

# Out of Sorts

by AshleyRose Sullivan

Originally Published In *Word Riot*

6.

I'm not sure why I started running, not even sure when. I just know that one morning, on a belly full of warm yolk and dry toast, I filled the tank of my car and never looked back.

19.

There's an old microwave in the trunk next to some bags of plastic flatware. I can hear the glass tray banging around inside. I feel like that a lot. Like a metal thing with something clear and breakable crashing around inside me. I have never owned a pair of high heels but my mother's were red and she wore them with an unmistakable elegance that I could never hope to match. My shoes are thirteen years old and they're brown and I have taken them to honest-to-God cobblers more times than once. It's hard to find a man who'll fix shoes when you're running all the time. When you never stop long enough for both feet to settle. When you don't know what town you're in, what state. In another life I had a little sister.

15.

Do you know that there are rest stops where the hand dryers blow your skin so hard that it ripples and waves like you've got hyper-active worms crawling under your flesh? I bend forward and pretend I'm skydiving, plummeting toward the earth.

21.

Do you know where the interstate ends? I do.

3.

I remember my first day in my first job. I wore a black apron and wished to God that my mother didn't live in Tupelo, Mississippi with Grady, a man I'd never met. And that I didn't have to work in a stinking diner to help my daddy pay the bills.

My daddy told me not to—ever—pick up hitchers. He said, “Don't pick anyone up. Even if they look ok. Just don't do it.” And I never did. But, sometimes, I stop and give cans of food and cartons of Pall Malls to folks at the side of the road. One time when I was a kid there was a lady with the most beautiful blonde hair outside the Piggly Wiggly who had a sign that said “Will Clean For X-Mas \$. Have Daughter” and my grandpa gave her twenty-eight dollars. When I told my daddy about it, he looked fit to kill a man. His hands were scrubbed clean but stained black as a crow's eye from engine grease. I could see the muscle in his forearm go up and down while he sewed the satin part of my sister's blanket back on with a gentle deftness that could've been used to disarm bombs or paint the blue hills where he'd come from.

18.

I have a soft stuffed whale. His name is Marcel and I like to think about him drinking down gallons of fish and plankton so tiny you can't even see.

I guess you're supposed to get off the interstate sometime. They have exit signs every few miles for a hundred years but me and Marcel, just assume the road'll never run out; that asphalt will lay on earth for as long as we can drive. I've been on roads where the interstate turned into a different one, or was called something else, or merged with a whole other road. This one didn't.

13.

Most times, like everyone, I drive with my right foot. Sometimes though, my toes get so cramped and tired I pull my right foot up into the seat and drive with my left.

I thought about getting a dog to sit in the car with me. For about eight weeks I imagined having one that was big and shaggy and yellow with deep brown eyes. I imagined us getting out to pee, and eating beef stew from a can, him carrying packs of Pall Malls to homeless men. But I got too afraid that he would eat Marcel. So—somewhere outside Moscow, Idaho—I set him off on the side of the road.

2.

When I watch the stars at night it makes me hear the ocean. My favorite sound used to be the sound of waves but now it's my sister's voice, laughing, and that makes me feel guilty. Like it should have been her voice all along.

16.

Sometimes I go to public libraries. I sit in the world religion section and read about the strange things that people believe. If I believed in God, I think he would have to wear snowshoes because he's walking around on clouds and needs something to spread out his weight. Mostly, at the library, God wears golden sandals.

22.

When I got to this place, I was tired. It was a kind of tired that I had never been before. The kind where your body just stops and everything around you seems too loud. All I know is my right foot was asleep and I'd been driving with my left for three days, ignoring exit signs, sticking to this road like there was no other.

17.

When I was a kid I saw that movie “The Jungle Book,” and I thought about how much I wanted a big gray bear to be my best friend, and to have a black panther taking care of me. I thought Mowgli was stupid for running after that little girl with the red dot on her head so he could go pretend like he wasn’t just an animal. Like we aren’t all just animals.

7.

My sister’s name is Grace. It’s different from mine, Olivia. My name is the same as my great grandmother who I never ever met. She had thirteen children which means I think she spent about twelve years of her life pregnant. She used to pick blackberries all summer long, her round belly poking into the briars, and when she was picking them one day, piling them like a purple mountain in her apron, her house caught on fire. She was barefoot and she ran all the way home to save her babies, but her brothers were there with all but her littlest and they held her back, thinking all the kids were out. Daddy says she screamed, “My baby girl, my baby girl!” and ran inside to save her newest baby. I think about her a lot. She was buried up on a hill under a black locust before me or Grace were ever born. Sometimes I wonder what it’s like to lay under the knobby, wandering branches of a locust tree. Sometimes I think about the clustered leaves casting a shadow on my face.

12.

I have a case of empty jam jars. When I started out they were full of apple butter from a farm in West Virginia. I stopped there and drank apple cider during a fall festival and told the woman I was going till the road ran out. She gave me the case. I hate to throw them away because good jam jars are just about the hardest thing in the world to come by. Even if you never put anything in them, they’re most surely the best thing to drink cold water from.

1.

Before my mother left, she made us this tray of cupcakes. They all had green icing and rainbow sprinkles that came off when I peeled back the saran wrap.

4.

My daddy and me and Grace went to the carnival one summer and we each got ten dollars to spend. I rode the Ferris Wheel about three thousand times while my daddy disappeared in the hot dog stands. When I found Grace, she had purchased ten goldfish in ten separate bowls and they rode home with us, sloshing around in the back seat, tinkling together when my daddy ran over bumps.

20.

When I passed the last exit I told Marcel that we were the only car left. That it was just us on the road. No one following. No one leaving.

5.

Grace was always just sad like that. Sometimes she would cry for days and days and we never knew why. I don't think she even knew. She just did it. And when she cried, it wasn't loud. She never sobbed or wailed like I did. It was so quiet, you almost couldn't tell. One night we found one of her ten goldfish floating on the water of the little bowl and Grace just stared at it. These giant tears started running like crazy down her face, but she didn't make a single sound.

8.

Sometimes I just wished that she would scream.

14.

One town I stopped in had this church that was bigger than the high school where I graduated. The stained glass windows with red and blue pictures of Mary and Joseph were bigger than my car. I read a story one time about a live nativity scene where people worked in shifts and

every three hours some new Mary and Joseph came in to take turns with the animals and the fake baby. If I were going to be Mary outside in December, even for three hours, I would want a giant thermos of coffee to keep warm.

23.

At the end of the interstate is the town. It didn't start out being a town. This woman named Erline said it used to just be a big dirt circle where folks turned around. But then—I guess—someone put up a shop. And then someone else put up a house and, I mean, you get the idea. They'd all been driving with their left foot for three days thinking about a dog that would never be. Erline gave me a plate of hash browns and told me I could stay in this town because I drove right past the last exit sign like everyone else that lived here. I suddenly belonged to a group. People who'd left their lives behind.

9.

This man my mother lives with came to see Grace in the hospital. He brought flowers that he said were from my mother but I knew they weren't because she could not tolerate the smell of roses. Grace looked at the flowers and at the man, Grady, and at me. I was still wearing my apron from work and I had flour dust in my hair from making biscuits. She leaned her head back against the tiny hospital pillows and cried in silent sobs like if she didn't get the water out of her body, she would drown.

24.

There is a way that people look when they come into this town. Sometimes you can tell what day they started running. One man in a green Toyota pulled in and I knew he'd got on the road the day he found out his wife was pregnant. One lady came with her little girl, the day a pot of tomato soup boiled over on the stove. Erline says that not everyone stays forever. Most people

come for a while, and then one day, they just go back the other way, driving into the dust, their tires finally gaining traction.

Erline's hair is bright red like the kind I always wanted. She orders it from a beauty catalogue. When I sit on the porch of the diner, I can almost see the whole town.

10.

Before Grady left, I walked him into the hallway and he bought me a Styrofoam cup of coffee so hot I thought if I poured it down my throat right then, I'd be warm forever. He told me that my mother was doing just fine and I told him I didn't give a rat's ass.

25.

Sometimes when I wake up in the mornings I think I can hear my daddy's old Jeep rambling down the dusty road, maybe looking for me, but then I realize it's not him. It's just the wind. When I get out of bed and my feet hit the wood floors of my apartment and a breeze blows through my room, I can feel what it's like to be home again. And I know that I'm not ready.

11.

Grady patted me on the shoulder after Grace fell asleep. Her eyes were still streaming tears. Before I knew it, I hugged Grady. I hugged him tight and held him as close as I could until I could smell the way my momma smelled when she woke up next to him that morning. I could smell the starch of her dress and I could smell her sweat, the way I smelled it when I used to put my face in the dip between her shoulder and her jawbone. I closed my eyes and held on to Grady till I thought he might burst from me trying to reach her and ask her a million, billion questions. I held the man until I could feel the curve of my momma's hip beneath my hand and, until I could taste the bread she baked the night before. When I let go I saw my daddy in my head, sewing the trim of Grace's blanket, looking fit to kill someone for needing something, for giving something,

for taking something. When I pulled away from Grady I could see that he'd gotten flour dust in his hair.

26.

This morning, Erline fixes me a cup of coffee and a plate of pumpkin pie and asks if she can have some of my jam jars for making up a batch of preserves. I say yes and think about my great grandmother named Olivia and the piles and piles of carefully gathered blackberries falling to her feet as she saw the smoke rising from her house. I think about the way those berries must have squished under her heels, staining her skin purple while she ran. I think about that choice she made, to run into the fire, and not away.