From American Estrangement
by Said Sayrafiezadeh

2021

SCENIC ROUTE

It's around six months or so after society has begun changing, mainly for the worse, when Lizzy and I decide to take that trip we've been talking about for so long, and which, only in hindsight, is probably our biggest mistake, i.e., not knowing what we're getting ourselves into. But she'll be turning forty soon, and I've already turned forty, and if we don't do it now, we'll never do it and instead we'll just talk about doing it. "Now or never," she says, and I'm sure she's right, because the most I've seen of the world has been this or that suburb. Besides, Lizzy says, no one can predict in what other ways society might begin changing—for the

worse—and I'm sure she's right about this, too, even though I suspect she's not just referring to society, but to *us*, meaning her and me. In any case, I mail in the applications for our travel documents, everything signed in triplicate and notarized, and they're approved without incident, and a few weeks after that we take two flights and one three-hour layover, also without incident, arriving in Maine, which is where our trip is officially beginning, at the Hertz rental car agency, at the top, in Maine, where you can't go any higher these days without having better paperwork, and our plan is to take the long way down, back roads and such, because that's the point, after all: to take the long way down before it's too late.

Nor is there any indication of trouble from the rental car agent, who's all smiles and New England goodness, eighteen years old and working his summer job. "Where you folks from?" he wants to know. He calls us "folks." He thinks we're married but we're not. Later, Lizzy will say, "Why does he need to know where we're from?" But she's only being paranoid and he's only being nice. He's surrounded by Hertz logos and fluorescent lights, telling us that there just so happens to be a Cadillac Escalade in the parking lot if we're interested, "just so happens," five-door, full speed, which he can get for us at a great deal. He does a good job pretending as if he's as surprised as anyone by how great and unexpected a deal this is, but no doubt he's reading off a script from somewhere inside his head, his eyes

moving back and forth across the page, watermarked with his commission. "We were hoping for something cheap and simple," I tell him, by which I mean two doors and good mileage. Lizzy has other ideas. "Oh, let's live a little!" she says, never mind that we're trying to be budget-conscious on a vacation that hasn't even started. She's implying, publicly, that I alone stand as the obstacle to delight and merriment, and therefore joy and happiness. The eighteen-year-old can tell he's making progress with at least one of the folks, and so he goes ahead and gives us the hard sell on the upgrade, and I must admit that the Cadillac Escalade does sound awfully good, what with the tinted sunroof, the leather steering wheel, the dual DVD players "for the kids," which we don't have. The idea of luxury, even rented luxury, is appealing to me, as I know it must be for Lizzy, having grown up, as she did, *without*. "Sure, why not," I say, "let's live a little!" And Lizzy drapes her arms around me, asking, "Do you mean it?" as if the choice were only ever mine. I make a big show of removing the joint credit card from my wallet. Beneath the fluorescent light the card appears burnished and indestructible, despite an outsized monthly balance about which, as with many things, Lizzy and I have grown accustomed to deferring. All that matters now, though, is that the card is swiped through without complication, granting us access to that coveted crimson key fob that matches the coveted crimson Cadillac Escalade that just so happens to be in the parking lot. "Where

you folks headed?" the agent wants to know. This is the last line of the script and he doesn't really care where we're headed. But it doesn't matter, because we don't really know.

Two hours later, Lizzy and I are reclining in rented luxury on credit, the daylight streaming velvet through the tinted sunroof, having made it as far as some town called Hamlin, population few. We see the sign and then the sign is gone. Lizzy's doing forty miles an hour, mostly she's doing thirty, at this rate it'll take us a week to make it through Maine, but this is the remedy that she has proposed. "The scenic route," Lizzy says. "Slow driving," she says. Slow driving, slow living. She has her finger on the pulse of "what ails us"—she's referring to society and also the *collective* us. When she's not working her day job at low pay, she's a yoga instructor above a natural foods store, three nights a week and Sundays, immersed for an hour and fifteen minutes in the ancient science of remedying and restoring one body at a time. That she is now steering a Cadillac Escalade down a country road, guzzling gas at twentysomething a gallon, is a contradiction in lifestyle that we have agreed to accept without further inquiry. Together we stare out at the therapeutic landscape, mesmerized by the stillness, by the emptiness, by the rolling hills, etc. When we hit a bump in the road, we don't feel a thing. We are sailing more than we are riding. "Undulating," Lizzy says. She's talking about

the hills. We have our luggage in the back, along with a cooler of green tea and room enough for eight more people. Outside the car it smells of fresh air, and inside it smells of air freshener. If society has changed, we can't tell through the window.

And yet there is something that is clearly ailing us. What it is precisely, no one has been able to determine, not even the couples' counselor whom we went to see, one hundred dollars out-of-network, with Lizzy and me sitting side by side on the couch trying to account for a lack of delight and merriment in our lives. We blamed ourselves, we blamed our parents, mainly we blamed each other. After a year of no improvement or discovery in either direction, we were told by the couples' counselor, "I'm willing to keep seeing you but I'm not sure what would be gained." Standing on the sidewalk in the wake of our last session, Lizzy had said, "The board-certified professional admits defeat." We continued onward, the two of us in our mid-thirties, occasionally evading, but never fully outrunning, a general dissatisfaction that now seems sure to tag along beside us into middle age. Perhaps we met at the wrong point in life, or in the wrong manner, i.e., online, where she'd lied about her age, and I'd lied about my height *and* my age. "You have a pretty smile," I'd written her, as vanilla a way as any to break the ice, but which still managed to be effective. For our first date we'd gotten together by the gazebo in the business district, where, yes, she was older than I antici-

pated, but beautiful all the same, statuesque actually, and her brown hair was lush, and her smile indeed pretty. She'd been dressed in a skirt and sensible shoes, long legs, nice butt, having come from what she would refer to only as her sellout day job. As for me, I was neither beautiful nor lush, and my hair was thinning on top, which I knew would be evident given that we were equal in height. "What I really want to do is to make the world a better place," she'd told me within the first few minutes. I wasn't exactly sure what she'd meant by this. "That's a great idea!" I'd said.

Then we'd strolled out of the business district and into the natural foods store, because if you really want to break the ice, you do it by taking a yoga class together. I'd never done yoga before, but I'd wanted to show her that I was up for anything, an easygoing guy, fun-loving, wearing droopy pants with a drawstring, perched on the edge of a rubber mat in a room smelling of body odor and brown rice, making me think how everything was so laughably cliché, including Lizzy herself, who was going by the stage name *Saraswati*, with bare feet, turquoise earrings, and temperate voice, cooing her students into positions that I quickly realized I could never achieve without risking injury. Class had scarcely begun and I had sweat dripping off the tip of my nose, trying to twist to my right, trying to touch my toes, trying to focus on the light within or something. Lizzy had come over and adjusted me. "Like this," she'd whispered. Her hands were on the small of my back, pressing softly, as

if there might be hope for me after all. "Breathe," she'd said, but I was already breathing, panting really. I was under the false impression, perhaps brought on by mental and physical exhaustion, that she had never touched anyone the way she was touching me. Later, she'd say, "I could feel the sadness in your body." She was talking about me, but she was also talking about her.

I'm wrong: we make it through Maine in a day and a half, staying overnight in a town called Yarmouth, about an hour from the border, where we hope to book a room in one of those old-timey inns, the kind from bygone days, with board games in the pantry, yogurt in the morning, and small talk about small-town life. But there are no inns in the vicinity, or bed-and-breakfasts, or lodges for that matter, an example of where society is heading, or where it has already arrived—this according to Lizzy. There is, however, a Motel 6, one story in taupe, where the attendant at the front desk also wants to know where we're from and also has "a great deal" on a room with a king-sized bed and spectacular views, plus free Wi-Fi with password. He pretends as if he's surprised by how great a deal all of this is. Again I hand over our joint credit card, which he swipes through without incident, granting Lizzy and me the electronic key that will get us into our room, Room 112, in taupe, and which, from first impressions, seems

to have been designed with traveling executives in mind, swivel chair, charging station, walls covered with framed and mass-produced watercolors of Small-Town Past, all nature and shoppes and no people. But who are we trying to kid, we love this Room 112, despite the assembly-line feel, in fact, we love it *because* of the assembly-line feel. Here there is Wi-Fi and cable TV. Here there is no draftiness or creakiness or an innkeeper poking around at night. Here there are hotel toiletries, brand names in small bottles, which we will collect as we travel, every one of them, stock up for years and always remember *where we were when*. It's nearly dusk and the "spectacular view" we had been promised is limited to thirty yards from our window, through which we can see a teardrop swimming pool with a plaque that reads in indemnifying block print SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK. Just beyond the swimming pool is our Cadillac Escalade, waiting patiently for us in the empty parking lot, its hood gradually transforming beneath the setting sun from crimson to ruby red, then, a moment later, an even darker shade of that, which is blood-red. Lizzy and I lie on our backs on the king-sized mattress, awed by the expanse, our fingers intertwined as we look up at the popcorn ceiling in taupe, saying nothing. I have a feeling that this might be the time for Lizzy to have "the talk" with me, or *a* talk, the first in a series, hopefully civil, about what the future holds for us, her and me. She'll begin lightly, politely, speaking gently, a soft-shoe prelude about everything we have done

together, lo these last years, and everything that we can still do together, hypothetically speaking, with the years that remain. After which, the conversation will segue from everything we have *done* to everything we have *not* done, items fixed and indisputable, and which includes marriage and children, as if I alone stand as the obstacle.

But, lying there on the king-sized bed, our fingers intertwined, Lizzy broaches nothing, and neither do I, something soporific and soothing having apparently been induced by those three hundred slow-going miles in the Cadillac Escalade.

It's the next morning at the border between Maine and New Hampshire where things take a turn for the worse. "Have your travel documents ready," reads the LED display, but there are no patrolmen anywhere around. I pull into the designated spot, marked by official and inscrutable arrows, directly behind one other car, which is also waiting for the border patrol, and has, presumably, been waiting for quite some time, because the engine is off and the passengers seem to be dozing in the front seat. It occurs to me how few cars we have seen in our travels thus far, moreover, how few *people*, and that there has been a pervasive sense of abandonment or desertion. But this, of course, is because we have chosen to take the back roads, and here now before us is a subcompact with two doors, more toy than car, the

to have been designed with traveling executives in mind, swivel chair, charging station, walls covered with framed and mass-produced watercolors of Small-Town Past, all nature and shoppes and no people. But who are we trying to kid, we love this Room 112, despite the assembly-line feel, in fact, we love it *because* of the assembly-line feel. Here there is Wi-Fi and cable TV. Here there is no draftiness or creakiness or an innkeeper poking around at night. Here there are hotel toiletries, brand names in small bottles, which we will collect as we travel, every one of them, stock up for years and always remember *where we were when*. It's nearly dusk and the "spectacular view" we had been promised is limited to thirty yards from our window, through which we can see a teardrop swimming pool with a plaque that reads in indemnifying block print SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK. Just beyond the swimming pool is our Cadillac Escalade, waiting patiently for us in the empty parking lot, its hood gradually transforming beneath the setting sun from crimson to ruby red, then, a moment later, an even darker shade of that, which is blood-red. Lizzy and I lie on our backs on the king-sized mattress, awed by the expanse, our fingers intertwined as we look up at the popcorn ceiling in taupe, saying nothing. I have a feeling that this might be the time for Lizzy to have "the talk" with me, or *a* talk, the first in a series, hopefully civil, about what the future holds for us, her and me. She'll begin lightly, politely, speaking gently, a soft-shoe prelude about everything we have done

together, lo these last years, and everything that we can still do together, hypothetically speaking, with the years that remain. After which, the conversation will segue from everything we have *done* to everything we have *not* done, items fixed and indisputable, and which includes marriage and children, as if I alone stand as the obstacle.

But, lying there on the king-sized bed, our fingers intertwined, Lizzy broaches nothing, and neither do I, something soporific and soothing having apparently been induced by those three hundred slow-going miles in the Cadillac Escalade.

It's the next morning at the border between Maine and New Hampshire where things take a turn for the worse. "Have your travel documents ready," reads the LED display, but there are no patrolmen anywhere around. I pull into the designated spot, marked by official and inscrutable arrows, directly behind one other car, which is also waiting for the border patrol, and has, presumably, been waiting for quite some time, because the engine is off and the passengers seem to be dozing in the front seat. It occurs to me how few cars we have seen in our travels thus far, moreover, how few *people*, and that there has been a pervasive sense of abandonment or desertion. But this, of course, is because we have chosen to take the back roads, and here now before us is a subcompact with two doors, more toy than car, the

type I had almost considered renting from Hertz back when I was in the habit of avoiding delight and merriment, which feels so long ago, and which I can say with confidence, sitting as I am in my leather seat with my leather steering wheel, surrounded by wood trim and chrome accents, with climate control set to perfect, that I am thankful for having made such personal growth. Indeed, I could sit here all day, gazing at the view where Maine becomes New Hampshire, a scene reminiscent of those watercolors from the walls of the Motel 6, pastoral, prosaic, no sound, all nature, Lizzy and me insulated within our Cadillac Escalade, the glowing knobs of the dashboard blinking at us with essential information, as if we are inside a spaceship *orbiting* the land, rather than *of* it.

"How long are we supposed to wait?" Lizzy asks.

"Slow waiting," I say. I thought this would go over well, but it does not. Evidently she is now in a hurry. She leans across me and presses hard on the horn, harder than necessary, longer than necessary, pushing with both hands. The horn sounds more like detonation than horn, and it disrupts the New England serenity, startling the passengers in the subcompact who are sitting upright and getting presentable for the authorities. I have a good feeling that *this*, this inconsiderate behavior by Lizzy, this *act against nature*, is going to be our first fight of the trip, and before I can fully work out an opening salvo that will cut hard and deep, the doors of the subcompact swing open, and instead of two chumps emerging from the car, I'm discomfited to see that it's actually two border patrolmen, dressed in dark blue uniforms, the New Hampshire coat of arms on one shoulder, the official bird, whatever it is, on the other. They are strapping, these patrolmen, six feet tall, barely fitting into their shirts, full heads of hair, no need here to lie about height or age, striding toward our Cadillac Escalade with the mistaken impression that it was *I*, not Lizzy, who had sounded the horn.

They tap on our windows with their flashlights as if they were the ones to have pulled up behind me, rather than the other way around, their silver rifles strung across their shoulders, long enough to be a third leg, appearing burnished and indestructible in the sunshine.

"Let's see your travel documents," they say without preamble.

Here we are not "folks." Here there is no New England goodness. Here we are playing solely by the rules.

Happily, our documents are in the glove compartment, six weeks in the bureaucratic making and all in order, but when I reach over and pop the glove compartment open, out they tumble, falling windswept across the floor mat emblazoned with the Hertz logo.

"You can't read the LED display?" the patrolmen ask. They are annoyed that I am not prepared, despite how much time I have had to do so, and this, I am sure, will be seen as an indication of out-of-state disrespect.

"Yes, sir," I say, "I sure can read it!" I hear the emascu-

lation coating my voice and I'm helpless to stop it. Later, Lizzy will pile on about the importance of maintaining dignity, especially in the presence of authority, especially in this day and age. "When our self-respect goes," she will say, quoting someone, "what then will we be left with?"

The patrolmen shine their flashlights inside the car, looking for I know not what, the flashlight diffused by the sunlight coming through the sunroof. They want to know who we are. They want to know who we are to *each other*. They want to know what's in the cooler in the back.

"Sixteen bottles of green tea," Lizzy tells them.

"How do you know the exact number?" they ask. They suspect they're on to something.

"Because I bought them," she says matter-of-factly, "and I've drunk them." She has a hard edge in her voice. She's giving as good as she's getting. She would never allow herself to be deprived of self-respect, even if it means we are made to sit here for hours by a vindictive, protocol-obsessed border patrol, who can, if they want, terminate our journey and send us back up into Maine.

But the patrolmen seem to accept Lizzy's answer at face value, and they move on to a long list of other inquiries, learned at the academy, such as where our trip began, what time did we leave, where do we intend to go. They're leaning in through the open windows of the Cadillac Escalade, their chests filling the frame, as if they're just chatting with us. I get the sense that they're more bored than annoyed,

and that we are their chief diversion for the day, a routine border stop that they will draw out until their shift is over. They would probably rather be policemen than patrolmen, occupying, as they do, the lowest rung of law enforcement, their principle activity guarding the state perimeter in snow, rain, and heat. When they shoot to kill it's almost always from a distance, and only after having chased some poor fool for half a mile through the New England underbrush.

"It took you that long to come this far?" they ask. Again they suspect they're on to something.

"The scenic route!" I say.

They think I'm being literal. "Which route is that?" they say.

"The zigzag route," Lizzy says.

"Is that so?" They don't know what either one of us is talking about.

They ask what business we have had in Maine and what business we will have in New Hampshire.

"No business," I say, "just personal." Child cheerful.

"What's wrong with your own state?" they want to know.

I'm not sure if this is a question for which I am supposed to have an answer. "Nothing is wrong with it," I say.

"Is that so?" they say. Then they take the travel documents from me and disappear back into the subcompact, the car sinking beneath their weight, our precious paperwork out of sight, being manhandled by bored and frustrated law enforcement who dream of greater glory.

Lizzy is muttering to herself, saying goddamn this, goddamn that.

"They can see you muttering," I say.

"Let them see me," she says.

She's going to make this worse for us and then she's going to blame society.

"What gives them the right to ask us anything?" Lizzy asks. I want to tell her that, first and foremost, their guns give them the right.

When the border patrolmen return, I am sad to see that they have carelessly rolled up our travel documents and are holding them as if they are batons with which they plan to beat against the windshield of our Cadillac Escalade.

They say, "Are you sure you didn't come all this way just to stay?"

"No, sir," I say.

"We're asking the lady," they say.

"Why would I want to stay?" Lizzy says.

"Why would you want to leave?" they say.

I have the troubling awareness that the patrolmen might be flirting with Lizzy, and have in fact been flirting with her the entire time, unbeknownst to me, this being their chief diversion until their shift ends.

But suddenly, the game is over, if ever it was a game, and they are unfurling our rolled-up travel documents, already having been stamped with that most coveted phrase ENTRY PERMITTED, below the raised seal of New Hampshire, a woodcut image of a ship from yesteryear, either going out to sea or run aground.

"Here you are!" they say, big New England smiles.

"Thank you, sir!" I am grateful. All is forgiven. I take our travel documents gently, as if they are scrolls which will crumble on contact.

Lizzy says nothing. Later, Lizzy will say, "Why do you thank them for what is yours by right?"

"Take the HOV lane," the patrolmen say, "it's on us."

But the last thing we're going to do is take the HOV lane.

"We sure will!" I say anyway.

And just like that Lizzy and I are across the New Hampshire border, the toy car getting smaller in the rearview mirror, my foot on the pedal, Lizzy continuing to mutter beside me in the passenger seat.

"Do you see?" she says. "*Now* do you see what this has come to?"

"We have our stamps, don't we?" I say.

"That's the point," she says.

"*What's* the point?" I say.

"It will be gone before you know it!" Her voice is rising, and to emphasize the importance of her words she bangs her fist four times on the center console trimmed in wood: *it. will. be. gone.* Here she might also be referring to *us.*

"What is that supposed to mean?" I say.

"It means that this is just the beginning!" she says.

I'm still not sure what this means.

"First states," she says, "then cities!"

Now she's screaming. Not at me, at society. Society in general. She's stuffing our stamped and precious paperwork back into the glove compartment.

"Be careful!" I say.

"Paperwork can't break!" she says.

She slams the glove compartment closed and it pops right back open. She slams it again.

"The glove compartment," I say, "*that* can break!"

"What do you care?" she says. "You don't own this car!"

"It's on my credit card," I say.

"No," she says, "it's on *our* credit card."

So this is going to be the first fight of the trip, and I have the inclination to go ahead and take the HOV lane after all, just to be spiteful. Instead, I split the difference and turn the leather steering wheel hard, swerving down the back road, going fifty in a twenty-five zone, dirt kicking up around the Escalade, speeding past some town named Ossipee, population four digits, which probably doesn't have an inn, and beyond which is the New Hampshire countryside, indistinguishable from the Maine countryside, bucolic and watercolored, breathtaking really, where a single peach stand comes into view, first distant, then immediate, a rare sign of life, two tables long, manned by a family of Ossipees and loaded with fruit the size of orange softballs.

"Look," we say, "peaches!"

Oh, but who would I be without Lizzy? Or more to the point, who would I *become* without her? I had never done yoga until we'd met. I had never drunk green tea. I had never contemplated society. "I've never eaten an avocado," I'd confided in her one afternoon, standing in front of an avocado display at the natural food store, six weeks into our relationship. She must have sensed my shame and embarrassment, thirty years old and so unworldly. "Don't blame yourself," she'd said, "blame your parents." I'd appreciated her compassion. I'd appreciated how she'd regarded this minor oversight about food as symptomatic of larger oversights in my childhood. I'd never considered my childhood.

She'd bought six avocados right there on the spot, good parent that she was, and later we sat cross-legged on her living room floor, amid the iconography of ancient goddesses as she sliced one open with a paring knife, slowly, sexually, cutting into the soft flesh just for me. I thought it would taste like an olive, given its giant pit, but it tasted like unsalted butter at room temperature. When we kissed, she told me, "I've never really been loved before." Indeed, she'd had the opposite of love, mostly in the form of an alcoholic college professor for a father who had once chased her around the living room with a frying pan while her enabling mother watched from the armchair, so blaming parents came easy

for her. "Love can't exist under these conditions," she'd said. I wasn't sure if she was talking about her parents or society. We were three months into the relationship when I moved into her apartment with twenty cardboard boxes and a full-sized futon, almost big enough for two people. We commingled our finances, we applied for a joint credit card, we paid our bills from the joint credit card. We made dinner each night from scratch, kneading bread, simmering broth, crushing spices with mortar and pestle. "Slow cooking," she'd said. One evening I accidentally dropped a jar of molasses from the uppermost shelf in the kitchen. It fell and shattered, oozing like lava across the floor. We watched and laughed, marveling at its incremental, almost imperceptible progress, and it was only afterward that I thought how we should have seen this, not as comedy, but as the first sign of ailment sent from the ancient goddesses, if you believed in that sort of thing. "I love you," I told her, standing in the kitchen, the molasses twelve inches from our feet, but hours away. "Do you mean it?" she said. She got serious. "Do you really mean it?" "Yes, I mean it," I said. And I did mean it. And I still do.

But four states later we haven't had sex. Not in the Motel 6. Not in the Best Western. Not in the Hilton Garden Inn, which is not an inn or a garden, and which, halfway through Pennsylvania, we decide to splurge on spur-of-the-moment, designed as it is for an even higher-end traveling executive in mind, because let's live a little. Lizzy and I drink the complimentary bottled water and wrap ourselves in the bathrobes, and we lie together on the king-sized bed, as we do every night, our fingers intertwined, considering the popcorn ceiling, having been subdued and sedated by the Cadillac Escalade. In the morning we wake at dawn and pack up the free hotel toiletries and drive onward below the speed limit, taking the long way through society, wary of what might have changed for the worse, but noticing nothing, unless nothing *is* something. When we do see other cars, the license plates are always of the state we are in. Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania. Ohio, Ohio, Ohio. Still, we go deeper. Five, six, seven states. We eschew the landmarks for the lesser known: the streams, the bluffs, the mom-and-pops, the farm-to-tables, the things that will be gone, according to Lizzy, before we know it. Speaking of the mom-and-pops, they are the ones who have become wary, as have the farm-to-tables, as have the peach stands. They are concerned. They are skeptical. They are fascinated. "Where are you from?" they want to know. "Where are you headed?" We tip big to show we're just regular people on vacation. Later, Lizzy tells me, "This is how society is changing." She gets melancholy about this. When we fill up for gas, which is every day, the gas station attendants will ask, "Where are you from?" But generally the gas stations are self-serve.

By the time we get to Iowa we have lost track of what we've seen and where we've seen it, the landscape of the country transforms so gradually that it's only one hundred miles after the fact when we realize mountains have given way to cornfields have given way to plains. "Remember that river?" we say to each other. "Remember that lake?" Which state was that lake? Illinois? Rhode Island? New York? We can't recall. Lizzy says, "What difference does it make what state was that lake? States are random delineations anyway." There is truth to this, of course, but at each border we stop and show our travel documents, and at each border we are waved through by the patrolmen, no questions, no problems, New Hampshire apparently having been the exception to the rule.

"Have a good trip," the patrolmen say to us, barely glancing at our travel documents, now stamped with the seals of a dozen states, mostly images of frigates and agricultural implements.

"We hope you come back," they say. "You're welcome here anytime," they say.

"See?" I say to Lizzy.

"See what?" she says.

"See things are not so bad."

She says nothing. She places our precious travel documents in the glove compartment. She closes it with care.

"So why do you thank them," she asks, "for what is yours by right?"

In Kansas we decide to really splurge spur-of-the-moment and book a room at the Marriott, ten stories, ultramodern, sheathed in glass, room service, turndown service, also whirlpool on the ground floor. I withdraw my joint credit card with a flourish and the clerk swipes it once, twice, three times and tells me it's been *declined*.

"Must be a mistake," I say.

"Must be a mistake," Lizzy says.

"Must make a phone call," the clerk says.

"Yes," I say, "must make a phone call."

"Yes," the clerk says, "must be a mistake."

But I know it's no mistake. Lizzy knows it, too. So does the clerk. We have deferred too long. Now Lizzy and I try to save face and come up with cash to pay for the night, along with our checking account information to cover minibar incidentals, of which there will be none. I fill out even more forms than I did for our travel documents, signing and initialing everywhere. "I've never done this before," the clerk says, as if he's engaged in an interesting experiment that he'll be able to tell his buddies about. Twenty minutes later, Lizzy and I are anticlimactically granted the keycard that will get us into the room that we can't afford, Room 814, top floor and bittersweet, designed not so much for traveling executives than for traveling royalty, with shear drapes, wood floors, Neutrogena toiletries, no bad art, no popcorn ceiling. Tonight Lizzy and I do not lie on our backs unwinding silently on the king-sized bed,

instead we get ready to go straight to sleep, ignoring the bathrobes and the imperial opulence, ignoring each other, mustering our energy for "the talk" that we both know we are going to have tomorrow, the talk about the joint credit card, which I am sure, even as I step naked into the shower with the frosted glass and the marble walls, won't be a talk but a *fight*, and it won't be about the credit card but about us, and what ails us, what has always ailed us, which we've only ever deferred.

We can go slow no longer. In the morning we take the turnpike, paying the toll with loose change, which clinks with the ring of indigence. "They should be paying *us*," Lizzy says. How she has come to this conclusion, I do not know. Immediately the unrelenting sameness of the country sets in, the crushing loss of distinction, the absolute homogeneity, the straight line of asphalt. No bluffs, no shoppes, no mom-and-pops. No watercolors from days of yore. Lizzy is right, they will be gone before we know it. I'm doing sixty-five in a sixty-five zone, fast is the new slow, the Cadillac Escalade hurtling earthward like a projectile. Kansas, Kansas, Kansas, say the license plates. Lizzy is arguing out loud beside me, saying something about turnpikes and big boxes and hollow calories. Somehow they're all connected. "Whatever happened to family-owned?" she says. "Whatever happened to DIY? Whatever happened to washing your clothes in the river?" I can tell she's just getting started and that she'll keep listing things all the way to the Nebraska border, where she will finally conclude with, Whatever happened to beating our rugs with a broom?

"Do you know who's to blame?" she asks me.

No, I do not know who is to blame. I am tired and confused. Mainly I am angry, mostly at her for having convinced me to break the bank with this Cadillac Escalade which we both knew full well we could not afford and which will now pursue us at top speed for years to come by way of a maxed-out monthly credit card statement, of which we will only ever be able to pay the minimum.

"Yes, I do know who's to blame," I say. "*You're* to blame!" But I don't say it, I shout it, at the top of my lungs, while banging on the center console with my fist to emphasize my words: *you're. to. blame.* And she's yelling and banging, too, and we're going through every fight we've ever had, like the time she left the empty jar of tomato sauce in the refrigerator, and the time I broke the bathroom light bulb after she'd just replaced it, every fight that will lead straight to this fight in the pristine confines of the Escalade. "Ten years for what?" Lizzy is asking me. But she's not asking, she's *stating.* She's cataloging every one of her grievances, each one still fresh in her mind, recalling them in vivid detail as if they'd just happened, especially the missed opportunities. She's yelling and then she's sobbing. Yelling *while* she's sobbing, trying to get the words

out, but they're garbled, but I can understand her anyway, we don't need language anymore. And soon she's stopped doing an inventory of her slights, and begun doing one of her *life*, big picture, where it's been, where it's going, which is nowhere, really. "It's too late for me at forty," she keeps saying. Even in the midst of the chaos and rage, I want to assure her that this isn't true, that slow living has been good to her, slow living, slow cooking, and that yoga has been good to her, too, Saraswati, that it's been a balm, that it's kept her young, that she still has a bright future ahead even in middle age. Who would she be without me, I had wondered. Why, she would be someone wonderful. I'm the one who should be concerned, balding, can barely touch my toes, diminishing chi. She's the one with hair that's brown and lush, scented with motel shampoo, and even though she has the onset of crow's-feet, they're only noticeable when you stare at the side of her face from two feet away, like I've been doing for however many miles.

And it is right then that I become aware that I'm being followed by the border patrol in an unmarked, unremarkable sedan, four-door and white, the kind, in hindsight, we would have been better off renting from that eighteen-year-old summer employee at Hertz. It's been following us for the last fifty miles or so, constant in my rearview, strangely always about a half car's length away, closer than what you're taught in driver's ed, and whose presence has suddenly wound its way up into my consciousness as a thing about which I need to be aware.

"Who is that?" Lizzy asks. She has stopped shouting.

And as if in response, the border patrolmen put on their high beams, shooting straight through the hatchback of the Cadillac Escalade and over three rows of empty seats, lighting up the interior, sunshine notwithstanding, the universal sign for pull over, which I do, on the side of the turnpike, putting the car in park and popping the glove compartment open.

"*Now* do you see?" Lizzy says. She knows she's won.

Now we wait, our precious travel documents in hand, the white sedan idling behind us, one long stream of cars passing by at sixty-five miles an hour, everything a blur. Kansas, Kansas, Kansas. I should be focused on the border patrol, but I'm focused on the fight and the sadness, and the feeling that we are in a place in our relationship, Lizzy's and mine, from which there is no going back. And it also occurs to me, far too late of course, that we are not actually waiting at the border, nor anywhere near the border, but rather in the middle of the state, and that the white sedan is not the border patrol, but something of which I should have long been wary.

When the car door opens I am momentarily relieved to see that exiting the sedan are two old men, somewhere between avuncular and grandpa, dressed in loafers and

khakis, ambling toward the Cadillac Escalade as if on their way to a picnic on the side of the turnpike.

I roll down the window. "Hello," I call, and this is where the avuncular ends and the menace begins.

"What are you doing here?" they want to know. There are no smiles. There is no Midwest goodness.

"No business," I say, upbeat and reassuring, "just personal."

"That's not what we asked you," they say.

"What gives you the right to ask us anything?" Lizzy says. Which is the wrong thing to ask, because they pull me shirt-first from the car, nearly dragging me along the pavement, some combination of pushing and pulling. They are surprisingly strong for being so old, and even in the midst of my distress, I wonder if I will be as strong as they are when I am their age, if ever I am.

"I have travel documents, sir!" I say, my voice at a high pitch. Lizzy's directive to always maintain dignity now a distant theory.

They don't care about the travel documents. They don't care about the border patrol. They don't care about the green tea in the cooler.

"Do we look like the border patrol?" they ask me. They sound insulted.

No, they look like they could be the regional managers for the Motel 6, and somehow I know that this makes things much worse.

I can hear Lizzy shouting from the front seat, Stop, stop, stop, and the cars whooshing past, the passengers staring out and wondering, briefly, what that man must have done so wrong, and I have a vision of running through the underbrush of Kansas, poor wayward fool, being chased by old men in loafers.

"Concerned citizens of Kansas," they tell me. I can't tell if this is an organization or a figure of speech.

"I'm not a drinker, sir," I say, because perhaps they're concerned that I've been driving through their state under the influence.

But they don't care about drinking and driving.

"What's wrong with your own state?" they ask me.

"The zigzag route," is all I can think to say.

They have me up hard against the hood of the Cadillac Escalade, which is covered in the dust and dead insects of a thousand back roads. Still, the beautiful crimson shines through, cherry-red in the sunlight, painted so skillfully that there is no evidence of even a single brushstroke.