

## More Felt Said That Way

I'd fallen in love like this before—a sudden yearning beyond my control—with the girl at the edge of the ocean, her bathing suit in waves of color, fluttery wings for hands. The old man feeding a cat from his palm in a field beside a dusty cement plant. I'd even attached myself to a boy riding in a shopping cart whose mother took a toy truck from his hands when she didn't have enough money in her purse. He was too young for words and didn't cry. Just eyes and empty hands. Too many nights I wished I'd squeezed around my cart and paid for that toy. It would've been a struggle, but I could've done it.

The thing with Jess happened up close, though, in the backseat of my brother's car. Pale, smooth arms, fingernails like they knew where to stop. But it wasn't until he pulled out a cigarette and raised it to his lips that the love kicked in. Every move felt intimate, a secret passage to his mind. Through hovering smoke and a scruffy beard there was a delicious tumble into darkness and bliss. At least that's how it felt in my brother's backseat. It's hard to explain, like the thing with the old man.

Four of us in that little car, impossible not to take each other in. Chad had the radio too loud, the backseat stunk like his old dog and the seats were unravelling in long, gray strings. He started cursing because the off-ramp was backed up. Jess took a drag on the cigarette, rested his elbow on the ledge of the open window. His hand dipped through the slow-moving air then rose, cigarette tucked into his palm like a protected gift. And then he flicked it still-burning among the rocks.

More cursing before Chad says we're out of gas. Devin said I told you and now what and other brilliant comebacks like that. There was no one to flag down for help because all the cars

were parked, gas or no. "It's right off the exit," Chad said looking at me from the rearview mirror. I got out, grumbling because he didn't even have a gas can, even though I'd never actually touched one in my life. I slid my Mastercard into my pocket and started walking. The credit card was the only reason I was there; everyone else was broke. People stared out their car windows at me and I thought about flipping them off but then Jess showed up beside me. We kept walking and didn't talk; somehow more felt said that way.

The exit was one of those long curves that keep winding into itself and goes on forever. Jess being there slowed me down; I would've been stomping in anger, so that helped. When we got to the four-lane, a cluster of emergency vehicles were flashing their lights and a tow truck spewed fumes beside a couple of bent-up cars. Up ahead, two guys dragged a deer to the berm, its body soft with fur, its head hanging. Gravel and blood and dirt got pulled along with it.

I stopped walking because the scene was right in front of us, but then the guy taking hold of the deer's head yells over his shoulder, "Keep moving!" so I did. Jess hung behind, and when I looked back, the men had left the deer on the berm and Jess was crouched beside it. I didn't wait. He wasn't around to hold the door to the convenience store, so I waited in line trying to appreciate the air conditioning. I was almost to the cashier when Jess appeared, carrying a container and headed out to the pumps. I'd assumed I'd be doing all that, so I bought him two packs of smokes and green Tic Tacs along with mini Caramellos for me. Stupid gas can cost over twenty bucks, another thing to add to what my brother already owed me.

The gas can was heavier than I expected, and after the intersection Jess took it because he must've seen my face. The smell of gas made my head ache, and with the sun on us everything felt unsteady. The walk back seemed even longer than before. Right before we got to the

accident Chad texted me three quick times, but I ignored him and tore open the Caramellos instead. They were super-soft and gooey but kept me going.

The last cop car pulled onto the highway and traffic started moving but slowly. Exhaust mixed with the smell rising from what was now a mound on the side of the road. I circled away from its flies and blood in colors you wouldn't expect. Jess lagged behind again and when I turned around, he was right beside the dead deer, bent over the open wound, smoke rising over his shoulder while the gas can dangled from his fingertips. Heat seemed to rise right through me. "I'll take that," I managed when I got beside him. I held out my sticky fingers and tried not to look.

Jess gripped the cigarette at the corner of his lips and blinked away smoke, moved the gas can to his other hand before giving it to me. "Poor thing," he said, his lips kissing the cigarette now clenched between his uneven teeth. The cars were facing our way this time with people staring at us over their steering wheels. When we got around the big curve and could see Chad's car, Jess rested his hand on the small of my back and kept it there. For months.

Almost a year later, when I had my own car, Jess told me to pull into the parking lot in front of Kohl's. He didn't go into Kohl's, though, but the store beside it. He came out carrying a little bag and two foil balloons. "Cheerful and cheap."

"For me?" I said, wondering at the Happy Birthday and Get Well Soon wishes.

"No, but these are." He handed me a white bag with a box of gourmet peanut butter cups inside.

"Now you're talking," I said and popped one into Jess's mouth, too. "What about them?"

The balloons only occasionally bounced off the ceiling in the backseat because they were almost deflated, the strings tied to them to keep them from floating away with not much to do. "Go down Glen Hill Road." Jess poked at the balloons and they hung there as I drove.

"Now where?"

"Here, slow down." I took Glen Hill Road on my way to classes at the university, so I remembered the deer before I saw it.

"I'm not..."

"Just pull over. It's okay." Jess lit a cigarette and studied the balloons for a moment before deciding to take them both with him. "Shine the lights on it."

I didn't want to; even in the dark I could see that the deer's body was swollen and obscene. Jess waved his hand like he was calling home his dog, so I turned on my parking lights and watched as he walked around the carcass, tilting his head and maneuvering his cigarette as he studied the dead thing. I thought I might throw up when he gently lifted the head and looped a silky string around the deer's neck. Get Well Soon. The other he wrapped around a leg. Jess stood with his hands on his hips, the burning coal of his cigarette close to his lips.

I couldn't help but fixate on the struggling balloons, bright colors drifting through the darkness. Even later, in the backseat, with Jess's sweet and smoky breath tasting all the right spots, I wondered if the balloons he'd left were meant as a tribute to life or a bawdy monument to mock both the living and the dead. It didn't matter.

Driving home I thought about the woman I'd seen in Kohl's parking lot while I was waiting for Jess. She could've been an old-time movie star with plump, flushed cheeks, her eyes bright even in the fading light. "Hakim!" she called, the baby carrier in her hand clearly not a

burden. "I've been looking for you." A man came up beside her, skinny with a big smile, and they both gazed into the carrier at a face I couldn't see.

It was over with Jess even then, before the deer and the wilting balloons. Love had found a new yearning, this time soft and pure. We didn't talk when I dropped Jess off at the side of the road. What more was there to say? In bed that night, I washed down the rest of the peanut butter cups with a tall, cool glass of milk.

