

*Berkley Carmine*



**BLAST OFF**

# Blast Off

by Berkley Carnine

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By seven p.m., sweat was plastered to my forehead and any hope for a ride was going down with the sun. I straddled the guardrail facing west. Fuchsia streaks jetted up from a horizon broken open with orange light. I didn't notice the semi drawing to a halt beyond the overpass until the brakes released a diesel filled sigh.

Back then, I hadn't figured out that if a driver needed you to hurry, he might want other *favours* as well, so I jogged. The passenger door of the Swift Company truck swung open and I climbed the ladder. The trucker looked like a washed up hipster with his handlebar mustache and sleeveless pink plaid shirt. His defined biceps, ruddy cheeks, and impish smile landed him in his late thirties.

When I asked where he was heading, he said he was hauling baby diapers from Sac to Nashville. "That and redistributing fate."

"You aren't another Born-Again?" I asked, feeling prickly after my last ride.

"Naw." He grinned and asked where I was going.

It was Friday night. I told him I needed to be in Tucson by Sunday at noon. He said he was crossing northern Arizona but might be able to cut south through Tucson.

"Anything to avoid L.A.?" I said, turning to survey his living quarters. There was no evidence of drugs, no porn magazines splayed across the bed, the only curiosity was a plank of wood mounted vertically on the sidewall between the bed and refrigerator. Evenly spaced, small circles of glass were set into the weathered wood. They appeared like portholes in a submarine. Instead of offering views of the ocean floor, the glass framed a series of Polaroid photos: one of a metal bird sculpture, another of a wrecked pink Cadillac, and the bottom frame had the profile of a dark haired man.

"You gonna let my AC take on global warming?" He asked.

“It’s too fucking hot for June,” I agreed and retrieved my pack.

While he tidied his living quarters, shoving a red shoebox further under the bed, I calculated a ten-hour drive to Flagstaff and fifteen to Tucson. Wondering how he would be able to drive an extra five hours south, I heard my ex’s voice, *you trust the wrong people*. Old Richard, the psychiatrist at Evergreen College, chimed in: *the idea of listening to your guts has biological merit*. That was the last session when he explained how early trauma damaged my judgment and made me *hypersexual*. In my head, I had told Old Richard, *it’s not my fault you want to fuck* before storming out. In reality, I’d waited for our session to end and never rescheduled.

The trucker plopped back into the driver seat and let off the brakes. “Hammer down,” he said.

“What do you mean redistributing fate?”

“Getting things where they need to go.”

Unable to get him to divulge more, we fell silent. The sunset gave a last display of creamsicle colored light. Inhaling, I detected cedar smoke and gypsum beneath the stench of cigarettes and laundry detergent. Exhaling, I tried to relax my shoulders. This was my first time hitchhiking alone. Thumbing rides was part of what I read about at the infoshop: dumpster diving, hopping trains, squatting, and taking direct action. Carve out an existence *based not on exploitation but mutual aid*. In a class on the borderlands, a professor pointed out the limitations of dabbling activism and encouraged us to find our own stake in movements, examine our privilege, and foremost, commit. So I dropped out of school to *commit* to something real. Meanwhile, I would prove to my ex I could do it alone.

Beyond an overpass, headlights jabbed at the now drawn darkness. Picking up the CB handle, the driver announced, “Got a bear hanging around exit 107.”

“Bear?”

“You ride with truckers much?”

As if in response, I slid my knife around to where it was visible.

“Bear as in a cop, not as in a gay man, you know bears and otters, tops and bottoms?”

I laughed, “There’s a lot of talk ‘bout those kind of bears on the CB?”

“I’ve heard there’s a truck stop in Winnemucca, you ask Bob for shower number three.”

“You’ve heard?”

“You could say I’ve investigated.”

On the CB, a rant about *fucking illegals* cut in. It turned into a debate about which of the Nevada LUV’s had hotter lot lizards, which I surmised meant hookers.

A nasally voice pierced the airwaves, “Anybody see that beaver hitching south? If I was going that way I’d take her for a ride, hog tie her, and...”

“That asshole,” my ride hit the scan button on the radio. It picked up Lil Wayne, then the Eagles. “Lucky he didn’t stop for you.”

“You think I would have gone with him?”

He gave a sidelong glance. “Nice knife. Is that antler?”

“Yeah, elk. My ex made it, pounded the blade from a railroad spike.”

“He make it before or after you broke up?”

“Before I slept with his best friend.”

The day we broke up, it was pouring. It was always raining. I scrambled up a tree and was hanging upside down, shouting that I’d drop on my head if he didn’t forgive me. Standing

below, Eliot's hair was slicked to his pale forehead. He used to call me a theatrical depressive—even my anguish was covered in sequins. Rain trickled down our faces instead of tears. We stared at each other knowing he would always forgive me and I would never let go.

“My ex told me to call once I figured things out,” I told the trucker, not repeating the part where Eliot asked if I was in love with Amy. I hadn't answered, but even then, he must have known. A nauseating thought gripped me: Amy hasn't spoken to me since that drunken night; Eliot will move on; I am alone.

“Is that what you're doing, traveling til you find yourself?” The driver's question jolted me out of my panic.

*Alone, like I want to be*, I reminded myself before telling him, “I'm going to volunteer with No More Deaths.” I repeated what Amy had told me about the recently formed humanitarian group that leaves water and supplies in the desert for migrants crossing the border. “Hundreds of migrants die each year.”

“You been down before?” He asked.

“No, I've been depressed,” I said, as if it was an occupation or something you study at school. Old Richard called it a distancing mechanism. Name the emotional state so it is transient as the weather.

“Saving lives should fix that.”

“Coffee's gonna fix it,” I said.

He pulled a thermos from behind his seat. “Finish it. We'll fill up outside Bakersfield.”

As if he was allergic to a place so nasty as Bakersfield, he began sneezing. Dainty at first, the sneezes culminated in an explosive spray of snot across the windshield.

“Blast off!”

“Blast off?” He asked, wiping the steering wheel with a baby blue bandana.

“My friend Amy says that instead of bless you.”

His grin widened. The radio picked up a public service announcement on identity theft, then Dinosaur Jr. He said, “Scan keeps me from getting stuck in a mood, but you can pick a station.”

I told him I could handle it; my high school ex used to put it on scan to annoy me, although he later got into the noise scene. When the trucker asked *noise?* I explained the idea, which is infinitely more compelling than the results: “It’s like you put all the channels together at once.”

“Don’t think my radio can do that.”

I smiled, “I’m Maggie by the way.”

“Crow.” At my questioning glance he added, “After my uncle.”

For miles, it reeked of cow manure. The radio blipped through Tool, Lionel Richie, and Rush Limbaugh. My eyelids sagged. I asked him about the porthole-photographs. He told me a friend sent the Polaroids and then changed the subject to his Microm 200 that his uncle gave him. “My uncle had no idea what that camera would mean to me.”

Crow described his childhood in a small town on the Gulf. When he was sixteen, his mom was locked up and he had to support himself. He started taking photographs for tourists in the Everglades—belly-crawling toward gators so pasty New England children appeared within snapping distance. After a particularly exciting shoot, a New Yorker turned Crow onto the idea of art school. At the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, Stephen captivated Crow with his dashing smile and endless descriptions of artist movements.

“Surrealists, Situationists, Dadaists, I hadn’t heard jack shit ‘bout any of it so I suggested the MaMaists. Stephen loved it, calling it a movement dedicated to the female form. We did a mother themed series. Assemblage,” he said in a ridiculous fake French accent, “including photos of us dressed up as pregnant, bearded housewives. I always sent pictures of myself playing the art student to my ma. She thinks decoupage is high art.”

By this point, I was cracking up and unexpectedly charmed. As I rolled a cigarette, he asked about my life. Estrangement from a recently successful father; a mother who went New Age but still can only communicate during family therapy; broken-hearted boyfriends, art classes, and writing workshops—it all sounded sheltered and boring after his. Wanting to shock him, I almost described the Women and Gender Studies seminar where too many of us shared our experiences of sexual violence. Swallowing, I asked what he did after art school.

He said once he realized he couldn’t afford school, he got himself kicked out. A month later, he landed a gig as a photographer for Miami’s gay lifestyle magazine. “We even did a shoot at Sea World. A bunch of beautiful boys splashing around with dolphins and making out in front of Shamu. This was before everyone realized killer whales could kill.”

“You get hit on a lot?” I asked.

Crow gave me a flirtatious grin. Before I could push for details, a sign for Bakersfield flashed in the headlights.

After using the truck stop bathroom, I came outside to find Crow standing in a semi circle of truckers. Above, a universe of bugs buzzed under the halogen lights and a Lanky dude was telling a joke about a trucker running off the road into a ditch cause his *blinker got stuck*. Then Lanky described finding his wife in bed with a guy young enough to be in high school.

“Kid jumped on a bike and started pedaling like the devil was after him. I drove alongside him and *my blinker got stuck.*” Lanky’s laughter turned into a coughing fit. When he recovered his voice was grating. “I threw a rope over the kid and dragged him down Serenity Lane with my wife giving chase in a bathrobe.”

Crow asked Lanky who he was hauling for. Lanky gave Crow a dead hard stare and told him “Mercer, out of Milwaukee. You?”

When we climbed back into the cab of Crow’s Swift Company Truck, Crow rummaged through the boxes under his bed, and finding a photograph, slipped it in his back pocket. “I’ll be right back,” he said, scaling down the ladder. He headed toward a Mercer Company truck.

When he returned, I sensed he didn’t want to talk so I kept silent as we drove east on a smaller curvy highway. After ten or so miles of the radio sampling Rhianna’s “SOS” and Dvorak’s “New World Symphony,” Crow started talking as if we’d just left the other truckers. “Some of those dudes are sick. Everyone tells you to be careful, right?”

“Guys either want to fuck me or pretend they’re my dad and I haven’t spoken to him in a couple of years.” I rolled a cigarette and took a drag. The last time I talked to my father, I told him I was starting to remember things his brother did to me when I was young. My father accused me of lying to get attention and asked *is this about the divorce?* When I refused to answer, he asked if I needed money. Always, I told him, but all his money couldn’t compensate for the doubt he sowed.

The radio picked up “Mammas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys.”

From the dark, Crow said, “That guy is gonna get it.” After a pause in which I held my breath, he went on, “That guy’s daughter was there when he *dealt* with his wife. He messed ‘em both up pretty good. I don’t have much tolerance for people who fuck with their kids.”

I snorted, “Me neither, but what are you going to do about it?”

“I have my ways.”

“What do you mean? Wait, how do you know his daughter was there?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got all night.”

“My boss man wants me to get some shut-eye no later than one. Can you roll me a spliff?” In the glove compartment was a bag of shwaggy looking weed. The cab filled with smoke. When he passed it, I convinced myself smoking would be copacetic. On the radio, Sugarland’s “Already Gone” had a few moments of glory before static reigned. This was when things got a bit shape shifty, when Crow said he cursed the dude.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Did you notice anything when I shook his hand?”

“Now that I’m thinking about it, it did look like you were playing thumb war.”

Crow snorted, “Wish it was that easy.” Then his tone was grave, “Until I touch someone, I don’t see what they’ve done. I’m not sure if my rage is gonna become a curse but if it does, I know what I have to do.”

I awaited grisly details: Lanky hog-tied and dragged down a dirt road, his face slamming into potholes. “What do you do?” Updates on alien activity came in from *Coast to Coast*. I said, “Do you want to talk about something else? UFOs?”

Crow attempted a laugh, but was gripping the steering wheel tightly. “I send photographs. Well today I just left a photo on his windshield.”

“Photographs?”

He nodded, “I send them to the people I bless or curse. Although it started with curses.”

My intestines unwound a little. I asked, “that’s what you meant, redistributing fate?”

He nodded. “One time I took revenge with my own hands, but after that I sent photos. The pictures drive them mad.”

“How?”

His story sounded like a reversal of the Three Furies I studied in a course on “Feminist Interpretations of Mythology.” Except instead of avenging patricide like the Greek Furies, Crow’s mother and sisters punished pedophiles and sexual predators. Crow’s mother Allison was vengeance—a postal worker who sent curses by mail; while her sister Tiss was justice—a lesbian, anti-violence activist in Atlanta; and Meg was wrath—a prosecutor with the most death penalties in Alabama state history.

“I had a pretty normal childhood—messing around with alligators and causing trouble with the neighbor boys. Every summer my mom would drive me across the panhandle to visit my grandpa. The last summer though, when I was sixteen, on the drive out she told me the story of how her brother, my uncle Crow, got revenge by castrating their father.” He said it explained why his grandfather never uttered a single word to him or his mother. Now, Crow understood she was showing him that those who take revenge also live with its consequences.

“On the way back from my grandfather’s, we were driving through this hurricane, the windshield wipers going all frantic, and she says to me, real matter of fact, *when you turn twenty-seven, you will take up where I left off.*”

Crow described the only time his mom had to deal with someone *physically* was when she, at the age of twenty-seven, found her boyfriend molesting Crow. Otherwise, if she met a stranger and saw visions of violence, she sent letters describing what disasters—madness, ravishing guilt, infertility, or disease—would befall them. As the accursed read the letter, the sentences were fulfilled.

“When she told me I would continue her life work, I think all I said was, *shit*, and asked to stop for ice cream. We ate cookie dough Blizzards and pulling into our driveway, I knew why she told me those things. They finally found her ex-boyfriend’s car. The Sherriff was waiting to take her in for questioning.”

“She killed her boyfriend for messing with you?” I asked.

In the dark cab, I could barely discern his nod.

“When I was first trucking, the only curse I thought about was how they locked my mom up for fighting back. She says the prison population seems to double every few years—all these black and Hispanic women in for trying to take care of their kids.” When Crow paused, we heard Thelonious Monk.

“Just after my twenty-seventh birthday, I was in Tacoma unloading boxes of carpet cleaner. There was this asshole working the docks. When we shook hands I saw him setting a snare for his fifteen year old neighbor.” Crow’s voice gave a shudder. “I asked where he liked to party and was waiting for him outside a strip joint later that night. It was the only time I got blood on my hands. After that, the photographs were a relief.”

I was holding my breath. Letting it out, I repeated, “So you send photographs as a way of cursing people? Like your mom sent letters?”

He nodded, describing the curses of disease, bankruptcy, loneliness, or impotence... mostly though, madness. Once, Crow sat at a diner counter next to a man who asked Crow to pass the pepper. When their hands touched, Crow saw what the man had done. Over the next month, Crow sent the man two hundred photographs of a single, tiny, patent leather shoe. Desperate to stop watching neighborhood children walking to and from school, the man stabbed out his own eyes.

“Fuck,” I said. Initially, I probably looked incredulous, even amused, but I’d gone completely stiff as he described the tiny patent leather shoe. *None of this is real*, I told myself, *his stories, nor mine*. My stomach muscles constricted, drawing my knees to my chest. Infomercials for Judgment Day played on the radio.

I was planning my exit strategy when he started apologizing, “I don’t usually talk about this.”

I saw a balding man stab at his eyes with a kitchen knife. Crow’s stories made real the acts he sought to avenge. The past slammed into me like a runaway semi. My uncle’s hands fell thick and heavy upon me.

“Maggie, hey, you O.K.?”

I forced my feet onto the floor, pressing my toes then heels into the mat. When I turned to face him, his eyes were crinkled with worry. I told him “pull off somewhere I can get a drink,” and then laughed because we were in the middle of nowhere.

He said he would lose his license if he got pulled over, but there was a bottle of whiskey buried under the bed. After groping around in the dark, I felt the bottle’s smooth glass. Pouring

a hefty shot into my thermos cap, I immediately drained and refilled it. The Dixie Chicks' "Goodbye Earl" came on. I sang along. When it cut to static, I said in a voice of someone who knows how to lose control, "that's what she's singing about: righteous revenge."

"She makes it sound pretty good." He sounded unconvinced.

With whiskey warming my guts, I asked, "But in the story, it's not only curses, right? You said something about blessings?"

"Story?" His tone imploring, *you think I'm making this up?*

"Stories are real," I said, *but only the ones you can remember.* I pressed him to tell me about the blessings.

"Maybe tomorrow." He sounded slightly mollified adding, "It's past three. We better get some shut-eye."

It was like going to a revival and right when I was about to be saved, the preacher says, *shucks*, something came up; his kid's sick; God doesn't care after all; he's got to go.

"Yeah. I'm pretty beat," I said.

Willie Nelson's voice rang with sudden clarity. I rolled a cigarette. Under the weight of night, much like water upon a submarine, the cab had pressurized, fusing us together. Only our belief in the laws of physics kept the cab from collapsing and the road from vanishing. Rolling down the window was like opening a pressure release valve. A cool wind sucked out the smoke. We disentangled: my panic from his suffering, his need to be believed from the memories writhing in my guts.

After awhile, the muscles around my spine stopped quivering. By the time we crossed the Colorado River into Arizona and pulled over at a rest stop, we were joking again. Parked, he motioned for the whiskey bottle. After warming my cup, he poured a generous shot in a Sea

World mug. We descended our separate ladders and carried our drinks to a bench overlooking a once vast and roaring river.

Back in the cab, he offered me the top bunk. I saw him as he'd been a few minutes before in the moonlight, singing Willie Nelson's "Hands on the wheel." The night felt again like a fantastic adventure as we toasted with a *blast off*. "To revenge," I had said, and when it made him look sad, I said, "to picking up hitchhikers." Now, as he waited for me to accept his offer, I knew if I stayed, I would want to convince him that his was an extraordinary kind of madness: truth. And back then, sex was what I had to prove and how I knew to prove it so I told him, "I like sleeping under the stars."

"You'd rather rocks than a bed?" I felt his gaze asking, *you still don't trust me?*

Pointing past a pile of boulders, I told him to wake me when he was ready to go.

"Maggie."

The sun was cresting the eastern mountains. He squatted beside me, and when our eyes locked, I saw my uncle's house and then Amy's face before our night of drinking blurred everything into oblivion. I blinked back the memories, *none of that was real*. My stare asked, *what do you want from me?* His answered, *for you to believe*. Standing, he said we had forty miles to the next gas station where I could get coffee.

Forty miles felt like four hundred. Even chain smoking didn't help. His attempts at conversation seemed like pleas for validation. Wishing his powers could magic away my despair, I tried and couldn't summon a response. The radio played variations on the same pop country refrain. When it seemed my gloom was contagious, I asked, "You sick of company?"

“No, just thinking.”

I almost asked what about, but we spotted a diner.

At Dolores’ Diner, we ate pancake specials: three flapjacks, eggs, and sausage. The waitress, an all-grown-up and faded Shirley Temple, treated us like a couple. Her overzealous smiles, the greasy food, and gasoline-dark coffee fortified us. Wiping up egg yolk with a last bite of pancake, he tried to sound casual, “You were asking about blessings.”

I nodded.

He maintained eye contact over his cup of coffee. “For awhile, vengeance became my life. My stomach was so acidic, I could hardly eat. I didn’t realize how bad it’d become until I picked up this hitchhiker.” He held my gaze as the waitress came and refilled our coffee mugs.

“Hitchhiker?”

“Devin.” Crow’s voice was tinged with longing. “He’d been driving up to Idaho to visit his mom when his truck broke down. It was his first time hitchhiking. He was young, but with these sad gray eyes that made him seem older.” Crow looked out the window and then back at his empty plate before adding, “He had this way of listening.”

Crow told Devin what lay in store for a waitress who was sending her son to live with a cruel aunt. Devin kept asking questions until Crow responded with an answer he hadn’t realized he knew. The mother sent her son away to keep him from retaliating against his father, a short tempered, brutish man. Devin told Crow, *we can’t understand the choices a mother has to make*, and asked she be spared. Crow said he would show her mercy but, meeting my gaze he added, “Usually, I don’t have a choice.”

The hotel room he and Devin rented had a view overlooking the Snake River Canyon. At sunset, they drank rum and cokes on a tiny balcony wearing only their boxers. “We didn’t care if anyone saw.” When they kissed, Crow felt the rage drain out of him. The next morning, Crow awoke calm for the first time in years. While Devin slept, Crow slipped one of his photographs into Devin’s pack: a picture of a wrecked sailboat washed ashore in the Gulf of Mexico. Pelicans roosted on its upturned keel. Watching the sunrise, Crow knew the photo would give Devin the gift of sight.

“Sight?”

“Like how I see the cruel acts of strangers, except, lucky for Devin, he sees the good as well as the bad.” Crow was looking out the window as if expecting Devin to walk by. “After that night with Devin, for every curse, I would meet someone who’d done something good, something beautiful, and I’d give them a photograph-blessing. That was the beginning of relatively peaceful years, although recently,” he stopped talking when the waitress came with the check.

“How was everything?” She asked.

“Divine,” he said.

“More coffee darling?”

I nodded, holding it out for her before she carried away our plates. “What were you saying?”

His expression was sorrowful, not ironic, as I had found it before. “Blessings range from the ordinary to the well, extraordinary as with Devin. The ordinary are things like granting forgiveness, the ability to let go of grief, or to love again. Extraordinary, as in the power to heal, see past lives, predict futures, or replenish creativity.”

The waitress returned with the bill. Reaching for it, I asked, “What happened recently?”

Crow snatched the check to pay. Thinking of my dad’s guilt money, I tried to wrest it from Crow’s fingertips but he said, “Let me take your picture.”

Releasing the slip of paper, I said, “Just as long as it’s not for a curse.”

His eyelids fluttered under the weight of lunacy, a mother calling collect on her breaks from solitary, and stretches of endless highway. He pressed his fingertips into his eyebrows, and peering between them scoffed, “No. Hell no.” After a moment, “I hope not.”

“Well, I’m no blessing.”

“Don’t be so sure. Maybe that’s what you’re running from.”

Scowling at him, I excused myself to the bathroom. In the stall, I heard *that’s what you’re running from* and started breathing too fast. My skin prickled and everything grew compressed and dark. Too much coffee, I decided, forcing myself to take deep breaths while wishing for a cigarette.

In the truck, I rolled another spliff. As the I-40 plowed through the Mohave, we took long drags. I wanted him to draw out my secrets. We drove between ridges the color of army fatigues that had seen too many wars. The sky was delirium-pale. I was fading out like the landscape. When Rage Against the Machine sideswiped smooth jazz, I asked, “Can I look through your photographs?”

He directed me to a milk crate but I saw the red Adidas box nudged behind it. Folded on top was a flyer with pictures of high heels, handcuffs, a stuffed pony, a sign for a public restroom, and an invitation:

**Photography exhibit and Performance: Objects of Desire.**

The exhibit will be displayed in the main gallery. In private photo booths, participants, if they desire, can take pictures of themselves mid-orgasm. In the public masturbation room, the artist will document. Forgetting my dread, I almost yelled, “No wonder you got kicked out of school!”

Beneath the flyer were Polaroids like the ones hung in the porthole-frame: a yellow Pontiac with porn magazines spread across the dash, a shot of a man’s torso in red lingerie. Desire jolted through me. I forced myself to pick up the next: an altar decorated with glass jar candles, crystals, a religious figurine, and a flyer for a missing woman. The last was of a border patrol truck parked atop a hill covered in saw grass.

Under the stack of Polaroids was another flyer: a photo of two women—dressed as the Virgin and Mary Magdalene—kissing. The text read:

#### MaMa’s Manifesto

Life is our stage: We are Gods, playwrights, actors, and audiences  
We give birth to our own destinies      Bathroom walls, our tablets  
Sidewalks, our canvas                      Every revolution, a poem

Crow’s story had been a performance. I put away the box and moved to the passenger seat. Pretending to read, I gave one word replies to his questions and told myself to let it go; *you’re pissed for believing him, for being so naïve.*

He must have sensed my need for revenge. Fifty miles out of Flagstaff, the road climbed into pine forests. The afternoon sun glowered, and he asked if I wanted to go on a short hike to a cave. Not the famous Lava River Cave, but a smaller one. Convinced that he was

planning on going through Tucson for me, I agreed. *It's not his fault I'm gullible*, I told myself, *I wanted to believe.*

Turning down a two-lane road, we drove several miles before easing onto a gravel turn out. We walked through forest so pungent the pines seemed like life-size air fresheners.

Part way up, panting slightly, I asked, "You ever been in love?"

He paused. I offered him my water bottle. Maybe it was just breakfast and the small cab, but our smells mirrored each others'. He started walking again, slower so I could walk beside him.

"With Devin, I thought it was lust and the fact he believed me. I thought I would forget him, but the longing only gets worse. And only love could have cured me of that rage, right?" He laughed, "I still look for him when I'm out west." Uncertainty wavered in his voice when he spoke again, "He was younger, had a girl back home. I know he wanted me, but he seemed freaked out waking up next to me."

Trying to see Crow's face, I stubbed my toe and pitched forward. He caught my arm to steady me and with his hand against my bare skin, I felt attraction between us. When I met his eyes, he stepped back and the connection was severed so completely I thought I'd imagined it.

"How much *younger* was he?"

"Eight or nine years. He was almost twenty," Crow said defensively.

"You could tell he was into it?" I thought of Amy.

Crow said, "He initiated it the second time. He got all soft-eyed, you know that look?"

I shrugged noncommittally. "And in the morning before he woke up, you gifted him with visions?"

"I worry it's been half blessing, half curse."

The trail headed up at a steeper pitch so we focused on our footing. When the ground leveled out I asked if he heard from Devin again.

“The autumn after I picked him up, Devin started sending me those Polaroids but never any letter or a return address. He’ll send a bunch in a row, and then they stop for a few months, and start up again. Like Morse code or something.” Crow paused, “I don’t know what they mean.”

“Which pictures?”

“A bird sculpture made of car parts, an altar in an abandoned school bus, a porn collection on a Pontiac’s dash. His dad ran a junk yard outside some little border town.”

“One of him in lingerie?”

His raised eyebrows asked *you looked through my red box?*

Quickly I said, “They’re beautiful, a little strange.”

He was shaking his head as he said, “when I feel like he never loved me, like he didn’t believe me, I’m blinded again by that rage. I can’t bless, only curse.”

“You’re reading too much into it. You were together for only a night?”

Shielding his eyes from the sun, he began hiking again. “You were in love with your boyfriend, from college?”

It sounded condescending. “I thought so at the time, but I’m young and naive so how should I know.”

He turned back, “That’s not what I was saying.”

“Really?”

The trail became a series of switchbacks through dense pine.

He asked, “Did you end up with him, the best friend?”

“End up with *her*? No, she would have chewed me up and spit me out.” Catching my breath, I went on, “Her parents were alcoholics. She was pretty manipulative, had a crowbar she would use on your heart.”

“Sounds like she would have been good for you.” The trail crested a ridge. From up ahead he called, “Hey, we’re almost there.”

I started describing what a bitch her mom was, “fucked Amy up real good. You think you could curse her mom?” I was yelling after him, “What about my uncle? I have his address.”

“I don’t choose. It just happens.”

“It just happens,” I repeated, catching him outside the cave’s slit mouth. My voice was shaking. “No. Fucked up shit happens and no one pays. The prisons make it worse, and it’d be nice to think that karma or something cosmic was working itself out but it’s not. We get messed up and take it out on the people we love.”

His eyes narrowed with concern; it felt patronizing. I wanted to kiss or slap him when he said, “We choose what we do with our pain.”

“You ever stopped something bad from happening?” I asked.

“Kept it from happening again.”

“It’s a nice idea this whole fate-karma thing, but I read your flyer.”

“Which one?”

“The manifesto. We are playwrights and actors. I mean, you told me from the beginning. You’re a performer. A genius. Go ahead: take a bow. You wanted me to believe and I did.”

He stared at me and I saw his conviction, but couldn't stop myself. "I'm sorry, I must be jealous. I want a role." I walked closer to him, "I know, *I'll* be Devin."

"What are you doing?" He asked in a quiet voice.

"I'll tell you what his photos mean."

"Please," he spread his arms out by his sides, palms face up, "by all means."

I climbed up a boulder just north of the cave's mouth. My breath came out ragged. "Your stories fucked with Devin." Crow squinted up with a pitying expression. I shouted, "*You* took advantage of him and now *he's* getting revenge."

Moving toward the lip of the boulder, I squatted on my heels, trying to get a hold of myself. *Amy and I were shit-faced. I can't even remember what my uncle did. None of this is real.* A red pick-up dawdled along the road below. From the valley floor, a ridge rose up like a wave capped with cedars and frothy clouds. Two black birds circled higher and higher until they were specks carrying my breath away.

When I slid down the rock, Crow had disappeared. The cave's mouth was dank. My shame tasted coppery. Shadows flickered on the far wall. With my outstretched fingers tracing the rough lava rock, I followed a curve into a larger, candle lit chamber. My breath caught in my throat. *Oh, this is nuts.* I moved closer. Laminated photographs hung from clotheslines. On a stalagmite mound, candles shed waxy rivulets of magenta, scarlet, turquoise, and purple. Kneeling, he lit a rose-colored candle beneath a picture of a woman. She had wispy blonde hair and an iron line for a mouth. Her strong arms were wrapped around a boy. Tilting the picture in the candlelight, I saw it was taken in a courtroom. This was the last time he and his mother were together without guards and bulletproof glass. From the angle of his head, I guessed he

was weeping. I'd ruined everything. My throat burned. He stood and attached a picture of a crumpled bicycle to one of the clotheslines.

Turning back to the shrine, I said, "I didn't mean what I said out there. You didn't fuck with Devin; he fell for you, how could he not have? You make art installations in caves, pick up hitchhikers, have amazing stories. You redistribute fate for Christ's sake."

"Stories I tell to fuck with people, right? Cause I'm no better than the ones I curse?"

"No. Devin's photos are love letters and yours, yours remind us that the things we do never leave us. We are responsible for things we can't begin to understand. We're causing hurricanes, floods, oceans to rise, polar bears are drowning." Sensing this was missing the point, I tried to explain what it meant to realize we have consequence. Then we were walking out of the cave into the sun, pausing to let our eyes adjust, and hurrying down the hill.

Those last fifty miles, the radio cruised to a Johnny Cash tribute. Crow punched the scan button. I wanted to hang my head and cry: the cab had lost its pressure, we, our intimacy. Ten miles later, I asked Crow to describe his top ten blessings. He'd taken a photograph an elderly man wading in red galoshes through a flooded cemetery. It had something to do with forgiveness. I'd asked Crow if he'd ever cured loneliness. When he said he was trying that one on himself, I reached for him. His shoulder stiffened then relaxed beneath my touch.

When I slid my fingers under the collar to massage his neck, he told me, "you don't have to." I told him I wanted to and he told me *don't*. I jerked my hand back as if his flesh burnt me.

"Sorry," I'd said with the last of my defiance.

He tried to explain that he cared about me but... I'd turned up the volume. Cash sung, "down, down, down," as the sun threw violet shadows on the peaks.

Outside of Flagstaff, we pulled into a truck stop. He said he would check in after a catnap. Certain he wanted to be rid of me, I scaled down the ladder without asking about Tucson. In the gas station, I examined the maps. Even if he wanted to, it would be ridiculous for him to go that far out of his way. After an hour in front of Subway's neon sign, I was contemplating flying a sign by the on-ramp when a man in gray slacks and a black button-up approached me. He was going to Tucson. As we chatted, I spotted Crow hurrying toward me, his body outlined in dusk. With my most-winning smile, I asked the man if he would get me a coffee. As he disappeared inside, I walked out to meet Crow.

Fear knotted my stomach as I recognized it in Crow's eyes.

"You getting a ride with that guy?" He asked.

I nodded. His eyes were amber against the turquoise sky. Although it was hours ago, I could still feel the imprint of his hand on my arm from when he caught me.

"Remember, you asked if I ever tried to stop something from happening?" His voice was constricted.

I nodded.

"I got a bad feeling about that guy. I know you don't wanna be told what to do, but can you trust me on this?"

I couldn't meet his eyes. I had told Crow that his revenge, like mine, was imagined; I saw myself yelling at him from atop the boulder, *you fucked with Devin*. Those last fifty miles, I'd been desperate to escape Crow's pity and felt it now in the parking lot as Crow's plea for me to trust him hung in the air between us. I stared at my hands, "You'd get fired for going through Tucson. It's a hundred miles outta your way."

"You could get another ride."

The cleanly shaven man returned with coffees.

Crow said, "I can go south."

Glaring at Crow, the man asked if I was ready.

"Yeah. I'll be right there."

As the man went to move his car, I avoided Crow's stare, "I'll be fine."

I inspected a hangnail until I realized Crow was extending his hand. When we shook, I felt something electric, not desire, but another kind of current. I wanted to apologize but could barely meet his eyes.

Watching him walk away, I tried not to hear my ex, the psychiatrist, or Crow: *you have to trust me*. This isn't about trust, I told myself, but was standing with my hands over my stomach when the man eased his Honda LX in front of the gas station and waved. I told him I'd better use the restroom. In the mirror, my complexion looked pasty and damp.

At the car, the man tapped my shoulder too lightly before taking my pack. His fingernails were manicured and his car immaculate. Somewhere in my intestines lay the contours of the galaxy.

"I got you coffee with cream and sugar."

Crow knew I liked my coffee black. I scanned the parking lot. A construction worker came out of the gas station wearing an orange vest the color of a prison jumpsuit. Crow's mother had gone to jail for protecting him, as he was trying to protect me. Snatching my pack out of the trunk, I dashed toward the semis. The man called out after me. I told him to go without me. A violent politeness strained his voice. Then I could no longer hear him.

When I rounded the building, Crow's truck was easing out of the back row. Sprinting across the lot, I prayed Crow would look in his rearview. I wanted to jump in another truck and

shout on the CB: *Wait! Don't leave me with only a photo I took without asking. I believe you. Blessings can outweigh curses; our lives are things of consequence.*

I trusted him too late. The truck was chugging down the on-ramp. I slowed to a halt. I have to believe he glanced back and saw me with my hands cupping my abdomen. I have to believe one day he'll write: *I am not longer chasing absolution. You reminded me there are some things from which only I can deliver myself.* I began walking down the shoulder as the Swift merged onto the freeway, heading east. It blasted away.



**Berkley Carnine** is a queer organizer, educator, writer, and musician of mixed European descent. She grew up in Oregon, lived for nearly a decade in the Bay Area, and currently resides in Arizona. After receiving her MFA at Arizona State University, she moved up to Flagstaff where she herds sheep, organizes around Indigenous solidarity, builds creative community, makes home in a bread truck and tries to maintain circulation to her fingers so she can write during the long winters. She is currently working on finishing her first novel.