



Go Down Swinging

You keep running. You notice the contrail is wide and fading overhead.

You think of your mother.

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You wake up in that roadside motel and the noonday sun beats through the window and he lies beside you. Fallen pillows collect illuminated dust. Empty glasses cast rainbow specks on off-white walls. A polyester bedspread entangles his feet and the air conditioner rattles a drumstick off-beat before blowing cold air. You think about untwisting the sheets to cover your body. But he's not snoring. The rattling of that rusted window unit has moved him from belly to back. You lie on your stomach, conscious of your breath, careful to keep it quiet. You dare not move your dry lips or the hair caught in your lashes.

Just yesterday, you picked poppies in your mother's backyard. Cattle moaned. Pump jacks moved. Sticky air smelled of pulpwood mills and your mother hung wet laundry on the line. She asked about your plans for the weekend now that school was out for the day. You said you might go downtown for a movie or on a desert drive to see if the ocotillo had bloomed. You said you might be with him, but it was kind of up in the air. He had been gone all week to Phoenix.

Your mother, bent over the laundry basket, stopped to look at you. You picked at the blood-red poppy petals. She said he was always gone. She said he was too old for you. She said he was trouble like your father and you wandered out to where the fence ends and thought of a canyon twelve miles out. Last August, something like a comet burned over the canyon. It streamed slow and bright and you ached for a farway time when your father was home and your mother was happy and their brokenness was hidden. You ached for something you couldn't put your finger on, something unfading. You heard your mother say that talking truth to people was like shouting at empty radio waves.

Stale motel air smells like bleached cotton and cigarettes. You

count the glasses on the table. Today you'll drive down into Juarez. That hadn't been the plan. The movie ends at midnight, you had told your mother. When he picked you up, she watched from behind the screen door and he kissed you on the lips. It embarrassed you. Las Cruces is out; I'm taking you to Juarez, he told you later on down the road. But the moon rose. A motel sign buzzed pink. Can't drive all night, he said. You asked to go home.

He's awake and watches you breathe mutedly next to him. A bloodshot gaze stays fixed on your body and then he kisses your cheek. The stench of last night's whiskey seeps from his pores. He kisses your neck and reaches for you, but you turn to face the wall. He untangles the bedspread and goes to take a shower. The bathroom fan starts up. You pull the thin cotton sheet to your bare shoulders.

A small suitcase on wheels sits upright against the wall. It swings open when he closes the bathroom door and you lie still. It crosses your mind he'll come back out and find it open. He'll look at you and ask you why you've opened his suitcase. He might slam it shut and tell you to be a better girl than that. He might grip your wrist until it burns and then kiss you hard. He'll wink and say you don't taste like a sixteen-year-old. You leave the bed to close the suitcase. On your hands and knees you see green and the silver trigger of a pistol.

Crisp bills rolled into a denim jacket stick out. Silver metal gleams in fluorescent lighting and the shower knob squeaks down into soundlessness. You hear him drying off with the scratchy motel towel.

The bathroom door opens. Steam dissolves in cold air. You've thrown on your sundress, the white one he likes best, and your bare legs dangle over the edge of the bed. He smiles at you and lets the white towel fall to his feet. He tries to touch you and you push his hands away.

He steps back, about to say something, but turns his back to you and slowly bends over the suitcase. You turn to the window. The torn edge of the screen flaps. A mourning dove coos from somewhere below. Your eyes follow telephone wires looping along the interstate, but the image of a pistol flashes across your brain.

You hear a few quick zips and clicks. Pearl buttons snap as he dresses. Cheap cologne fills musty air. He tells you to get your stuff. Wait here while I check out, he says. The door's chain lock sways when he slams the door. You wait for the clicking of his boot heels to fade. Then you move swiftly.

In your new purse you've stuffed your mother's lipstick and fifty dollars cash saved from your after-school job. You dig out a yellow wallet and the calling card you bought at Wal-Mart. You'll say you had to call your mother before hitting the road. With damp palms you latch the door behind you.

Carts line the balcony. A maid rolls a vacuum into the neighboring room. You press the suitcase to your chest and squeeze past the carts. Sunlight blinds you until you reach the shadowed stairwell. Mourning doves scatter. Your sandals flop and click, flop and click on the cement stairs and you see his face in front of you. You stop in place. Your sundress billows like a flag.

You find words and tell him you're packing the truck. He rips the suitcase from your arms and grabs your hand. A radio buzzes above and the maid hums. You're yanked across the empty parking lot, and at the truck, he swings the suitcase into the bed. You're pushed into the cab. You hear a series of quick zips and shuffling and then nothing. He stands beside you now, wearing the denim jacket, fumbling with the inside pocket. You're a good girl, always doing the right thing and helping out, he says. He closes your door like a Texas gentlemen.

At the motel office door, the desk clerk hollers his name and waves a paper in her hand. He tips his head back and mutters something. Got to go straighten out business, he says. The barrier of the window muffles his voice. He waves at the desk clerk and walks off.

You spot the telephone booth. It's near a Coke machine and the interstate.

A Cadillac zooms past and the rusted motel sign rattles when an eighteen-wheeler barrels by. The interstate's lonely now and heat wavers and buzzes with grasshoppers. You've got a tight grip on the suitcase and you walk fast.

The enclosed booth is dusty and shakes when a jet roars over. The contrail streams low. You remember the canyon, but you can't think of that now. You've got to dig quarters out of your yellow wallet.

He hollers your name. Time's wastin', sweetheart. Got to get goin', he says. One quarter. Two quarters. You've got to find two more, but he's spotted you. He smiles wide. Trembling hands deposit the first one, then the second. His boot heels click faster. Your heart races.

When you drop the phone, it swings, beeping. You take off down the graveled shoulder of the interstate and he chases you. The

suitcase is too heavy and you toss it. It busts open in the ditch. A wave of money swirls in the breeze. Hundred-dollar bills catch in barbed wire. You're running as fast as you can now. He yells at you from far behind. When you don't stop, a single shot echoes into the deserted noonday. Another shot. You keep running. You notice the contrail is wide and fading overhead. You think of your mother.

He's catching up to you now and there's nowhere to go. But you don't go down without a fight.