

Introducing Atlas

“The shortest distance between two points is a straight line.”

And the line ran straight through a loan mart. It sprang up somewhere in the naked parking lot of a private Christian college and ran uninterrupted into the stale and silent interior of a short-term loan center. This is where my parent’s travel weary Ford Focus happened to collide with reality - the front lobby of Payday Loans.

The front bumper met first, kissing the glass and steel store-front, hood curling back like lips parting for the slide of a cool metal tongue. In the confusion, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a girl behind the counter. She was hunched over, and backed up against a wall, with her arms covering most of her face. I could see her wide open grey eyes. They were not covered, and they were not closed against the sudden pandemonium. They were exposed and shining. The last real thing I glimpsed. I could still see the grey eyes of the girl emblazoned in my mind. I hope she doesn’t die. I hope she isn’t dead already.

Everything after was a meteoric confusion of chaotic sounds, images, deafening grating lights. An alarm, glass shattering, metal shrieking, combusted neon and chunks of yellow plaster – a symphony of material spraying into the air. Head slamming into steering wheel, nose giving under the force, blood squirting. Why the fuck didn’t the airbag go off? Black smearing even more of my vision into obscurity.

Close my heavy eyes. Image of frightened girl melting into another wispy feminine form. There was Beth. Profoundly sober in the center of the proceedings. Fucking Beth. I dodged her this time. Every other time, I hadn't.

Every other time we were constantly impacting against one another. Bumper meeting bumper, but nothing ever really coming of it. So, when I finally announced my decision to undertake an epochal cross-country journey to visit her in Massachusetts – it seemed wise to gather a second opinion. I ran the idea past my best friend Brian while we were swigging Dr. Pepper and playing a video game version of capture the flag.

“The whole thing is like a parked-car metaphor. My relationship with Beth – how we never really took off. It's like she was always riding the median between my innocence and lust. She was always steering while I fumbled with my seatbelt and tried to reach her from the driver's side. I was so busy watching her, that it was her eyes on the road, tilting at the wheel to keep us straight. Sometimes it would be my hands on her milky thigh and my legs moving fitfully, working to relieve the discomfort of an erection and her teasing smile. She could be such a tease. I don't know if she even knew it.”

Brian, avoiding eye contact, manipulated his sniper and shot me in the back of the head. *Game Over* flashed in bold red letters on the screen. He stood up and zipped up his jacket.

“It's pretty late and I have to open the store tomorrow. I think I'm going to call it quits for the night. Plus, I totally owned you: Eight to Two,” He said, indicating the score by tapping on the television.

I nodded, turned off the game console and followed him out of the room.

On his way out, down the front steps, he stopped and turned back around. His face was serious and prophetic in the low light angling out from the open door. He fumbled around in his pant pockets briefly, and pulled out a green piece of paper folded in half. He handed it to me and I leaned out to retrieve it.

It was a fifty dollar bill, crisp and crunchy against my fingers. I smoothed the middle crease and held it in my two hands. I looked up and out at him. He smiled.

“Look, man, here’s fifty bucks to add to your wealth of fairly fucked up romantic notions. While I advise strongly against it – you’re not in the greatest shape to make an East Coast visit – I can see you’ve got nothing better to do, as well as nothing else to lose. You have to try. Isn’t that in the seminary handbook anyway? Don’t you have to get laid before you become a priest?”

I jammed my hands into my pockets and kicked with a bare foot at the cool tile in the foyer. Red bloomed on my cheeks and trailed down onto my neck.

“Yeah, something like that. I have to make sure it’s what I really want to do.”

“Then make sure it is. Make sure it’s really this Catholic priest thing you turned down the Airforce Academy for, and not the girl. If it’s her, you should know. You will know. Well, whatever. Drive careful.”

He walked away.

I was left in the open door way, fingering that slick bill. Running the pads of my fingers over it. It felt almost real. I had some hope, then.

I drove for a week. And, instead of an answer, any answer - her window was unlit. I stood below it, on the manicured lawn, in the gloom beyond the reach of the cozy streetlights. No lithe silhouette burning itself in the shadows above me. No scantily clad

love beckoning with flowing fingers, and offering to hike up her skirt. Instead, just the same black underlying every one of my nightmares. In sleeping, I couldn't close my eyes without seeing planes tumble from the skies, a mile high meeting the earth.

I stood below her barren window with its portentous black nothingness and watched it all come down. I closed my eyes and could hear the song of failing engines, the clouds peeling apart and depositing a thundering aircraft at my feet. I leaned over, and picked up the twisted, burning wreckage. I popped it in my mouth; it tasted like sulfur and novocaine.

I stumbled back to the dirty door of that badly used automobile and tugged on the handle. Darkness poured out from the inside, enveloping me in inky obscurity. I fell down into it.

Then, there was the lullaby with which I had appeased myself for the past week and half on the road.

“The shortest distance between two points is a straight line.”

That is where James took shape. The girl from behind the counter, name tag reading, “James,” emerging first as a blurry blob of black and white. Then sluggishly, filmy – her image appeared. I blinked. Eyes closed. Plummeted towards the earth. Eyes opened. Focused on hers – huge and grey. I recognized them. They were staring at me through the vines and veins of abused windshield glass – and relief flooded over me. Her eyes were cross-sectioned in glittering lines. The lines started to sharpen. The colors and streaks filled in so my eyes could adjust to the dis-chord before them.

It's amazing what lucid details you can remember after complete amnesia.

Nose was bleeding, could feel the healthy trickle of blood above my upper lip, acrid and coppery on my tongue. I could hear light bulbs sizzling over the terrible disquiet of something awry on an otherwise pleasant Tuesday afternoon. I could smell the grime dousing the catastrophe, a faintly oily, faintly gassy scent emanating from the car and rolling up with the billows of dust. Out of my line of vision, from somewhere wherever the girl had emerged and then disappeared, I could hear a rapid-fire series of sneezes. God blesses you child.

The door popped open, shriveled and scratched. James gaped in, moderately unruly eyebrows furrowed in deep grooves, eyes immense against the ambivalence. I couldn't lift my streaming, swimming head from the steering wheel; I just shifted my eyes in her direction. Her nostrils flared. I noticed the left one was pierced. My sensory organs for some reason were shifting importance to her appearance.

She wasn't markedly attractive. I mean, she wasn't Beth. I mean, I was high. And I wanted a fucking vision. I wanted a heavenly beauty with glowing angel wings and the light and the pearly gates. She wasn't anything divine. She was just her disappointing self. She was not Beth.

James had red and white streaked hair tied back in pigtails, and a shiny pink scar running the length of her right cheek. She was wearing thick black glasses. She had average sized breasts, propped up by wonder-bra, and spilling out of a black hooded sweatshirt.

But she had breasts. They were not altogether successful at defying gravity unaided by undergarments, but still round and appealing. If I was going to die, here was something to depart to. And here was something else. A colossal silver cross resting in

her cleavage, catching the light from an overhead fluorescent fixture. The light sparked in my eyes. This was something. My hand spasmed out and grasped it. Now, this was something else. This was everything. The cross was cold against her warm skin. Her skin, so ingratiating and pliant in consideration of mine own. Her flesh, organic and substantial. She was almost like a real person.

I rolled my head off to the right hand side of the steering wheel and vomited. It was stomach acid stewed with half dissolved red and white pills. She made a gagging sound at the rank smell, and probably at the sight of the soup of saliva and blood drooling from my chin. I wavered, and almost toppled over, my balance precarious in the attempt to sit upright. She ran her arms around me; they were heavy against my chest and back. Firm, like they were actually there. I sensed her tension at touching me, all rigid and awkward now that we were wrapped up together in a vast, sticky, and cream-colored ball of being. She released me, hesitating as my chest heaved again. Was this a wise decision? As she backed away, her nose skimmed my cheek and ran into my hair. I could feel each follicle parting and springing back into place underneath the weight of her. Oh now, this was something else entirely.

I shuddered and puked again. I wiped my mouth with a free, flapping hand. It was instantly coated in a thick helping of my own secretions. I ground my head against the steering wheel, looking down into the ruins of my stomach contents, wishing them back inside. My hold on her necklace constricted and forced her closer. James grunted a little, exhaling in short breaths.

“Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus. Don’t die. Oh please don’t die,” was the first thing she said to me, her face now near my ear.

I burped in that barking way signifying more regurgitation.

“Oh fuck, what do I do?” She grabbed my hand.

I couldn't see her, but I could feel her hot breath colored with the odor of fruit punch. Her fingers bent towards mine, pressing hard on them, turning them bone white with the effort. My inflexible hold tightened. This was *my* salvation. This was something, and what the fuck did she think she was doing? Fucking Beth.

“Let go. Oh Jesus Christ. Please, let go. You have to let go, ok? Shit, shit, shit. I have to get help. I have to call somebody.”

I didn't need anybody else. They would do me no good. Just like her. James was doing me no good. She was just anybody with something to offer, but holding back. Not giving it up. She couldn't get away fast enough. She had both hands applied to the task of freeing herself, straining against the chain with her face moved away from mine. I gave a harsh tug and her neck flailed forward – back towards me. I could have grinned. She was malleable and overwhelmed – it hadn't taken much. The booming of her breathing intensified. It was pouring out of her nostrils. All that oxygen. She was excreting precious fucking oxygen while the cabin de-pressurized and the gas masks swung down.

“We're losing altitude,” I mumbled through the tepid mixture of snot, blood and vomit oozing from my mouth.

I drug my face across the steering wheel so I could catch her eyes – it left a slimy slug trail over the shiny leather. I pulled her closer with a rough hand, the one seizing the necklace. The other moved to cover her mouth, and she flinched away from it. I seized her face then, her sweet cheeks complying dutifully with the painful pinchers of my fingers. Her agreeable and yielding lips were all pursed out in defiance, trembling.

Staring at her, into her – I could feel my biceps flexing even tighter. My arms felt adamantine. I could snap her in half. I could have this. This could be mine.

“We’re going down.”

James was dropping tears into her breasts, pulling against the silver chain binding her to me. It was biting like bitter teeth into her neck, and an angry red ring was forming in her flesh around it. I watched as a watery bubble skied down the slope of her chin, tumbling end over end after the drop, plopping moistly into her cushiony cleavage. I wanted to be that salt water, swimming in her eyes, rolling over her skin and sliding down into all her crevices. This was most assuredly something now. Her eyes were wide and scared and holy. *This* was my salvation.

“Let me go,” She said slowly, voice edging on hysteria.

“But it’s a long way down,” I pleaded, slurring my words and moving closer.

Inches from her, shaking. She was shaking.

“I can’t fucking help you, if you don’t let me go,” Her voice hiccuped, and cracked around her words. Dry mouth and no longer the smell of fruit punch. Her breath smelled like panic.

I felt sorry for her. I tried to counsel.

“Someone else will separate the earth and sky. Someone has to stand in the middle and make the separation. Or where would all the planes go? All those people?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Please don’t die.”

“Fucking Beth.”

I could feel her teeth touch down into my flesh like little razors of reality. Like sharp little points of reality. Feral and frightened. Pain roared to life inside my hand,

climbed – defied gravity. The room started whirling counter-clockwise. We're taking off. I'm holding on still.

“I'm sorry.”

Her hands relaxed. Her lips were left. Scorching and soft.

Where did her hands go? I couldn't be bothered. I just wanted something from her. And it wasn't coming, was it? I returned to vomiting up all those pills, expelling the hundreds of crashes and burns boiling in my system. Almost as important as this moment, as this...something. I felt the pressure of the silver chain around her neck, it seemed like the weight of the world. I felt it release.

There were just her lips on my hand, burning. They remained. Searing. Branding. And without warning, they were gone. Then, so was she. That was James, everybody. James saving.

In my hand, James left the cross. In the contrast of chalky clouds and sapphire sky and spinning towards the ground, she holds back disaster. Just long enough for me to grab onto something. And then, she hands it all back to me. Biting with those pointed teeth and breasts, lips all concerned and solid. Somebody said, “Give me a woman, and I will give you the world.” I will. Just not right now.

Instead, I jitter a hand out, past the steel support bars of the hospital bed and pick up the card. On the front, is a picture of Atlas – he is best known for bearing on his shoulders the pillars that keep earth and heaven apart. Open it up and take another look at what it says inside. Yes, there it is. There was something. It wasn't fucking Beth and it wasn't death.

“And Atlas, they say, though pre-eminent in strength, moans as he holds the vault of the sky on his back.”

I believe it because James says it. She makes a good point.