

Binding
Short Story
By Cathryn Vogeley

Shortlisted on Reedsy Contest

blog.reedsy.com/creative-writing-prompts/author/cathryn-v/

The road stretches out in front of me as far as I can see, all the way to the horizon, straight and flat with empty fields on both sides like enormous blank pages. Nebraska, almost halfway to San Francisco, I am alone on this endless stretch of interstate 80.

The audible book supply is depleted. So, for a change, I'm riding in silence.

In the rear-view mirror, a patrol car with flashing lights screams toward me. I slow the car and pull to the side to let him pass. But the lights slow too.

The state trooper is at my window, sunglasses, wide flat-brimmed hat, black shirt, and a belt laden with radios, flashlights, pistol. He looks huge.

"License and registration, please," he says, all serious like I'm a fugitive or something. I hand out the cards.

"Eileen Brannigan?" he says.

"Yes sir," I say. "What kind of gun is that?" I ask, nervous and talky.

"It's a Glock 22, ma'am. You're from Akron, Ohio?"

Why the questions, I wonder, it's all right there in his hand. Mr. Big looks from the license to me and back again. My heart is going wild, banging away. What've I done?

"That's right," nervous laughter, then "the rubber capital of the world, your honor."

Oh god, I can't believe I just said that, your honor.

He doesn't smile. "What are you doing, Miss Brannigan from Ohio out here in the middle of Nebraska?"

I'm going somewhere with my life to a better place where I'll be happy.

"California. I'm moving to California."

"You're alone?"

"Yep, all alone."

I thought of Greg helping me pack the car the night before I left. He accepted the leftovers, extra toilet paper rolls, and bags of grass seed. He stood back stiffly, making noises with his breath, tightening his mouth, holding his chin up.

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Six years. On our first date, I opened the door to find him wearing a leather bomber jacket and fedora, like Harrison Ford.

I'm on the Harley with my arms wrapped around him, breathing in the sweet scent of leather.

"Ready?" he yells back to me.

"Ready," I say.

The engine's growl takes us down the road and around the bend. I lean into the curve, riding over gentle rises of country roads, passed fields with their straight edges and perfect parallel rows. Long shadows at day's end, the sweet grassy aroma from newly cut hay; seconds of dung odor, then clear air.

Greg and I never declared love for each other. There were no sweet cards, no little unexpected gifts. I flirted; sometimes, he teased back. He often came over for dinner. One time, he stopped at Kroger's for wine and Sriracha sauce and picked up a bunch of Marigolds.

"How nice of you," I said, putting the bouquet in a vase. The flowers' unpleasant scent plowed over me when their stems hit the water. "I think I'll just leave these posies out here," I said and placed them on a stand at the entryway.

Back at the stove, I threw in onions and peppers, making hot oil explode; chicken strips next; shaking the pan and flip, shake then, flip. A sweet smell of browning onions filled the room. More wine?

"Sure, I can open a second bottle," Greg said, his voice a beautiful baritone.

"You should be on the radio," I said, "your voice is lovely."

He smiled. "You're probably biased."

We drank Cabernet, shared a joint. Greg inhaled deeply and talked while holding his breath, sounding like he was being strangled. Our lovemaking had to be oiled up with booze and weed as if we couldn't manage sober sex. We liked each other, though. No fireworks or pretense, just comfortable friendship. He never stayed all night. His two kids and his sister expected he'd be there when they woke up.

He was a small-town Ohioan, untraveled except to buzz down to Cincinnati now and then, his idea of a vacation. Watching football together, throwing popcorn, laughing till I couldn't speak. Sundays, we hiked in the forest, sharing a backpack of snacks and bottled water. He preferred smoky beer pubs to my love for concert halls. A great listener. A non-committer.

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The officer looked away for a moment. "That's too bad. You shouldn't be alone. Unless that's how you want it, I suppose."

"Can't say as that's what I want. But that's what I got."

Was it, I asked myself?

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After I decided to move west, after I found a job and packed up my things, Greg asked me for dinner at his place for grilled beef tenderloin and roasted potatoes. The table was covered with a linen cloth and matching dinnerware. Twelve-year-old Brie and eight-year-old Jeffrey hustled in and out of the kitchen, bringing water, butter, and a bouquet of fall flowers in an elegant glass vase.

Brie looked all coy. She said, "Eileen, just relax and enjoy your wine. We'll take care of you for a change."

"How sweet," I said, bewildered. The four of us had never had dinner together, other than Olive Garden or Red Lobster for special occasions.

The beef turned out moist and pink in the center, melt-in-your-mouth delicious. "You have outdone yourselves with this dinner. I'll never match this," I said.

Greg asked, "Have you arranged for the movers yet?" Just like that, he said it as if we were mere acquaintances. Fine with me.

"I have two different companies lined up for estimates. I should know soon. Anyway, let's talk about what's going on here. This is all very nice. Fancy. Like some special day. What am I missing? A school award or something?"

Jeffrey looked side to side, then flicked his eyes to Greg. "Now, Dad?"

Greg's upper body wiggled a little like he was moving his leg or like a puppy wagging his tail. He nodded, then stood.

Brie said, "Wait. Don't we need dessert first? Daaad, you said we'd have dessert and then--"

"Shhhhhssh," Jeffrey said as he spun around the corner. "Dad, I have it. Eileen, do not look."

Even with all that, I didn't see it coming. Greg placed his hand on the back of my chair. I turned to his figure bending down to the floor on one knee, and in his hand was a small red velvet box. My heart nearly stopped, and my breath caught. He opened the lid and in it was a diamond ring, surrounded by filigree platinum edges, old-fashioned and delicate, exactly my style.

"Eileen, I know I'm not perfect. It's taken me a long time to get to this place. But I promise you, I'll always love you. Will you be my wife?" he asked, the words quivering in the air.

My heart sank. I groped for words. My California dream. What about that? I took the ring and placed it on my finger where it sparkled, the loveliest I'd ever seen.

"It's, it's beautiful," I said, stuttering. "I don't know what to say. You know about my plans."

The children watched, their mouths gaping.

"Please, Eileen, think about it."

"Oh, Greg, I'm sorry, but I just can't." I pulled the ring from my finger and handed it to him. "I'm sorry."

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The officer kept up with the questions.

"You have a place out there?"

"Sure do. A real nice place."

It's not as nice as my condo in Ohio with high circle top windows and the river below. But the new place is an hour's drive to the Pacific Ocean. So, I'm excited about that.

The new apartment faces a parking lot and a rusty green dumpster. I'll need to hide the view with some window coverings.

The policeman says, "Stay put. I'll be right back."

He strolls back to his cruiser. I feel stupid waiting there, just sitting. I need to stretch my legs anyway and step out of the car. I've forgotten my phone and reach in for it, slip it in my pocket and walk toward the police car, only because I want to ask him how far to the next rest area.

His voice booms, "Ma'am. Get back in your car. Now."

I run back shaking, feeling confused.

The I-phone, Snickers' wrappers, and an empty can of cheeseballs litter the passenger seat next to me. My phone dings, a text from Greg says that I've forgotten the box of photograph albums he saved. I text back. Ok, tnx for letting me know.

At last, the trooper appears at my window again. "Ma'am, do you realize your tail light is out? Better get that fixed as soon as you can. And watch your speed. Not everyone is as nice as I am. You were ten over the limit. I'm giving you a warning, next time, it will be a citation," he says as he hands my cards back. "You have a nice day now."

I wait until the police car drives by before starting my engine, then back up to speed; I set cruise control right at the speed limit. The fields of Nebraska remind me of those cycle rides when I held my arms around Greg.

Ahead is the straight, flat highway, like the binding of a book. I reach for my coffee and bite into a cheese cracker. Phone messages, one is from my sister cheering me on. Another from Greg.

"Hi, Babe. Wanted to give you a call and say hey. Just to let you know, I'm with you. Take care. Be safe." That baritone voice.

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At the service center, I fill the tank and drive to a parking spot. Only semis and bearded men wearing plaid shirts are around. In the restroom, I splash cold water on my face, take paper towels to pat it dry, and face the worn mirror for a moment longer than necessary. Then, back in the SUV, I pull up Greg's number. "Hi, it's me."