Fear Is a Road It’s Not Safe to Travel

I.

My second week in Colorado, I hear a siren wail. Its cry bounces off the rock walls that corral Ouray then dwindles as the ambulance disappears, heading south on U.S. 550 into the San Juan Mountains.

Two days later, I book a solo tour with a guide my parents recommend so I can snag a good story to write during the weekdays at my hideaway cabin. Early in the morning, as the guide and I near the ghost town of Ironton, I ask him why the siren was screaming. I ask if next week’s paper will cover the accident.

“Tourists buy our paper. You think our small-town news is quaint.” He smiles and bats his eyelashes, coy as Daisy Duke. A curvy, topless woman is tattooed on his right bicep. She dances when he shifts gears. “If we print the scary stuff,” he adds, “it ruins the hillbilly mood.”

In all stories—in the ones we live and in the ones we tell—the landscape is a virtual world we control. Maybe the Ouray Plaindealer omits the gory specifics: the
gasp of an automobile plunging into the gorge, the crunch of metal and glass against rock, the fracture of bone, skin stripped loose like tattered cloths. By doing so, the newspaper preserves the old-timey backdrop we want to believe in.

Which doesn’t mean the scenery isn’t true. In Ouray, Colorado, people do leave their keys in the ignition when they go into work or eat at a restaurant. Some of them leave their cars running. Kids, even the young ones, walk to school without fear of molesters. The local swimming pool gives them free summer passes so their parents can run their curio shops without paying for babysitters. The stores on Main Street, which is only ten blocks long, have wooden floors and no air conditioning, and none of them have alarms or surveillance cameras or bars on the windows. Everyone who’s able attends spring graduation, funerals, weekly bingo at the Elks Lodge, and the Dixieland concerts in the city park. Tourists or locals—we come to Ouray searching for childhood, looking for Mayberry or some other old neighborhood from before WWII, Vietnam, 9/11, a set where we can re-enact what life was like when it was good.

II.

By noon, I realize my guide has a sparse vocabulary. He only knows two pronouns—you (as in you weird foreigners) and we (as in not you weird foreigners). When he tells stories about forest fires, he says, You people are match-happy. When he describes bizarre hunting accidents, he says, If you can’t control a sharp blade, we’ve got a butcher who can dress meat. And when he imitates the thump of search-and-rescue helicopters, he says, We pay taxes to help save you crazies hiking around in blizzard conditions.
I understand his disdain for tourists. They come to Ouray (pop. 600) to escape the city hustle, see a fresh view, experience a “simpler” life, but immediately, they want to know where is the nearest Wal-Mart or McDonald’s. If they need parts for their motorcycles or RV’s, they huff and puff when they’re advised to drive to the True Value, ten miles north in Ridgway, even though the distance to the grocery store from their homes back in California and Texas is most likely fifteen minutes or longer, a journey they make several times a week and in heavy traffic.

Too, unfamiliar with mountainous terrain, travelers cause trouble—even death—on U.S. 550. Nicknamed the Million Dollar Highway, this road connects Durango to Silverton then Ouray, threading through the San Juan Range as thin as a tightrope. For tourists, giddy with vacation plans, fear makes a boring traveling companion, sitting in the backseat, barking directions. So they gallop along in their SUV’s and camping trailers, snapping pictures, pointing at waterfalls, and frolicking in patches of snow. They don’t know to tiptoe across this wiry highway.

They don’t know what the runaway ramp branching off of 550, south of Silverton, signifies. Yes, a semi gone mad can fly up this escape hatch, hit the bed of sand twenty feet later, sink to its axle, and mercifully stop. But let’s imagine what the pullout implies before the rig halts: an eighteen-wheeler ripping down the grade, skidding around the hairpin curves, its brakes charred. Let’s imagine that much tonnage rushing toward us in the rearview mirror. Know that in the forty-one miles which climb then descend Coal Bank, Molas, and Red Mountain passes—all of them higher than 10,500 feet—the topography allows for only that one runaway ramp heading south, none heading north, and suddenly, the pullout—or the lack of more of them—isn’t all that comforting.
Tourists also don’t know that where the forest gapes open on steep hillsides, where the slopes are barren, avalanches—both natural and controlled—have barreled down like military tanks, ambushing trees and shoving debris and sometimes cars into the gorge. Tourists don’t know that between Coal Bank Pass and Ouray there are fifty-seven slides that run so regularly they’re named. That’s one chute every three-quarters of a mile. If we look closely, we’ll see tiny rectangular signs, painted brown to camouflage their existence, which read, _Launcher Site_. These signs indicate the points where winter crews—men lean as starved dogs and amused by danger—set up their 75mm howitzers or 105mm recoilless guns to blast for avalanches when weather won’t permit Heli-Trax crews to fire chargers from the air. The sideways concussion of the required firepower blows off the hubcaps and shatters the windshield of the vehicle hauling the recoilless. If it takes that much ammunition to launch an avalanche, imagine how furious is the snow that plunges downward. At only a moderate speed of 60 mph, the impact of snow is thirty to fifty tons per square yard—an impact equivalent to that of a 180 mph wind. Three tons of force wrecks log cabins; ten tons uproots mature trees; thirty annihilates everything. And yet, winter tourists frequently park in avalanche zones while taking pictures or letting their dogs out to pee. Either they don’t see or they ignore the large white signs that read: _Slide Zone, No Stopping or Standing Next 5 Miles_.

The only thing vacationers do notice when traversing 550—and they notice it pretty quickly—is the absence of guardrails. The road crews and the Colorado Department of Transportation work hard the year round to domesticate the mountains: Besides controlling avalanches and plowing winter roads, they repave the asphalt every other summer and build wire nets and position crossties to hold loose rocks and soil in
place. The security they bestow may not be infallible, but travelers should trust that if road crews are earnest enough to risk their own lives to save others, the absence of guardrails is a result of tactical, not sloppy, engineering. If we want snow bulldozed off the highway, and we all do, then we can’t place anything along the rim that will block the tumble.

I’ve heard that, despite all the careless vacationers, most car accidents happen less than five miles from the driver’s home. This statistic seems suspiciously low, like some urban legend invented to slow down reckless teenagers who aren’t allowed to venture far, except that I know the average distance from my mother’s collisions and her and my father’s house is actually a negative number. She prefers to crash her car—and has done so frequently—in their garage.

One morning, late for a dental checkup, she forgot to raise the door before reversing, as if she wanted to burst from her stall like the Dukes of Hazzard. One evening, weary from work, she misjudged the length of the garage and nosed the front grill of her Suburban through the wall. My father, who heard the crunch of sheetrock, thought a lunatic was trying to run him down as he sat in the living room, watching Tom Brokaw and the six o’clock news. Her third collision happened when she heard a stray kitten mewing under her car. As she backed into the driveway, she didn’t watch her path out the rear window. Instead, her Suburban door hung open, and she poked her head through the frame, listening for the kitty, watching the ground so she might spot its tiny paw before her wheels smashed it. It’s not surprising that, under those circumstances,
she didn’t steer a straight course, that she lost her side-view mirror when she whacked it against the support column inside the garage, but who would have thought her open door would snag and peel away the passenger side of my father’s brand new Miata?

Some people will argue that even the dullest audience can interpret basic props. Sparse furniture—a shovel, two trashcans, maybe a lawn mower—situates us in someone’s garage, a space where it’s safe to stash your car. Then the lights go down, and we can hear the crew bumping around in the dark. Stagehand shenanigans don’t fool us; we know they’re changing sets. When the curtain parts again and we find buckled doors and walls, side-view mirrors clattered onto the pavement, and a skinned sports car in that garage, we’ll say these are facts no one can dispute. We won’t be willing to park our cars there. Some of us will even point at my mother and say, *If you can’t control a vehicle, we’ve got a husband who can drive for you.* We’ll say her license should be revoked.

Even so, surrounded by Victorian homes decorated like gingerbread houses and shopping in old-fashioned variety stores, tourists may find it difficult to heed my warnings about U.S. 550. I’m sneaking behind the scenes and, with words, turning vacationers into tightrope walkers, avalanches into military attacks, cars into horses galloping at full throttle. These metaphors contradict the local paper and everything we know about road-trips to small-town America. It’s a trick no one is buying because, comparatively speaking, very few tourists die on 550 compared to the numbers that travel across it.
Perhaps I should apologize for portraying travelers dashing about like dumb cattle in a stampede. Perhaps I should apologize for anthropomorphizing an eighteen-wheeler into a lunatic who tailgates tourists. As if a truck could ever go mad.

On Saturday, September 30, 2000, at approximately 7:00 p.m., Michael Harbin’s semi overturned, gouging the asphalt and skidding over the cliff at Lookout Point, just south of Ouray on U.S. 550. The screech of metal grating against the blacktop drew emergency workers and townspeople into Main Street immediately. They watched the eighteen-wheeler slide forty feet down the steep embankment just above 4th Street, threatening to plow down the southernmost houses. They watched his load—long, steel pipes—shoot down the slope like harpoons. For two days, they watched the rig balance precariously above Ouray, before weather permitted road crews to haul the wreckage up the hillside, a procedure that took eight hours.

III.

However badly I might want to be a local instead of a foolish tourist, I’m not willing to dress the part. My guided tour takes place in late spring, and it’s fifty-five degrees outside, so I’m wearing jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and hiking boots. Pansy that I am, I’m packing a jacket and mittens. A native would have on Birkenstocks and shorts and a tank top. A native wouldn’t be wearing makeup and wouldn’t have bothered to tote along sunscreen, a camera, a map.
Nonetheless, I spend the morning and afternoon bumping over scree and washed-out trails without complaining. I don’t flinch when the guide’s beagle lashes at me for climbing inside the Jeep. I don’t panic at the top of Engineer Pass when the clouds pump up then shoot sleet sharp as BB’s. I don’t ask where the seatbelts are when, at the last second, the guide slams the Jeep into reverse on a switchback because there isn’t room to bank the turn. By 4:00 p.m., I’ve proven that I’m sturdy enough, rooted as a local, to handle the gruesome details.

“So,” I prod again, “you really don’t know about that siren?”

The guide shrugs then confesses, “We had trouble on Black Bear Pass.” There’s that royal we again, though the guide wasn’t there, and neither were any other locals. An elderly couple from out of state went off-roading with some college kids. The frat boys bounced safely down Thrill Hill, a slope that slants sixty degrees near Black Bear summit, tilting vehicles so sharply that passengers are standing on their feet even though they’re still seated. Imagine the steepest hill on an ordinary roller coaster—except there aren’t upstop or guide wheels beneath the road locking your Jeep to the trail, and drivers can only descend the gradient, with its stair-step topography, by applying a steady foot to the brake and lowering one tire at a time.

With something to prove, the old folks followed the boys at full throttle. They rolled their Jeep four times—not sideways, but bumper over bumper. The man flew free; the woman stayed buckled to her seat. Both survived. A fact that hardly seems plausible.

“The newspaper could print that happy-ever-after story,” I say.

“Hell, no,” the guide insists. “The mountains are fickle. Sometimes they let you escape; sometimes they grind you up like hamburger.” He shakes his head. “No, ma’am.
We don’t want you flatlanders renting our Jeeps and roaring down Thrill Hill just because two yokels survived.”

I don’t tell the guide—though clearly he’s assumed it—that I am, in fact, a flatlander myself. In Texas, the cap rock upon which my husband and I lived was a plateau so level we could see our destination fifteen minutes before we arrived. No trees or skyscrapers blocked our views. There were no hills. There was even a city ordinance that restricted the height of business signage. The streets, plotted in alphabetical or numerical order, steered everyone in safe, straight lines—no tangents, no trouble.

But I inherited my mother’s driving skills. Frequently, I turned the wrong direction down one-way streets. In high school, I hit a barricade and, less than two months later, a brick mailbox. In college, I knocked the side-view mirror off my car while pulling up to the drive-thru at Jack-in-the-Box, and I’ve lost more than one radio antenna in the car wash. Today, I can’t make a right turn without bumping the curb.

My husband knew about my driving record, so when I drove us to the theater or a restaurant, he barked orders at me: Look out for that car turning! Do you see that car? It’d be quicker to take the Loop. I’d take the Loop. You’re gonna make us late. Where are you going? He’d tell me to take one route, and as I turned down the street of his choice, he’d change his mind. “Wait!” he yelled. “Go the other way!” Frequently, he gasped and clutched at the dashboard as if we were about to crash. Sometimes I hit the curb when trying to maneuver his sudden directions. Sometimes I jammed on the brake, trying to avoid his imagined collisions. I zipped through yellow lights because we were
late, and usually I didn’t enjoy the movie or my meal because I was so rattled by the time we reached our destination.

Honestly, I wasn’t simply a hazardous driver; I was a coward, too. Because I didn’t tell my husband that we were both reckless: I sat behind the wheel, but he steered. I didn’t tell him to knock off the drill-sergeant routine. I didn’t say, Get out. Walk home. Who could drive safely with a lunatic yelling? I didn’t think for even one second that I was a thirty-something woman with a Ph.D. who clearly had the intelligence to manage an automobile. Instead, I kept quiet, followed orders. And when I grew so distraught, so docile, I took the passenger seat and let him drive. He didn’t even have to ask.

*The Plaindealer*, I’ve since learned, covers local accidents. If the paper softens the stories at all, it does so by focusing on the facts—*who, what, when, and where*. But people spread rumors—truths, if we believe them—more grisly than facts could ever be.

On July 27, 2004, more than two years after my tour, Allen and Susan Huntington, a couple the same age as the pair in the guide’s story, though not so lucky, will drop 927 feet off the ledge of Black Bear Pass. The road over Black Bear climbs to 12,800 feet before descending into Telluride, down Thrill Hill and through a series of infamous switchbacks, so tight, so narrow, that they’re restricted to one-way travel and passable only by high-clearance vehicles and only during two months out of the year. In the hour before the Huntingtons’ accident, temperatures will drop twenty degrees when a cold front blasts into the area. Witnesses will report snow and ice falling on the trail and limiting visibility. All of these facts I will learn from the story that runs in the paper.
In addition, the reporter will write that when their 2003 Jeep Rubicon flies off the cliff, both Mr. and Mrs. Huntington are thrown from the vehicle because neither is wearing a seatbelt. In telling us this, and by adding that the airbags did deploy, the reporter will imply that the Huntingtons might have survived if, like those of us smart enough to wear seatbelts, they’d used more caution.

What the reporter won’t say is that the couple traveled to Ouray every summer and had traversed Black Bear numerous times, without incident. What he won’t admit is, despite their experience, the mountains won. The Huntingtons will have purchased a car with four-wheel drive, all-terrain tires, and airbags, but this equipment won’t stop the freak winter storm that July. They might buckle ten seatbelts when they climb into their Jeep, but that won’t temper a 927-foot plunge. What the reporter won’t tell us, but I will later learn from an EMT responding to the scene, is that every bone in the woman’s body broke, her core so completely shattered that the coroner will call her a wet noodle and report difficulty scooping her onto the examining table.

These are the rumors—the facts?—the newspaper omits because these are the details that kill—literally—the tourist industry.

Haven or hazard? Cautious or careless? Lies or truth? We present the facts—excluding some, highlighting others—until it’s impossible to render a verdict. This is the reason prosecuting attorneys find it difficult to convict on circumstantial evidence. It’s just too easy to shuffle scenery.
For example, if we discover, as we did in the previous chapter, a cabin designed by the Brothers Grimm in the forest of our dreams, we might assume sinister magic will happen there. Perhaps an old woman will fatten small children to kettle in some soup or maybe a troll will steal a mother’s child. But I place a cozy kitchen, a comb and mirror, even a modern convenience like electricity inside that Grimm cottage, and suddenly it’s a refuge for someone’s grandmother in the afterlife or maybe for some bedraggled woman lost in the night. She needs a bath, clean hair, a place to rest. If you want, tell me that cabin was a silly dream; an incongruous, absurd backdrop; wishful thinking. But don’t tell me we didn’t feel safe there. We were all wearing pajamas. We all knew grandma would brush our hair and send us back to bed with a warm glass of milk.

Another example, more complicated: Let’s say we follow a man’s wife to Colorado. Not more than five days later, we tail her to the local bar and peek in her pocket and find she’s hidden her wedding ring there, a setting detail weighted with obvious symbolism. We see her converse with some cowboys. We haven’t caught her in a tangle of sheets yet, but that doesn’t mean we won’t. She’s in a bar, alone, without her husband. Don’t tell me you and I haven’t already pronounced her guilty. Don’t tell me we don’t have expectations now. If we’d found a gun in her pocket, we’d demand she fire it before the story ends. But that doesn’t mean she would.

IV.

The guide prowls our Jeep along a precipice. “Look,” he says as he nudges us closer to the edge. “You see a car down there?”
This isn’t a lookout point, but rather a rockslide area, no stopping, no slowing down. I know this because there’s a yellow warning sign picturing a pile of rocks dumped atop a vehicle that looks a lot like a Lego car. The driver, portrayed as a stick-figure, is still conscious and apparently unharmed. She peers from the rubble and smiles sheepishly, looking as simple as Henny Penny.

Like my guide’s hesitance to speak about danger, like the paper’s holiday tone, some of the road signs on U.S. 550, which are required by federal law and posted by CDOT, sustain the impression of kid’s play. They look like cartoons sketched by first-graders. The language of elementary art is universal, and comic strips deflate danger, thwart mass panic.

To caution the traveler about deer crossing the road, there are more warning signs. These picture a buck dancing on his hind feet, a hula-hoop whirling around his belly. A woman driving on U.S. 550 might expect circus deer to caper across the road, doing high-kicks, their front legs hooked around each other’s shoulders. She won’t be watching for a buck or doe to bound off a thirty-foot embankment or jump a ten-foot deer break, landing inches in front of her car as she zips along at the speed limit, singing to the radio. Nor will she imagine that if she hits the buck in that second when his hooves aren’t planted on the pavement, he’ll slide up her hood and slam through her windshield, the weight of his body and the shards of glass killing her on impact. And if the collision doesn’t end her life, watching the buck with a broken back crook his front legs, like a two-pronged gardening claw, to drag himself off the road will certainly haunt her. Watching a helpful passerby bash the deer’s skull with a rock, a mercy-killing, will make her wish she’d died, too.
When my husband’s maternal grandmother died one winter, he and I rode with his parents from Dallas to the funeral in Stephenville. The trip began like this: I climbed into the backseat of his parents’ SUV; my mother-in-law climbed in beside me.

As we waited patiently in the frosty car while the men locked up the house, I said, “This is going to be a rough day. You should ride in the front seat.”

But my mother-in-law grew up in that generation—I’ve seen this before in women her age—where men are granted front-seat privileges, as if we’re pilgrims crossing the Atlantic, the men steering, navigating the ocean, because women, who can’t possibly understand the dangers of treacherous waters, are useless at the helm.

My husband’s mother patted my hand. “I’m happy, sitting with you. We’ll visit.”

My husband got to the car before his father. He didn’t offer the front seat to his mother or even glance at us in the back. He walked directly to the driver’s side, opened the front door, and propped himself behind the steering wheel. He asked his mother for her keys. I looked at her. She looked at me.

“This isn’t good,” I said.

My husband said, “What?”

“Your father will want to drive.”

“We don’t need any problems today,” my husband argued.

*Then stop causing them*, I thought. But my mother-in-law gave him the keys, and I stared out the window.

My father-in-law came to the car, walked to the driver’s side, opened the door, glared at my husband, shook his head, closed the door, walked around to the passenger
side, and got in. None of us spoke for the next twenty minutes. My mother-in-law put on
the smile of the dead, her lips snagged tight as if stitched into position by an undertaker.

It’s critical that we remember when this story took place: the day my husband’s
mother saw her own mother—dressed in her Sunday finest, a waxy finish to her face—
wedged inside a coffin and lowered into the ground. After the funeral, the graveside
service, and the family get-together at the grandmother’s home, where cousins had
already moved in, staking their territory, my husband took his seat behind the wheel for
the long drive back to Dallas.

His father said, “I’m driving.”

My husband said, “You’re not.”

His father’s face darkened, the way paper singes seconds before it catches fire,
but he took the seat on the passenger side.

On the way home, my husband suggested we stop at a gas station for a fill-up,
some sodas, and a restroom break. His father insisted we didn’t need fuel or drinks or a
ladies’ room: “I know how far my own car can go on a tank. This is my car.” They
argued for several minutes but agreed not to stop. My mother-in-law smiled at me.

A mere ten minutes later, just as my husband was cruising by an exit to an access
road with gas stations, my father-in-law yelled, “Pull over! We need gas!” He huffed
like he couldn’t believe how stupid my husband was. Any moron could read a gas gauge.

My husband swerved up the exit ramp. It was raining. Hard. The wipers
snapped across the windshield in double-time. Any minute, the bitter temperatures would
drop lower, and the water would turn to ice. I was terrified we’d flip the car.
My mother-in-law sat in ladylike fashion: her hands gathered in her lap, both feet on the floorboard. “A Dr. Pepper sounds nice,” she said.

My husband asked his father which gas station he wanted: Shell or Texaco?

His father snorted. “It doesn’t matter.”

But when my husband pulled into the Shell—the first station—his father yelled, “Not this one. The Texaco, for Chrissake!”

My husband stared at him, his jaw agape. “You said either one.” He spun the wheel of the car in a tight 360 and peeled out of the parking lot. We lurched into the Texaco station, bounding over the entrance. My butt popped off the seat; my neck whiplashed.

At the Texaco, my husband pumped the gas while his parents went inside for snacks and cold drinks. “Can you believe him?” my husband asked. “Unbelievable.”

What I managed to say—and I’m not proud of this—was, “Just let him drive.”

When my in-laws returned to the car, my husband was closing the gas cap and waiting at the pump for the receipt. My husband’s father said, “I’m not sure why, but you’re angry and not driving safely. I’m taking over.” He pushed his eyeglasses farther up his nose, tilted his head downward, and peered at my husband through the lenses. He handed my husband a Sprite. “You wanted something to drink, didn’t you?”

My husband refused the soda but climbed into the passenger seat. My father-in-law, calm and rational now that he was steering, tucked the beverage in the drink holder between them. My husband ignored it. He would’ve died of thirst before he took a sip.

My father-in-law sat hunched behind the wheel. I had no idea how fast we were going, but it felt way too swift for the weather conditions. He jerked the wheel, yanking
our car in and out of traffic. Water sloshed around our tires and slapped against the
windshield. The taillights on other cars flashed by like red, eerie bolts of lightning.

None of us spoke for the rest of the way home—except for the moment when my
father-in-law reached a hand back to my mother-in-law and said, “This was your day,
Mama. I sure love you.” My mother-in-law, still smiling, clasped his hand.

Like actors obeying the stage directions of a comedy, the residents of Ouray don’t
advertise the risks of U.S. 550. Amongst themselves, they whisper prophecies. “The
Million Dollar Highway hasn’t taken anyone lately,” they say. “Someone’s number is
up.” But in the Variety Store, when tourists are listening, they crack jokes. When cars
with out-of-state tags roll through town with the stench of burnt rubber, burnt brakes,
trailing after them, the locals crinkle their noses, shake their heads, wink at one another,
and say, “How many tourists does it take to read a road sign?” Because there are plenty
of signs encouraging drivers to shift into low gear, instead of riding their brakes, when
descending the passes. And the locals tease the vacationers about the road’s nickname,
too, claiming it refers to the refusal of some folks to cross it—even if you offer them a
million dollars. My uncle calls it the Million Holler Highway.

In the same way, some families will kid about their ancestral legends. A daughter
telling stories about her mother’s accidents in the garage uses comparisons meant to
make the listener laugh: The mother smashes through doors like TV hillbillies, and she
fillets her husband’s sports car. It’s like watching the antics of Road Runner and Wyle E.
Coyote. Nothing catastrophic or deadly ever happens.
In high school, when I ripped through that blockade then skulked home in my wounded automobile, my family called me Barricade Betty for exactly one month, two weeks, and three days. It’s a nickname that might have stuck permanent, but then, on another rainy night, I backed out of a girlfriend’s drive and toppled that brick mailbox. After that, my family called me Mailbox Mary.

Sometimes, I’m saying, we tell jokes in order to translate terrifying situations into cheery spaces. My mother-in-law’s smile, the one sewn across her face, tells me she outwits her husband’s temper, her son’s copycat behavior, in the same manner. By putting a smiley-face on every fiery situation, she simply ignores—even denies—their attempts to control her and one another. But her good humor will be hard for some people to fathom. Implausible reactions undercut good character development. It’s why a lot of people insist that abused women enjoy the abuse.

In the San Juan Mountains, locals do lots of things to foil the fury of avalanches. They use good snow tires, change their wiper blades frequently, maintain their exhaust systems, their heaters, their defrosters. They keep emergency equipment in their cars: tire chains, first aid kits, warm clothing and blankets, flashlights, hatchets, water, spare food.

In 1985, a Denver architectural firm, Stearns-Royer, designed and built a snowshed at the base of Mount Abrams in what is known as the East Riverside Slide zone, the most infamous slide in Colorado. Six people have died there, all of the deaths occurring during a second run, not the initial avalanche. The chute starts 3,280 vertical feet above U.S. 550 and drains a seventy-five-acre area, which can retain a depth of up to
twelve feet of snow before the slide runs. The chute is sleek and accurate, as steady as a well-sighted rifle. The cement structure built by Stearns-Royer has steel beams, is designed to withstand an impact load of a thousand pounds per foot, and provides emergency lights as well as an emergency phone for anyone buried inside the shelter.

Here’s the catch: for adequate protection, Stearns-Royer suggested a shed-length of no less than four hundred feet and a preferred length of 1,269 feet, to be built in three stages. The state of Colorado put up $1.6 million dollars, enough to complete only the first phase—a shed that is 180 feet long, less than half the advised minimum, less than one-seventh the preferred. Travelers may feel safe noodling through the shelter: it’s a hefty structure, and there’s that emergency phone hanging on the wall, a lifeline. But from the top of Mt. Abrams, the snowshed looks like a matchbox. From the bottom, on the highway, you can’t see the top of the chute. It’s the only run in Colorado where visible confirmation of a triggered avalanche is impossible from the target-area. If the East Riverside Slide blows while you’re in its path, you won’t see it coming, and you’ll have less than a 60% chance of being in that tiny shed when the tidal wave hits. If you’re caught outside, the force will suck you down, like the tow of an ocean, smothering you under the swell of snow and debris. An avalanche will flatten a car, knock the victims loose, scatter their bodies so they can’t be found for months. An avalanche will leave undisturbed a crate of eggs, a carton of cream, even as it fills the inside of a victim’s mouth with a ball of ice so large, so hard, it prevents swallowing or breathing. Imagine your jaw jacked open; imagine gagging on snow. Imagine digging the wrong direction because, in the dark, packed as tightly as you are, you can’t tell which way is up.
On March 5, 1992, an avalanche trapped four people inside the shed. It had been snowing nonstop for two days, but officials didn’t close Red Mountain Pass until 1:00 a.m. Afterward, two highway-maintenance men—Danny Jaramillo and Eddie Imel—worked outside the snowshed, clearing a path from the north to rescue the victims caught inside before the Pass shut down. Though a car drives through an avalanche zone in less than a minute, highway workers stay in the path for hours at a time. The equipment provided by the state of Colorado was old and faulty. When a chain broke on the rotary plow at 3:00 a.m., Jaramillo and Imel got out of the cab to fix it. While the victims inside the shed watched the two-man crew at work, a surge of snow, a second run, thundered on top of them. Its estimated speed was 250 mph. The fallen snow quickly set as hard as cement. Those safe inside the shed left their haven and tried digging for twenty minutes but had to return to the shed because avalanche conditions prevailed. Before rescuers could arrive from the south, the East Riverside Slide ran six more times.

Trapped in a miraculous air pocket below the plow, Jaramillo and Imel dug, using the only tools they held in their hands: a flashlight and a pair of pliers. Jaramillo, perhaps the stronger of the two, perhaps the most stubborn, talked constantly to Imel, perhaps cracking jokes, trying to rouse him, keep him awake. But fifteen hours later—four hours after the victims inside the shed had been rescued by another team—Jaramillo realized he must choose to save himself or die from hypothermia with Imel. He cleared a tunnel to the plow, kicked out the windshield, reached the K-Mart shovel inside the cab, and burrowed through ten more feet of snow, reaching the surface another three hours later. At 10:00 p.m. on the 5th, Jaramillo was rescued, and Eddie Imel’s body was
retrieved from the tunnel. The plow, its engine still running, was uncovered three days later, less than two hundred feet from the shed, within the range of minimum safety.

For years, my father has hoped I would dig myself out of the ruse of circumstances I have accepted as my marital tomb. He knows that when a man restricts his wife to the passenger seat, he isn’t saying, Relax, enjoy the view. We strap children in car seats because it keeps them safe in case of an accident, but also because it restricts their movements, making it possible for us to feel in control as the drivers. A woman smiling while trapped inside a car, whether under a pile of rocks or simply strapped into the backseat, isn’t genuine happiness but only an act. My father knows that when a husband steers, pointing out left and right turns, the correct route to follow, and all the possible collisions, his wife may grow fearful of engines, a full tank of gas, the keys hanging right there by the door. She might not spot the tunnel to freedom. And even if she does, she may choose to sit still, because running sometimes feels a lot like leaving a body behind.

My father, by his example, talks me through the dark, coaxing me away from the chill of guilt. For my mother, he has installed a new garage door, patched sheetrock, and hung a tennis ball from the ceiling so it taps my mother’s windshield when she should stop driving forward. When she skinned his Miata, he didn’t pace or clench his fists or demand to know what happened. Instead, he hugged my mother while she cried and swore her car door just flew open; then he helped her look for the kitty, lost and crying for milk. He even chewed out his insurance agent when she suggested there was
something fishy about all the accidents happening in their garage. “We pay our premiums,” my father said. “If my wife wants to crash in the garage, it’s her damn privilege.” And when my mother drives to downtown Dallas or heads for Corpus Christi, my father draws her a map. But he’s never taken away her keys.

V.

My guide’s Jeep crawls along the highway at two miles per hour. We’re still in the rockslide zone. If someone whirls around the curve behind us, traveling at the speed limit, they’ll stomp their brakes and start spinning or rear-end us, thumping us off the cliff. His Jeep rattles as if already loosened by previous collisions.

Again, he says to me, “You see anything down there?”

My leaning toward the door may shift our weight in an adverse direction. I stretch my neck, cock my head toward the view, but stay centered in my seat. Out the window, my side of the Jeep appears to hover over the gorge, no road beneath the tires.

“Don’t see anything,” I say. “Just air.”

The guide cackles. Spit sprays from his mouth, clings to his woolly mustache. He tugs on the shoulder straps of his overalls. He looks like Grandpa from The Waltons, the family rogue, the one who takes nips from the Secret Recipe or might demand dirty jokes, obscene gestures, a piece of your clothing if you want to cross his mountain.

“A woman’s car plummeted a couple summers back,” he says when he finally shuts off the chuckling. “You can see her wheels in the brush if you look hard.”
I scan the trees, looking for the flash of metal or maybe the wink of light bouncing off glass. “How’d she lose control?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes and twirls his finger near his temple—sign language for nuts-o. “We locked her up in Montrose. The suicide ward.” Then he shrugs. “Who knows, really?”

I shrug, too. I’m learning to mimic the locals’ nonchalance. “Guess no one ever will, since we won’t print that story in the paper either.”

“God damn,” the guide says.

I nod. “We don’t want every depressed fruitloop up here, climbing our mountains and taking the plunge.”

During the summer of 2000, a Ford Explorer drove into the Uncompahgre Gorge just north of the snowshed, near Ruby Walls, on the Million Dollar Highway. The driver, Nancy Shippy, was ejected through the passenger window—an explosion of glass—and tumbled after the Explorer.

The next morning, when officials finally discovered her, paramedics descended upon the wreck via ropes. They worked on Ms. Shippy while a Flight-for-Life helicopter maneuvered the small space between telephone wires in order to land near the scene. Because the winch broke, all personnel on site worked together, by hand, to haul Ms. Shippy up the unstable slope, after which she was transported to St. Mary’s Hospital in Montrose. Suffering two collapsed lungs, several broken ribs, a compound fracture that
splintered her left arm, and brain damage because her head bounced against the rocks all the way down, the woman remained comatose for one week.

If we park our cars at the turnout for Engineer Pass, look both ways, then cross the road to stand on the edge of the cliff, we can see an SUV nestled in the brush 350 feet below. Sometimes, in the mountains, it costs too much money to raise a car from the dead—it requires a crane, a road crew, stable weather, light traffic. Better to abandon the vehicle in its resting-place, a warning to out-of-town drivers.

Like lemmings, we are all drawn to the cliff’s edge. We want to hear the story, see the cars piled in the canyon, look a little too closely, ponder a little too intently the downward tumble. Afterward, if we tell the stories, we jumble facts, omit particulars, manipulate pronouns, tell jokes to distinguish ourselves from the lunacy. We arrange our surroundings to narrate a story we can navigate.

In the month that followed Eddie Imel’s death, when Ouray citizens banded together, holding violent town-hall meetings and signing a petition that demanded the completion of the shed, state officials comforted themselves and answered Ouray’s outrage by claiming that the East Riverside Slide was not the only avalanche zone in Colorado and they couldn’t build sheds for all of them. It was a convenient argument, but clearly myopic, because for every car that is caught in an avalanche on any other mountain pass in Colorado, seven will be caught on Red Mountain.

The locals, including the guide, whisper about Nancy Shippy’s accident. Even *The Plaindealer* hints at her suicidal tendencies by quoting her family—“She loves life,”
they insist—though the reporter never uses the word *intentional*, never mentions a psych ward. Three paragraphs ago, you and I stood on the highway’s rim and imagined a woman, broken and bleeding, her clavicle or femur, maybe both, snapped in two and thrust through her skin. We imagined her shivering under a quarter-moon, waiting for help to come through the dark. If we were there when the rescue happened, we would’ve exchanged knowing glances with the EMS medics, the first hint of supposition in a chain of tales about mental wards and guides signing *crazy* to tourists. However cruel or irresponsible or even defamatory are our speculations, it’s easier to think that some folks need driving lessons, directions, a better map, maybe a therapist, rather than admitting that the highway gods are willy-nilly thumping us to our deaths.

Some of you will say I reveal intimate secrets about my mother-in-law as another act of differentiation. *Look at her pretend smile—the one embroidered across her face.* *Look at her little hands clasped in her little lap. I would never.* But there’s always that moment when the similarities snap into place—the tumblers of a lock catching. The moment my father-in-law offered his hand between the seats, the moment he told my mother-in-law that her mother’s burial day had been her own, the second she smiled back, the scene felt so fake, so familiar, I nearly vomited. It was like looking in a mirror.

VI.

By the end of the trip with my guide, I’ve adopted the royal *we*. And the guide, too, seems fooled. When he drops me off at my cabin, he invites me to dinner with some of his friends. He invites me to join *us*. Even his beagle whines and dances on my lap,
anxious because he knows I’m leaving and he’s decided he likes me in his Jeep. After lunch—after I gave him part of my hamburger—the beagle rode in my lap the rest of the trip, standing, wobbling, trying to keep his balance on my narrow thighs. By tomorrow morning, bruises will bud on my legs, tiny paw roses.

Maybe I’ll meet the guide and his friends at the Buen Tiempo; maybe I won’t. Over enchiladas and margaritas, they will surely ask why I’m alone in Colorado, and it’s difficult faking an identity. I still haven’t told the cowboys my story yet. I’m smart enough to know that some folks won’t like the real answer. Most of us prefer cartoons over tragedy, silence over the gruesome details, reconciliation over divorce.

To be polite, I’ll have to tell the guide and his friends the excuse I’ve practiced: I’ve abandoned the caprock upon which my husband and I live to write among scenery that might inspire the great American novel. A romance, perhaps. It will be a story about a woman who lives in the mountains, a landscape as brutal and stubborn as hope. I’ll drag us—you and me and my husband—down U.S. 550, where boulders and semi-trucks drop from the sky, where bucks crash through your windshield, where trained road crews drown under the surf of snow, to prove that this woman—dressed in a true Western costume—can maneuver any road, even the trek to freedom. I’ll replay the gruesome accidents on Red Mountain for maximum effect: People die here, I’ll say, but our leading lady lives. She studies the landscape. She researches traffic reports, talks to EMT’s, listens for sirens. When she reads the paper, she catches all the rhetorical tricks. No one will ever fool her again.

And some days, I almost believe my lies.
Perhaps you, too, believe them. Perhaps you’re expecting a get-away car, a chase scene, a woman on the lam, firing a pistol, choosing a canyon-plunge over the prison of marriage—a woman making fools of men.

But that afternoon with the guide, driving along the cliff near Ruby Walls, the backdrop is so clearly surreal. There’s the rough, gray hide of rock; the shimmy of aspen leaves like shaggy hair caught in wind. The rasp of asphalt snatches at our tires. Six hundred feet below is an automobile flattened beyond recognition.

The guide parks and waits patiently. The engine idles. The beagle stumbles from my lap to the guide’s, poking his head out each of the windows. The pine trees below guard the wreckage.

Sometimes, I swear I see a woman who mapped the course of her life with intent. I feel her foot apply pressure to the gas. I hear the rev of engine, the swirl of wind when her car took flight.

At others, I see a husband standing by the car in the canyon, talking to his wife who’s seated inside. He tells her she’s lost, scoot over, hand him the keys. He’s waving a map in one hand and holding a stopwatch in the other. He leans over and peers into the wreck. He’s yelling, *You need an ambulance now, don’t you?*

Truth is, when I replay this scene, imagine the flattened car, I understand that I’m the same woman who’s always obeyed orders. The sturdy woman living in the mountains is all an act. Haven’t you noticed? There I am, still sitting in the passenger seat, paying a guide to drive me where I want to go. There I am, hiding in a remote village instead of hauling my tail home, kicking someone’s ass, saying, *Let’s stop pretending fear is the same thing as love.*
The engine of the Jeep rumbles softly. I lean into the door. There’s the road and the sky. There’s the tomb below.