

When the Car Broke Down

by Sara Sands

This time, the car isn't actually broken. Not that Jacob's 1999 Honda Civic runs well because it doesn't. Only two months before it broke down the week of my senior prom. That meant instead of being charioted off to dinner and the dance in a silver two-door compact, he rocked up to my parents' house in the suburbs driving Scooby Doo and the gang's Mystery Machine disguised by a coat of burgundy paint. The FEMA trailer, a lingering remnant of Hurricane Katrina residing on our front lawn, was only slightly bigger than the van. I had to hike up my Ross-4-Less hot pink dress and grab hold of the armrest to pull myself in. However, it is now July and the Civic is running fine. That's just not what I tell my boss, the camp director, when I ring her that Monday morning.

We had gone to Jacob's parents' house in Baton Rouge for the weekend. They were out of town, which meant that their lovely home with Jacuzzi whirlpool bath was vacant. I convince Jacob we should go to see his friends, but my underlying motives are all selfish. I am sick of spending every waking hour playing with preschoolers as a Senior Counselor at the Jewish Community Center's summer camp. I am also tired of arguing with my parents over the appropriateness of their 18-year-old daughter staying over at her 21-year-old boyfriend's apartment. The fact I am adult enough in the eyes of the US government and by my own reckoning to do so is a moot point. They fear I'm having pre-marital sex, which to them is an affront to the caution, morality and self-respect they strove to instill within me. From my perspective, pursuing sexual freedom is the easiest and most gratifying way to escape the confines of my trophy daughter reputation. Aside from the occasional pot smoking, I don't do drugs. They are only vaguely aware of my love affair

with Jack Daniels. My high school transcript shows a healthy streak of vowels, with the exception of math and chemistry. I hate how good I am; however, I don't want my parents to believe I am anything else. Thus, leaving the city to get wasted and bang seems ideal.

We arrive Friday night but come Sunday morning, I am brimming with dread. I have six weeks until I move into the dorms at Tulane University. I want to be young and free and spontaneous—all the things I seem genetically not programmed to be given my inability to do anything without planning. I'm bemoaning this state of affairs, contemplating the mundaneness of life, when Jacob has an idea.

"Why don't we go to Alabama? Orange Beach?"

"When?" I ask, sensing that this is going to be another empty suggestion, like an emergency evacuation plan made but never enacted.

"Now," he replies. "We can go now."

"Can't, I got work in the morning."

"Call them and tell them that we got stranded in Baton Rouge or something. Tell them the car broke down."

I look at him, carefully chewing one of the partially frozen fudge brownies his mom has left us in the Christmas tin in the freezer.

"So I should lie?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "Or you can go on another hunt for Bunny the one-eyed Rabbit tomorrow." I chew this over a bit more.

"Okay," I say, "I'll lie."

We pack the car and head out.

The last time I played hooky was when I skipped school the day before the fifth grade science fair. Two months of prep time had dwindled down to a matter of days until it was the weekend before the fair. I hadn't done anything but purchased an albino frog that I couldn't do

my ice cube experiment on without committing frogicide (a clear violation of science fair rules). Thus, 48-hours before the due date, my dad drove me to Destrehan where a family friend had caught a garden frog that was science experiment safe. I then stayed home the next day to conduct the tests while my mom created a triptych display to present my project to the whole grade. When she went to pick up my brother from school, the teachers all enquired about my whereabouts. She emphasized the severity of my 24-hour stomach virus while assuring them I would be a ray of sunshine in their classrooms the next day. I was dropped off the following morning with instructions to confirm everything she said. That was seven years ago. Since then, I have dedicated myself to at least showing up to my duties. Playing hooky never even occurred to me as a legitimate option for avoiding responsibilities. However, as I rub my hand across the crotch of my older boyfriend's green khaki shorts while cruising down I-10 toward Alabama the Beautiful, I wonder why I haven't considered it before.

We make incredible time and decide to stop in Foley, Alabama to have lunch at Lambert's Café, the "Home of the Thrown Rolls." We both went to Lambert's as kids and frequently question why we never go together. Taking this detour feels something like a pilgrim's trip to Mecca, if Mecca has big-gulp-sized mugs of sweet tea and chicken fried steak. We get to Lambert's around noon and put our name on the predictably lengthy waiting list; it is Sunday and the place is packed with women in wide-brimmed hats and men in linen suits. We then head outside to wait on the big front porch and bask in the unabashed kitschiness of the establishment. Lambert's is designed to look like a mom-and-pop country store but surrounded by a concrete parking lot to rival most Wal Marts. With a giant checkerboard painted on the ground and gift shop stocked with rock candy, cornbread mix and aprons, it is the off-brand version of Cracker Barrel with one distinct difference: They literally throw the rolls at diners. The waiters also walk about with pots

of unlimited "pass-arounds"—free sides like fried okra, macaroni & tomato, black-eyed peas and apple butter. The amount of eating to be done is endless.

"Oh, look, a wagon," I say, jumping on the back.

"Give me the camera," Jacob says. I dig around in my purse and hand over the chunky silver Nikon. My Facebook account is barely three months old and already we are trying to capture and catalogue our relationship for the Internet and posterity's sake. He snaps the photo. I take a look at it. I'm posing in my green workout tank top and Daisy Dukes, sunglasses perched on my head and hair piled high in a bun. My legs are crossed, hands holding my chin, a smile plastered on my face. Behind me, a mom pulls her crying daughter out of the wagon's front seat. It isn't a bad shot. I look happy. "Totally Facebook worthy," he remarks, and I give a nod.

I'm watching the cars speed past on the interstate when somebody calls for "Jacob, party of two" over a loudspeaker. We make our way back inside the restaurant, where we follow the hostess to a booth at the front of the main dining room. As we sit down, I see an exceptionally clean-cut waiter with short blond hair wearing a blue vest and red bow tie enter the hall with a tray of muffin-topped rolls.

"Get your thrown rolls," he shouts. "Hot and fresh out the oven."

"Hell yes!" I exclaim and raise my hands. He looks me in the eyes and, with the finesse of a baseball player, lobs one across the room. Watching it sail through the air, I become panic stricken that I'll drop it. Arms up and waiting, the moment I feel it in my grip, I close my hands tight, fingers breaking through the brown crusty outside and sinking into the hot doughy center.

A waitress with a big pot appears at our table. "Apple butter, darlin'?"

"Yes, please." We place our orders and begin to tuck in to the pass arounds. I'm halfway through a napkin full of fried okra when Jacob speaks up.

"This is what I want. This is the good life."

"What? Fried okra?" I ask, popping another two in my mouth.

"No, like this. You and me, going places, enjoying good food, being together."

"Yeah, I like it too. I'm glad we did this."

"Yeah, and just think, when we get older, we can do this all the time. Just go. I mean, of course we'll have jobs and kids but Alabama isn't that far away and we can just drive anywhere for a weekend, you know?"

I stop eating and take a very slow, long sip of sweet tea.

"Um, so you like, want to stay here? In the south?" I look him over. His short brown hair is sticking up—a sign that he forgot to brush it. He's a hairy guy and after two days of not shaving, his face has some serious wiry growth. This is also day two he's rocking the gray T-shirt that says "COLLEGE" in big navy letters. Typically, I let these sorts of things slide, but now they demand my attention.

"Well, New Orleans, really. Don't you? I mean, that's where your family is and most of mine. All of our friends too. This is where we grew up. We've got a good thing here. We don't really need to go anywhere else, do we?" He stops and looks at me. At the next booth over, a waiter holding a pitcher of fake ice tea pretends to knock into the table and spill it into the woman's lap. She shrieks and her husband laughs. I can see the waiter coming my direction and give him the evil eye to stay away.

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it." I tear into a piece of golden fried chicken to excuse myself from talking anymore. The truth is, I have thought about it. A lot. The month before, Jacob turned twenty-one. He and his friend threw a joint birthday party. Jacob got super drunk and was throwing up, so I took him back to his apartment. As I put him to bed, he started to cry and confessed that every time he looked at me, he felt he was looking at his one chance to have a family, and he wanted to be a better man to prove it. He never wanted to disappoint me, which was a bold statement because while the tears were touching, the endless

production of vomit ruined our otherwise cinematic moment. It also prevented me from using the new black lingerie I purchased for the occasion, which only led to more tears on his part. If he remembered the conversation the next day, he didn't mention it.

However, it made me worry. Had I decided to go to Tulane to be with Jacob? I had chalked my decision up to money and not being able to afford to go to any other schools but was that really true? Either way, a decision to stay in Louisiana for college didn't mean I wanted to be there permanently. There were so many factors to consider. There was the city – the humidity and history. There was the pressure of my family and the oppressive nature of my personal breed of over-achiever. Each of these things felt like a cinderblock tied to my ankles; I was drowning in New Orleans. I wanted to get out. Furthermore, our pregnancy scare the previous April confirmed that a baby was the last thing I wanted right now, and, either way, I didn't want to have a baby with him. The role Jacob wanted me to play, a version of motherhood crafted by his mother who had a philosophy degree from Tulane but opted to dedicate herself to her children, including coming to New Orleans to clean her grown son's apartment, was not the part in which I wanted to be cast.

Jacob, over the seven months we had been together, had written a shared past and future for us, which I had co-authored. We had often marveled at the fact we never met before his cousin's Bar Mitzvah at my synagogue a month before Hurricane Katrina. His aunt and my mother were friends. My sisters went to the same pre-school as his younger cousins. We should have, could have, might have been together long ago. However, in reality, our not meeting wasn't surprising. We had none of the same interests. I knew his friends and, until Jacob and I got together, they didn't speak to me. I went to public school while they all attended the most expensive private schools like Isidore Newman and Country Day. I was overweight with unruly hair and possessed little expendable income for fashion. My parents

refrained from lavishing me with designer products that didn't come from the clearance section of T.J. Maxx. I also was a helpless know-it-all with a greater love for sarcasm than for niceties and friends. Thus, while our location might have coincided on occasion, our social circles did not. Our relationship was in equal parts driven by our libidos and by the thrill of dating someone with whom, in principle, there could have been a future in the eyes of our families. Finally, bombarded daily by lawn signs describing missing fathers and grandmothers, our relationship was also sustained by a need to feel found in Katrina's human debris.

Jacob is focused on his plate, shoveling coleslaw into his mouth. In the mirror on the back wall, I see us together, framed by the window behind our booth. I want to break out of this frame with a sledgehammer and leave the pieces on the floor underneath the restaurant motto hanging on a sign over the cash register: "We hope you come hungry, leave full, and hopefully have a laugh or two!" I am no longer hungry, but I am not laughing.

We return to driving. The highway is practically clear but my brain is erecting its own speed bumps and stop signs. The magnitude of my decision to skip town and take an overnight joyride to the beach where I'll be checking into a hotel room with him is hitting me like a MACK truck. I want to see my parents, watch *South Park* reruns on the couch, and make my lunch for work the next day. I want to go home, but I don't know how to tell him.

"This is very adult, isn't it?" I start.

"What do you mean?"

"I just mean the whole skipping work, going to the beach, getting a hotel room by ourselves. It's sort of a lot, isn't it?"

"What are you saying?"

I stare out the window, watching the sand flash past in swaths of yellow, like one long yellow light. However, proceeding with caution isn't really Jacob's forte so he continues to press me.

"Sara, what are you saying?"

"I'm just saying this all feels like too much.

It's just really adult and I'm not sure I want to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean like checking into a hotel, getting a room together, just the two of us, in a different state. An unplanned get-a-way. This is like what adults do, right? But I don't feel grown up enough for this. I'm not old enough for this movie."

My nervous habits—picking my nails, littering my speech with "likes," tapping my bare feet against the glove compartment—are all manifesting. As though for effect, we pause at a red light. I look down at my nails but can feel him considering me from the driver's seat. It is three o'clock. He speeds ahead to the next red light.

"Okay, well, what do you want me to do?"

His knuckles are white around the steering wheel.

"I don't know."

"Do you want me to turn around?"

"I guess not. Not at this point anyway. It'll take three hours to get home."

"So what should we do?"

"I, um, don't know." This time I look him in the eyes and let out a massive sigh. Inside me there is a four-year-old with pigtails that is yearning to cry freely. Not too far in the distance are the signs for the hotels lining the highway. Time is running out.

"Look," he says. "Why don't we stick to the plan but get a room with two beds?"

"Yeah? You don't mind?" I look up again.

"No, if you're uncomfortable, we'll just ask for two beds and we won't do anything. We won't sleep together or anything. We can be separate."

I consider this offer and then shake my head yes before giving a verbal affirmation. "Okay, I think that's fine."

We pull up to The Quality Inn, a bland sun-washed building the color of Cheez Wiz with the occasional stripe of red ceramic tiles. The tarmac of the parking lot is hot and we start sweating the moment the car shuts off. The beach looks so nice; I want to be there

now. The lobby is very small—two green chairs flank a small round wooden table next to a rack of pamphlets enticing visitors to “Get Hot ’n’ Steamy: Eat at The Steamer,” “Visit the Historic Fort Morgan,” and “See Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo: the Little Zoo that Could.” A woman in an unremarkable navy suit stands behind the counter.

“Hi, welcome to The Quality Inn. How can I help you today?”

“Hi, we don’t have a reservation,” Jacob says. “We’re looking for a room.”

She examines each of us individually, and I feel as though she is sizing us and our story up. Are we runaways? Are we lost? Where are our parents?

“Let me see what I have. We’re very full.” Her nails click on the keyboard. “I have a queen-sized room for tonight.”

“How many beds?” I ask. She looks at me, I think, suspiciously.

“Just one.”

“We need two beds,” Jacob states, a hint of hesitation in his voice.

“I don’t think I have any.” The very small balloon of hope inside me is starting to deflate. Worse, now I’m starting to feel silly and juvenile. Two separate beds may have been his idea, but we’re only doing it because of me, so everything feels like my fault. It’s not like we don’t sleep in the same bed on nights when I stay at his place. I’m being ridiculous. I’m about to concede when she throws a lifesaver into my pool of uncertainty. “No, wait, there’s one. It is not a beach view, but it has two double beds. Will that work?”

“Yes,” Jacob and I respond in unison.

She starts taking all of Jacob’s details to put the room in his name. I zone out until I hear the total—\$125 for the night. Paying for a hotel never even factored into my decision-making process. Working as a counselor and doing some hours as a receptionist at the front desk at the JCC isn’t exactly a lucrative gig. Jacob doesn’t have a job because his parents believe that while he is in school, even over summers, his only job should be school. He takes out his tat-

tered wallet and pulls out the credit card his parents pay for. I’ve got no idea if this was his plan the whole time. We are now officially playing hooky on his parents’ dime. The transaction done, we go back to the car to grab our stuff. All I’ve got is a mismatched bathing suit, my black bikini bottoms with my cousin Ashley’s ill-fitting blue-stripped halter tankini. I change into it and we head to the beach.

We find an optimal piece of beach real estate, far enough away that we don’t think the incoming tide will get us but close enough so I can easily go to and from the water. Jacob immediately stretches out on his island of a towel in the sand. I set up my towel but am far too fidgety to stay. I dive in and am struck by how warm the water is. I’m considering whether this means we’ll get another hurricane when Jacob comes up behind me. He picks me up and holds me like a baby. I giggle on cue when he grabs my sides and hold on to his neck but on the inside my entire being is recoiling. I don’t know why, but I’m embarrassed to be there with him. Touching him, feeling his chest hair, the scruff on his face as he comes in close to mine—I want to swim away to the other side of the cove. However, I stay put, clinging on. We are talking about nothing when he comes in close again.

“Hey baby,” he says, “I love you.”

This is not the first time we’ve said I love you. However, I don’t want to say it back. Despite the expanse of water around me and being a very good swimmer, I feel trapped.

“Ditto, babe. Ditto. You know I love you too.” He looks at me a little disappointed. I suggest we swim for shore. We occupy our separate towel islands.

“Jacob,” I say, “you know that we’re really young, and we’re going to say a lot of things now that we mean, but, like, things can change. Will change. We mean them now, but we might not mean them forever.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. You know I was thinking after lunch that even though I said we should stay in New Orleans we could go somewhere different. Like Houston.” I don’t have the language dexterity or balls to tell him that’s

not what I mean. That what I mean is right now we'll say "I love you" and it is true, but someday it might not be. The sun starts going down and we pack up. Before we go, he asks for the camera again.

"Pose," he says. He snaps and I take a look. This one I don't think is very Facebook worthy. I'm stretched out on the beach, squinting into the camera, legs covered in sand, wet hair sticking to my shoulders, the water and sky a near-matching blue behind me. The scene is nice, but I wish I was ten pounds lighter. I make a mental note that I should go to the gym when we return home.

Back in our hotel room, I get ready to shower. There's awkwardness between us as we maneuver around each other and try to find my toiletries. In normal circumstances, we would shower together. He sits on the corner of the bed, looking dejected.

"You can, uh, come in with me, if you want. I mean, I don't think we should do anything but you can just be there."

"It's alright," he says. "I'll wait here."

"Okay, well, if you change your mind . . ." and I trail off. I'm in the middle of shampooing when I get a knock at the door.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." He comes into the bathroom and just stands there, holding the shower curtain open. "You can just watch too, if you like, I guess. But it isn't going to be a sexy shower. It is going to be a purely functional affair."

"That's okay," he says and he doesn't move. I rinse the shampoo and move to the conditioner.

"You see there's really nothing sexy about conditioning." I follow with a nervous laugh but Jacob just gives a small smile. Nobody has ever just looked at me before. I'm acutely aware of his presence, the gazing eyes and what must be the incredible amount of self-restraint to not intervene in my otherwise totally mundane ritual. In a way, his attention is sexy. Always an attention-seeker, I almost want to be on show. However, this thought makes me more uncomfortable. I feel more vulnerable, more ex-

posed, than I think I ever have. I rush through the rest of it, only doing a cursory check to make sure all the sand is gone.

The night passes without remark. We drive around and go to dinner at The Steamer where we make small talk over platters of boiled shrimp and crawfish. Using my friend Ariel's old driver's permit that says I'm twenty-two, I get a strawberry daiquiri topped with whipped cream and a maraschino cherry. I save my cherry for last, using the straw to retrieve it from the creamy bottom when the liquid is gone. We go back to the hotel and put on the TV. For a while, we lay in the same bed and make out. However, when the clothes start coming off there is an abrupt stop. The familiar moves—his fingers wearing a groove in my back, the impressing of his lips on my forehead—are more committed than before. Where there is typically urgency, there is now intransience, and undertones of an unspoken promise of permanence, although whose life playbook I'm agreeing to run is unclear to me. What is clear is that our period of stasis, of simply skirting the borders of adulthood without entering the territory, is over. I pretend to be tired, curl up next to him and close my eyes. A few minutes pass and he must think I'm asleep because I hear a whisper in my ear.

"Good night, baby. I love you." I squeeze my eyes shut harder. I imagine I legitimately fall asleep soon after, at which point he must move to the other bed because when I wake up early to call my boss he is there. I find my cell phone and call the JCC.

"Hi, Dionne? It's Sara. Can I please be put through to Pam's office?" I hold the line.

"Good morning, this is Pam."

"Hi, Pam. It's Sara. I'm super super sorry but I'm stranded in Baton Rouge. Yeah, you see Jacob and I went for the weekend and his car broke down last night. Yes, it does suck. They think they'll be able to fix it today but just not sure when I'll be able to get back. Yes, yes, I'll definitely be there tomorrow. Just wanted to let you, Dana, and Ellen know so that people can plan accordingly. Thanks so much for being un-

derstanding. You're very welcome. Have a great day!"

I stay in bed, dropping in and out of sleep for an hour until Jacob gets up.

"Did you call your boss?" he asks. "Did you tell her about the car?"

"Yeah, already sorted."

"Great, see, no harm done." I nod my head in silent agreement.

I mull this over as I brush my teeth. "No harm done." Sure, nobody is physically damaged. However, my emotional state is like the detritus of a shipwreck washing up on the shore, fragmented and unrecognizable. Twenty-four hours ago, when we first started our drive, I was certain that I would wake up carefree and elated, smug with the self-satisfaction of having played hooky and gotten away with it. Wiping the toothpaste from the corners of my mouth, there is not a trace of smugness to be found. Just the outline of shame. In my head, I was leading my own sexual revolution from an inexperienced Cecile Caldwell to something between a Kathryn Merteuil and a Michelle Flaherty, eschewing the cruel intentions and cocaine habit of the former and the flute playing and band camp stories of the latter to arrive at a sexually aware, experienced, and self-possessed state of being. However, it seemed the lines between sex as rebellion, self-direction, and commitment formed a Bermuda Triangle. Was this now sex for me or sex to spite my parents? Or was it both and also something else? Awkward in most other respects, and not believing myself to be pretty enough, sweet enough, or anything enough for anyone to love easily, sex was a gateway through which I believed I could create a lasting emotional attachment that I would otherwise never have. But this commitment with Jacob isn't the right one. I feel the way I did when I was seven and received a remote control dog for Chanukah—a combination of disappointed, angry, and embarrassed when I realized that just because I could make it bark and walk did not mean it would ever be the real thing.

We collect our limited belongings, check

out and hit the road. We decide to go straight back and not stop for breakfast. It's still early but already it's clear that the day is going to be a scorcher. I put my bare feet up on the dashboard and lounge back in the passenger seat. As will become my typical reaction whenever I think I've put a man out, I feel guilty. Yet I also feel incredibly close to him. Like I've put him through some test and he has now proved deserving of my attention and trust for a while longer. I take Jacob's hand. The Lifehouse song "You and Me" comes on the radio.

"You know, we don't have a song," I state, thinking that he might get the hint.

"Yeah, I guess not. Guess we'll have to give that some thought. Nothing too stupid or cheesy. Maybe something old school or something by Dave Matthews."

Lifehouse is not Dave Matthews and this song is so cheesy that it was definitely played once at prom if not twice, although I can't confirm the second time because we didn't stay until the end. Again, my desire to get drunk and laid came first. I don't tell him, but I assign it to us anyway. We get to my house and he parks outside.

"So tomorrow?" he asks.

"I think I need to be at work."

"Yeah, of course. Maybe see you after?"

"I'll give you a call." I kiss him goodbye and head inside.

I post the two photos from the trip on Facebook. Within minutes, Jacob tags them and adds captions. For Lambert's: "Damn she's so cute." For the beach photo: "Got the best view in the world. OoOo, am I at the beach?" Seconds later, one of his friends, who is also now my friend, "likes" them. A sudden pain shoots into my stomach and up my throat. For a brief moment, I hover the cursor over the delete button, but then I move it away and close the tab instead. The needle jabs back, though less strong this time. "Must be hungry," I think, and walk to the kitchen. ▲▼▲