying, when it's your time it's your time. Bridget

had said, not everyone believes that and even if it were true that doesn't mean you can't become paralyzed in the mean time. In any event, she thought, the sooner Elon Musk got Tesla to make self-driving cars the better, considering what bad drivers most people were. Or whatever Cheng Industries was going to come up with. At the rate they were going that Chinese company would rule the world one day. And everyone might be all the better for it. It had nothing to do with her anyway; she was down here on Earth, just barely surviving.

As morning came she saw the familiar flat rocky plains of Wyoming, a rugged desert having its own kind of beauty. She drove through the 393 miles and 5 hours and 41 minutes of Wyoming, a place that seemed so devoid of towns she couldn't get a new Penske truck. She drove by staying in one lane as much as possible. When she had to move she'd look for the shadows the vehicles around her might cast and leave her blinker on for very generous amounts of time before slowly changing lanes. It wasn't all that hard to drive without a driver's side rearview mirror until she'd have to egress the freeway to gas stations then ingress again. She just tried to make as many right turns as possible. The scenery didn't change much until she reached Utah and continued as the freeway lead down through some light, rocky hills, and a river. Outside of Ogden she took a gas stop that led up a hill and to a strip mall with a Wal-Mart, which she knew would have just what she needed for the idea she'd come up with the night before♪.

After she got gas she parked the truck and ran across the street to the Wal-Mart. When she got back she duct-taped a handheld mirror to what was left of the framing for the driver's side rearview mirror, which just barely got the job done.

Into the evening she drove through 80 miles and one hour to Idaho and 270 miles and three hours and 50 minutes through it on I-84. Into the night she drove into Oregon, across the border and to the edge of the Rocky Mountain Range and down its cascading waves of highway until she reached relatively flat ground in the desert terrain of eastern Oregon.

Around 1 a.m. and 72 miles and one and a half hours into Oregon she stopped in Baker City for gas and two large black coffees. She drank both as she kept driving west with her single-minded imperative of reaching home, and on the lowest budget possible. A while later she stopped to pee by the desolate freeway. She felt a strange feeling of someone dangerous watching her, assumed it might be a wild animal, got back in the truck, and hurried away. She felt better when familiar names like La Grande, Hermiston, and Pendleton started popping up on signs. She drove without stop, continuing to play different CD's like Raphael's *Los Exitos*♪, which she'd hoped would help her pick up some Spanish. She drove until after dawn had broken the black night, 240 miles and three hours and 45 minutes from Baker City. She began to feel strained and tired by the time she was passing Hood River but she just rolled the window down and breathed some fresh, cold air then ate some more carrots for energy and because the chewing helped to keep her alert. 58 miles and 1 hour and 20 minutes later she was happy to be back in Portland and turned on the radio to hear Mumford & Sons' "Little Lion Man" and Lana Del Rey's "Video Games". Then she turned off the radio♪, too tired to listen anymore.

She drove 20 miles and half an hour across town out Saint Helens Road and Highway 30 to Sauvie Island, so far out into northwest Multnomah County that although the addresses said Portland it wasn't legally considered part of Portland for voting purposes. All of the western Pacific Northwest was gorgeous with towering hills of green trees and water falls but Sauvie Island was particularly calm and pleasant. Most of the island was made up of small, family-owned farms but there were also nature aficionados, pretend back-to-the-landers, and outright hermits. She drove along the two-lane roads without guard rail, off a side road, and up the gravel driveway to a large farmhouse surrounded by blackberry vines, raspberry bushes, blueberry trees, and patches of lavender. She stumbled into the house and fell asleep on a futon couch.

She awoke with a cat sleeping on her shoulder. She got up and fed the cats then began to make some lunch or dinner or breakfast, or whatever it was. She found cans of soup, beans, and vegetables, opened and mixed them, first rinsing out the sugary sauce they were packed in, then microwaved them in a large bowl and added Smart Balance healthy fake butter alternative and a dash of sea salt as a truck pulled into the driveway. A few minutes later two gray-haired men came in.

"Hi dad, hi Mr. Flanagan," she said.

"You're back!" Bob said with surprise and delight.

"You can just call me Doug—I'm practically your uncle."

"Thanks Doug."

"Where's the truck?" Bob said.

"Uh, it's in Clear Lake, Iowa. It had a total meltdown."

"Really? You should have called, I would have sent you some money."

"No, it's fine," Bridget said dismissively, "I was just glad to get away from the cousins. You know how a lot of them have businesses and Phil was supposed to own a contracting business?"

"Yeah?" Bob said.

"Well, they either had no jobs or offered me none. Then they'd complain I wasn't paying for enough, when I had no money coming in."

"Really?"

"That must have been annoying," Doug said.

"Yeah, but they sure tried to get me to rent a trailer in a park outside of Grand Rapids and a house in Bemidji, and lied to me about the rental prices. For one, I heard Aunt Priscilla placing an ad in the paper for her house at one price, then she lied and told me a different price."

"Really!?" Bob and Doug said.

"Yeah, I think I know why grandma stopped doing much with them. I like Phil's cousin actually and was going to stay with her. Then when I got there they were like, oh by the way we forgot to mention she now has a woman with a baby sleeping on her couch. I told them I do not like babies or small children but they wouldn't listen. It was enough that she has three kids around

10—at least you can have a conversation with them, but a screaming newborn? Oh my god—it was total sexist insanity, and insanity in general. But Aunt Rhoda did have a zip-line that her sons had put in and I rode it then found out I was the only female ever to ride it. For all her big talk and big chainsaw she really is a very typical woman.”

“What chainsaw?” Bob said.

“Oh this big chainsaw that she made a huge fuss about to saw a small branch that wasn’t even blocking a path anyway. It was a status symbol to her to prove her strength and then it wouldn’t start. She took it from me and said I wasn’t pulling the chord hard enough. I was like, look lady, I did this for the first time when I was 12 and I know how to do it. I tried to tell her that either the chord was frayed or she put gas instead of gas/oil mix in it but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Yeah, that’s what most people do.”

“So she couldn’t get it to start and then said she didn’t know why and got me a handsaw. I chuck the branch aside and went swimming in the creek she called a river. But anyway, I’m glad to be back.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bob said with a smile as Doug walked into the next room to read the latest *Oregonian*.

“So... how are you getting along with your friend Doug?”

“Oh it’s okay. The rent was cheap and I... I really didn’t know where else to go. And there are plenty of farms on this island so I should be able to get some work and maybe stay here until I’m retired.”

“Really? Cool,” she said and they paused in awkward silence. “I’m really sorry you lost the farm dad.”

“Yeah, so am I. That farm was in our family since they came over on the Oregon Trail in 1893. Have you heard from your mother at all?”

“Uh, no, we’re not talking. Not since I berated her for leaving you.”

“So you don’t know how your sister and brothers are?”

“Uh, I heard from my sister a while ago. They moved in with mom’s sister Mia in Oregon City. So they’re fine.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess,” he said, and their postures slumped.

“Are you guys going to get a divorce?”

“I’m not sure. She started the paperwork but I haven’t heard from her again.”

“Yeah. So, have you seen her at church?”

“No. I mean, I haven’t’ been going. I think we just need some space right now.”

“Yeah. Makes sense. So... is there another guest room or...”

“Uh, yeah... hey Doug, can she stay in that other room?!?” he called into the next room.

“Yeah, sure!”

“So, what’s the rent?”

“Don’t worry about it honey I’ll pay it. You have enough to worry about.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, almost wanting to argue then deciding not to since he didn’t need his status as a man and provider knocked down any further. They paused for a moment then she went off to bed.

In the room she saw the several boxes of her other things she’d packed up before leaving. She’d hoped to avoid sorting through them but once again she was finding there were no shortcuts or easy outs in life. She would need to go through every last one.

After a day’s rest she drove down past Saint Johns Bridge to the nearest Penske place. She took out the papers and a Penske employee looked over the truck.

“I refilled the gas tank on my way out here,” she said with a smile. “I was warned that if I didn’t I’d get charged for a full tank. I don’t know if it got a little low on the drive out here but I did just refill it,” she said and continued to smile as she saw the young man notice the beauty mirror duct-taped to the smashed driver’s side mirror frame by the cracked windshield. “I bought the top insurance too,” she said. “It covers everything. It should all be in the forms.”

“Yeah... it is,” he said, still staring at the riddle in front of him.

“Well great, I’ll be on my way with a receipt then, okay?”

“O... kay,” he said hesitantly as Bridget grabbed the receipt from him and rushed to the nearest bus stop, took it back to the island, then walked the three miles from the stop to Doug’s house.

Back at the house she chopped wood, built a fire, and warmed the house. Then she took out her laptop, connected to the Wi-Fi, checked her e-mails, and began filling out as many online job applications as she could. Then she went to the website of Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, where liberal Christian singer-songwriter-activist-author-actress Jewel went as a teenager. She filled out a request for an informational pamphlet to be sent to Delilah in Minnesota. She did the same for Musician’s Institute in Hollywood, where Sarah McLachlan’s drummer and husband Ash Sood went. She found a few colleges in Minnesota and requested they send Delilah their information too. Then she put the computer down and walked away. It was all she could do for her, and more than she’d been obligated to do.

It stayed with her though and she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was *responsible*. Somehow. This feeling lingered for days. She had to do *something*. She was somehow obligated. Maybe a purpose in this life? Maybe a higher calling? Maybe a karmic debt? She didn’t know, but it kept her up at night. The world was just... *wrong*.

After the next time she spent four hours doing all kinds of online job applications she sat there staring blankly at the computer screen afterwards, with the whole world a click away. She decided to write something on Facebook and see how everyone reacted...

“Women Cut up other Women (the Taboo subject we need to open up about)

It's been my experience that publications, places, political parties, etc. lump women with different lifestyle choices into different categories; moms with moms, independent childless with the same, etc. As such I've at times been discriminated against and treated badly by women who've made different lifestyle choices than me.

In fact I've had my essays rejected from many markets run by women supposedly for the purpose of promoting and encouraging all women because my author bio mentioned that I'm happily childless or because I wrote about my beloved grandma who had an abortion.

Several other women have encouraged me, and published me, but by and large women still cut up and snub other women. It is taboo to talk about the fact women cut up other women (so to speak), and very convenient to, often wrongfully, blame men for women's lack of equal status around the world. But we need to open up and talk about it.

Representing all different types of women and their views—and that of men too—all voices, is what needs to happen. Women like me not getting a voice in a mommy and feminine female-dominated society is a genuine problem."

Over the next couple of days, to her surprise, the response was positive, not negative. Some friends posted messages that they were glad someone brought it up. And then it occurred to her, maybe she could write a blog? Maybe she could say what no one else would.

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