



You and Crystal both know her time at Berry Smooth is dwindling, she's been there almost three months now and has recently been plotting her escape. Other employment options she is considering are freelance cat sitter, henna artist or spiritual dietician. Before she started Berry Smooth she was taking a course from The StarPath Institute which her mother told her about. At that time she was going for a degree in Spiritual Advisement and Attunement. She did a few weeks worth of assignments, manila folders were spread like dead moths around her computer.

Her plan was to put an advertisement in the college paper and serve as some sort of counselor for college students who don't know which major they should go into. She thought their parents would surely pay sixty dollars an hour for such guidance. When one of the assignments came back to be redone from The Institute because she was answering questions based on her instincts instead of the text, she abandoned that plan. You have heard that it's important to try to support your partner in whatever endeavor, no matter how insane you may believe it to be, but your CopyWorld paycheck can't pay for both her student loan and the rent.

You are having dinner, choking down thick slices of garlic in your salad, when the next plan comes up.

“I was looking back at the StarPath website today,” she says.

“Yeah, what did you see?” You know the direction this is going.

“I was thinking about astrology, you know, get certified. I could get it done in two weeks if I quit when the course work arrives.”

She elaborates on the plan, she’ll become an astrologer for the stars, stars as in celebrities. She will research a specific celebrity’s birthday, currently leaning toward James Spader but that could change, do a complete astrological workup for them and send it to them free of charge. She assumes they will be so impressed by the insight of this unknown person sending them an astrological forecast that he’ll tell all his other celebrity friends and she will never have to go back to Berry Smooth again. You consider how you might carefully suggest that she keep her job because the rent is already six days late and needs to be paid. You know better than bringing up her last experience with The StarPath Institute or the dwindling grace period on her student loan which looms like a fifteen thousand dollar mushroom cloud on the horizon.

“Maybe you could do the course while you still work,” you say.

There is silence. You can feel her hand tighten to a fist around her fork. “It’ll take too long that way. I could get it done in a few weeks if I’m not smashing fruit.”

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You decide there are many Berry Smooth types of jobs she can get after this new paradigm dies its own natural death.

You say, "Well, whatever you want."

Her fist relaxes a bit around the fork and she says, "Don't forget we're going to Mom's this weekend."

Fuck.

Showlow is a small nothing town in the middle of nowhere Arizona. It should take three hours but the car will die somewhere along the way and this will add six to twenty-four hours to the trip. It dies every time. You have learned to pack extra water, sleeping bags, cardboard and markers to make signs, "Need Ride to Town: Car Broken." Hopefully, it will die close enough to Globe, the halfway point, so you can get it towed and resurrected relatively easily. Your car, a tiny Geo hates the ride and will throw tantrums for weeks afterward but Crystal sold hers to pay for the first StarPath sessions and she has to see her mother every couple months or else she becomes manic. Her mother doesn't drive for spiritual reasons. Her mother is loaning Crystal money for the astrology program and she won't mail things especially checks. She doesn't trust the post office.

"And besides," Crystal says, "I need to see her." There is an emphasis on need.

Sometimes Jeanie, the friend you've never met, will do the road trip with Crystal but she is working extra hours this month so you are stuck driving your temperamental car up the winding mountain passes of northern Arizona. You try this time to have the tired sun-burnt

Geo tuned up before you go. Hoping that fifty dollars of prevention would propel you all the way to Showlow like a slingshot of luck and karma.

Halfway there as you putter through Globe and start up the next incline for the last leg of the trip, you think it worked. Granted the engine is heaving to push twenty miles an hour and you have the hazard blinkers on and a string of cars is huffing behind you. But despite all the best wishes and good karma, the poor Geo can take no more, it is exhausted and starts stalling. You are about six miles outside of Globe which really isn't too bad and it's even still light outside. You both know the routine. You don't even discuss what to do next. You coast over to the dirt shoulder, lock the exhausted car, put your bag over your shoulder, grab the water in the rinsed-out gallon jug that once held organic milk, and start walking back down hill to town.

Not much is said on the walk but every once and a while, one of you confirms your good luck in the car stalling where it did. "Not too bad, " or "At least we made it past town," or "The tune-up helped I think."

Cars speed by in the opposite direction and you notice that as each one passes Crystal's posture became more upright, confident, head held high like this walk is important and purposeful. At first glance maybe that's how the people in the cars might see it but at that moment trudging back to town to find an auto-repair place, it seems more like an attempt to appear together, at ease, calm in the face of the storm. You see her as filled with a strange combination of insecurity and arrogance and you feel a mixture of both repulsion and sympathy for her at

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that moment. You also sense that these are the base emotions that keep you with her month after month.

You both decide that it will be easiest to just get a motel for the night and try to get the car towed in the morning. Night's Inn is the first one you come to. A single level horseshoe of cinderblock rooms around a gravel parking lot. A piece of wood on the ground in front of one of the rooms says, "Office."

When Crystal knocks a man's voice says, "It's open."

It's like walking into some stranger's living room. A bloated man is watching *The Wheel of Fortune* and eating powdered donuts from a TV tray.

"This the office?" you ask.

"Yep, what you need?"

"Uh, can we get room for the night?" you ask.

He looks at us for the first time and says, "We have a few open," and chuckles to himself.

He gets up from his chair and goes over to a desk piled with papers and the innards of some electric device. Wires and gears mingle with what you assume are foreclosure notices or health code violations.

"We don't take checks or credit," he says pulling open the desk drawer.

"We have cash. How much?" you say.

"Forty for the night or a hundred for the week," he says still looking through the drawer.

You turn to Crystal and say, "Week's a better deal. What do you think?"

"Just the night please," she says to him ignoring your joke.

He folds the twenties into the front pocket of his jeans and gives you one of the cliché motel room keys that are a staple of Americana, a flat plastic diamond with the room number rubbed off.

“Oh yeah, do you know of a mechanic near by?” you ask.

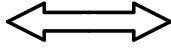
It appears to dawn on him that this interaction is taking longer than he thought it should. “There’s a phone book in your room.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Room Nine is done in shades of brown and orange. Brown curtains, orange lamp, brown blanket on the bed, orange carpet with brown stains. You have been in these situations before. You knew the procedure: find mechanic, order food delivery, try to glean whatever comforts there are to be had, maybe a shower, maybe some shitty television program if the aluminum foil antenna gets any reception. The phone book is water wrinkled. You hope it’s water. You manage to find both a mechanic and a pizza place. So the night passes with greasy cheese and reruns of some crime drama set in an alternate universe where even the criminals are attractive and no one has ever seen a motel like the one you’re sitting in.

The feeling of repulsion and sympathy for Crystal has followed you from the walk into town and now gains weight and mass in the run-down motel room. It is impossible to escape, you didn’t bring the patches, recorder or post-its with you. You are left to feel the melancholy realization that your life with Crystal will never really change.

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To see how the class responds to Alex's Squid story,
turn to page 171.

To read the final story traded to Roberta for a kitten,
turn to page 176.