Along U.S. 550, a clever photographer listens for the tumble of boulders, the growl of avalanches, the thump of Search and Rescue helicopters, the squeal of brakes. She keeps her camera ready. She hears the dramatic shots coming.

This morning as Nick and I take 550 into the mountains, what I hear is the grind of gears, the throb of Nick’s Harley. My camera is stowed in my pack.

Nick’s hair is long and the color of maple syrup. Loosened, it spills over his shoulders like a drape of silk sheets. When taking Nick’s picture, or going with him for hot chocolate at the coffeehouse, or riding on his bike to Silverton to cover a story, I have asked Nick to free his hair from its ponytail. He refuses. “I am more than a good head of hair,” he argues, pointing out the hook of his nose, the knots of his cheekbones, his slender fingers, the nutty hue of his skin. “I’m not simply pretty either,” he says. “I’m a skillful reporter. With words, I perform magic.”

* * * * *
This morning, early, Joe calls about the accident.

“You gotta go now,” he says. He’s rattling information, excited by the windfall of headline news. It’s hard on a man’s pride to serve as publisher for the local paper when the only stories are high school soccer and the annual county rodeo. “Nick will take you on his bike. The road’s necked to less than one lane because of the spill. They won’t let cars through.”

“What’s the weather doing up there?” I part the curtains and look toward the mountain pass.

“A frost last night, but it’s thawing already.” Joe waits for a second. “Don’t get artistic with this one, Julie. Just get the shots. The chemical crew will be there soon, and they’ll shut down the show.”

“I hear you.” Already I’m imagining the scene, what angles I’ll shoot, what type of film I need.


When I hang up, Nick cocks one eyebrow. “You didn’t tell him I was here?”

“Didn’t seem wise,” I say.

Nick lies beside me. In my bed. He’s naked.

On the nightstand, his beeper vibrates.

Outside town, on the mountain highway, the scrub oaks blush. Their rosy color reminds me of young girls embarrassed by their beauty. Nick’s hair is bound in its usual ponytail; mine’s free. The wind tousles it, then rattles the lanky aspen. Their yellow leaves let go of the branches and shimmy in the air. With a camera and two flash units, one slaved to the other so they fire in
unison, I could freeze this moment: an autumn cloudburst like the scatter of gold coins or the flutter of a woman’s laughter.

Still-life photography requires an eye for pleasing arrangements and a leisurely approach. Early assignments in college require students to shoot several rolls of found still-lifes—compositions that exist already and only wait for a sensitive photographer to recognize their potential. My first good pictures were of discarded antiques in a storage shed: several Matchbox cars, their paint-jobs chipped, their wheels missing, tangled in an open toolbox; two quilts, limp as empty clothing, hung on rusted nails; a pair of muddy cowboy boots, one standing and the other dead by its side, under a card table; a battalion of empty milk bottles at attention in the windowsill; and four china saucers, all white, tossed like little moons on the floor.

Near the Idarado Mine, two cranes swing their heads over the cliff. With their long necks and boxy cabs, they look like giraffes. Giraffes don’t live at high altitudes.

Finding those cranes in the mountains is like discovering a termite worming its way through your oak cabinets, an aneurysm ballooning in your aorta, or an ambulance parked outside your parents’ house when you arrive for a visit. Some images, because of their irony, make dramatic compositions. The second I see those cranes, I know I’ll finish three rolls in less than an hour.

The EMS medics gather around the cranes and peek over the cliff. A police officer talks to the man perched in one of the cabs. “Lower away!” he yells. The pulley whirls, and one hook drops into the gorge. The medics strain their necks, but don’t stand too close to the precipice. I know what they’re trying to glimpse. I know what they’re trying to raise from the dead.
Every year, Nick replaces the vanities on his Harley and his Bronco. He hangs the old plates in his garage like artifacts in a museum. There are four rows of nine plates, each one labeled by year, and two rows of track lighting cast spots on his favorites: *IH8MYX*—I hate my ex; *T9C*—Teenincy (his Mastiff’s name); *4NIK8*—Fornicate; *AJB4BUT*—Age before beauty. It’s a collection of wordplay, shorthand for dummies.

Last night, on our first date, Nick parks me in his garage before dinner and tells me to read the plates. Even with the door up, the garage is dark and cool, a bit damp. The setting sun casts geometric shadows across Nick’s face. He holds a stopwatch. “You have sixty seconds.”

When I only get thirty of the thirty-six plates, I ask, “Do I still get to eat dinner?”

“Yes,” he says, “but no dessert.”

At the scene, the semi is caught on some boulders and tilts at a thirty-five degree angle. Before the victim can be hauled up to the road, the Highway Patrol uses one crane to anchor the rig so it won’t topple on the EMS medics who will go down and retrieve what’s inside.

When the medics pry open the door, a copy of Pablo Neruda’s love poetry, not the trucker’s body, flops out of the cab. The book lies on the ground like a broken bird. Its pages flutter, one last convulsion. The medics offer the volume to Nick. “Something for your human interest story,” they say.

“You can add it to your library,” I suggest.

Nick stares at me, waves the book away, but scribbles notes in his pad.

I take the book. Most of the pages are dog-eared. In the margins, the trucker has scrawled the names of women, one for each sonnet: *Sandra Butler, Whitney Dawson, Laura*
Kennedy, Dina Bowers. . . . In the back, on the blank pages, he’s listed the names again and, beside them, the page numbers where they appear as well as phone numbers and dates. I count forty-six women, eighteen different area codes, and a span of twenty-one months.

After Joe’s call, Nick walks home to get his Harley. He’ll return for me in five minutes. I pop a roll of Kodak 100 in my Canon T-90 and two more rolls in my fleecer pocket for good measure. In my backpack, I stow the camera and both my telephoto and wide-angle lenses. I think about how callous I will look if I show up at the scene with too much equipment—then I add my polarizing filter, a table-top tripod, and a compact umbrella.

When Nick returns, I’m ready. His bike rumbles around the block as I’m locking the front door. He doesn’t have to wait for me, is what I’m saying. So I can’t figure why he gets off the bike, props it on the stand, then heads up the walk. A pad of paper and a pen poke from the pocket of his leather jacket.

“What’s in the big bag?” he asks.

“I’m the photographer,” I say. “What do you think is in the bag?”

“This isn’t a studio gig.” He unzips my pack and tugs on the umbrella. “What’s this?”

“Every picture is a still-life,” I say. “A good photographer arranges her compositions.”

“For Chrissake, Julie, two men died.”

In the middle of the asphalt spill, the second vehicle, a Jeep, rests on its side. Its tires have melted into odd shapes. A Patagonia jacket, zipped but empty, lies crumpled on the ground. The plastic shell has melted into the fleece lining. Two shoes—one a hiking boot, the other a loafer, both for the left foot—stand near the flipped Jeep. We can’t find their mates.
Smashed beer cans are scattered along the road, a game of kick-the-can turned rowdy. Four CD’s, pitched from their cases, are warped from the heat. They look like nickels placed on railroad tracks and run down by a train. Using my 28 mm lens, I move in close so I can distort the size of each object. In the pictures, they will look like a giant’s toys.

At Nick’s, there’s a window in the bathroom above the toilet. This window—with no shutters or blinds—doesn’t overlook the backyard or the road Nick’s house sits on, but faces inside, toward the stairwell that climbs to Nick’s bedroom. When I excuse myself before dinner to visit the ladies’ room, I crouch beside the toilet and peer out this window. I stand like a man peeing; I step on top of the seat so I’m taller. No matter where I situate myself, I can tell that only a giant, ascending the stairs, would be tall enough to see over the sill, to see me hiking up my skirt, sitting on the toilet. Still, an open window implies a view. It says, Look at me.

In front of this window, I can’t take care of business. But Nick is listening. I rustle some tissue paper, flush, run the tap like I’m washing my hands. When I head back to the living room, I smile like I’m relieved.

Back from the accident, Nick and I go straight to the office. When we wander in, the reporters are hiding in their cubbies, clicking away at their keyboards. Behind the glass window of his office, Joe nods at us, but doesn’t wave or come out to hear the scoop. Sharon, the receptionist, clears the switchboard before acknowledging us.

“Some night!” she whispers. “Rumors are flying.”

Nick taps his notepad. “We got the facts.”

She smiles. “We always do.”
Paper whirs from the printer near her desk, one sheet after another. The rhythm of it sounds like a car’s tires thumping over the seams of a highway. No one else speaks to us. Fatal accidents happen frequently on U.S. 550, but the driver of the Jeep was a kid working in town, saving money for college. Everyone knew him. The way death steals in the back door, kidnaps someone you love when you’re sitting right in the other room, watching TV or eating dinner or sleeping, can sober folks up. For a couple of days, people will drive more cautiously. They’ll speak kindly to one another. For a couple of days, they’ll keep a solemn vigil.

A shrewd photographer can manipulate a scene so her pictures tell a story no one expects to hear. If she shifts the center of the camera and eliminates half of a woman’s face, lopping off her eye and ear and part of her lips, she can hint at instability. If she shoots a low-angle portrait of a renowned politician, so that his height is exaggerated and the viewer feels like he’s looking up at this man, the politician will seem colossal, even menacing. At weddings, if she catches family members at opposite corners of her frame, she can introduce tension into the festivities. She implies secrets, family squabbles, trouble abrew. And if she uses a deep red filter, she can transform sunshine into moonlight. She can insist certain events—for example, a woman visiting a man, not her husband—occurred not in the candor of daylight but under the flush of a full moon.

Two days ago, Nick calls and says he plans to drive up to Montrose and catch a movie. He doesn’t invite me along, but asks what I plan to do with my day, the one separate from his. We’re not dating. We’ve only grabbed lunch together or gone for hot chocolate after a long shoot outside in wintry weather. He isn’t obligated to spend his weekend with me.
“I’ll go hiking,” I say.

Along the road to Owl Creek Pass, I meet a friend of mine, a male, driving instead of walking. He gives me a lift to the top, then we hike to the West Fork together. His dog, a mutt, scrambles through the bushes, foraging for dead birds and marmots, but he heels pretty quick when a herd of cows crosses our path. My friend and I watch the sun peak then start the slide into evening. My friend’s in love with a girl who likes to fly-fish. He calls her his little mermaid. I tell him Nick talks to me like we’re trapped in the ’60s. He calls me his lady friend. He calls me Lady. “Dreams have always gotten my tail into trouble,” Nick says. “I gave my heart once. Never again, Lady.”

When my friend drops me off at my house, Nick is pacing on the front porch. He’s dressed in black—a leather vest, leather pants, with silver studs pocking the hide. He’s wearing three silver rings and a necklace I’ve never seen before. His hair is loose. I think he’s dressed to impress someone, a woman he spent his day with in Montrose. He stares at his watch. “You’ve been gone for over five hours.”

“We hiked a far piece.” I unlock the door and invite him in.

“You said you were going alone.” He steps into the threshold, raises his arms, and presses his palms against the doorframe like any minute the strength from that long hair of his is going to kick in and he’ll push my house down. The tonal contrast between the outline of the white jamb and the shade of evening looming behind Nick, projects his presence into the room. I can almost see him lurch forward. It’s an elementary framing device even young photographers recognize.

“You’re keeping secrets,” Nick says. “I’m keeping it real.”

“What’s real?” I ask. “I don’t speak hippie.”
“You’re always ignoring people’s feelings.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“Like now, for instance.” He flips around and gets on his bike. When he drives away, I see his wrist rotate, shifting the engine into second gear. I hear the motor hiccup then roar freely.

When Sharon whispers, “Some night! Rumors are flying,” she means to tell Nick and me everyone at the paper knows we slept together the night before. I’m not listening.

Nick catches on, plays stupid. “We got the facts,” he says, tapping his notepad, pretending she means the story up on the pass, not the one from my bedroom.

Sharon winks. “You always do, Honey.”

Paper whirs from the printer near her desk. It sounds like two people whispering.

I lock myself in the dark room. The sign hanging outside the door says, Development in Progress. Do Not Disturb. I place the cassette of film inside my changing bag, poke my arms into the light-trapped openings, and remove the film from the cassette and load it on the tank. I tighten the lid, then remove the loaded film from the bag. I pour the wash into the tank’s lid and shake it gently. After I drain the liquid, I flip off the overhead bulb and turn on the safelight.

Only after I’ve enlarged the images onto print sheets and am processing the paper in chemical trays do I figure out what Sharon and Nick were talking about. In the darkness, the trucker, shrouded in white, takes shape. In the background, the crane’s neck slowly stretches beyond the frame. The images, one after another, blossom like inkblots. And in my mind, Sharon and Nick’s conversation blooms, too. Their words, initially the routine chitchat after a scoop, flower into innuendo: everyone knows.
Nick says, “What did you expect? Your hair has the tousled look of a woman who just got laid.”

When I turn my head, slightly, I can smell Nick’s cologne in my hair.

I catch snippets of conversation around town—in the Variety Store, Cecilia’s, the post office. The trucker, folks say, was forty years old. Or maybe twenty-six. He was heading home to see his wife who was having a baby. Or was she suffering from cancer? And what about the accident? Perhaps the rig’s brakes burned to metal against metal, or maybe, some say, the trucker swerved to avoid hitting a deer and spilled his load: 600—or was it 6,000?—gallons of hot liquid asphalt.

Then someone says the kid in the Jeep might have been drunk. A silence darkens the room the way a yellow filter over a camera’s lens can blacken the sky and increase the muscle of cloud formations.

“He worked at the liquor store,” someone whispers.

Judgment eclipses their faces. In my viewfinder, their skin would look jaundiced.

“No,” I say, “he waited tables at Pricco’s.”

I tell no one about the trucker’s book of love poetry.

The library in Nick’s living room would make any bookworm jealous. When I first meet him, I think I could love a loner who packs novels by Henry James or William Faulkner when he makes his annual pilgrimage to Sturgis or attends the Iron Horse rally in Durango.

But days later, when Nick confuses famous, but secular, literature with scripture, I grow suspicious. A penny saved is a penny earned. Or Good fences make good neighbors. Nick
claims these aphorisms are verses in Proverbs. *It was the best of times; it was the worst of times* kicks off one of the four gospels. Here’s my favorite: *Call me Ishmael*. This one, Nick swears, is in Genesis somewhere. Ishmael was the prophet who got swallowed by a big white fish.

Finally, Nick admits the books are an illusion, another trick for his funhouse atmosphere. At night, in Sturgis, he burns incense and listens to CCR. At home, before bed, he watches Howard Stern. Truth is, Nick hates to read. He found the books in the closet when he moved in. Nonetheless, when I imagine how I will describe Nick to my family and friends—I still picture him as the bookworm I first conjured. I can’t fathom that Nick isn’t the Nick I want to know.

When someone dies, those left behind summarize his life in 500 words or less: obituaries, police reports, tombstones, conversation. We conjure accomplishments, conceal faults, distort facts. We pretend we know those people who stroll through our lives then, one day, wander off-trail and vanish from this world. And who knows whether our words are lies? Someone knows a young man saving money for college, and that young man dies. The coroner says he knows a child with a blood-alcohol content of .14, and that child dies. I know a kid, an athlete, his body rippled with muscle the way only a man’s can be, and he dies, too. And if these boys pass in the same instant, in the same body, on the same stretch of highway—a powerful line of coincidence that directs our gazes toward one conclusion—are they not the same boy? And did we not all know him?

When taking pictures of people, the sensitive photographer learns to interact with her subjects. If she sees the model squinting or if she notices that wrinkles and other signs of age are too pronounced, she cranks down the lights. She helps children trust the camera by letting them
look through the viewfinder and take her picture. And she poses her adult subjects in their natural environments where the backgrounds can embellish their characters. She positions the slight priest in front of his church to imply power; she places the farmer in the middle of his wheat fields where the open sky suggests a generous nature; she poses the man, proud of his virility, beside trophies, automobiles, dazzling women; and she shoots the athlete at his game.

The driver from the Jeep lies face-down in the spill. I back up so the expanse of my wide-angle shots will swallow his body—a man engulfed by the litter of his life. Raised over his shoulders, his arms shelter the back of his head as if the heat searing his face and clothes and skin rained down from above like the eruption of fire and ash from Vesuvius. He’s wearing a softball uniform, a red shirt with a white 7 on the back. His nylon shorts are brilliant, green, and melted to his hips. The vivid colors of his costume contrast with the black ooze of asphalt. He’s stiff and brittle as charred wood, so different from an athlete in motion.

I set the shutter speed to 1/2 second exposure and lean against a nearby tree to steady the base of the camera. I wait for the squad car that’s parked in the background to drive away. When the police officer starts the engine and inches forward, I snap the shot. The breeze rustles the trees in the same, perfect instant. In the photograph, the body will lie still, but the background—the trees, the car—will blur, as if life, forgetful of death, continues. The sound the camera makes when I snap the picture is like the scratch of a match struck.

Nick’s house is made of mirrors, more funky décor for the house of fun. The mirrors panel the walls in his living room, dining room, and bedroom. When he invites me over for dinner, my reflection startles me. I don’t recognize this woman with dark circles beneath her
eyes and a blouse too large to sit square on her shoulders. She seems surprised that I’m watching her.

“How do you live,” I ask Nick, “spying on yourself like a voyeur?”

“Mirrors are like cameras,” he says. “You’re just not used to seeing yourself in the viewfinder.”

I pretend to aim a camera at the glass. “I couldn’t use a flash in here.”

“Mirrors make all spaces bigger,” Nick argues.

I look around his living room and shake my head. “They crowd the place. You’ve got twice as much stuff now: two couches, four loungers, two TV’s.” Then I point to his reflection. “There’s two people occupying your one-bedroom apartment.”

“I’m the best roommate I ever had,” he says.

After dinner, when I’m clearing the dishes from the table because it’s the least I can do, Nick takes the platter of spaghetti and meatballs from my hands, grips my waist, and lures me on top of his lap. In the mirror, some woman is kissing a man. Some woman is straddling his lap. Usually I shut my eyes when kissing, but I can’t stop watching the couple in the mirror. I’m horrified, transfixed. The woman’s eyes are open, too.

I’m thinking about Pablo Neruda and the trucker’s liaisons when I set up my tripod on the trunk of a nearby squad car and attach my telephoto to the camera. I’m wondering what kind of man would know enough women that he recognizes a different face in every love poem he reads. Nick is asking questions of the six police officers at the scene. When I wander over to the EMS medic guarding the trucker’s body, Nick looks up from his notebook, peers over his shades, and follows me.
To the medic, I say, “I’d like a shot of his hand.”

Nick stares at me. “Joe won’t run that photograph. We don’t need a shot of body parts.”

I keep my eyes locked on the medic. “One picture,” I say.

The medic’s brow wrinkles, but he folds back the sheet. I flip the trucker’s hand over so his palm faces me. A fortuneteller once told me you could recognize folks who had lived several lives by looking at the bellies of their hands. They’re wrinkled with wisdom from having lived hundreds of years, from seeing so much of this world through the eyes of so many different creatures.

The sun has risen higher. Shadows fatten the scene, making all the edges thicker. The creases in the trucker’s palm are black and deep as gullies. I walk around to the rear of the ambulance and crank open the door so it bounces the sun onto the stretcher. Light splashes across the trucker. Now, the wrinkles that slice up his palm are thin as wires. He may have lived many lives, but this one snapped like a frayed string. I crank the camera again and again.

“Jesus Christ,” Nick says.

When I think Nick is busy, I sidestep the barricades and am about to step into the spill. Suddenly, Nick grabs my pack and yanks me backward.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

I point at the Jeep driver. “I’d like a close-up.”

“He’s a charcoal briquette, Julie. What’s wrong with you?”

“He’s more like a melted candle,” I argue.

Nick glares at me.

“I want to know,” I insist.
For what if I rolled that driver over? Could I distinguish eyebrows, lips, nose? Can a man blistered beyond recognition show emotion? Maybe his face would capture the fury of death. Maybe it would reflect the movie of his life, rolling backward in his final moments to victory, love earned, a good mother, a cozy womb.

On the way back to town, before the snow shed, before the East Riverside slide, Nick takes the double s-curve at 55 miles per hour. Looking over his shoulder, I can see the speedometer. I tilt with the bike. Nick has told me if I lean against the turn, out of fear, we will lose control. The bike will buck from underneath us. Our bodies will skid along the pavement. Our skin will burn. Our clothes will tatter to threads that catch in the wounds.

When I leave Nick’s house early, declining his invitation to sleep over, he accuses me of being interested in my hiking companion of two days ago. “You’re young,” he says. “You want to play the field.” His accusation is meant to persuade me to sleep with him; I have something to prove.

I leave anyway but, later, call and apologize and beg forgiveness until Nick agrees to come over and make good on what he offered. Why I do this is obvious. It’s not that Nick is a sly wordsmith and I’ve fallen for his lines. It’s his hair. I want Nick to perch on top of me, the long tendrils streaming around his face, tickling my shoulders and neck. He may never let me photograph his hair loosened, but in my head, I’ll take pictures. Beneath him, I’ll reduce his face to the purity of silhouette, the black, blank canvas of shadow. He’ll become a stranger, and then—only then—I’ll roll from beneath him, steering him onto his back, so his hair fans across my pillows like the spill of honey.
Last night, when Nick’s finished but I’ve been forgotten, he hurries to the bathroom, borrows my brush, and tends to his hair like a woman giving her tresses one hundred strokes before bed. He slides his fingers through the strands, flips the cloth of it from one shoulder to the next, smooths all the tangles as if loosening the knots of our tumble together.

If I whispered, “Say, *Cheese,*” right now, would he be mad?

The local softball team won the regional championship game last night in Montrose. Another reporter and photographer, not Nick and I, covered the league all summer. On a clothesline in the darkroom, this photographer has hung his pictures to dry. The game unfolds before me: the team in the red shirts and green shorts knocks balls out of the park, steals bases, slides home. In the celebration photos, the victors cheer and pop open bottles of champagne and crack cans of beer. The photographer keeps using fast film though his light sources are fading. As a result, the pictures are grainy. In the ghostly images, it looks like the fatigue of death has settled onto the players’ faces. It looks like we covered a wake for the dead. Number 7 is centered in one of the photographs. His eyes are closed.

When I was seven, I broke my nose running through the House of Glass at the county fair. My sister and I were racing to see who could wind her way out of the maze the fastest. I flipped a corner and, in the mirror before me, saw a girl, my height, my age, beelining toward me. Her hair rippled in the breeze of her motion. Like me, she raised an arm to protect her face. When we collided, my body flopped against hers like a bird slamming into a patio door: the flutter of hair and feathers, the shatter of glass and tiny bones, a light sudden as a camera flash,
sharp as the sun. When I pulled back, her nose burst, a bloody rose. She opened her mouth to
gasp. Blood soaked her teeth, filled her mouth, covered her tongue. As I pondered how odd it
was that I could taste her blood, sweet but salty, too, the girl stared at me. I asked her if the blow
felt like sneezing. She said, “No, it’s like an explosion.” Then she was gone.

A child getting his first haircut, an elderly man bathing his ailing wife, a young girl
milking a cow at dawn, her ivory skin awash with light, the silver pail aglow—these images are
high-key affairs. Recognizing this, the photographer dresses her models in pale clothing. She
diffuses the light in her studio or shoots outside before eight a.m. She surrounds her subjects
with reflective surfaces like a white baby blanket, snowy soapsuds, a sun-bleached fence. But
when a photographer records other images—the cavern of a stony cathedral, a pack of Somali
children gaunt with hunger, the tangle of cars at the scene of an accident—she wants dark tones
to dominate. She wants to convey peril, sorrow, the shadows of suspicion.

Death isn’t a high-key assignment. But last night, an early frost glazed the landscape,
and this morning, the trees are flocked with ice. The sun—so early, so low—scatters halos in the
lingering mist. The trucker, laid out on a stretcher with a sheet pulled taut over his head, gleams.
Beside him, the ambulance is clean, white. The bright tones should frustrate my poetic instincts,
but I’m smart enough to see I’ve been handed a gift. I take the first exposure, obeying the light
meter. The second picture, I overexpose by half a stop. The third, by a full stop. Already,
before the darkroom and the processing, I know the wider aperture of the shutter along with the
diffused sunlight and the silvery palette will transform this scene into something holy. The
leaves on the trees will burn like so many light bulbs switched on. In the breeze, the sheet
covering the trucker will jostle as if he’s stirring to life again. On film, the movement will blur. Later, anyone looking at the photo in the newspaper will wonder that the trucker’s body, cloaked in the shiny gown of an angel, didn’t rise—as the shutter flew open—to make its ascension.

I wake first, before Joe calls. I hear the clock at the Methodist church chime the hour. Six a.m. Nick sleeps beside me. His face is relaxed; his cheeks, deflated. I think I’ve got a ghost in my bed, or maybe Nick’s roommate—the mere reflection of him. This face, calm as it is, belongs to a man different from the one who came inside me last night. That man’s face twisted in pain. In the dark, his eyes, white and round, seemed to pop from his head like those of a cartoon-figure who has swallowed a lit firecracker. I’m a skilled photographer. I know a dark background can make white objects explode. Still, I wasn’t ready for the Looney-Tunes expression. I nearly laughed out loud.

After Joe’s call, Nick gets out of bed and dresses in front of the window. The light cascading through the sheer curtains is silvery. Bathed in the soft glow, Nick’s skin brightens, metallic, like water lit by sunshine. From across the room, I imagine the warmth of his body the way I always sense heat rising off objects before I snap my camera. And I wonder if Nick feels awkward dressing without the mirrors in his bedroom guiding his hands to buttons, his legs into pants, his arms into sleeves. When he’s slid into his jeans, he stops and glances out the window.

He says, “I knew when I woke, the whole world had changed.”

* * * * *
This morning, before dawn, a trucker swerves on U.S. 550 to avoid a drunk driver whose Jeep has crossed the yellow line. Steering clear of the head-on collision, he tips his rig and spills his load: 1,000 gallons of hot liquid asphalt. Who knows which driver fares better? The semi plunges into the gorge, hits rock, and buckles like an accordion. The windshield fractures, bones break, and the trucker’s head bursts open like a jar of preserves dropped on the floor. The Jeep spins in the asphalt, a Tilt-a-Whirl cup cut loose from its moorings. The centrifugal force tosses the driver face-down in the spill. There isn’t much you can do for a boy who drowns in a lake of lava.

This morning, Nick and I head into the mountains on assignment. Early as it is, the sunbeams twirl in the forest like ballerinas, leaving behind footprints of light. Under these conditions, a tiresome photographer might listen for twigs snapping, leaves rustling, the cliché of a doe and her fawns scavenging for breakfast.

But Nick gives it the gas, and the Harley staggers then bolts forward. The gears grind. The engine throbs against the rock walls. An alert photographer, with camera ready, will detect the drama. She’ll hear that moment when the shift of gears yanks the woman’s body away from the man’s as if the bike might ride out from under only her. She’ll know that the man’s hand won’t drop to the woman’s thigh, an anchor assuring her safety. She’ll see the look of surprise on the woman’s face. And she’ll snap the picture.