Flight Plan [1]

October 13, 2014 Short Stories [2]

Short Story by Katie Cortese



Maya's new apartment complex had eight units, four to a side across a small courtyard. She'd rented one of them, sight unseen, against her father's advice. The landlady, Alma, was waiting in the parking lot as promised when Maya eased Black Beauty's powerful engine to a stop. The '79 Corvette celebrated the end of her cross-country romp in a musical crunch of gravel. Maya tried not to stare at the woman's sun-spotted shoulders—or the amber folds of flesh melting down her thighs—and climbed into the heat of midday, bending to stretch her legs.

Alma gestured to Maya's car with the business end of her cigarette. "She's a prize."

"Black Beauty," Maya said. "Used to be my dad's. She's hell on gas."

Alma grunted, then spun on her heel and began walking while Maya scurried behind. The car had made her stick out on her journey. Whenever she made a pit stop, men dragged their eyes from stem to stern, then looked Maya over the same way. She'd protested when her father insisted that she take it as a college graduation present, but he wouldn't back down. It wasn't her kind of car, she'd said, by which she meant it was too much like him. Flashy. Unreliable. Slick.

"You might be sick of Maine. Sick of me," he'd said the day she left Bar Harbor. "You might think Arizona's got

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something here doesn't, and it's your right to find out, but this car is all I have to give. You're taking it. End of story." As usual, she gave in rather than fight.

Alma keyed into Unit 3. Outside the car, Maya began to realize what it meant to move to a desert in June. She fanned herself with the money order she'd brought for rent. The heat was worse in the apartment. "Call APS for your electric," Alma said, opening the blinds to let a shaft of sunlight onto a carpeted floor. The woman's face shivered with wrinkles. She moved down a short hall to the back door, which opened to a small fenced yard. "Rent's due on the first."

Maya handed over the money. She'd chosen this place for its proximity to the middle school where she would start teaching in August, and because she had enough savings to swing it until her first paycheck. Her father had hinted at a loan, but she wouldn't ask for money. Taking the car had been hard enough. This place had some furniture, a navy cat-scratched couch, a twelve-inch television, a single bed exactly like the one she'd slept on in her college dorm.

"No smoking, no pets, no funny business," the landlady said. Maya glanced at the cigarette burning between Alma's fingers, and the woman laughed. "I own the place, Dolly."

Maya followed her back out into the sun. A small fountain, dry, occupied the center of the courtyard. In its shady depths slept a thin black cat with one white paw. Her neighbor to the right had rosemary bushes in woven baskets to either side of the door and a straw welcome mat. In front of Unit 2, to the left, a metal lawn chair sat askew next to a coffee can half full of butts.

Alma crossed the courtyard to Unit 8, where the door had a sign that read *Office*. She paused to drop her nub of a cigarette in the fountain's blue basin. "Get out of here," Alma hissed at the cat, and it leapt out of the fountain, diving beneath the lawn chair's sagging seat.

"Psst, kitty-kitty," Maya said, crouching down. The cat arched its back beneath Maya's hand before winding an infinity sign around her ankles. "Not so fast," she said, when it tried to sneak past her into the dim apartment. "No pets allowed."

Inside, sweating in the airless flat, she dug the cell from her purse to tell her father she'd arrived. While it rang, she heard the echo of his goodbye, five days earlier, in their driveway of crushed clamshells. "I hear in some cultures," he'd said, "kids take care of their elders instead of splitting first chance they get. Still, I guess you know your mom would be proud."

"Maybe so," Maya had said.

She'd almost added that he hadn't known what her mother thought while she'd been alive, so it was doubtful he knew now, but she wanted a clean break untarnished by a last-minute blowout. She had turned 22 a month before and was ready to let Maine recede into memory. Within a week, her father would meet himself a new squeeze at Archie's and forget to pretend to be lonely. She understood the car was meant to be his vote of confidence for her new job, her new life, but Maya hated the thought of Black Beauty, his bullet-shaped pride and joy, propelling her into all the world she'd yet to see.

When the call went to voicemail, she left a short message, relieved.

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Maya knew no one in the city. She called her friends from home and talked until they cut her off. "Heat waves literally shimmer over the roads here," she told her best friend, Anna.

"Crazy," Anna said, and Maya could hear voices in the background. Male and female. "Listen," Anna went on, "we're heading to Old Orchard for the day. Can I call you back?"

Maya called ex-boyfriends and second cousins, describing the sulfur smell rising from her kitchen sink, itchy ankles—dry skin, she guessed—and her neighbor-to-the-left's video game marathons and poker tournaments. Midnight

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in Phoenix was three a.m. for her friends and family, so Maya spent her late nights reading, or watching reruns of *M.A.S.H.* on TV.

On the Fourth of July, she sat on her sagging couch, listening to her neighbor's blowout grow slowly out of hand. Just after two a.m., Maya set aside her lesson plan on photosynthesis and stepped out into the lawn. The fireworks she heard mimicked the cough of her father's motorcycle exploding to life, a sound that usually signaled his departure for another of the "business opportunities" that could take him away for weeks at a time.

"Good one," someone cried. A drunken chorus cackled and shrieked as a few more bottle rockets went off, one landing lit and sputtering in Maya's yellow grass, sprouting a small blaze.

"Shit," she said, running into the house for a bowl of water. The orange licks had spread by the time she got back, and she splashed the fire at its base until it hissed up as smoke.

Next door, the music and heavy buzz of conversation seemed to swell. She considered sending the empty bowl, just plastic, over the fence like a Frisbee, but instead rapped on the boards, which stood a foot over her head. "Thanks a lot, jerks," she yelled, flushed and breathing hard.

First, the music dropped a notch; then most of the voices sunk to whispers. "Wha—" she heard, and in the next instant, a head of sandy hair popped over the fence like a jack-in-the-box before disappearing just as quickly. It had clamped a cigarette awkwardly between its lips.

"You set my lawn on fire," she said to the fence.

A chorus of drunken apologies rose up. "Sorry," the same guy said, his head appearing again. Then, "Happy Fourth." Mr. Video Games, she guessed. The only neighbor she hadn't met.

"Back at you," she said, her throat sour with leftover fear.

She left the firecracker's sodden casing in the center of the yard and went back inside, wondering what her father had done for the Fourth without her there to police him.

All Maya had wanted from him during the four years cancer flirted with and fed on their family was to help bear her mother's terrible tolerance for suffering, her faith that it served some higher purpose, an idea that turned Maya's otherwise steely stomach. After her mother passed, her father tried making up for his absences and flings by working daily at the local Midas, staying home nights to tinker with Black Beauty. But it was too late. Conversations were sparring matches. Her clothes were trashy, friends losers, hair too short ("You want people to think you're a dyke?"). His sins made fighting back too easy.

In her kinder moments, she knew he was trying—and that he loved her—but those moments were rare. After graduating college early and on scholarship, she knew it was time to go. Part of her hoped that, this time, distance would save them.

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A week later, a squealing garbage truck dragged Maya from sleep. She tried to place a secondary sound that had worked itself into her dream. Singing. Her neighbor had an Elvis album cranked, and though she could separate his voice from the one on the CD, each had its own charm. Her clock read 4:17, and the light was gray. She moved a pillow over her head, then gave in and slipped on her flip-flops.

The air outside her front door had a cool taste, foreign to her new Phoenix sensibilities. It was enough to make her cross her arms over the T-shirt she'd slept in.

"The sun'll be up in a minute," her neighbor said from his seat in the lawn chair. A lazy curl of smoke trailed from the cigarette in his hand, and she watched him drag on it before tapping a gray spray over his coffee can. He wore a blue shirt with *Tin Man's Tin Can Diner* on it.

Maya remembered her legs, bare to the thigh, and crouched down on the metal threshold of her apartment, pulling her T-shirt over her knees. She absently scratched at an ankle, while the black cat scratched his face against a leg of the lawn chair. "You lit my lawn on fire," she said.

A grin transformed his narrow, freshly shaven face. "How's that for an icebreaker?"

He stroked the cat once, and then it padded over to Maya, licking the top of one of her feet.

"It's a good thing I wasn't asleep," she said. "We all could have burned to death."

"Look around," he said, his smile surprising and wide. "This is the desert. We're all on a slow broil anyway." She looked away, and he leaned closer in his chair, elbows on his knees. "Hey, I'm just fucking with you. I'm sorry, okay? It won't happen again."

She held out a hand from habit and introduced herself. His grip was firm, warm.

"It's nice to finally meet the girl of Maya dreams," he said, not releasing her hand.

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Maya instructed her body not to betray her, but a blush rose anyway. “And you are?”

“Hungry,” he said, patting a stomach so flat it was nearly concave.

Maya scratched the black cat’s belly. “Well, who’s this then?”

“Mittens, Shithead. What’s your pleasure? He’s not my cat.”

“He looks like an Elvis,” Maya said. The animal stretched its limbs, claws emerging.

“You’re a fan of the King?"

Maya shrugged. “Not really, but I guess you are.”

He brought his face inches from hers. His eyes were pure gray. “What’s not to like?”

Maya looked away first, watching the cat work the tip of its tail with sharp little nips.

“It’s been nice chatting, but I’ve got a date with a timeclock,” he said, tapping his chest where the Tin Man smiled at no one. “Those old timers need their flapjacks.”

“Don’t let me stop you.” He was the first person she’d spoken to face-to-face in weeks.

“I wish you would,” he said, stretching, bones cracking merrily. “Believe me.”

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Five minutes later, Maya heard a pounding on her door. She pulled on a pair of shorts and swung it open to see Unit 2 on the walkway. “My car’s dead, and I can’t be late again.”

“You need a jump?” She’d already reached for her keys.

“Actually, it’s been dead awhile. Weeks. I just missed the bus I usually take.”

“You’re asking me to drive you?” There was being neighborly, she thought, and there was taking advantage. Before he could answer, the black cat squiggled through their legs, squirting under the low sofa. The two of them dropped to their knees to try to lure it out.

“If you’re going to be late, I can get him out when I get back,” Maya said. It was strange to see another person, a man, in her living room, sitting easily on the floor, ankles crossed.

He twisted his thin lips sharply and stood. “He’s really not an indoor cat.”

Maya had the urge to defend herself. She wasn’t looking to keep it, and what would he care if she was? He’d made it clear the animal did not belong to him. But then the creature began to drag its claws down the ruts in the sofa, and her neighbor scooped him up with one arm. “Good-for-nothing feline,” he said, and tossed the creature out the door. Maya got her purse.

“Sweet ride,” he said when they stopped by the Corvette.

“I guess.” Maya unlocked it.

The car smelled of her father: stale cigarettes, spearmint gum, leather. He’d claimed he was getting too old for it. *You’re not old*, she’d told him, and he’d laughed as if it were a compliment. But it wasn’t. He’d always be the

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childish man she'd known when she was herself a child. Her mother had been a dentist, the breadwinner, while he bounced from lawncare to lobstering to fixing cars for friends to "opportunities" that took him away from home whenever things got stressful. If those trips ever made money, Maya had never seen it.

His Corvette couldn't erase the times he'd taken off when her mother was laid out, sweat-drenched, heaving the contents of her stomach into a basin Maya's childish arms could barely span. He'd always return for the bounce-backs, the brief respites from chemo, the hopeful wigs secured on her mother's head for a drive-thru date. Then, when she got bad again, as she always did, he'd hop on his bike and get gone. Nothing on four wheels could change any of that.

"So, where am I going?" Maya said, pulling onto a road all but empty at this hour. The radio blared Phil Collins, and her neighbor reached for the dial. He gave her vague directions.

"No fucking way," he said. "Is that an eight-track? Does it work?"

"Yeah," Maya said. "But I usually use the radio."

"My parents had one in their car. Memory lane, man." He snapped open the glove box and emerged victorious with a tape. He wore some kind of cologne Maya could barely make out in the car, but it was different, and it was good.

"Don't put that in," Maya said. It reminded her more of her father than the car itself.

Her neighbor grinned. "Or what?"

"Or you'll see. It's no Elvis."

He put it in. "The Flight of the Bumblebee" burst out. "What the fuck is this?" He hopped in his seat, putting his hands to the roof so he could beat them there.

"I told you you wouldn't like it. It's my dad's," Maya said. "This used to be his car."

"I fucking love it," he said, hooting out the window so that his hair swirled around his head.

"You're going to get us pulled over," she said, so busy watching him and the rearview mirror that she nearly stalled at the red light.

"Your pops must be cool," he said, stroking the leather seat like the cat at the complex.

They'd arrived at a silver-bullet trailer—Tin Man's—less train car than UFO.

"Is that it?" Maya asked.

"Shithole sweet shithole," he said, settling back into his seat. "You're a lifesaver, Maya. Maya hero." He flopped his head to look at her when he said it. She concentrated on parking.

"And you're a head case, whoever you are," she said, flashing a quick smile.

"Call me Elvis," he said. She shook her head. "Darth Vader? Okay, George Bush. Why don't you come inside and let George whip up a couple flapjacks for his beautiful chauffeur."

She put the car in reverse. "Have a good day at work, Dubya."

Trailing a hand along the car's curves, he crossed to her window, gesturing for her to roll it down. "I'm Hank," he said. "For real." He picked up her hand, damp and sweaty, from the steering wheel and held it pressed between his two, large, dry ones. "And for real, thank you."

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He was the kind of guy her father had delighted in warning her about. The kind he claimed to have been, as if all that were in his past.

“You’re welcome, Hank,” she said.

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The next morning, Hank must have gotten himself to work. She listened for his raspy singing, but all was silent. In the evening, he had one of his poker nights that lasted until dawn.

Staff Orientation at J.B. Sutton Middle took up the rest of the week. Maya sat through sessions on Sexual Harassment and Disciplinary Tactics, and attended equipment training sessions on operating desktop computers and focusing overhead projectors. On Friday, there was a catered lunch of cafeteria food, and Maya sat at a table with the other newbies, stirring the buttered corn on her Styrofoam tray and nibbling at the edges of her chicken nuggets.

“It could be my imagination, but I think I can actually smell the hormones in here,” said Bill, the prematurely balding math teacher next to her. The first day, he’d cracked jokes all through Rudimentary First Aid, until the instructor pretended to send them to the principal.

Maya laughed and lifted a forkful of kernels. “I think that’s just *eau de* rancid corn.”

They traded student-teaching stories while she ate the cream off her pudding. In Sixth Grade Seminar, they received HR paperwork, supplementary assignments to their major teaching areas, and gradebooks. Maya’s area was science, but she’d also been assigned Photography Club.

“I don’t even own a camera,” she said, laughing on her way with Bill to the parking lot.

He stopped at a pickup truck a few aisles short of Black Beauty.

Bill waved his folder. “You think that’s bad? Apparently, I’m directing the fall play.”

“Must be your star quality,” she said.

“T-minus ten days,” he said, swinging open the truck’s door. “Maybe we should get together this weekend, memorize some of these Disciplinary Tactics?”

“Acknowledge, assess, address,” Maya said, reciting the Holy Trinity of Happy Classrooms, according to the training session. “It’s a date.”

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Hank looked up from a paperback as she approached his lawn chair. “Howdy,” he said. He was shirtless, revealing an expanse of golden skin and a bowtie of blond chest hair.

“Guess you’ve been making your bus,” she said. Her keys slipped to the walk at his feet.

He scooped them up, handing them over with a grin. “Miracles never cease.”

“If you say so.” She moved inside, where it was cool and quiet, and started fixing a tuna sandwich. When the phone rang, she got it on the third ring, expecting Bill’s cheerful voice.

“How’s my girl doing?” her father said, his words thinned by distance.

“She’s fine, Daddy,” she said, spreading mayo on bread.

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“She’s not doing that hiccup thing on the highway anymore, is she? If you haven’t got the oil changed yet, I’ll send you a twenty to bring her in.”

“I thought it was my car now,” she said, knowing the “it” would rankle.

“Me and Arlene are going to the beach for a few days. I’m telling you like you asked.”

“What happened to Jen?” she said, biting into her sandwich and going barefoot out the back door. As if it had been waiting, the black cat trotted past her into the house. On her father’s end, metal pinged against metal. She pictured him popping a dent from his new fixer-upper.

“Arlene’s the new receptionist at the shop,” he said. “We’re taking the bike.”

“What happened to Jen?”

“Listen, Magpie, take care of Black Beauty,” he said. Maya went back into the cool and peeked through her blinds at the car in the parking lot. It seemed to suck the light from the day.

“Be careful, Dad,” she said automatically, hanging up. He’d never had an accident on the bike, but one day he would, according to all the statistics. Her mother had called it The Death Trap. The cat was on the counter now, navigating the sharp edges of the tuna can with its tongue.

“Come here, freeloader,” she said, scooping the musty cat into her arms. “Out with you.”

Maya tossed it out front next to Hank. “You’ll be sorry, letting that thing in your place,” he said. The cat sat in the dry fountain, a portrait of injured pride.

Maya scratched an ankle, trying to erase her father’s voice. “It wasn’t really a choice.”

“If you say so.” Hank marked his place in the book and reached for his pack of cigarettes, lighting up and speaking around the butt. “It’s just that Jackson’s a regular flea motel.”

“Jackson?”

“One white paw, like the King of Pop.”

Maya stopped scratching her ankle and examined it. Half a dozen red dots ringed her fair skin. She groaned. “Great, I was looking for an excuse to clean all weekend.”

Hank ducked inside and came back with two cans of Coors, handing her one. “He lived in your place with the last girl. She named him.”

“Why’d she leave him?” Maya thought of the couch with its ragged striations. She relished the ragged path the cool beer cut down her throat.

“She left in a hurry,” he said, studying the can on his knee. She understood then; they’d had something to do with each other. It took a minute for the feeling in her chest cavity to register. She was jealous of a girl she’d never met who’d dated this guy she barely knew. According to him, the previous tenant broke all of Alma’s rules. Kept the cat inside, threw mid-week parties.

“She’d come knocking on my door, looking for a pick-me-up. Total cokehead,” he said.

When Maya finished her beer, she broke her own promise to be cautious around him, this sweet-tongued huckster, gray-eyed tease, and went boldly into his apartment. “Hey,” he called behind her, filling the doorway, a black shape

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against the setting sun.

A breeze seemed to wash over her damp skin. She'd miscalculated, boxing herself in. Who was he anyway? As her eyes adjusted to the dim living room, she saw crates in the corners heaped with shrink-wrapped video games and CDs. A dozen *Grand Theft Auto IV*s leaned against one wall. Her heartbeat stuttered.

"Grab me one, too, okay?" he said before slipping back outside.

Back on the walk, she felt relief to be out in the open and knew she should keep going back to her apartment—and stay there. He was a person who dealt in stolen video games and could get a line of coke on a moment's notice. Odds were he was a liar, too.

"Do you even have a car?" she asked.

Hank sipped before answering. "Not at present." He winked. He must have performed the mechanics of standing, then bending, then scooting next to her, but to Maya it happened instantaneously. Sharing her square of concrete, his body was warm and solid for all his thinness. "You can't blame me for fibbing. How else is a guy like me getting next to you?"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," she said, the words seeming to issue from someone else's mouth. The sky bled in gashes of red and yellow and violet. "I've never seen sunsets like these."

"Best in the world," Hank said, raising his can to the view.

"Amen," she said and allowed him to kiss her with his taste of smoke and beer.

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Bill called Saturday afternoon. She was on the way home from the vet, where she'd picked up a flea collar and cat shampoo, and was about to head to the laundromat to wash every item of cloth in her apartment—clothes, bedding, the cushion covers from the sagging couch.

"I thought mini-golf would be fun for tonight, or is that too juvenile?" Bill said.

"To beat the enemy, one must know the enemy," Maya said and agreed to dinner after.

Talking to Bill, her cheeks grew heated remembering how she'd driven Hank to work that the morning, the two of them rising from his futon before the sun was awake. They'd listened to the radio, and he'd kissed her cheek before exiting the car. "Fuck this place," he'd said cheerfully, slinging an apron over his Tin Man shirt. Then he'd thanked her for the ride.

She tried to keep from feeling bad about sleeping with him. She was an adult and single and beholden to no one. Her choices had nothing to do with her father's legacy.

Now Jackson the cat was clean and had been declared a prime feline specimen by the vet, and Maya had a real date with a man who had ambitions, a career, a car. She lugged Jackson in his cat carrier to Unit 8 and banged on Alma's door. The woman answered with the chain on, then opened it wider, revealing an interior opaque with smoke.

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“I have a cat now,” Maya said, holding up Jackson in his carrier as proof.

“Good for you, Dolly,” Alma said. She held in her hand an ashtray on which a long, thin cigarette burned away, but made no move to drag from it.

“It’s going to be an indoor cat,” Maya said.

“I figured that’s what you meant the first time.” Alma took a hand from her door to move it in a circular motion. “Anything else you’d like to get off your chest?”

“No,” Maya said, backing across the courtyard. “Just that.”

Alma manufactured a smile that barely revealed her teeth and closed the door. Maya heard the chain sliding back into place. Her own apartment smelled of Lemon Pledge, and every surface gleamed. She’d run over the whole sofa with a lint brush and shampooed the rug and purchased food and water bowls and a litter box and a whole arsenal of cat toys. “Welcome home again,” she told Jackson, releasing him. He took up his accustomed post in the corner of the sofa and began cleaning himself with great attention to detail.

Hank knocked on her door after work. “Want a brew?” He held up an extra beer.

Maya wore a flared white skirt and pink-striped tank top. Her lips were glossed, her hair blown dry. “Sorry, I have plans tonight,” she said, ashamed the second it left her lips.

“Wow, yeah, I can see that,” he said. “Twirl around now. Let me see how you look.”

He whistled, and she felt a slow heat flood her chest. He retired to his lawn chair and set the extra beer by his feet. “Freedom of choice,” he said. “It’s a beautiful thing.”

This was something her father would do. Take her mother dancing one night, then meet his girlfriend for beers in the town over the next. The saliva dried in her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” she said, surprised to find she was. The sun was down. Bill was on his way.

"For what?” he said, hackles up. All pride. “I was just looking to kill a few hours.”

“We should do something tomorrow,” she said, hearing defeat in her own voice.

“I’m not big on plans,” he said, “but we’ll see. Have yourself a time.” She closed the door as he dragged on his cigarette, the cherry brightening like a jalopy’s one working taillight.

When Bill knocked, right on time, Jackson took off for the bedroom, skittish in his new-old life as a housecat. “You look stunning,” Bill said. He’d brought a bottle of red, and she set it on the counter, wondering if he’d meant it for now or later. His monk’s tonsure looked newly trimmed.

“Well, should we be off?” she asked. The evening ahead suddenly seemed like work. She locked up as Jackson yowled, scared at the way the world had shrunk around him.

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Bill turned out to be witty and considerate. They bet the price of dinner on mini-golf and he lost woefully, comically, and got flustered when she accused him of doing it on purpose. In any case, he let her take care of the tip for the Thai food, which was hot enough to bring tears. Back at her complex, he pulled up next to her car and glanced over at it.

“Don’t say it,” she said.

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He turned to look at her. “Say what?”

“Whatever you were going to say. Guys always drool over that thing. It’s just a car.”

“Yours, I’m guessing.” His face showed polite interest. She could tell him the story over a glass of the wine he’d brought. It was the next natural step, but she let the moment pass.

“I have a busy morning,” she said. It was mostly true. School started in a week. She still had to plaster her classroom with posters on cell division, the solar system, the scientific method.

“This was nice,” he said. Their lips met harmlessly in a stream of cool, conditioned air.

She waited until his taillights faded, then reapplied her lip gloss, ran a hand through her hair, and paused before Hank’s door. The nights she’d cursed her father’s inconstancy swelled in her head like some nightmare symphony. She’d never understood his ability to smooth-talk every woman but the one he’d married. They’d taken a family vacation to Colonial Williamsburg, once, her mother’s last. For two days, Maya had shared her mother’s seat in Black Beauty’s belly, and then, while her mother napped at the hotel, Maya’s father took her to the settlement, where a blacksmith made her a ring out of a nail and gave it to her father for safekeeping.

Then he’d left her in the crowd. While a man dressed as a barber from the 1800s waved around a rusty razor as part of his spiel, Maya had looked frantically for her father, panic rising in her throat; a steady heartbeat of *where-did-you-go, where-did-you-go*. She finally found him chatting up a girl in a mob cap a few houses down. The girl had been wearing Maya’s nail ring.

Hank opened his door as if he’d been expecting her knock.

“Did you kids have fun?” he asked. His television was on to some sit-com, and it made the light strange and shifting.

“I feel like shit,” she said.

“Don’t sweat it,” Hank said, going to the refrigerator for a couple of beers. “It’s not like we’re engaged.” The silver can was so cold it numbed her hand on contact.

She gave it back. “I have some wine next door,” she said. “Do you work tomorrow?”

“Fuck that place,” he said, pressing her against his kitchen counter. He held her unopened Coors to the small of her back so she arched away from it, into him. When he pressed it to the nape of her neck, she moaned. At her place, she set her bag on the counter and kicked off her heels. He took the corkscrew from her hand and poured Bill’s shiraz into matching yellow mugs.

“Bottoms up,” he said, and they clinked porcelain. As they drank, Maya kept recalling portions of her date: Bill tripping at the foot of the windmill, the way his glasses kept sliding down his nose, their chaste kiss in the car. Bill was sweet and smart, a grownup, but Hank was all magnet, and around him she shattered into metal filings. It didn’t feel in the end like a choice.

Her twin bed groaned under their combined weight. She put his hands where she wanted to feel them and cried out when they connected, the two of them falling asleep just before dawn.

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The rumble of a revving engine woke her early on Sunday, and she found the half of the bed where Hank had been cool to the touch. Maya fumbled on a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. There was a Starbucks down the street. The stroll would wake her up. She reached into the bowl for her house keys, but they were missing—plus the one for Black Beauty. Outside, the engine growled again, and she pictured Hank goading her awake before speeding off into the sunrise. The pit of her stomach went cold. She didn’t even know his last name.

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“Shit,” she said. Though it was her car now, her first thought was of her father’s wrath.

Jackson streaked out the door when she stepped barefoot onto the walk, concrete searing her soles. “Shit,” she said again, watching the cat sprint into the park across the street.

When she saw Black Beauty still in the lot, her hammering heart began to slow. Hank sat shirtless in the driver’s seat, one hand kneading the wheel, elbow cocked out the window. “The Flight of the Bumblebee” issued from the speakers with all its natural lunatic force.

Maya went to his window. “Didn’t your mother teach you not to take people’s things?”

He looked up, grinning, and turned the sound down. “How about a Sunday drive?"

The hot asphalt beneath her feet made her shift her weight back and forth. “I can’t. School starts a week from tomorrow, and I have a lot to get done. Name tags, lesson plans.”

His grin only widened. “My pops always said the Lord made Sundays for fishing.”

“I had no idea you were religious. Slide over,” she said. Her feet were getting crispy. He lifted himself past the gear shift so she could take his spot.

“You been to Sedona yet? Once school starts, you’re going to be no fun at all. Come up north with me today, and I won’t bug you about it again. Scout’s honor.”

He was right about one thing. She wouldn’t have time during the school year. “I’d have to be back tonight,” she said, trying to sound stern but hating the bottomless feeling of surrender. “I have a ton of stuff to do at school tomorrow.” Plus, she’d promised to meet Bill for lunch.

“I’ll have you home by midnight,” he said, reaching across the seat to cup her knee.

"Scout’s honor?” She ran her hand up his arm glinting with golden hair.

“One day, that’s all I’m asking.” She helped him pull her past the stick shift and into his lap. “Everyone needs a break sometimes.”

Her father had treated every day like Sunday. The tape Hank loved had been a joke before her mother got sick. *You’re my honeybee*, she would tell her father. *You fly away, but always come home to your queen.* Maya tore the tape from the deck.

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“I have to stop by the diner,” Hank said on their way out of town.

Maya laughed. “You’re still hungry?” After packing overnight bags, just in case, they’d stopped for Grand Slams at Denny’s. The way he’d been caressing the steering wheel earlier, she thought he would want to drive, but he’d chosen the passenger seat.

“I’ve got some back pay coming. How can I show you the time of your life without the millions I’m due?” He started biting at a ragged thumbnail as she pulled into the Tin Man’s lot.

Maya watched him hold the door for an exiting family before she spun the radio’s dial, settling on Donna Summer, who’d topped the charts the year Black Beauty was born. She was singing along to “Hot Stuff” when Hank burst from the diner, taking the steps two at a time.

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“Go, go, go,” he said, tearing open the door and throwing himself in. She had the idea that if his window had been open, he’d have dived in that way. Before she could ask what was going on, the diner’s door shot open and a man took to the steps, enormous gut swaying side to side under his apron, red face screwed up with fury, a shotgun in one hand.

“Hit it, goddamnit,” Hank yelled, the first time she’d heard him raise his voice. She screeched out of the lot, watching in the rearview as the cook screamed something after them.

Maya’s palms were slick on the wheel. When she started to slow for a yellow light, Hank eased his hand onto her thigh and squeezed gently. “You got it, girl,” he purred, and she did not look at him but only lay on the gas and entered the intersection just as the light turned red.

When they’d gone a few blocks without incident, Hank leaned his head out the window, looking back the way they’d come. “Adios, Vern,” he hooted, slapping the roof of the car.

“Was that your boss?” Maya asked. She slowed to get on Route 17. “What happened?”

“Vern’s a dick about tip-outs. He shorted me, so I resigned.” Hank rustled in his backpack for a moment, emerging with a cigarette.

“Should I be worried? Is he going to call the cops?” Their getaway, if that’s what it had been, was already blurring into a scene from a dream.

“I doubt it,” he said, “but maybe we should have muddied up the plate.”

Her hands grew cold on the wheel, but when she looked over, he was laughing, slapping his knee, ribbing her. She shook her head as they cruised past the red roofs of Phoenix, the mountains already in sight.

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It was mid-afternoon before Maya took the downtown exit to a quaint main street of cafes, palm-reading parlors, crystal shops, and signs advertising *Pink Jeep Vortex Tours*.

“We need gas. Then dinner and maybe a hotel?” Despite all that had happened between them, Maya felt shy proposing it. But the mountains were beautiful, red striated with brown and yellow, accented by smudges of green mesquite. She’d left a bowl of food outside for Jackson, and the drive only took two hours. If they left early tomorrow, she’d be back in plenty of time.

“Pull into that Circle K,” Hank said. While she fed Black Beauty, leaning back against her door to take in the view, he went into the store and chatted with the clerk. Hank jogged back rubbing his hands together. “I’ve got the perfect place for tonight.”

After steaks at The Cowboy Club, where he wouldn’t let her see the tab, his directions took them twenty minutes north of the city to a compound of adobe buildings huddled against the rainbowed mountains. She pulled up to the largest one. “This looks pricey.”

“Just hang tight,” he said.

He went in through a large arched door. It was so quiet that she felt bad about the car’s rumble and shut it off. The air smelled of lavender and creosote and the possibility of rain, though the sky was clear. Evening sun slanted through the

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back window, and Maya was on the point of nodding off when Hank came back with a paper map marked by an X in Sharpie.

Their cabin perched on a cliff overlooking Sedona's cluster of lights, capped by the vast sky. "This place must cost a fortune," Maya said, dropping her pack in the tiled living room with a dark flat-screen and a corner kitchenette. "Let me pay for half, at least."

"I thought you'd dig it. It's ours till Tuesday," Hank said, taking his bag to the bedroom. Back in the kitchen, he reached into the fridge and liberated a bottle of champagne.

"Tuesday?" She recalculated. If she put in eight-hour days the rest of the week—and rescheduled with Bill, of course—she could make it work. "Let me make a quick call." She went into the bedroom to dial Bill, crisscrossing her legs on the pillow-heaped bed and shifting Hank's bag to make room. The top was unzipped and the dull gleam of metal inside caught her eye.

"Hiya," Bill chirped in her ear before she was ready. She swallowed with difficulty.

"Hey, I'm really sorry, but I have to cancel for tomorrow," she said, pinching up the canvas of Hank's bag, where an oily-looking silver revolver nested in a heap of crumpled green bills. She must have squeaked, because Bill's voice jumped an octave.

"Maya? Is everything all right? You sound—winded."

She choked on air before drawing enough breath to manufacture a laugh.

"I'm fine. A friend just came to town unexpectedly. We're up in Sedona."

"Sounds like fun," he said, nothing in his voice but disappointment.

"Would Wednesday work for you?" She pushed Hank's bag to the end of the bed.

"Sure thing. Have a blast up there," he said. She promised to do just that.

She'd known Hank was a thief, though she'd thought a petty one. Still. Maybe she hadn't asked him about the games or anything else, not even his last name, to keep herself in the dark. No, not maybe. The truth was she liked who she became around him; someone daring. Sexy. Impulsive. A loose canon, and now, a partner in crime.

He'd left the bag open on purpose, she thought. He wanted her to see and make a choice.

"Maya, are you coming?" Hank was whistling out there. A pretty tune she didn't know.

"Just a sec." The person she really wanted to talk to was her father. He'd know what to do. She brought up his number on her phone. Of course, he'd also be the first to say he told her so about Arizona, guys like Hank, and that running never fixed anything—he should know.

"Any bubbly left?" she asked, joining Hank on the sofa. He hadn't turned on any lights. Over the TV, which held their dim reflections, she saw he was staring out a long narrow window that framed a panorama of pristine night sky. He handed her a flute and filled it.

"This is a country of wonders, and I bet you haven't seen the half of it." His arm came around her shoulders. She caught herself stiffening, but made herself give in to his warmth.

"I've seen a few things," she said. The champagne's bubbles burned her tongue.

"Vegas is a day's drive. That would be fun with money to burn." If he was joking, nothing in his voice let on. She knew

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what she was supposed to say. She had a life waiting for her in Phoenix. A job. A sweet boyfriend, if he forgave her lie. A half-wild cat and a father somewhere who would worry.

“We can’t take Black Beauty. You said it yourself. Vern saw the plate.” She waited for him to deny or explode. For his true self to surface. Or maybe her own. She’d kept driving, after all, when she knew everything about him that mattered. She was already an accomplice. Or whatever it was called, an accessory after the fact.

Hank stopped studying the Milky Way. In the dark, his face was a blank. “It’s cherry,” he said. “Easy to sell. I know someone in Flagstaff who could help us.”

Maya set down her flute and went to the window. “Who are you, anyway?”

He downed his glass in a swallow. “I’m pretty sure you know by now.”

“So did your last neighbor, I guess.”

In the glass, Sedona’s stars shone below, the Milky Way above. Wonders upon wonders.

“Look, if you want to go back, we’ll go. No problem. Or, we can go forward. Vegas. Hollywood. Mexico. There,” he said, and came to the window to point at the fingernail moon.

After all those years of her father tearing out of the driveway and returning unscathed, she’d hated him in the end not for leaving, but for leaving her behind with a woman whose needs were endless and exhausting, whose pain Maya couldn’t hope to slake. She’d despised her mother’s beatific endurance by the end almost as much as her father’s vacillation. It had taught her that sometimes staying could be as bad as leaving. Sometimes it was worse.

“I don’t know who you think I am,” she said, “but I’m not her.”

“I don’t know a damn thing about who you were before,” he said, trembling next to her, with excitement or fear, she couldn’t tell. “You can be whoever you want with me.”

She pressed a hand to the window. The sky went up and up. “How far is Flagstaff?”

“Close,” he said, lips against her ear. “We’re practically there already.”

She went to the bedroom first, where it was dark and cool. When she closed her eyes, she imagined around them the walls of her flea-blown apartment, then the sea she’d grown up next to eating its fill of the granite shore. It was a scientific fact that over time the sea would make those familiar crags unrecognizable. In a hundred years, it would seem to be a place she’d never been.

Art Information

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For more information, see Katie Cortese's website [7].

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