

Annamaria Formichella
Past Forward

SHE STANDS IN A CONVENIENCE STORE, of all places, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and scanning the shelves of the freezer, looking for peas. The fleece of her coat embraces her as she rocks back on the heels of her black boots while outside a face hovers expectantly in the moonlight. Later he will tell her that he watched her with her hair pulled back and her tiny silver earrings and the frown on her face of looking for peas in the most unlikely place, a place where hurried people buy cigarettes and lottery tickets. But this is the only store still open, now that they've waited too long the way people do who are too much in love to remember things like food.

As she looks into the frozen foods case, squatting down to check the lower shelves, she suddenly becomes aware of music playing. She pauses, balanced on her calves.

It feels like someone has started playing the soundtrack of her life. A romantic pop song of the type she would ordinarily pay no attention to, the tune rivets her like just the right frame around a picture. It paints the edges around every detail in sight and crystallizes this moment—sharp outlines vibrate around neon Budweiser signs and cellophane packages of peanuts and overpriced bottles of detergent she can't imagine anyone ever really buying. The glass in front of her shimmers. Her heart jumps.

No peas but that doesn't matter. Suddenly all she can think of is getting back into that borrowed car idling outside in the thin Colorado air. The mountains gloat in the distance while the lyrics swirl around her heart and tighten, making every beat an agony, and all she wants is to get past the pizza and bad coffee and out to the hands drumming expectantly on the steering wheel.



The next time she hears this song he will smell like his ex-girlfriend's perfume. They will be standing next to the futon in his cramped but tall room, and he will be telling her how it's okay that the hugging and kissing happened and why she shouldn't worry.

He will have a nuzzly voice wrapped in soft cloth. "She was a very upset little girl," he will murmur. "She needed to be held."

She will flop down on his bed thinking, this is probably exactly where *she* sat and he is sitting where *he* sat and then he reached forward just like this to comfort *her*. He will reach forward to comfort her just as she thinks it, and the smile in his eyes will be just enough to eclipse the sinking feeling of being exactly right when she didn't want to be.

"She was upset, and hurt, and she needed me," he will say, rubbing his neck where the perfume lingers. Then he will curl playfully on the bed-spread like a cat, while the song leaks from a far corner of the apartment. The same cheesy melody will appropriate her heart and start a little dance inside of her chest. How can she begrudge a small gesture of concern when here he is, with *her*, in the middle of the day wanting to make love, looking at her like she's the only person in this snowy, grimy city. As he

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lifts her onto the oaken chest of drawers, change and books falling clamorously onto the floor, the music will bear her off the ground.

The next time they will be screaming at each other in an old farmhouse. It will be summertime with a heat that infiltrates every corner of their lives. It will be the morning after the evening when they will see so many fireflies in the field they will think the night sky and the earth have somehow been sewn together into one sparkling blanket. That sparkle will have faded by the next morning, when she will be silently accusing him of spending too much time at the bar downtown, leaving her to do the chores they agreed to take care of in exchange for the use of the farmhouse. She will look out at the lawn she has so carefully cut on a tractor he was supposed to drive, spinning ever smaller circles until near the center of a close-cropped bull's-eye she thought the mower might tip over on top of her.

The back of his head will challenge her in return, as he faces out the window and away from her angry eyes. His body will tell her that she has not been warm enough, has not loved and supported him unconditionally the way she should have. She has made *demands*. It will not be the first time they have had a fight without actually speaking. On the counter the little clock radio will play the song that now seems outdated. Not old enough to be a classic, but old enough to sound tired and inappropriate, hobbled. When he leaves that day, he will not come back. He will drive her pick-up down the gravel road right through town and onto the Interstate.

The last time she'll hear the song is in a coffee shop on the day before her fortieth birthday. She'll become aware of the melody just as she reaches into her pocket, finds her son's mittens and shrugs to the cashier, realizing she's left her money outside in the Jeep. The song will choke her heart just a little as she remembers, and she will have a moment to think about the way night felt in the Rocky Mountains—velvet—and compare it to the way darkness feels now—constant, raspy. But then there will be no time and the money calling and the other customers waiting. She will run out into the alley and reach into her car just as a Budweiser delivery truck lumbers by, dragging her and her Jeep's door a few hundred yards to the front of a dry cleaners at the other end of the street. In her hand they will find crumpled bills and a lint-covered pacifier.



This is it, she thinks, as she throws open the door and walks out of the convenience store into the Colorado night. This is the most I will ever love anybody. She looks in through the window of the car and loses her breath for a moment when she can't see him, can only see her pale face reflected, monstrous. But then a car backs up, the light shifts, and his face materializes on the other side of the glass like hope. Pushing a strand of hair from her face, she opens the door and climbs into the warm air of the car they've borrowed from one of his friends. The gas tank's on empty and there's a blizzard in the forecast, but he assures her they'll make it to the cabin just fine. He has always liked to push his luck.