

# Migratory Mistakes

*by Johnny Dantonio*

Highway 1 brings out murderous and suicidal thoughts that are innate to us all. It is impossible to wind and turn the road without premonitions of spearing the side door of an oncoming Taurus, shuffling it into the open-mouth of the Pacific below. As I trek north from Santa Barbara, I picture myself breaking from life's goading through a guardrail, and into a closed-eyed free fall to the same fate.

I haven't been on this road since Elizabeth brought me home for the first time to meet her parents. We had flown to San Francisco to see my Uncle before making the southern venture toward Los Angeles, where she had grown up. I had thought the Golden Gate Bridge was interesting. So many people had come here before us to die. She made a joke about it being a fancy line segment between poverty and homosexuality.

The trucks on the highway are but humpback herds, gradually lapping one another but tightly swimming. Their air holes spew upon each tough turn or before downhill dives. I stay in the right lane to watch their uniformity, their young vans and buses consistently trying to avoid them just like any other adolescent. It's a longer, lonelier road than it was in the past. Quieter.

Her father was exceptionally beautiful and had her high cheek bones. Her mother seemed more aged, less excited. They were warming, the both of them, in harmony, opening the door before we knocked.

Elizabeth's dad greeted me with a whiskey and a directional lead toward an all white living room where it looked like no one ever sat; an intricate fusion of comfort and intimidation. We diverged at the entrance hall and Elizabeth flew, towards what I would later see as the kitchen, under her mother's arm.

Reconvening after I had chewed all of my ice, I insisted washing the lettuce as the three of us stood while Elizabeth sat at the island bar stool, flying sarcastic exasperation at my attempt to help. Her mother seemed unaffected though; a sweet pitched thank you while

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hovering over some sort of sauce that popped and bubbled on an electric stove. Dad hopped up on the cobblestone countertop that split the manning stations with a refill in hand. It was surreal, maybe dangerously, how quickly the anxiety of it all slipped away.

After dinner, I coyly excused myself into the white vacancy to breathe a bit. Sitting on the middle of a cloud like couch, it couldn't have been but two minutes before Elizabeth found me: elbows on my knees, my back away from the cushions, my head pointed down toward the glass that slowly circled in my hand between my legs. I watched the brown-soaked, thin frozen chips abide to the revolutions generated by my fingertip grasp around the lip of the cup.

"I'm telling, if you spill," she said like a sibling. She leaned against the wall of the room's entrance, her smile weighing her head to where her shoulder rested. Her arms were crossed. She looked younger than me, and she was, but in the particular stance, I guess the fact was exacerbated.

"Yeah, I just need to gather myself, really. Isn't it just like depression to be showing up like this?" I tried to smile the statement away.

Walking toward me during my hypothetical, she didn't speak until her right hip was snug to my left, her eyes whispering down my nape as she watched my sight stay on the ice.

"Johnny and the fight for serotonin," she smirked with a slow, flat-palm back rub, her head following her secrets.

I looked at her long, parted brown hair, and kissed the top of it.

"It's like I need sorrow, like sadness is an addiction."

She listened.

I paused.

"Your dad is the man. He told me about your baby brother that died before you were born, almost immediately, which was ironically relieving."

"He tells all my boyfriends that," I felt her say.

She slid down my chest to lay horizontal across my lap. Her bony spine scratched atop my thighs before she positioned herself comfortable, looking up at me and continuing.

“No, no. I think he wanted to make a declaration, you know? Not only are we scarred and similar people, but he wanted you to recognize the gratefulness he has for how good you are to me, and maybe he wanted to transmit that through telling you a secret since you bare so many of mine.”

That night we sat on a back patio in lawn chairs around a lit chiminea sipping merlot. Four friends beneath respective blankets, you curled on my lap, your mom mirroring. We shifted between red wine and softer inside jokes, to inviting them in on city stories that you drunkenly shouted across the imaginary valley between us and them.

The left lane lacks imagination. Just a path to get you to a place. My windows are up and the music is off. I grip my steering wheel tight as I cut hard right with a clenched jaw, an 18-wheeled calf crying behind me disapproving my intrusion of their migrational unity. The divots before the rail warn of my wavering.

I re-correct myself.

Unadorned tragedies pinpoint the worst angles of the road; simple crosses or bouquets line boulders painted with car crash smoke or skid marks that tiptoe to the edge of cliffs and then, apparently, leap.

