

Antonio Aiello

Winter Dance

I was freshman class president and chairman of the winter dance committee. It was the middle of fourth period Student Council and we were debating an issue of the utmost importance. Should we have red and white streamers—the school colors—or silver and white for winter? What about balloons? We so have to drop balloons over the dancers like snow. Confetti is way more snow-ish. Shut. Up. Who's going to blow up all the balloons? "People!" I slammed my fist on the table. The council chambers fell silent. "It's not a matter of balloons or confetti, red or silver streamers. This is the freshman class dance, our dance, and we want to show East High School we know how to party." The chambers erupted in howls. "Settle down," I said. "There's money in the budget for everything." Tina Lamn, J.V. cheerleader and committee co-chair was standing next to me. She did one of her cute little rapid-fire handclaps. "Now, let's break up into shopping groups and..."

There was a knock on the door and everyone watched as the hall monitor came in. She whispered something to Mr. Boatright, the student council advisor, and handed him a note. Boatright unfolded the paper and read. He looked up at me and stared a moment. He cleared his throat. "Five-minute recess." He turned to me. "Jack, I'd like to see you a minute in the hall."

"Busted!" someone yelled.

We stood in the empty hall for a moment, silent except for the muffled jingle of keys in Boatright's pocket. "I'm sorry to be the one to give you this." He handed me the note. Grandfather Ralph passed away, the note said. Mom is on the way to pick you up.

I crumpled the note and dropped it on the ground.

I dug my hands into my pockets and rocked back in my duck boots. Boatright was the only one at school who knew about my mom and what had happened that summer. He'd been trying to convince me to move in with my dad.

"If you want to talk..."

I shook my head and he quit talking. We stood there for an awkward minute.

"Will you make sure Tina gets the shopping done?" I said.

Outside, the esplanade was barren except for the school's security guard parked by the bike rack in his beat-up white Ford. I sat down on the cold cement. It was November and the air was fresh and clean. A cold front blowing down from the north had washed away the brown cloud blanketing Denver. The sky was a monochromatic swirl of cumulous that made the jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains pop from the horizon. Grandfather Ralph had been dead for four years. Lung cancer. For weeks Mom had been trying to talk me into spending Thanksgiving break in Oklahoma City. She wanted me to see J. J as in Jesús. Jesús with a whisper J. Mom's twenty-six year old boyfriend, Jesús. The same one recently transferred to El Reno medium-security after being sentenced to fourteen years by a Texas judge. El Dentista is what the DEA called him. Victim of Reagan's War on Drugs is what Mom liked to say. This was the same Jesús I hadn't seen since he was arrested flying from Denver to Dallas-Fort-Worth with a kilo of cocaine seal-a-mealed inside a couple of pounds of freshly ground Columbian roast coffee. Now, he was just backdoor Jesús, cavity searched by DEA agents at the Dallas airport.

Mom's eggplant Mercedes turned onto the esplanade. I stomped and patted the cold from my arms and feet. As she pulled up to the front steps, I saw her smiling through the dirty windshield. The car had barely come to a stop before she opened the door.

"Surprise!" Mom curtseyed and spread her arms. She was dressed in one of her casual aerobics outfits: white tights, maroon legwarmers washing over black jazz shoes and a matching maroon t-shirt dress—neck cut out—hanging off of one shoulder, black bra

exposed. There was a thick black belt around her waist and a headband holding back a new perm. At forty-two she was still pretty enough to make my freshman art teacher stutter.

“Guess where we’re going?”

“Mexico,” I said.

“Oklahoma,” she said. “We’re going to see J. You know how much it costs to fly seven hundred miles during Thanksgiving?”

“What’d you do with the turkey?” I said.

“Four hundred dollars a seat,” she said. “So we’re driving. You and me, kiddo.”

“What happened to Thanksgiving?” I said. “We talked about this. You had a turkey thawing in the sink.”

She hugged herself from the cold. “Turkey’s in the freezer where it belongs. You’re going to have to drive, sweetie. Mommy’s been running around all morning. Packed your bag for you: khakis, socks, underwear. Got it all. Brought that blue and white pinstripe oxford you’re always wearing and your topsiders. There’s a can of beef jerky in the back seat. Thought you might like that.” She opened the passenger side door and started to get in.

“What about your friends, Meg and Jeanie and the twins?” I said. “What about Dad and Kathy. We’re supposed to do Thanksgiving together.”

Mom stepped toward me and cupped my face with her hands. When she set her mind to something, there was no changing it. “Meg’s having the girls over to her place. They’ll be fine.”

“What about Dad?”

Mom kissed my forehead and let go. “I told him we were going to see Grandma in Wichita.”

“This is bullshit,” I said.

“Can we finish this conversation in the car? Wanna get on the road before it starts snowing.”

She patted me on the butt scooting me toward the other side of the car and I swatted her hand away. I threw my backpack in the back seat. I got in on the driver’s side and pulled the seat up as far as it would go. I adjusted the mirrors and put my seat belt on. Snow started coming down in light crystalline flakes. I pushed the gas peddle all the way to the floor and threw the car in gear. We fishtailed

and Mom flew back in her seat.

“Damn it, Jack!” Mom grabbed onto the door with both hands.

When we pulled up to the stop sign at the end of the esplanade I brought the car to an abrupt stop.

“You’re not too old to smack,” she said. “You pull another stunt like that...”

“So smack me,” I said.

She was quiet a moment. Then she said, “It’s not like I’m asking that much.”

“We’re going, aren’t we?” I said.

She put her hand on my knee and let it sit a minute, then she squeezed and let go. “You okay driving in the snow?”

I put my foot on the gas and slowly pulled out. Mom turned around, reached between the two seats and grabbed her quilted overcoat from the back. She spread it over herself like a blanket and leaned her head against the headrest. “I’m wiped out,” she said. We were heading north on Colorado Boulevard. The snow picked up and came down thick and white. I put my blinker on and carefully maneuvered across traffic to make the entrance onto I-70 heading east.

When we hit the eastern plains of Colorado, the snow let up and the roads were clean and dry. The two-lane blacktop melted away into a golden backdrop of rolling hills and harvested wheat fields. I kept the car going at a steady sixty and made it to the Kansas border in less than four hours. Mom slept most of the way, waking only once when we stopped for gas and biscuits and gravy at the Flying J outside of Limon. There weren’t many cars going our way, mostly semis and flatbed farm trucks. Headed in the opposite direction, was a steady stream of families, ski-racks on their roofs, cars loaded with kids for Thanksgiving weekend in the Rockies.

Once we crossed into Kansas, Prairie Dog Town billboards started popping up every couple of miles. Greatest Freak Show On Earth, the signs said, Six-legged Steers, World’s Largest Gopher. We had stopped there once. I was ten and Mom and I were on our

way to Wichita for grandfather Ralph's funeral. My parents were separated then, and had been for months. I had begged Mom to stop. I remembered standing in the parking lot looking up at the world's tallest gopher and being disappointed it was only six feet tall and made of brown cement. Mom came up next to me, took a drag off her cigarette and sized up the gopher. Then she said, "This place is like my marriage."

We passed a sign advertising a two-headed goat. I looked over at Mom asleep in the passenger seat, head bobbing gently to the rhythm of the road. Her mouth was slightly ajar with a little dab of drool on the edge of her lips. She looked harmless curled up under her quilted overcoat—eye-shadow faded and smeared, her headband slightly askew across her forehead.

On the road, white lines flew by one after the other with mesmerizing monotony. I thought about the years after my parents' divorce and how things had changed. Here is Mom leaning against the kitchen counter smoking her cigarette, drinking her coffee, talking on the phone. Ernie and Eddie, Enrique and Jorge, Miguel, Antonio, Arturo, Abram.... she says. Why was I ever married? Here is Jack sitting in the living room playing *Defender* on a Saturday morning. Here is Jesús, shoes in hand, shirt unbuttoned, walking down the front stairs. What're you playing? he says. Here is Jack, arms around Jesús's waist, blowing down a Capital Hill back alley on the back of a Suzuki 2000, garages and trash cans and red brick incinerators blending into one blur of color. Here is Jack pocketing beers from the pool house bar. Mom's friends fill the backyard. Jack and his buddies sit on the pool house roof shot gunning beers, watching the bodies below, greased up, liquored-up, coked-up, writhing to the Flashdance soundtrack. Your Mom is so cool. Here is Jack sitting on the pool house couch watching Jesús and a guy named Feta cut cocaine in plastic laundry tubs. In goes the cocaine. In goes the baking soda. Taste it. Weigh it. Seal-a-meal it in freezer bags. Not in my house, Mom yells. Here is Jack in the kitchen, phone cord stretched to the refrigerator. Caroline, he says. I didn't scrump Faith. And here is the back door splintering open as men in blue windbreakers—DEA—swarm the kitchen, shotguns raised. Here is Jack and Mom standing by the pool as agents search the living room, Jack's room,

Mom's room, the pool house. He's not living here, Mom says. Here is Jack taking off his shirt, his tennis shoes, his shorts. He climbs up the pool house wall to the roof. Damn it Jack, get down from there. He backs up to the roof's edge farthest from the pool. He runs, slow at first, but picks up speed as he nears the edge. Here is Jack pushing off from the metal flashing, walking through the air, free from Jésus and DEA agents, free from Mom and her aerobics outfits. Here is Jack splashing into the deep end, warm water enveloping him as he sinks to the bottom of the pool.

A gust of wind howled across the road and hit the car. Here is Jack swerving onto the shoulder, gravel clinking against the passenger side door.

Mom stirred in her seat. I pulled the car back onto the road. Mom covered her mouth and yawned. She ran her hands through her hair, fluffing up where her head leaned against the seat. I kept my eyes on the horizon. Out there, in the rusty brick farm towns of Kansas, mothers were baking pumpkin pies, thawing turkeys, peeling potatoes. Guys my age were lining up on muddy football fields, doing the last wind sprints before the end of football practice. Mom reached across the divide between us and stroked my cheek.

"What was that for?" I said.

"Just wanted to make sure you were really there." She put her hand in her coat pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. "What a dream I just had."

She sat up and grabbed her pack of cigarettes off the dash. "They were trying to take you away from me. Goddamn FBI. Said I bought you with drug money." She took out a cigarette and lit it. "Assholes. It was like the day they searched the house." There was a tone in her voice like when she was badmouthing my father. "They showed me a receipt saying I bought you at Target. Had a date stamped on it from last summer. Target. Can you believe that?"

"Can you roll down your window a little?" I said.

"I argued with them. I pulled out my own receipts: receipts for food and clothing from when you were little. I pulled out that big, old adding machine, the one with all the keys the cats kept pissing on, and started tallying up the expenses. Those agents stood over me shaking their heads. 'Ma'am.' They kept saying. 'We have all

the evidence we need.” Mom brought her knees up to her chest and took a long drag off her cigarette, shrouding herself in a plume of mentholated smoke.

“This trip is like a new beginning,” she said. “We’re like a team, the three of us. A family. No one can take that away from us.”

I rolled down my window. The fresh air cooled my face. “I don’t know,” I said.

We drove on a couple of miles with her smoking and when she had finished her cigarette she said, “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

I could tell she was watching me and not the road and I didn’t know what to tell her. I was thinking about my girlfriend, Caroline and how I liked having dinner over at her place, how she and her sisters sat around the kitchen picking on each other making it difficult for Ms. Grossman to get dinner ready. How that’s the kind of family I wanted.

“Jack!” Mom said.

“I was thinking about you and J,” I finally said. I could tell she was waiting for more and I didn’t know what to give her. I wanted to ask her why she couldn’t be more like Caroline’s mom. Why she couldn’t go back and date that lawyer who took her to San Francisco right after her divorce. I wanted to tell her how much I hated J. How I felt like he was taking her away from me. “I was thinking about how things have changed since meeting J.”

“People change, sweetie. J has changed.”

“You almost went to jail because of him,” I said.

“That’s just not true. I didn’t do anything and the DEA knew it.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I love him, Jack. You’re old enough to understand that.”

“You know Caroline’s not allowed to come over to our house anymore?” I said. “You notice she hasn’t been around for a long time?”

“You two were getting too serious ...”

“Her mom said our house isn’t fit for kids. I heard her say it myself. She said you have a different set of values.”

Mom let out a choked laugh. "Caroline's mom needs to get fucked." She went silent for a minute. "This is a road trip. We should be having a good time. Have some more jerky." She pulled down the sun visor and leaned in close. She took her handkerchief and wiped the wet makeup from around her eyes. She stopped suddenly and turned around in her seat. "Will you look at that sun," she said.

Behind us, in the rear view mirror, I saw a glowing orange sun sinking below a crimson horizon. On either side of the highway endless swaths of harvested corduroy cornfields glowed golden brown.

"Pull over. I want to take a picture for J."

I edged the car onto the shoulder of the road and slowed down to a stop. Mom dug through her purse and pulled out a camera. She got out and started taking pictures, the flash illuminated the ten feet around her: the gravel and asphalt and the splintered corn stalks in the field.

Mom came back to the car and grabbed her coat. "Come on outside and stand with me. Come and watch the sunset with your mom."

We sat there on the trunk of the car and watched the sun set. Mom pulled me close. "I'd like to see J paint that," she said.

J had picked up drawing and painting when he was in a Texas prison camp. He started out with charcoal sketches on newsprint: sketches of his cellmates—nudes—that Mom taped up on the fridge next to Ziggy cartoons and inspirational pronouncements she wrote to herself like *Dancing Frees the Soul*. Proportions weren't J's strength. Hands looked like clubs, and his models always seemed to have these monolithic penises.

Mom sent J supplies: paints—watercolors and acrylics—and brushes. To inspire him she had Meg take some posed pictures of her all dressed up. Within months the antique Woolworth's sign hanging over the living room mantle was replaced by J's first acrylic series. There was *Chica Baby*, Mom doing the splits before a roaring fire, her black silk robe was pinned back revealing a red teddy, red garters and black fishnet stockings. *Mamma Chica* was J's vision of American Gothic. There was Mom splayed out on the chaise lounge dressed the way she was and me standing at her side in my wool

slacks, white oxford and loafers. Finally, there was Nueva Familia, J's first foray into the purely imaginative. Standing on an iridescent green lawn in front of a colonial mansion were Mom and J dressed in black evening wear, flanked by two little Aryan toddlers and a toy poodle.

"It would be nice to see him paint some landscapes," I said. An eighteen-wheeler barreled past us rocking the car. The sun had disappeared leaving a golden band stretched tight above the prairie. We stayed like that a minute, the two of us leaning into each other, watching the last color on the horizon fade to black. Sitting there on the western edge of Kansas, I felt comfortable and safe. It was a simple feeling: the weight of Mom's arm around my waist, the steady rhythm of her heart beating, the familiar scent of mentholated smoke permeating her clothes and hair. This was my mom. And for the first time in a long time I felt like a kid again.

Mom pulled her hand from my waist. She kissed my forehead. "Why don't I drive for a while," she said. "You look pretty well worn out."

I woke up in the back seat smothered under a blanket of mentholated smoke. I laid there for a while looking up through the rear window watching the night sky. Highway lamps flew by in long smears of white and yellow.

I thought about the night J took me along with Feta and a mechanic named Mustafa to strip a client's car who hadn't paid. This client was older than J, in his forties, with gray streaks in his hair. He lived in one of those cul-de-sac communities in the suburbs of Denver. When this guy saw us in his driveway, he came out and begged J not to take his car. Not here, I remembered him saying, not in front of my house. When Mustafa popped the hood, this guy broke down and started yelling for his wife to call the police. J was quick to shut him up. He hit him in the knees with a crowbar, and when the guy crumpled to the ground, J kicked him in the mouth. Jack, J said to me, get moving on the hubcaps.

I sat up and looked out the front windshield. A city glowed softly beneath a charcoal sky.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Mom said.

My stomach churned and my temples hummed with an awkward numbness. Nicotine buzz.

“Are we going through Wichita?” I climbed into the front and slid down into the passenger seat.

“Oklahoma City,” she said. “El Reno’s just west of here.”

“Why didn’t you wake me,” I said. “I didn’t mind driving.” I rolled down my window and leaned toward the fresh air. I swallowed hard trying to make the nausea go away.

“You were sleeping like a baby,” she said. “Besides, I’m the one dragging you to Oklahoma.” She looked over at me and smiled. The skin around her eyes was dark and hollow and she looked older than she ever had before. I wondered if telling her would change the way she felt about J.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said, “for understanding what’s going on with me, for realizing how much this trip means to me and J.”

My stomach pitched and I leaned out the window and threw up. Yesterday’s biscuits and gravy grazed the side of the car and hit the blacktop. I knew I couldn’t tell her what I had seen. I didn’t know why exactly. Courage maybe. Or maybe I felt like I had to protect her. I didn’t want her to think she had been a bad mom. She was just going through a phase—like her disco queen phase and then her Flashdance phase. When the reality set in, when she saw me sitting in the El Reno visiting room, she would see J for who he was—Jil Dentista, serving seven years—and she would break it off. Things would go back to the way they used to be.

“Jack!” Mom slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. “Hold on, sweetie. Let me get you some tissues.” I pulled my head in the window. Mom reached over and wiped my mouth.

“It’s over,” I said. “Everything’s fine.”

Mom brushed the bangs across my forehead. “We’re almost there.”

El Reno was a two-story white beacon hunkered down in the middle of a wide-open field. There was a main building and

smaller outbuildings with yards and basketball courts, everything neatly encased behind double chain link fences topped with razor wire. Guard towers dotted the periphery. Inside the main doors was a thick, orange line painted on the floor for visitors. Mom and I followed the line through the metal detectors and x-ray machine, past guards with a printout of the day's visitors, where photocopies of Mom's driver's license and my birth certificate were handed over for review and filing; we followed the line down a florescent white hallway—metal doors buzzing and clanking behind us—and into the main visiting area.

Mom scanned the rows of Formica tables and benches. The room reminded me of my elementary school lunchroom except here, everything was bolted to the floor. Along one wall was a line of vending machines selling cokes and candy bars, pre-packaged sandwiches and single serving cans of Dinty Moore Beef Stew and everything Chef Boyardee. Little kids wove in and out of the tables playing tag. Whole families sat around eating and chatting like they were picnicking in the park.

Mom waved to a woman sitting close to an inmate. "Her husband's doing fifteen-to-twenty for narcotics," Mom whispered to me. "It's his third time serving. Maria's been at the Motel 8 long enough to have her kids enrolled at El Reno Elementary." She pulled a roll of quarters from her purse and handed it to me. "Go get us some coffee, sweetie. And get yourself something to eat." She headed toward an open table in the middle of the room.

I set the three coffees I bought in the center of the table and sat down across from Mom.

"I got J a coffee," I said.

"You're not hungry?" Mom stood up and smoothed out the bottom of her t-shirt dress. She adjusted and then readjusted the neck-less top, first shifting it to expose her right shoulder and bra strap, then the left.

"It looks fine," I said.

She shifted it one more time.

"There he is," she said. She held up her hand to get J's attention. Her eyes teared up. "I don't know why I bother wearing makeup when I come. This always happens." She wiped her eyes.

with the back of her hand.

Before J was arrested, he was thin and lean and wore sweatpants under his jeans to make his legs look bigger. The J sus sauntering toward us, nodding to friends and smiling like he was in no hurry to get where he was going was big. Prison big. He was dressed in a navy sweat suit that was so snug you could see the shape of his muscles. The sweatshirt was so tight around his neck I thought he might choke.

“I sent him those sweats,” Mom said. “Doesn’t he look good?”

“How’d he get so big?” I said.

When he got to us, I stepped back so Mom could be the first one to say hello.

“Chica Mamma.” J put his hands out to Mom.

She went to him and they hugged for a long time. She looked so small in his arms. Her hands slid down around his waist and tightened like they would never let go. J nuzzled his nose into the top of her head, and I wondered if he’d missed the way her hair smelled like mentholated cigarettes. One of the guards blew a whistle and J pushed away from Mom. “I’m cool.” He put his hands up in front of him, palms out. “It’s cool.”

Mom stood back from J and looked at him hard. In the year he’d been in prison, his boyish face had matured. He had creases in his forehead. And when he smiled at us, he looked nervous and anxious and happy all at once and I almost felt sorry for him.

“Look at your lips,” Mom said. They were cracked and flaking so badly I thought they might start bleeding any minute. She ran her thumb across his top lip. She got up on her toes and kissed them once, twice, and then I saw her tongue coming out.

“Mom!” I said.

She stopped and looked over at me. She smiled and wiped her lips and then she sat down, pulling J with her. I sat down too, and there we were, Mom and J next to each other and me on the other side of the table.

J reached out across the table to shake hands. “Looking good *hombrecito*.” He took my hand and maneuvered it into three separate shakes that ended with the snap of our fingers. “You taking good

care of my Chica Mamma?" he said.

"Course he is." Mom nudged him with her whole body.

I smiled and then J smiled and we were all three of us sitting there smiling, and I couldn't help thinking I'd rather be back in Denver for Thanksgiving dinner watching Dad get drunk and Mom badmouth him for overcooking the turkey.

Mom leaned up and kissed J on the lips again. "I just can't get enough."

J nodded at me. "The heat in this place is on all the time. Everyone gets chapped lips. People will trade a carton of cigarettes for a single Chap Stick. You know what works best? A sliver of gristle from a steak. I used to have an amigo who worked in the kitchen."

"What happened to him?" I said.

"I'll pick up some Chap Stick tonight and bring it in tomorrow," Mom said. She took J's hand in hers and then reached across the table for mine.

"Here I am with my boys," she said.

"For Thanksgiving," I said.

Mom turned to J. "J," she said, "I can't hold it in any longer."

"Chica," he said "It's not for sure."

"It doesn't matter," Mom said. "It's the planning that counts."

J looked at me and nodded a couple of times like he was getting the courage to say something important. My stomach turned in on itself and I felt like I was going to throw up again.

"I want you to know I love this Chica very much," he said to me. "She's a very special lady."

"And..." Mom said.

J licked his lips and then said, "And I love you too. Like un hijo."

I looked past Mom and J to a woman sitting at the table behind them. This woman couldn't have been any closer to the guy she was with without sitting on top of him. Her hand was in his lap and her whole body shook. I knew she was giving him a hand job.

"You know how J's appealing his sentence?" Mom said. "Since the court didn't provide a translator, there's a chance his sen-

tence will be over turned. J might be out as soon as the New Year.”

“How’s that?” I said.

“El President,” J said. “Chica Mamma and I are going to get married.”

I smiled so hard my cheeks ached.

“Of course, not until he’s out,” Mom said. “I don’t want a jail-house wedding. But we’re engaged.” She reached into her purse, fumbled around a minute, then pulled out a diamond ring. She glowed. “I got myself a ring. I know, it’s cubic zirconium, but J said he’s going to replace it with a real diamond when he gets out. I’ve been dying to wear it.” She held up her hand.

I couldn’t look either one of them in the eyes. I looked between them instead, to the guy getting a hand job. He leaned into to the woman giving it. He closed his eyes tight and kissed her on the neck. The woman’s body suddenly stopped moving the way it was and they both slumped into each other. All I could think about were all those times mom had come to visit J without me.

“You look like you’re about ready to cry,” Mom said. “I know, sweetie. I feel the same way.”

Mom and J looked at me and I knew they wanted me to say something nice. And all I could think about was how things used to be. How after the divorce, Mom would have me sit with her while she watched the 10:00 news and then M*A*S*H; how I’d fall asleep with my head in her lap, her hand brushing through my hair. She wasn’t an aerobics queen then, or a disco queen or a boy-toy queen. She wasn’t a prison wife. She was just my mom.

I looked across the table. Mom’s face was white from the overhead lights and caked with too much makeup. Her shoulder was exposed and there was that bra strap. She looked exhausted from the drive and worn down from trying to make me fit into her life. How strange it is to be blinded by love.

“El Dentista” I said.

It took a moment for Mom to register what I had said. Then her eyes narrowed and she stopped smiling. She looked to J and J tightened his grip on my hand.

I caught Mom’s eye and tried not to look at J. “I know why they called him that,” I said. “I saw him do it: kick a guy’s teeth

in.”

She pursed her lips and I knew she was more disappointed in me than pissed. “Why would you say something like that?”

“He did it right in front of this guy’s house,” I said. “Right in front of his wife. I saw him do it. I saw him with my own eyes.”

“Chica-aaa.” J’s grip tightened.

I tried to pull my hand away but he squeezed even harder. My hand hurt like hell, but I made sure to keep my eyes on Mom.

“If I’m lying, then why is J crushing my hand?”

Mom turned to J. I was pulling hard to get my hand back and J let go. I reeled back so hard, I fell over backwards off the bench. When I got up, there was coffee everywhere and both mom and J were wet. Whistles blew, guards were hollering at J to sit back down and everyone seemed to be watching us now.

“Damn-it, Jack,” Mom said. “Look what you did.”

I took a good look at the woman standing in front. She looked like she was waiting for an apology. I grabbed my coat and hurried past the security guards rushing toward our table. I followed the orange lines on the floor to the security check-in and I signed myself out.

I waited for Mom by the car. I figured she had a choice to make. She could come after me and try and make things right or stay inside with J. Half an hour passed and then an hour. Families trickled out the front doors, and slowly, one-by-one, the cars cleared out of the parking lot. The sky was a heavy blanket of gray. The air was crisp and sharp like it might snow. I thought about the winter dance and wondered if Tina had bought both balloons and confetti like we talked about. I thought about Boatright and all the conversations we’d had about me moving in with my dad. And I thought about my dad. I thought about calling him and telling him where I was, telling on Mom.

When the lot was almost empty, Mom finally came out. She headed toward me like she couldn’t get to where she was going to fast enough. As I watched her storm toward me, something inside me grew cold. I didn’t care anymore. Not about her. Not about her and J. And I was going to tell her as much. Before I could get a word out, she smacked me hard across the face. I didn’t see it coming. I

saw the beige brick guard tower and coils of razor wire. I saw a gray sky, vast and endless. She raised her hand like she was going to hit me again. "Asshole!" she said. Then she fished the car keys from her purse and opened the door. She got in and hit the locks.

"You can't leave me here," I said.

She didn't look at me. She sat in the driver's seat for a moment touching up her hair as if I didn't exist. She puckered her face: lips pursed, brow furrowed, her features narrowed into an arrow pointing toward the visor mirror. She stopped teasing and adjusted and then readjusted her pink headband.

I knocked on the window. "Mom!" I said.

She turned the key to start the car. The engine whined and then turned over. She put the car in gear and backed up. I hammered the hood with my fist. When she was out of the space, she put the car in drive and tore away toward the exit. I watched as the wooden security arm rose and the line of tire spikes sunk into its nest in the ground. My mom gunned the engine and disappeared out on to the highway.

I stood there for a while, waiting for her to come back. Wind riffled across the wide-open fields surrounding El Reno and whistled through the chain link fence. A light dusting of snow came down. I watched the guards in the tower train their rifles on inmates playing basketball in the yard. As I walked across the parking lot toward the exit, I thought about all the pronouncements my mom had written to herself and posted on our refrigerator door. No Lying, read one. Dancing Frees the Soul, read another. No Regrets, read the one posted the week she finalized her divorce from my dad. As I stepped out on to the open road, a semi barreled past. The cold wind burned my face. I looked down the highway both ways. Off in the distance, I saw my mom's car pulled over on the side of the road.

Sometimes I wonder how things might have worked out if I hadn't left her on the highway outside El Reno, if I hadn't walked to the closest truck stop and called my dad and asked him to come and get me. Maybe I wouldn't have moved in with him. Maybe my mom wouldn't have felt abandoned. And maybe she wouldn't have wasted

seven years waiting for J to get out of prison just to have him break her heart when he did. People do change, or at least relationships do. I still see my mom every now and then. We've become friends. We never talk about her and J or how things fell apart between us. But sometimes she brings up our road trip. "I can't believe I let you drive like that," she says. Or, "you remember that sunset out in the middle of Kansas? That was something." I like remembering that sunset, too. I like thinking about the orange sun disappearing behind a crimson horizon, the hard wind blowing across the cornfield. I like remembering the familiar scent of mentholated smoke permeating my mom's hair and the comfortable weight of her arm around my waist.