

A Winnebago Filled with Snack Foods

Joanna needed to leave Carlisle, and it was her day to talk with Cole, so she got in the Corolla and drove to Boston.

“*Jo.*” The narrow doorway of Cole’s building made it a cramped welcome.

“Wow.” An awkward hug. He hadn’t seen her in almost a year. “It’s great to –”

Every Tuesday since college, they talked. No matter where they were, what they were doing. Twenty years. Extraordinary fidelity. Except for the year after her divorce. And these last months. Since her son Anthony ran away.

“You going to invite me in?” Joanna stood on his doorstep with a suitcase and a peanut butter jar filled with human hair. She had lost weight. All skin and sinew. Streaks of magenta in short black hair. Flecks of gray. Her eyes scanned him, the hallway behind him, the sidewalk. Constant motion.

“I broke a heart,” she said. “It’s time to light out for the territories.”

Inside, they sipped vodka from frozen glasses and held hands.

The peanut butter jar on the table before them, a white mailing label with words in green capital letters: “DIANA’S HAIR – THE SHORT PIECES.”

Cole nodded. He was willing to accept this. You couldn’t push Joanna for details.

“You’re going to carry it around with you?”

“Penance,” she said.

She planned to stay overnight. No longer. She couldn’t keep still. In the heat of his South End condo. On the roof deck, pacing. Stormy eyes.

“I’m not doing well,” she said, urgent. And then, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She said, "It's time to light out for the territories."

But she didn't. Not right away.

She cooked instead. Cornish hens, stuffed grape leaves, roasted vegetables.

She listened to Cole's work woes and told him his time as programming guru at Z-Tech was over. To leave before they dumped him.

She thought they should take off together. "You and me," she said. "Huck and Jim. Butch and Sundance. Fear and loathing."

"Let's face it," she said. "Warren hates what you represent. The creative side of programming. The whole concept of pioneering. The writing's on the wall. You should be the one to make the move."

He was chief architect of an internet encryption system, and he was being pushed out. Her theories were plausible. Things he had considered himself. He had considered other things as well. Intellectual property issues, though his views did not dovetail strictly speaking with the law.

"Let's talk about you," he said. He gestured at the plastic jar filled with hair. "What's going on. Why you're here."

"Let's not," Joanna said. She paced the living room while she talked, and she talked fast. "Think about it," she said. "On one side, a methodical campaign to make you miserable. Cost/benefit analysis. Project approval cycles. And time sheets, Cole. Time sheets. He puts the screws to R&D, experimentation. It doesn't take a genius to see this is a problem." She paced, hard angles around furniture. She talked about his situation. He thought about hers. A runaway teenage son. A jar full of hair. She didn't look well.

Joanna paced. “Even if you see the project through, they dump you.” She confined her steps to a strip of floor beside the coffee table, peanut butter jar at its center like a talisman. “Here is Cole, armed with information, and the question – given what Cole knows, what will he do?” She stopped, faced him. All eyes and nervous energy.

“We’ll take off,” she said. “Poof. Gone.”

He loved her ability to believe this. The promise that if you don’t like something, you can erase it.

“You make it sound possible, Jo.”

“It is possible,” she said. “It’s a big country.” Her body electric. She charged the air. “You and me. The open road. We see something we like, we stop.” She slapped the palm of one hand with the back of the other. “We make it happen.”

Her eyes shone. “How many people get this chance, Cole?”

They drove through the night, following Interstate 30 across the border into Texas. The Winnebago moved gracefully and they kept the speed down, stopping only occasionally to add some food item to their stockpile – something one or the other of them decided, as soon as they thought of it, that they couldn’t live without.

“Tapioca pudding,” he’d say. “Those little plastic cups.” And they’d visit supermarkets, combing aisles of as many stores as it took until they’d find it. This was their job. To take care of each other. To keep darkness from closing in.

“Did I get us a deal, or what?” Joanna held the Winnebago steering wheel tight. After the cramped Corolla, the cab felt expansive.

Cole stretched. He watched the highway slide by through his own pale reflection in the windshield. Deep-set green eyes. Soft mouth.

Joanna checked the speedometer. “Admit it. I was brilliant.”

The salesman, a slight twang, a step behind in his awareness of evolving gender roles. Had questioned Joanna’s ability to handle the Winnebago. Ned’s Motor Home Sales. Rockwood, Tennessee. An outdoor lot, a grass field at the side of State Route 116. Ned tried to backpedal, but he wasn’t near fast enough. When Ned threw out a price, Joanna scowled. “I’ve seen the same model, three thousand less.” She’d never seen a Winnebago before. In the end, Ned met her halfway, and doubled the trade-in on the Corolla. Now she drove with a kind of glee.

“Let’s sing cowboy songs,” she said.

Cole raised and lowered the armrest. Stretched his legs out. Just because he could. Everything was in shades of brown.

“I don’t know any cowboy songs,” he said. “Do you know any cowboy songs?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure.” A canopy of stars stretched above them. The road to Fort Worth spread straight to the horizon. “The only one I know I know is ‘Don’t Fence Me In’.” She hummed three or four bars. “At least I think it’s a cowboy song.”

She sang.

It hadn’t rained in days. Felt like it would never rain again.

They stopped at places they'd read about and wanted to see. The Natchez Trace, the Rio Grande, the Black Hills of South Dakota. They etched an erratic line across the country, gleaning edible treasures from small-town markets, choosing destinations based on the sound of a name – Hoxie Arkansas, Alamogordo New Mexico. They moved west not by design but by implicit consent, thinking of foods they wanted to gather, putting miles, vast sections of the country, between themselves and what lurked behind them. The midwest as a buffer zone.

“There should be two distinct types of sexual relationships.”

Joanna behind the wheel. Somewhere in South Dakota. The great moonscape of the Badlands behind them, air conditioning on high, bright midday sun on the vast American highway. Cole swiveled in his seat. Sipped a Coke. He felt tall in the motor home. Big. In one part of his brain, Willie Nelson sang “Don't Fence Me In.”

“Are you listening?” Joanna asked. Gray wraparound sunglasses gave her a teenage aura.

“Two types of relationships,” Cole said. He was half listening. Half thinking about his own circumstances. How he'd spent a year – more – creating a next-generation encryption key. How you didn't just walk away from that.

“Exactly,” Joanna said. “The ones where you're committed – the deep, lasting, let's-work-things-out kind, and the purely recreational, for release, with both parties clear on what it is.”

“We’re talking about Diana here.”

Joanna nodded. She loved the feel of the big steering wheel in her hands. The sense that she was driving the whole world. “I made a mistake. She was too young to appreciate the distinction.”

“She’s an undergraduate, Jo. She’s what, twenty-two?”

The Winnebago swallowed highway. Entire chunks of country left behind them, rapidly reducing the amount of space between them and the end of the road.

They were on their way to California, though they did not know it yet.

“What can I say. She’s young. She’ll get over it.”

Cole held the peanut butter jar, brown strands of hair inside. There was sadness in Joanna’s voice.

“I stopped for pizza,” she said. “Carlisle looked like a quaint college town.” Her eyes burned. Road-weary. “There she was. Sweet. Open. I pounced.”

Cole swiveled in his seat. Full lumbar support. The part of his brain that played music switched to “Blue Shadows on the Trail,” gentle, like a horse cantering.

“Maybe I did her a favor.” Hands on the wheel. Road slipping away. “She’s not really a dyke – she’s checking out girls. A college thing. She’ll find a nice man.”

Cole looked askance at her.

“Okay, that’s bullshit. I broke her heart.”

“And the plaintive wail from the distance

comes a-driftin’ on the evening breeze”

Cole realized that the song in his head was coming out his mouth. He didn't know when that had begun. He didn't know how – from where – he knew the song. He caught Joanna's eye. He shrugged. Swayed to the rhythm.

Joanna's lips curled into a smile as he sang.

*“Soon the dawn will come,
and you'll be on your way
but until the darkness sheds its veil,
there'll be blue shadows on the trail.”*

Lordsburg, New Mexico. Cole at the wheel. Two-lane highway. Dusty shoulder. Eyes darting from road to rearview mirror.

“What are you doing?” Joanna said.

Cole's eyes riveted. “Panicking.”

She looked behind them. A police car framed in the rear windshield.

Cole turned right, past a Union 76 gas station. A quick left. Seeking the shelter of narrow streets. Tall buildings. No such luck. Not in Lordsburg. He hit the gas, felt the drag. All that weight. This vehicle made for straight lines. Open highway.

The police car paused at the gas station, turned down the road they were on.

“Shit,” he said.

“What do you expect,” she said. “You're driving a Winnebago in erratic circles in a small New Mexico town.”

He looked at her. In the mirror. Back to the road. He began to feel dizzy.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Take a breath. Drive normally.”

He nodded his head.

Blue light flashed around them. Reflected off the windshield, the roof of the cab.

The police car closed on them.

Cole began to sweat. “Fuck. What now?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Joanna said. “Pull over.”

Even with dark glasses on, Cole squinted from the glare off the pavement. Two narrow lanes. A warehouse set back from the road. He eased the wheel to the right.

Tapped the brake. The police car stopped behind them.

Joanna heard a door shut. She watched Cole’s face. His shallow breathing. “You told me you’d done nothing illegal,” she said.

He shot her a quick glance. “I never used the word illegal. I said I’d done nothing *wrong*.”

“Good morning.” The officer stood at the driver’s window. Sand-colored uniform. Silver nameplate. “License and registration, please.” Thin mustache. Thick arms.

Joanna fished the registration from the glove box. Cole pulled out his wallet.

The Winnebago rode high enough that the officer had to reach up for the documents. Blue light bounced. “Wait here, please.”

Cole leaned his head back against the seat.

“Is there something I should know about?” Joanna asked.

“The law isn’t entirely clear,” Cole said.

She rubbed her hair, greasy from days without washing. Rested one foot on the dash. Untied, then retied her shoelace. “You took it with you, didn’t you.”

The road empty, quiet. Two blocks ahead, a ramp reaching up to the Interstate.

Cole didn’t say a word. Lines of computer code. Thousands upon thousands of keystrokes, all made by his fingers.

Behind them, the car door shut.

“Boys and their penises,” Joanna spat. “How fucked are we?”

Cole watched the mirror. “It’s hard to say.”

“Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle, Mr. Newton?” A squared-off stance. A refusal to look up at Cole.

Cole opened the door, stepped onto the road. The heat dizzying.

Joanna began to climb out.

“Wait there please, ma’am.”

Here we go, Cole thought. He had no idea how to behave in a showdown. He didn’t feel properly dressed. He faced the officer. Squinting. A ringing in his ears. He saw himself, twin reflections in the officer’s sunglasses.

“Temporary registration,” the officer said. “You just buy this rig?” A man who liked his beer. A body still strong from high school football.

“Yeah.” Cole concentrated on not lowering his eyes. Not looking away. “Traded her car in Tennessee.”

Piercing sun. Cars in the distance.

In the cab of the Winnebago, Joanna hummed a tune.

“Here’s the problem,” the officer said.

“Problem?” Cole said. He heard his voice waver.

“I’ve got a suspicious nature. Tennessee plates. Massachusetts license.

Handwritten bill of sale. Peculiar driving.”

Cole’s knees felt weak.

“And our computer’s down, so I can’t check you out.” The officer shook his head slowly. “I don’t like it,” he said.

“No,” Cole managed. “I guess not.”

“If my computer were working, would it tell me anything interesting about you?”

Cole wished he could see the man’s eyes. Wished he knew the answer. He willed his knees not to shake. His voice steady. “No, sir,” he said. “I don’t believe it would.”

A car rolled past. Some big Ford. A wave of heat from the engine. Cole concentrated on breathing.

The officer nodded. Handed back license and registration. Inscrutable. “Guess we send you on your way.” Handed Cole a moving violation. “I don’t want to see you again.”

A long exhale. Cole waited until the officer reached the patrol car, then melted slowly into the driver’s seat. “Fucker.”

“Nice and easy,” Joanna said. Cole handed her the registration. She popped it back into the glove box. “All is well,” she said.

Cole eased the motor home onto the road. The miles slipped behind them. Interstate 10. The Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway.

Joanna did curls with a dumbbell they kept on the floor on the passenger side.

“So,” she said. “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

He shrugged. “Legally, it’s a gray area.” His eyes followed the broken white line that marked the lane. “It’ll be fine.”

“Look at me when you say that.”

He looked at her and smiled. “I did what I had to do. Remember?”

“No,” she said. “You had to leave. You didn’t have to steal the code.”

They moved west at sixty miles an hour. They had crossed over into something new.

“I didn’t steal it,” he said. “I created it. It’s mine.”

“You haven’t gotten any smarter with age.”

Joanna behind the wheel. East of Indio. The Mojave around them, all expanse and shadows.

Cole wore his sunglasses, despite the darkness. California made sense to him.

“What did you expect?” he said.

“Never mind.” Her right foot tingled, half asleep. She tapped it on the floor.

Wiggled her toes. The Winnebago slowed noticeably. “I expected you might be smarter is all.”

She pressed the accelerator. She liked driving fast enough to create the illusion that they were airborne: a flying bus, a steel dirigible defying gravity.

“I thought it would be different out here,” Cole said.

“It is. Look around you.” Headlights cut a swath of road and dust. She could feel hills in the distance. “Think like you’re seeing it for the first time. Like it’s only just been discovered.”

Cole pushed the sunglasses on top of his head. Craned his neck to see the broadest possible stretch of night sky. The world had changed. The weight of the air.

She fumbled in the tray between the seats. Found a Mallo Cup. Shook away sleepiness.

He wondered how much she hurt. When she’d crack. She had a runaway teenage son. She had broken a heart in Pennsylvania. And something more. He sensed it. Behind her eyes. Behind the sunglasses. But Joanna was the queen of bob and weave. Joanna always knew the location of the nearest exit.

They passed a green highway sign. *Indio 46. Los Angeles 183.*

They drove to the edge of the country and looked off.

Sunset Boulevard runs into Pacific Coast Highway just north of Santa Monica, and if you go straight across PCH you find yourself in a municipal parking lot, six rows of white lines painted on faded blacktop, and if you pull to the west edge of the parking lot you encounter a steel cable which, along with a narrow stretch of beach, is then all that stands between you and the Pacific Ocean.

Joanna nudged the Winnebago forward until its nose rested against the cable.
Turned off the engine.
She stared out at the water. Breakers. White foam. The tang of salt in the air.
A man, white shorts, shirt open to the breeze, strolled the beach, sandals dangling from his fingers. The digital clock on the dashboard read 4:49 am.

“Here we are,” Cole grinned. “America.”

Joanna swiveled to face him.

Waves on the shore. She felt cramped. “I need to stretch,” she said. “Let’s walk.”

He opened his door. “I’ll catch up. I need to see a man about a horse.”

She walked on wet sand, just beyond the waterline. Smooth shore. No rocks. A weight in her forearms. An ache in the knees. The miles had taken a toll. She wanted her son Anthony to be a baby again, riding on her chest in a Snuggli while she combed Wells Beach for starfish, sea shells, called out the names as she lifted them from the sand – mussel, scallop. Placed his tiny fingers on the ridged surfaces so he could feel and remember. She wanted to be forgiven, then have the moment obliterated, so she didn’t have to live grateful.

Cole’s footsteps behind her. “I just want you to know I’ve marked my territory.”

She laughed, eyes on the horizon. “I’m happy for you.”

He fell into step beside her.

“We’re free, Jo. We’re brand new.” His tired eyes big as moons. “We have no history, no limitations. Who have you always wanted to be?” In the distance, a pier. The silhouette of hills. “I’m going to wear a black hat. A badass grin.”

“You believe we can do this? Start over?”

“I do,” he said. “You’re living proof.” He didn’t mean it to hurt.

She stopped. Looked out at the ocean.

“What’s wrong?”

Fading stars. A warm breeze. “He’s out there somewhere.” She stared, intent, as if she might see Anthony among the waves, floating.

Cole was not prepared for gravity. Not interested. “Fuck,” he said. “Not now.” He hadn’t meant to speak the thought, but there it was. He tried to think of something kind. He put his hand on her shoulder. “He’s sixteen, Jo.”

She pulled away. “He’s my son.”

Cole watched with her, the foam of waves, the incoming tide. A shape. He made it an arm. Anthony’s arm. He tried to give the image flesh. So they could effect a rescue. So he could show her that she wouldn’t. “You’re here, Jo. No looking back.”

A wet wind. Joanna felt salt against her face. She wiggled her fingers. Watched the muscles ripple in her forearm. Stiffened her voice. “I carried him inside me,” she said. “Still do. Always will.”

Dawn edged the horizon. “That’s other people, Jo. Not you. You can walk away from anything.”

Water swirled at her feet. Seeped into her running shoes.

He hovered behind her, near enough that his shirt brushed against her back.

She could feel his breath on her neck, his words in her belly. She wrapped her arms around herself. Goose-pimpled.

They stood there. They did not move.

The sky slowly brightened. California coast stretched before them like possibility.

They had come across the country and stood at its edge. They had a motor home filled with snack foods. They had each other.