

Ditch

“You’re gonna ditch me HERE?” I say, as Ally looks down at her sandals. I’m supposed to hitchhike cross-country with her, my best friend, whose fucking idea this was in the first place, and we’re not even halfway there. Hell, it’s only been three days.

Mom must’ve said *look before you leap* a hundred times senior year. *If your friends jump off a bridge would you jump too* is another favorite. *Hell yes*, I always answered, *my friends are awesome*.

“Not ditching. You can stay here, too.” Ally’s half-smirk, half-smile kicks in. Her mouth glides up and to the left, like always. I’m addicted to the thrill of seeing Ally’s eyes light up, when I become a co-conspirator in some impulsive adventure. That smirk-smile got us both in and out of trouble in high school. It got us over a thousand miles away from Lansing after graduation so far.

“In Rapid fucking City? What about San Francisco?”

“I want to see where things go with Brian.”

“You just met Brian. Yesterday. He’s dumb, Ally. Duuummb.”

“Not really. And that hair! He’s sweet, Megan. Let’s stay a while and go to San Francisco later.”

Ally’s dream is mine enough now that I will not cast it aside for a semi-handsome gas station attendant who constantly flips his mop of hair out of his face with a quick twist of his tattooed neck.

“No way. I’m finishing this,” I say, determined to prove a point, to someone, anyone.

The August sun turns my German-Irish-Polish skin pink as I stand with a smile and a thumb out at an on-ramp for forever hours. I’m hyper-aware that my bra is like a beacon of negative space, the only spot on my body where sweat isn’t visibly staining through. And I’m painfully aware that I’m a girl traveling alone now.

Everyone is on their way to some motorcycle rally in Sturgis I never heard of. I’ve never seen so many motorcycles. I startle every time they shoot past, like knives shot from cannons. In big packs, they ride more slowly. The biker men stare at my tits and take the time to gauge my reaction. I have to admit that the cute ones make me a little curious, just enough for my feelings towards Ally to soften.

Eye contact is a tricky fucking thing. I make eye contact to demonstrate awareness of my surroundings, to announce that I can recreate a face for a sketch artist, and to show that I'm not a victim. But hold that eye contact too long and it can become an invitation.

A Honda sedan rolls up.

"Harlan Mitchell," he says, with an easy smile. I make eye contact. No stomach churning red flags, so I hop in, and off we go.

We make the customary chit-chat at first: where I'm from, where I'm headed, and why. Telling him I'm going to San Francisco is my second mistake. I'm far from home. Far from loved ones. No one expects me and he knows it. It's not long before he eyes my crotch like the secret to the meaning of life is down there.

"Do you shave?" he asks, emboldened, and every terrifying flag in my gut waves to get the fuck away in a violent semaphore.

I eye the locked door, the road whipping past, and run the calculus for the best solution I can muster, hoping that I can turn him off with it. "I've been on the road for a few days already and haven't been near a shower or a razor."

It's not enough. He still wants to take the meaning of life regardless of whether I'm shaved or how he thinks I smell, or maybe because of it, I don't know. But I won't give him my fear.

Motorcycles roar past in the goddamned daylight. Upside down, in the tall prairie grass, reflections of the sun on the chrome tailpipes, handlebars, and tire rims blinding past forces me to blink so much they become sun-dappled sprites dancing in the Michigan breeze on the lake water at Hawk Island Park back home. The water in San Francisco Bay is like this, I just know it.

When his breath finally slows, he stands towering over me as another herd of bikes roars near. I scramble to the road, wild and screaming. The women amongst them immediately register the situation.

They whisper to their men, slowing. Eye contact is made.

And Harlan Mitchell's keys are still in the ignition.