

## Van with No Brakes

My boyfriend's van is speeding out of control down a hill. I am driving. He's yelling at me from the passenger seat. I pump the brakes and nothing happens but I don't lose my cool – I reach for the emergency brake. The handle tears away in my hand.

"We've got no brakes," I yell.

"What da ya mean?"

Jimmy lunges over, grabs the wheel and almost sends us straight into a wall of trees. It's funny how a man, in a crisis, suddenly assumes that the woman has no idea what she's doing – as if this assessment of her true nature has been lurking inside him all along.

I elbow Jimmy out of my way and swerve back onto the road.

"We've got no fucking brakes," I scream.

At the bottom of the hill there's a busy intersection. I picture the van smashing into a school bus (it's that time of day), killing the entire third grade soccer team – so I veer left off the road onto somebody's lawn. I am sorry to have to do this, sorry to be slicing through the pristine green carpet even though I think that such efforts to civilize nature are absurd, but it's the only way I can think of to slow down the van.

I dodge a picnic table and just miss a row of concrete ducks but can't keep clear of a fussy little gazebo that's been plopped down right in the middle of the lawn. I've never seen a gazebo that didn't make me wince so I'm secretly delighted when the van smashes right through it and the cheap white wood splinters into bits.

"Jesus Christ, Jen, watch out!"

Jimmy is almost whining now.

I glance over and he's frozen in a crash-ready position, hands on the dash, legs locked in front of him. His face looks like a baby's just before it's about to start bawling, with the scrunched up eyes and downturned mouth. It's a face

I've never seen before, pitiful really, and I wonder why I've stayed with him for so long. But mostly I'm angry because he refused to take the van into the shop for servicing. "Oh, they just make up those schedules to keep the money rolling in," he says. Jimmy's a musician, a guitarist. He has trouble with authority. So do I. He likes to do everything himself. So do I. This is why we get along – and don't get along – so well. But the grinding sound just kept getting worse and worse, and now there's no sound at all but the woosh of air.

The lawn doesn't level off as I'd hoped but gets steeper and steeper. I swerve back and forth to try to trim speed but on the third swerve the van almost tips over, so I straighten her out, brace myself and wonder about airbags. Does the van have them? I don't know. A flash of silver catches my eye and I remember the lake at the bottom of the hill where we all used to skinny dip, and how a midnight dive into the cool water sobered us up, brought the party back to life. Those were the days. But I don't have time for nostalgia because it's almost as if we're flying now.

Jimmy has started to scream a run-on sentence of swear words with an occasional appeal to God for salvation mixed in – the cry of a lapsed Catholic suddenly returning to the fold. I decide to join in even though I know it won't do any good, that as soon as we hit that slab of water, we'll be killed. My young life flashes before me, just like they say it will, but it's less like a movie and more like a jailbreak. Every experience, thought and feeling I've ever had scrambles for recognition, jamming up and disabling my frontal lobe so that a more primitive part of my brain takes over. I am filled with remorse and regret for all the things I have and haven't done. That I made fun of my little sister's lisp. That I wasn't nicer to my mother. That I smoked too much pot. That I never went to college. That I still worked at BJ's Book Shop. That I hadn't become the writer/actor/painter I imagined I'd be, that I hadn't had a baby, or contributed in anyway to furthering the cause of humanity.

"Lord forgive me for my trespasses!" I yell out at the top of my lungs. It's the only prayer I can remember, something my Grandmother used to say before she ate. I steer straight for a little wooden dock thinking maybe it will slow us down, keep us afloat, but it vanishes beneath us and SPLAM! we hit the

water and BABOOM! the airbags explode, punch us in the face, then disappear like nasty, chicken-hearted ghosts. Water pours in from all corners. Jimmy starts coughing. (He's been smoking a pack a day since he was twelve.) My eyes burn and I can barely make out the profile of his body through the powdery white haze – just like the clouds of heaven, I think. But this is no time for fairy tales because we're going down fast, nose first, as if the water isn't water but a just a darker, heavier air. I fumble for the window buttons. I press and I press and nothing moves but it's too late anyway. All I can see out of the windows is a murky gray-green. The doors, of course, won't budge.

The water is surprisingly warm, seems to be the same temperature I am so that I only feel its pressure as it climbs over my shoulders. I don't know why we are not screaming and pounding on the windows like the people in those public service announcements on TV. We seem to have skipped that stage and are instead immersed, almost hypnotized by the prospect of death.

I look at Jimmy and he looks at me. We stare at each other wide-eyed and frozen, like reflections of reflections. We're both underwater now. His straggly blonde hair bobs in the current. He looks suddenly beautiful, like he did when I first met him five years ago. I smile and reach out. So does he and we touch hands. How are we still breathing? Why does everything feel the same but slowed down? I undo my seat belt and so does he and we float together and embrace between the two bucket seats.

We kiss and it reminds me of our first kiss – shy and soft and eager – the kind of kiss where you've forgotten where you are when you open your eyes. We were sitting in his mother's station wagon in the school parking lot during rehearsal of the play "Our Town." We had minor roles but we didn't mind because it gave us lots of time to make out. All we had to do was show up at the end and say one line each. We played the dead people. The irony of this in light of the current situation suddenly seems wildly coincidental, as if our lives were plotted by some hack-writer in God's fate factory late one Friday afternoon.

I pull away.

"Do you think we're dead?" I ask. The words come out low and thick, as if I'm drunk, and resonate through the water. But I'm grateful that I can still talk.

Jimmy looks out the window.

“This is some deep lake,” is all he says. The van is swaying gently back and forth, almost like a cradle. It’s the only way I can tell we’re still sinking. There’s no fish or bits of seaweed floating by, only a constant dull green, like the screen of an old defunct TV.

“We must be,” I say.

“Jesus Christ Jen, what do you think?” Jimmy pulls the pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and puts one in his mouth. The cigarette bobs in the gentle current then breaks off at the filter. “Shit,” he says.

I decide to assume we’re dead, that we’re drifting in some sort of limbo that will keep slowing down and ease us gently into nothingness. Then, tomorrow morning, a scuba diver will find us, see the tragic image of our bodies, pale and limp, lying one on top of the other between the two bucket seats. He will hook a chain to the chassis and the van will be dragged out. Jimmy and I will be separated, each in our own plastic bag. A photo of this will appear on the front page of the newspaper – two long lumpy masses of black plastic lying side by side on the torn up grass. Our yearbook photos will appear inset below the headline “High School Sweethearts Drown in Van.” People will shudder, as if they were in the bags, or their children. Why is this? Why are we so susceptible to imagining our own deaths? Perhaps it’s an essential vaccine that boosts our passion for life – for at least a day or two – until, in self-defense, we forget.

I feel sorry for my parents. They’ve worked so hard, sacrificed so much. Dad gave up on his idea of being a painter when I was born, and Mom, well, Mom gave up everything to be Mom. They’ll blame my death on Jimmy. They never approved of him, never said exactly why, but I know. Jimmy’s Dad is a truck driver and his Mom used to be a Playboy bunny – and in my parents’ eyes, these facts make them less worthy human beings.

Suddenly, I want to live. I pound and kick on the door. I want to tell my parents how wrong they are. I want to cook a dinner for all six of us – nothing fancy – pasta with sausage, a big steaming basket of garlic bread and a vat of Chianti. Why haven’t I thought to do this before?

“I’m hungry,” Jimmy says.

Then I start laughing and can't stop. The water surges in and out of my lungs and stirs up the water inside the van. I finally feel like I'm drowning. Then I imagine eating a giant pastrami with sauerkraut – Jimmy's favorite – which, while alive, I would never eat. Too greasy.

"Pastrami with sauerkraut and mustard on rye," I say.

Jimmy turns to me. "Yes, exactly."

I see him sitting on top of a cliff, wearing shorts and hiking boots, eating the pastrami sandwich. Behind him is a harem of dark-haired women with slanted eyes all dressed up in slinky silk outfits. Four stand at attention next to an ornately carved sedan chair upholstered in red velvet. Behind them are rows of stretchers piled high with blankets, fruit, meat, cheese, bread and jugs of wine. Then I notice that Jimmy is suddenly wearing an idiotic-looking cap with a giant emerald glued on the front. Below the cliff shines a narrow sea.

In real life, I would never imagine anything like this. I look over at Jimmy and he's not moving except for his hair which is fluttering in the current of my laughter. He's got this beatific smile on his face and I wonder if maybe he's died and gone to such a heaven, and somehow I am seeing this place he has gone. Wouldn't it be amazing if, when we died, we could invent our own heavens? Then I worry I've condemned myself to an eternal pasta dinner with my parents and Jimmy's parents who will never see eye to eye. I try to quickly reimagine my heaven but instead see a woman who's not me sit down on the cliff next to Jimmy and stick her tongue in his ear.

So I stick my tongue in Jimmy's ear. He jerks awake and yelps like a puppy whose tail is caught in a door.

"Jen, what are you doing?"

"I thought you were dead," I say.

"We are dead," he says.

"I mean dead dead. You looked like you'd, you know, left your body, so I just wanted to see...."

"Well, that sure is an odd way to do it."

"Why?" I ask.

"How can you think of sex at a time like this?"

“What should I be thinking of? What were you thinking of?”

Jimmy doesn't exactly redden. The flush is more conceptual in nature – his body sort of shimmers in and out of focus. Then I see Jimmy on the mountain again and he's pushing the woman away. His real arm flutters in the water. Up until now I haven't allowed myself to even think it, but now I know for sure. I am seeing his thoughts – reading his mind – and I am furious. What a hypocrite. I should've known. How could I have been so blind? Suddenly I regret our relationship, my tragically short adult life with this man, the only man I've ever loved.

“It's not what you think,” he says.

“No, it's what you think,” I say.

Then, suddenly, there's a huge bang, the sound of metal ripping and I'm thrown on top of Jimmy and the van starts to spin sideways. I wrap my arms around the seat back, around Jimmy and start to cry. Jimmy holds me with one arm and grabs the seat with the other. Locked together, we roll and roll and roll, our instinct for self-preservation still intact in death. Jimmy kisses me, first on the forehead, then on the ear, then on the mouth. I love you, I love you, I love you, I hear but don't hear. And this is all I hear for a long time. Maybe this is heaven I think, a long endless saying of what has forgotten to be said. Maybe, in time, the van will disintegrate and our bodies will merge with other such bodies to form large spheres spinning eternally through this watery space – huge clumps of love never ceasing its restless tumble in search of even more love. (This is one of the strangest thoughts I've ever had and now I'm not sure whether I had it or Jimmy had it or we both had it together.)

Suddenly I feel more alive than I've ever felt in my whole life. This makes me happy, then sad, then happy again because regret is a trick of the devil, we think. I know it's we now because I was brought up Unitarian where all I learned in Sunday school was how to make finger puppets and clay pots.

I enjoy this we-type thinking and wonder whether this is the way Jimmy always thought, before we died I mean, and all of a sudden I understand what his music was all about and why he was always so hard on himself. The sounds could never live up to the visions in his head. So I forgive him for his harem,

wish I had thought to think of one of my own. I would be an Indian princess with long black hair who lived in a lush river valley. Dark skinned men with lines painted on their bodies would keep me in furs and flowers and peyote and watch over my many children who would be born, painlessly, each morning, fathered by the man I had slept with the night before.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

The refrain continues behind our thoughts like the sound of rain dripping from the roof. Jimmy's hands are all over me, and mine all over him, and somehow we are floating unharmed at the center of the spin.

(Published in *Literal Latte*, Vol. 7, No. 2. 2001)