

Jennifer Levin

Stand Wherever You Want

Jonathan liked to drive up the mountain and drink in the dark. It seemed like the small-town thing to do, so I drank with him and looked at the stars. He named the constellations, kissed me between shots. Picking out points of light in the black was just about as romantic as Jonathan got, and he could've been making it all up. I'd never seen a sky like that before.

Jonathan showed me all the back roads. He laughed when I called the small villages we happened upon "settlements." He laughed a lot. We drove all the time. Physics, chaos theory, gravitational pull: the science of the situation is unfortunate — now we drive past each other in traffic. He honks, he grins, and he waves at me frantically, like a lunatic. I anticipate every white Jeep in town. He should not smile, he should not wave, he shouldn't even look at me. There should be a law.

I left New York intent on clearer air. I picked the tiny town out of a black and white travel photography book, drawn to the narrow streets and the shadow-filled slope of mountains. I knew nothing of brown land and water shortages.

I drove into a valley filled with sick, yellow smoke, wildfires burning the forests above. I found an apartment on the main road through town, over an antique store, next to a Laundromat. My bedroom smelled like dryer sheets.

I spent my first three weeks out West walking and exploring, observing my new surroundings, gathering material for my novel-to-be. I took notes. And then I met Jonathan at the grocery store fish counter, where we argued over the last pound of salmon fillet. The fish man offered it to us for half price, provided we ate it together. It sounds like a fairytale, I know. Jonathan had curly brown hair and slim hips, ruddy skin and

white teeth. Plus, I'm a damn good cook and that salmon was excellent. And after dinner, the first romantic thing he said to me:

“You're not like other women.”

I asked for an explanation and he kissed me.

“Really,” I said.

He shook his head. “You're not like girls from around here.”

But like men all over the country, he didn't call me for nearly a week, which I spent crying and sleeping too much and not drinking enough water. And then, after six days, he called to ask me out for Chinese food. Of course, he was going out of town for the weekend, so he was hoping I was free on Monday. I could practically feel his breath through the phone.

I spent the weekend writing. He was so cute and I wanted to remember his face exactly, but I'd really only seen him the one night. I didn't know where he lived. I still don't, which is comforting. If I knew, I'd drive past.

The Chinese food was awful. Jonathan paid the bill, insisting it was his turn since I'd already cooked for him. We went back to my place. He brought cranberry vodka that didn't taste like cranberries but was red. We each had some in a glass over ice.

“Why did you move here?” he asked, sliding his leg closer to mine on the couch.

I tried to shrug. “Tired of the city, I guess. I couldn't relax anymore.”

“It doesn't seem to have helped — I mean, you're not relaxed right now.”

“I'm relaxed,” I said.

“You're high stress,” he said. “Uptight.” He said it like he was smiling but his face had no expression. Eerie like when he asked questions without question marks. He'd said ‘You like vodka’ like a quiet command.

“The nature is good for me,” I said.

“But you don't go anywhere. You hate hiking. You haven't been camping. You like your car.”

“How do you know what I like?” I poked him with my big toe and tried to look absently in the direction of the stereo. I didn't want to sound defensive. “You don't know

what it's like to see only concrete and steel your whole life. I can see more nature out the window than I've ever seen out any window."

He chewed a piece of ice and smiled at me. "What are you writing about?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"You can write and not know what it's about."

"I'm waiting for the right story to come along."

"I don't know what that means," he said.

"I'm pretty patient," I said.

He slid closer. "So, you need inspiration."

I squirmed. "Is it possible to get a cappuccino in this town?"

"You need fancy coffee to write."

"It helps."

My thigh was right up against his. I didn't know where to look.

"Maybe you'll let me read something," he said.

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because then you would know me better than I know you. I can't handle the imbalance."

He sat forward to get his drink from the coffee table. When he settled back he leaned into me. I sipped my vodka and listened to ice cubes clink in our glasses.

"You're not going to write about this town," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's boring." He sneezed. "No stories here. We don't even have cappuccino."

He put his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me forward.

Later, after he crawled out of bed and dug through his pants for a condom, he said, "Do you mind if I have sex with you?"

He stood completely naked in the moonlight, extending the little foil package out to me like a gift.

There must be parts missing from those conversations. The magic must disappear in the retelling, because I fell quick and hard. I didn't write. I sat at my computer, screen blank,

replaying the taste of cranberry vodka on my lips. I saw his face everywhere. He was echoed in the shoulder of the man sitting next to me in the public library; he was an inflection in my own voice.

July arrived without rain. The reservoirs were nearly empty, and the town was on high alert. We were encouraged to skip showers and flush less often. Any and all plant life was drained of color. I called my sister.

“It’s pouring here,” she said. “It’s been raining for days.”

“Send it over,” I pleaded. “You don’t understand what it means to have so much contact with the ground. It’s rugged here. I’ve stopped wearing makeup. My hair has never been so blond. I feel like maybe I bleached it, but you’d think I’d remember something like that.”

“Take my rain,” she said. “I’m sick of it. I left my car windows down and now my seats are flooded. I have to rent a wet-dry vacuum.”

The pressure of twice-weekly showers and the pervasive piñon smoke from the mountain; sometimes I forgot New York altogether. Taxi rides, bagels and cream cheese, Indian food in the Village, happy hour in upscale bars where young urban professional men paid for all the drinks. I forgot what dating meant back home: dinner, a martini bar, nice clothes, gallantry and pretense. But I couldn’t hope too hard for rain, smoked white fish, or a familiar accent. Living in the moment required my resourcefulness and imagination, and a certain lack of clarity.

It doesn’t seem like much now: tequila with no chasers and my split ends. Jonathan, my couch, much fumbling and certain embarrassing scenes. He never spent the night. Sex was pleasurable, but rare. I couldn’t talk to him about it.

“I can’t talk about this,” he said when I brought it up.

“Just say something,” I suggested.

His face was red. He hedged and stuttered. “Please, Greta, just leave it alone.”

“But how do I even know if you actually like me? Do I matter to you at all? I’m not saying we have to change anything, but don’t I deserve to know where I stand?”

“Stand wherever you want,” he said. “Go stand on the other side of the room.”

“It’s not a joke,” I said. He put his arm around me and we spent half an hour making out on the couch before he left. “I have to get up early,” he said.

“You make me feel sixteen,” I said.

He appeared almost weekly, right around the time I’d decided he was never calling again. He’d show up and take me to dinner and for a drive. In the meantime, my main activity was dehydration. I drank tequila instead of water. I was tired of walking and exploring. I spent a lot of time up the mountain, drinking next to a dry riverbed. The mud sat in flaky sheets along the sides. At a touch it crumbled into nothing but dust.

On his birthday, I braved it and called him at home, something he found distasteful. He didn’t want to see me. He was going camping for the weekend, and he was already drunk. There were voices behind him, enough to be a party.

“So stop by later, before you take off,” I said. “I got you a card.”

“A card.” Then, his muffled voice talking to someone else. “I’m not going to be able to stop by,” he said clearly.

I’d spent an hour in the grocery store, picking out the perfect birthday card, nothing telling or leading, witty without being forward or presumptuous. It was an intensely casual card.

I berated myself. I sat on the couch with the card on my lap, sealed in its gold-colored envelope on which I’d written his name in calligraphy. I tore it in half.

I got a glass of ice water and turned on the radio. Then I tore the card into tiny pieces. When the pile was too thick to rip anymore I took a scissors to the scraps. I flushed the confetti down the toilet along with a bowl full of urine and tissue.

The next day I bought heavy, cream-colored paper and the nicest art markers I could find in the office and school supply section of the grocery store. I spent the evening drawing the mountains on a sheet of paper creased down the middle — a homemade card covered in lines, more lines and finally a new drawing on a fresh sheet of paper. The sunrise I stayed up for.

I spent hours looking for a poem for the inside. The one about waiting for rain felt right, and the beautiful last lines that Jonathan would take the wrong way, no matter how he took them:

*to lie down in the dreams
of a young man whose hair
is the color of mahogany.*

Jonathan showed up smelling of earth and tent mildew. "I'd like that card," he said.

"I tore it up," I said.

"You tore it up." He lit a cigarette and sat next to me, put his feet on the coffee table.

"I was mad."

"No card." He shrugged.

"I made you a new one. Do you want it?" I was still mad. I wanted to scream at him, push him out a window. But he was there, finally, and I didn't want to do any of those things.

Smoke swirled around his head as he studied the poem. My stomach twisted into my chest.

"This is going right up on my mantle," he said when he was done. He closed the card and put it on the table. He had a mantle. "You think my hair is mahogany?"

"I didn't write it." I sighed. "I just thought it was nice, about the rain."

"I don't know if I want you to write a poem about me," he said.

"I don't write poetry."

"No?"

"Nope."

"But if I inspire you that much, I guess it would be okay."

"Hey, Jonathan," I said.

"Hmm?"

"I don't write poetry."

I looked at the curly brown hair on his legs. He had beautiful thighs. He held my hand.

"I was thinking about spending the night," he said. He kissed me. He tasted like marijuana and apples.

Dust blew in through every possible crack or opening in my apartment. My nose crusted with blood each morning. I stayed inside, naked in front of a fan, until I realized people could see me from the street. I covered myself in underwear and a tank top and drank.

Jonathan arrived at twilight. He dragged his bike up the outside stairs, banged on the door. He stood in the doorway, panting and staring at me.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“It’s hot.”

“In here. You should go outside. There’s a cloud.”

I squeezed lime into a shot. He took it away from me and drank it himself, even though it was halfway to my face.

He pulled me through the apartment by my elbow. We went out to the rickety wooden back porch that overlooked an alley, and beyond that, dirt and brush grass. I shivered in the new breeze, but it was a warm wind that settled over us.

“See Greta,” he said. “Are you drunk?”

I looked at the sky, which was darkening in the disappearing sun. “A little,” I said. Lightning flashed high above.

“Did you see that?” He poked me. I listened for thunder but it never came. Jonathan leaned his elbows on the railing. “Monsoons,” he said, “and then there will be rainbows.”

“Can you really see all the colors?” I asked.

“Of course. More lightning.” He pointed at the sky with his chin. Thunder cracked a second later, so loud I jumped.

“Don’t be scared,” he said.

Voices chattered in the alley. Three teenagers walked below, arm-in-arm, bumping into each other.

“Better get out of the rain,” called Jonathan.

They looked up. “Right on,” said the girl. They skipped off around the side of the building.

Jonathan glanced at me. “If it really pours,” he said, “I’ll strip down to my underwear, too.”

The phone rang and I went to the kitchen to get it. It was my sister. I bought the phone outside.

“Jonathan’s here,” I said.

“Tequila?” she asked.

“And lightning.”

“It’s raining?”

“No. But soon there will be rainbows.”

“It’s pouring here,” she said, “it’s been raining for days.”

“Who is that?” asked Jonathan.

I ignored him and looked at the gray-black sky.

“I’m thinking about coming home for a visit,” I said.

“No you’re not,” said my sister. “You’ve been gone for three months. Get over it.”

“It’s been at least a year. Ten years. I miss my room.”

“Mom turned your room into a den years ago. You know that. At least you get a sleeper couch. All I get is a sewing machine and a giant pile of cotton batting that provides *no* lower back support.”

Lightning hit the dirt across the alley and static rushed through the phone. I dropped it to the porch slats and rubbed my pulsing fingers.

Jonathan picked up the receiver gently, two fingers on the antenna, and handed it to me.

“What happened?” she moaned. “I feel like my eardrum exploded.”

“I’ll call you back,” I said.

I hung up at the first drop of water hit the railing. In one moment, everything green was alive. The air had potential. The rain fell in fat splotches, thrumming on the roof and turning the dirt field black in patches. Thunder filled all the space and Jonathan yelled.

“I want to be out in it!”

His voice was too loud. It cut right through the water. He raced through the kitchen and I clattered down the outside stairs after him, around the antique store to the alley. We were soaked in seconds. Jonathan picked me up and whirled me in circles.

“This is it for us!”

“What?” I yelled, but he kept on spinning.

“I’ll dance with you all night!” he cried in my ear.

I struggled against him. “Put me down! This is not dancing. I mean it!”

He dropped me in the mud, which seeped through my underwear like ink. I turned my face up to the pounding rain. “I thought you were stripping down,” I said, hearing the whine in my voice.

He squatted next to me. “My stripping days are over. Are you okay?”

“Can we go in now?”

He left me there, walked back around the front. I climbed the stairs behind him, my muddy feet slipping on the wood. Inside I shut myself in the bathroom to clean off and put on my robe. On my way back through the living room I picked up the tequila bottle.

Jonathan was on the back porch, leaning on the railing and staring into the dissipating rain. “It’s over,” he said.

The brush grass below was green and steaming. “It’s not enough,” I said.

He shook his head. “It’ll rain so much you’ll get sick of it.”

Something had shifted. “Jonathan — ‘that’s it’s for us’? Is that what you said before?”

“Right,” he said. “That’s what I said.”

My head felt thick. I would not cry, not now, not for him. “Why?” I croaked.

“It rained.” He ran his fingers along the porch and flicked water at me.

“What the hell does that mean?”

He threw up his hands. “I’m moving in with my girlfriend. It was only a matter of time.”

I sat down hard, bathrobe gaping open. I didn't move to fix it. "I can't hear you," I said. I picked up the tequila bottle but he took it from me before I could take a drink. He looked at me.

"Am I supposed to say something now?" I asked.

He took a drink. "I can see all of you," he said. "I see everything."

I grabbed the bottle, took a shot and spit it at him. He wiped his face.

"Do you have anything you'd like to add?" he asked.

"Asshole," I said.

I stayed on the porch while he clanked his bike down the outside stairs. I threw the tequila bottle down to the alley where it crashed into a thousand pieces. Liquid disappeared in rivulets of water.

I've seen him too many times in three years, smiling and honking and waving from the relative safety of his open-top white Jeep. But I've never been up close enough to touch him or smell him, until today, when I ran into him and his bride at the fish counter.

He recognized me first and said my name. His eyes were hard, and beadier than I remembered. I knew who he was; I'd been prepared every second for this moment. But he was unfamiliar. He smiled at me for longer than I thought was appropriate and his wife, with her shiny gold band, rocked from foot to foot.

He introduced us and we shook hands. Hers was warm and much softer than mine. She smiled. I tried to smile back, I tried to look at her — but I couldn't turn away from Jonathan. I wanted to grab the white-wrapped tuna steak from his wife's hands and smack him across the face with it.

She looked at me, and kept looking, and I knew that she knew — in that moment in front of the fish she'd assessed the situation.

After a minute they left me there, saying 'nice to see you.' When he passed, Jonathan pinched me, hard, on the side.

“Did you get a good look at him?” I asked the fish guy. “There’s something wrong with him —” I sighed and leaned my forehead against the glass. “Half a pound of salmon, please.”

He handed me a white-wrapped package. “Take it,” he said. “It’s free.”

Originally published in *The Iowa Review* (Volume 35, Number 1), Spring 2005

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