





*I still feel this way.*

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## NORTH OF DODGE



Erika Krouse

My high school voted me “Most Likely to Leave Dunfield,” so a week after graduation I stole my uncle’s station wagon and did just that. It’s not a felony so long as you stay in Nebraska. I drove three hundred miles to Omaha, where I was supposed to begin college in the fall, and parked on Leavenworth Street for breakfast. The car was stolen again by the time I left the diner, but I didn’t care. My uncle was a dick, and all I needed was the ride out.

When you steal a car from a white supremacist, the safest place to stay is in a black area of town. I asked a gas station attendant what parts of Omaha a white girl should avoid and he said, “North of Dodge Street,” so that’s where I went. As I marched north, my backpack chugged its own rhythm: *This is your chance, this is your chance*. It was a Sunday morning; at that moment my uncle would be preaching his new sermon, “You Better Get Right or Get Left.”

North of Dodge, I felt conspicuous in my white skin, guilty. I hadn’t seen so many black people in one place since I lived in Detroit as a kid, before my parents died. Here, everything was brown—buildings, cars, windows, puddles, clothes. I was walking backward in time, as far away from Dunfield as I knew how to be. Torn corrugated

metal siding drooped off storefronts. Clammy hand-scrawled flyers for lost dogs and children peeled from the sides of buildings. The occasional breeze smelled like cat sex and exhaust. Aluminum foil covered the insides of windows to deflect the sun, which was mostly a suggestion of brightness in an otherwise gray sky.

By afternoon I found a place to rent from a flier staple-gunned to a telephone pole. The apartment manager said I looked sweet and honest, and that's what I am, except honest. I paid with the majority share of my uncle's cash—a bonus I had found in his glove box under an unopened pack of expired condoms. I guess it was my cash, really, since my uncle had stolen all my money.

My new apartment was one musty room at basement level off Ames Avenue, next to a parking lot I later voted "Parking Lot Most Likely to Have One Abandoned Woman's Shoe on the Ground." First I found a white sandal, and then a royal blue pump with glitter. I collected the shoes as they appeared, wondering if they were evidence. I lined them in my windowsill as a reminder not to leave the windows open while I slept.

The former tenant had left behind a mattress, table, lamp, and a vinyl chair I slid around in at night, greased by my sweat. No air conditioning or fan. On the sticky table I found a notebook and three pens. In cursive handwriting, she (he?) had written an interrupted list:

*Cookies*  
*Lice shampoo*  
*Vinegar*  
*Toilet pa*

By the time I read the notebook, it was too late to worry about lice—I had already slept on the mattress. I figured the notebook was a kind of gift, so I started writing in it every night before bed. I mostly wrote about how scared I was. I had never lived by myself before, or worked a job besides cleaning my uncle's church and

the annex we lived in. I didn't feel safe outside my apartment, and less so inside at night. I couldn't find any job openings in my new neighborhood—hardly any businesses, even. When I walked down the street, men rolled down their windows to flap a wad of bills at me and ask, "How much?" I wondered if it might come to that. I didn't know how I would survive on my own, let alone go to college in the fall or ever or get the chance to be somebody to anyone.

Shortly after I moved in, I was fretting in my notebook when two voices giggled at my window. My heart stuttered in fright, but they were just children, two of them. The bigger one was African-American, maybe eleven. In the dim light reflected from my lamp, he was chubby in the face, his lips curling into the fat of his chin. His spectacular afro reminded me of those disc-like halos in medieval art. The white boy was skinny like an ermine, with curly, matted hair that might be blond under the dirt. He looked much younger than the big one, who said, "We're going to rape you."

"Yeah," the smaller one said. "Rape you." They laughed. "Can we come in?"

"Hell, no." I had babysat plenty, but never kids like this. "And don't talk like that."

"I'm going to break into your house and steal your TV, then," the big one said, but he could see that I didn't have one. "You got a man?"

"He's in the bathroom."

"No way. We been watching you. You ain't got no man there."

I stood to shut the window and they scattered, afraid of me. So I left the sash open and returned to my notebook, vowing to buy curtains, catching whatever breeze they weren't blocking. They had already crept back, like squirrels made brave from hunger.

"How old are you guys?" I asked. "What are your names?"

They grinned, flattered by my interest. The little blond one said, "Six. I'm Kyle. I'm six, he's ten. He's Jarvis."

Jarvis said, "I'm twelve."

Kyle said, "He's ten. My dick's about from here to there."

"You're *six*?" I asked.

Jarvis told Kyle, “Aw, you got an itty bitty dick.”

Kyle told Jarvis, “Hey, that’s your mom’s shoe.”

“That’s *your* mom’s shoe,” Jarvis said and they laughed, high-pitched, like jackals.

“She hates me,” Kyle said.

I couldn’t tell which mother Kyle was talking about—Jarvis’s, or Kyle’s own. It seemed inconceivable that anyone could hate a six year old, that there would be anything to hate yet. Jarvis asked, “What’re you writing?”

“I’m writing down the things you’re saying,” I said.

“Why?” Kyle asked.

“They’re interesting.”

“We’re *interesting!*” They tried to high-five each other but missed and got embarrassed. Jarvis’s nose formed a sharp triangle when he laughed. I wrote in my notebook, *Most Likely to Do Time for Someone Else’s Crime*.

Little Kyle said, picking his nose, “I went to jail for drugs. I busted out.” Then, “I’m gonna bust in here when you’re asleep.”

I began to get unrealistically nervous again until Jarvis said, “No way, not with these high windows. You’d knock into everything, it’d be dark, you wouldn’t be able to find a lamp, you’d bump into a heater and burn your feet.” Then he said to me, “Send him home. He should go to jail.”

Kyle told me, “I love you.”

Jarvis said, “I’m sorry for him. You’re pretty. In the tits. Give me back my mama’s shoe. Please, ma’am.”

The *ma’am* shocked me even more than the rest of it. Jarvis had to point twice at the blue pump before I popped open the screen to hand it to him through the crack. He grasped it so gently, all I felt was a lightness in my hand as the shoe and the children returned to the darkness of the streets.

Over the next week, I called every number in the want ads from a pay phone outside Bill’s Bar-B-Que and Liquor, covering the

mouthpiece whenever a semi passed. Nobody wanted me to come in for an interview, and I couldn't do half those jobs anyway: accounts receivable, security guard, hospice nurse, meat packer. After a few calls, a ring of men started to form around the pay phone saying things, so I had to leave and return again later with a new pile of quarters.

Still, there was something comforting about being in the worst place in America. At the bottom of the barrel, everyone floats. I voted myself "Most Likely to Have Nowhere to Go But Up" and called the number on a flyer I had chanced upon: "Icee Treats is Hiring Drivers. Work Outside! No Background Check!! We Pay Cash!!!" The guy, Chip, hired me over the phone because I agreed to sell ice cream north of Dodge Street. He said, "I've had trouble filling routes up there, and you sound honest enough." *Honest*, I was quickly learning, meant *White*.

Icee Treats Headquarters was a wooden shack filled with freezers at the very southern edge of town, and I had to leave early to catch the right bus. At six forty-five in the morning, the white prostitute at the corner was still selling sex and also crack. My apartment was a half block from her corner. The moment I stepped onto the sidewalk she started chasing me, yelling and waving her fists. But I wore sneakers and she wore stilettos, so I left her wheezing and screaming, "Get your own fucking corner!" I prayed she would never change her shoes, because her thigh muscles bulged in her fishnets. I probably couldn't outrun her if she came prepared.

The drivers arrived at eight to stock the ice cream trucks and fill them with gas. I didn't know why we had to check in so early, but we did or we were fired. So I sleepily counted out Peanut Buster Bars and Bomb Pops and Fudgsicles and Creamsicles and Choco Tacos and Strawberry Shortcakes and Chocolate Eclairs and Drumsticks and Push-Up Pops and Ice Cream Chipwiches, hauling them to my assigned truck. I filled the cold plate freezer but wasn't allowed to drive away until ten. So I sat on the grass to wait with the other drivers, mostly Mexicans and fat white ladies who pulled out peanut butter sandwiches and burritos wrapped in

wrinkled foil. Everyone was older than me, and nobody talked. The windowless slaughterhouse across from the ice cream shack was also silent as the chain workers slumped across the yard toward the smell of manure.

Sometimes the cows screamed. Their throats sounded hoarse, as if it were their first time screaming, pleading for their version of God. There was nowhere to escape the sound—just fields and dead weeds and wide streets and the prairie beyond. After a few days, I bought a pair of spongy orange earplugs that dulled things until I could tear out of there, driving back to my neighborhood north of Dodge.

North Omaha was even poorer than Dunfield or Detroit, but people found money for ice cream. It was cheaper than air conditioning. Kids, adults, everyone was happy to see me. I was usually one of the only white people around, but people were nice about it, except they called me Vanilla. Lots of people begged for free ice cream. “Vanilla baby, I ain’t eaten in three days,” one old guy kept saying, but it was always “three days,” even after I had given him a free Crunch Bar the day before.

Jarvis and Kyle showed up every day, calling me Vanilla Bonilla. They acted nice when they had money, but when they didn’t, Jarvis would say something like, “Yo Vanilla Bonilla, can I get my mouth on your ice cream?” and Kyle would laugh so hard he had to sit down.

Even the prostitute bought from me once, but I was safe inside the truck with the doors locked. She flipped the strands of her blue wig, slapped a five dollar bill on the counter, and said, “Bitch, get me a Bomb Pop.” She peeled the wrapper and began to fellate the popsicle as she walked away, sliding it in and out of her ruby mouth and smiling at the men in the street. Even I could get it—she was sexy in the way people are when boundaries evaporate, when the world is simply about the fucks and the fucked.

Customers kept asking, “I know you got ice cream, but do you got anything else?” That’s how I found out that half the ice cream truck drivers dealt drugs—maybe more than half. It was why they guarded their routes so fiercely. One of the fat Icee Treats moms sold



oxy out of her truck to teenagers in the Leavenworth neighborhood. They'd ask for the "special sprinkles" and she'd layer it over the Cookie Dough Cup.

I had a crush on one regular customer, a solemn guy in a do-rag and thick Buddy Holly glasses, a combination I found arresting. He always bought the Big Sundae Cup. He was older than me by six or eight years, maybe more. He held himself straight and tall, his beautiful lips parted, his skin satiny. He was often flanked by other men and boys who checked his expression after every joke they cracked. They were in love with him—everyone was. He and I rarely said anything but order-speak, but his glasses lent his gaze depth, and he often lingered at my truck like he was waiting for me to ask him something.

When the kids were around, Big Sundae Cup sometimes grabbed Jarvis's magnificent hair, shook it a little, and said, "Is this where you keep your extra brains?" He'd order "one each for the little soldiers," and I'd hand down Jarvis and Kyle's favorites, tossing them smiles meant to boomerang back to Big Sundae Cup. He always sauntered away without asking for my number, which was fine because I didn't have a phone. He made the wide street feel small, spooning fudge into his beautiful mouth, slapping hands of friends who then joined him, shoulder to shoulder.

I would be safe if he had my back. He was all the way inside this place, its hot heart; I was just a split end. I half-hoped some day he'd brush aside the kids from my window, take me to Fuzzy's Lounge, and buy me enough drinks so I wouldn't care what I did. I was eighteen and already mourning the lost chances of my youth. The university sat just across town, but I had never even seen it. If I retreated to Dunfield, I was pretty sure my uncle would have me arrested. I had no people, or money. My future was visible every day in the women sitting on sunburnt grass outside the slaughterhouse, chewing soggy burritos to the soundtrack of dying animals. I couldn't leave Omaha if I tried.

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After my parents died in a car crash when I was fourteen, I left Detroit to live in a church annex with my uncle in Dunfield. I had no one else. As the town's pastor, it would look bad on my uncle if I went to a girls' home. He repeated this often, like it was my fault for threatening his standing with the community.

It's impossible to invite kids over to a church, so I mostly read alone in my room when I wasn't in school or doing chores. Kids in my classes treated me with an awkward distance, like I was just a visitor, and maybe I was. My senior year, I fumbled through a college application and got accepted at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. I wanted to major in philosophy because I liked Nietzsche, especially this: "Everyone who has ever built anywhere a new heaven first found the power thereto in his own hell." I wondered if I would build my new heaven in Omaha, and if Dunfield's muted hell was enough for me to earn it.

I finally spoke one night at dinner, and the sound of my voice startled my uncle so much a chunk of biscuit dropped from his mouth. I said, "I need the money from my parents' bank account." I didn't know how much it was—I hoped at least a thousand. I showed my uncle the U.N.O. acceptance letter. "I'm late on the deposit. I think I can get a loan for most of the rest."

With a flick of his hairy wrist, my uncle tossed the letter back at me without reading it. "That money's spent," he said.

"Spent?"

He pointed at the kitchen I cleaned every day. "You think your food and shelter don't cost anything?"

Rage blurred the room. "The church gives you this place to live. And I work for my food. For you. For *free*."

"U.N.O.'s a shit school."

"I want my money."

"So you can go live with the wetbacks and blacks?" he asked with more contempt than I had ever heard from him, even on the pulpit, for Satan. "Trust me. You wouldn't be able to stand the smell."

I didn't know what to say. I never did.

My uncle wedged a paw inside his belt buckle and leaned back in his chair, like he was waiting to see what I would do. He cleared gristle from his teeth with his gray tongue. Then he forked a slice of sausage back toward his white molars, chewing slowly. The liquid sounds inside his mouth made me want to vomit.

That night after the engine of my uncle's snoring thrummed into gear, I stuffed clothes into my backpack and stole out the door, closing it gently behind me. My uncle's keys already dangled from the ignition, where he always left them. Fingers of wind ripped through my hair. It was the first time I fully understood just how alone I was. No one, no one loved me. I wondered if this was how people felt during tornadoes, when the roof rips off and there's nothing above but storm and sky. I shoved my uncle's car into neutral and pushed it a half mile down the road before starting the engine. Back then, I was afraid he would follow me. Now I know it's worse that he didn't try.

Every night after work, Jarvis and Kyle sexually harassed me through my window, and every morning they shouted and ran to my ice cream truck as if they hadn't seen me in years. They presented me with all sorts of things that were supposed to stand in for money: bobby pins, hairbands, coupons, and once a torn and rained-on lottery ticket from two weeks ago. "It could be a winner," Jarvis said.

"Guys, I have to buy this ice cream myself. It's not free."

They looked so innocent, which made it hard when they paid me in meth. "It's my mom's," Jarvis said. "Don't tell her I took it." It looked like rock candy in a tiny ziplock, the kind beads come in. I accepted it so Jarvis wouldn't have it anymore. I thought that there must be something to meth, if people were willing to give up their whole lives for it. I considered selling it, or smoking it. But I didn't want that kind of heaven. I emptied the drugs into a puddle.

One night at my living room window, the kids suddenly grew more polite, as if they had decided to court me. "You're beautifuller tonight, Vanilla Bonilla," Jarvis said. "Did you comb your hair?"

Kyle said, “He wants to suck your—,” but when I looked up from my notebook, he said, “I don’t know. Your nose.” He ducked away, and then ducked back into view. “I do too.”

Jarvis said, “Kyle had a sex change.” Something dark and weapon-like lurked in his hands.

“Get rid of that stick,” I said. Jarvis threw it away. Kyle bent over from a coughing fit deep in his chest. I felt crappy, too, probably from my diet of dirty meat and processed cheese, which was all I could find to buy in the neighborhood. I hadn’t seen a single fruit or vegetable since I left Dunfield.

I said, “Jarvis, your friend is sick. It’s late. You should take him home.”

“He’s not my friend; he’s my brother,” Jarvis said in a habitual way that told me he wasn’t using a metaphor. I must have looked surprised because he said, “It’s okay. Nobody thinks we’re brothers ’cause he’s white and I’m black. Are you drinking beer?”

“No, milk. You kids want some?”

Kyle stopped coughing and asked, “What does it taste like?”

“You’ve never had milk?” I asked. “Jesus, where are your parents? Why do they let you out so late?”

Jarvis said, “Milk tastes like Kyle Strobe.”

Kyle said, “It tastes like Jarvis Wells. Can I marry you, Vanilla Bonilla?”

“Vanilla wants to marry someone else.” Jarvis turned at a passing siren, so I didn’t catch the name he muttered. “If I was him, would you like me then?” Jarvis whipped a finger-gun out of his pocket and shot me three times in the heart with it. Then he holstered the imaginary weapon in the front of his pants. “Would you give me a chance if I was in the game? Could I lay down by you and look at your butt?”

“Go home,” I said, but nobody moved. I saw myself as they saw me—a white girl made of sugar and milk, who drove a truck full of happiness and slept in a locked dungeon. They were chasing a flavor, but not chasing it hard, because they couldn’t pay.

Kyle said, “What you writing now, Vanilla Bonilla? Are we still interesting?”

This and microwave burritos ruled my life. Sometimes I considered unlocking my door and letting them in. They could wrestle each other on my carpet or play Hangman in my notebook. My parents never would have allowed me to run around at night and talk to strangers through windows. They never would have let me buy ice cream out of a truck. Or sell it.

My truck's loudspeaker was broken, so Icee Treats had installed a cheap bell. My arm ached from clanging that bell all day, and the sound's echo punctured my dreams all night. The boredom of Omaha was remarkably like the boredom of Dunfield, plus financial worries. Every evening we checked in the ice creams we didn't move and reconciled our cash with Chip. I left there with bills and change that worried me. I kept my money in my sneakers, under the insole. I didn't know what I would do after the summer ended and people stopped buying ice cream. I imagined one of my own shoes abandoned in the parking lot.

One night I was out of tampons so I started for the convenience store. My own invisibility distracted me, my darkened body slipping through the blackness, as if I had every right to be a woman on a night street. I forgot about the hooker—I was never out after dusk, so she mostly functioned as an early morning hazard. We didn't notice each other until I had almost passed her. Then she whipped around so fast her blue wig tilted askew. "Bitch," she shrieked. "You get off my corner!" She grabbed me. A press-on nail embedded itself in my arm and tore off her finger when I started to run.

She was fast behind me, her silver skirt flashing in the streetlight. I beat feet toward home, blood seeping between my legs. From the crabgrass in front of my apartment building, two boys shouted, "Mama, *stop!* She's okay, Mama!" I wouldn't stop. I was nobody's mother. Then I realized that the boys were shouting at the hooker behind me, who had slowed and stopped to talk to them. And the boys were Jarvis and Kyle.

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The kids stopped coming around. Where were they? I had nobody else to talk to. Maybe they were in summer school, or gone on vacation. Ha! Vacation. It rained and all my regulars deserted me. All day I drove around empty streets with a full truck. Even Big Sundae Cup was off the streets. My voice atrophied into a raspy mumble.

On my day off that week, I stopped at Bill's Bar-B-Que and Liquor for a pork fritter sandwich drenched in Dorothy Lynch dressing. Attached to a gas station and liquor store, Bill's was the only restaurant in the neighborhood. They flavored their beans with beer, and the shy guy behind the counter always gave me free gizzards, which I didn't like but it was food. I ate outside on the curb because Bill's didn't have tables. It had rained that morning and the street was cleaner but soggy. Just after I bit into my sandwich, someone sat down on the curb next to me.

It took me a moment to recognize the prostitute without her makeup or the wig. Jarvis and Kyle's mom. She had showered. Up close, her skin was grayish white, pocked with large pores. Irregular bald patches shone through her shorn light brown hair. Sores circumnavigated her mouth. I wondered if they interfered with her job. She was smoking, and I was afraid she'd burn holes in my arms.

"This is a public street," I said. "I can be here."

She exhaled smoke onto my plate and it curled around my cooling sandwich like steam. "I ain't mad at you," she said.

The street was quiet except for the distant skin-like sound of old tires peeling off new asphalt.

The prostitute finally said, overly casual, "You seen Jarvis? He been staying away a couple days."

"No. Have you called the police?"

She snort-laughed and picked at what remained of her eyebrows.

"Is Kyle gone too?" I asked.

She looked away and drew on her cigarette. She said, "Before he got gone, that little shit ate all my waffles." I saw—little Kyle didn't matter, but Jarvis did. She blew her nose in a tissue, delicately. "So,

Jarvis. Ask his daddy next time you see him. He knows everything north of Dodge. Everything in Omaha, Neblastya. Neblast-yo-ass.” She frowned.

“I don’t know Jarvis’s daddy.”

Something nabbed her attention. “Did him,” she said, chin-pointing at a large man with a beard across the street, who slouched against a utility pole and lit a cigarette. “Bam!” She twisted to face me, her gaze lagging far behind. She was high. “Anyhow, it’s on you. You gotta find him. My boy. Jarvis.”

“Me?”

“You got that truck, bitch.” She stabbed her cigarette into my sandwich to extinguish it. “Us crackers got to stick together.” She stood and smiled, a pit where her left incisor should be.

“I’m not a cracker,” I said, but she was already swanning down the street, waving at the man with the beard, who didn’t wave back. I ripped out the part of my sandwich with the cigarette in it and ate the rest, but it wasn’t enough.

*All right*, I thought. The next day, I crawled the ice cream truck down each street, peering into alleys and parking lots, looking for Kyle and Jarvis. It was a bad idea to drive slowly because kids liked to ride on the back bumper, and I couldn’t see them from the driver’s seat. So I had to accelerate and then stomp hard on the brakes so they’d bounce off. That’s how I drove the neighborhood, in jerky bumps and rushes. Even I was carsick. I worried I’d crash the clumsy truck and lose my job. And for what? If I needed dirty children and bad treatment to mark my days, there was something wrong with me. But I missed them.

That afternoon, Big Sundae Cup was walking down the street, alone for once. I pulled over and opened the service window. He swiped the corners of his mouth and gave me a slow smile. “Vanilla,” he said. He offered me the last bite of his cheese frenchee. It tasted like my mother’s used to before she died, with layers of fried batter, bread, cheese, and mayo, hard and soft and hard again.

“I like to watch you eat,” Big Sundae Cup said.

I swallowed a few times and stammered, “Have you seen Jarvis and Kyle? Those kids you buy ice cream for sometimes?” I blushed. I must have looked like a pervert in my ice cream truck, asking after young boys.

Dark drops of rain began to dot his button-down shirt, which was yellow and ironed. Big Sundae Cup stroked his chin with a smooth finger and thumb and looked at my mouth as he asked, “You sure you’re not looking for me?”

I thought about closing the window and driving away from this older man who made me so out of breath. But if there were answers in this neighborhood, Big Sundae Cup knew them. My vocal cords shrank and I almost squeaked, “Their mom’s looking for them. They’ve been gone for days.”

Big Sundae Cup’s eyes melted behind his glasses. “Hey. Don’t worry. Those kids are okay. They been crashing with my friend nights. I got Jarvis doing a few things for what I got going on. I’ll tell his mom.”

I was so relieved I forgot to feel nervous. “She scares me.”

“She scares *me!*” Big Sundae Cup scratched the back of his head. “Those boys just need a chance. I gave Jarvis a Huskers jersey—you’d think the boy never saw a shirt before. He’s pretty proud of himself, now he’s got a little folding money. Little soldier’s ready to work.” He half-smiled. “Maybe you could work for me too.”

“And leave all this?” I gestured around the truck. We laughed together, a bright sound in the gray day. I wanted to ask what Big Sundae Cup’s work was, but he acted like I already knew.

Besides the guys at Bill’s Bar-B-Que, I had the only legal job in the neighborhood. But whatever Big Sundae Cup did for money couldn’t be that terrible. He was nothing like the gangbangers and drug addicts with bad teeth, shuffling over broken concrete in torn shoes. He was more like a superfly incarnation of the freshly showered men at my bus stop every morning, riding away to work in the cleaner parts of the city, or the young fathers pushing strollers home from daycare each evening. Big Sundae Cup had something to live for. Maybe he was growing pot.



“Jarvis said he wanted a job so he can kiss you, Vanilla. Can’t blame a guy.” Big Sundae Cup leaned on the frame of my service window, his muscular arm resting there. “Speaking of, you know I read books? One a week. Done that since I was wee. Jarvis says you write in a notebook. Just figured you’d want to know that about me.”

“What do you read?”

“Anything, you know. Thriller, mystery, crime. Classics. I’m reading *Invisible Man* from the library. Now that’s a good book. Fuck the man, right?”

I nodded, although Big Sundae Cup was the only man there. He glanced left and right, and then leaned in. “So what you got going on in your truck?”

Thunder rumbled in the rain. Big Sundae Cup was getting wet, but he didn’t seem to mind. I was so lonely. I had only ever slept with one boy once ever, and it was over so fast I wondered if I was still a virgin. My father installed gaskets into Fords for eighteen years and my mother worked at a secondhand store. Their car crashed on the way home from a church fundraiser. The last thing they did on this earth was eat hotdish and watch a polka band. I had come here to build my new, wild heaven, but all I had gotten so far was small change.

So I unlocked the truck and opened the door for Big Sundae Cup. He climbed in. We closed the service window.

Fingernail rain tapped the metal roof. He inspected the freezers. “Now, then. This all you’re selling?”

“Selling?” Was he calling me a prostitute?

Before I could get mad or sad or anything but confused, Big Sundae Cup’s brow lifted. He stepped toward me. “Hey. My bad. I’m sorry. It’s okay, right?” He was so close. Humidity built between us. I didn’t know where to look until he kissed me and I could close my eyes.

His skin radiated heat, and it was cool inside from the ice cream freezers. Big Sundae Cup called me Vanilla, and it was too late for me to ask his name without feeling cheap. He folded his glasses,

rested them on a freezer, and spread his good shirt on the cold floor of the truck before laying me down on top of it. He draped himself over me, warm and sleek. "It's nice in here," he said, and then stopped talking entirely as he got to work. He smelled like bread, and I smelled like ice cream, and the summer wasn't so bad anymore. We used my uncle's condoms I had swiped from his truck, stashed in my backpack all this time as a good luck charm for my new life.

By eight the next morning, the sun had unhooded itself and it was ninety degrees with ninety percent humidity. My makeup slid off my face. Even my scalp sweated, greasing my hair. The cold plate freezer didn't work in the truck and the ice cream had already started to melt, so I had to fight with Chip behind the counter for a replacement truck. I asked, "You think it doesn't matter if they get melted ice cream north of Dodge?" and he shrugged. I waited until he sauntered to the back before I swapped keys from the peg board and stocked a different truck. My earplugs had fallen out of my pocket when I took off my shorts for Big Sundae Cup, so I had to plug my ears with my fingers when the cows started screaming again.

The temperature rose to a hundred degrees by the afternoon. Everyone wanted ice cream, and nobody had money. Yesterday's rain steamed the air, and my skin felt poached. My crotch was raw and sore, and Big Sundae Cup was nowhere. I voted myself "Most Likely to Get Dumped After One Ice Cream Truck Fuck." I hated him a little, and hated myself more. Take a chance! Screw a stranger! Turns out that being wild was pretty close to being pathetic.

I was selling a Bomb Pop just off Ames Avenue in the late afternoon when someone started setting off firecrackers one at a time.

People ducked, and it took me a second to understand it was gunfire. My customers fled except for an old guy who seemed unable to move. I pancaked myself next to my service window, hugging metal. The only movement in my side mirror was two small figures running down the sidewalk, toward me.

Kyle and Jarvis. Kyle ran in front, so pale he blended in with the gray of the sidewalk. His arms flailed, swimming through the sodden air, heels tossed out at angles behind him. Jarvis chased him, wearing an oversized red Huskers jersey I hadn't seen on him before. He ran like a child unused to running. His belly jiggled with each short stride, his giant floppy hair bouncing into his eyes.

I leaned out the service window and shouted, "Kyle, Jarvis, get in here. Someone's firing a—"

But little Kyle darted past, glancing once as he hurled something through my service window. It was so fast I had to duck. The object bounced against the wall and skidded on the greasy linoleum floor.

A gun.

I had shot old rifles at cans back in Dunfield like everyone else. But I had never seen a handgun before. It was new looking, black, shiny. Kyle was six. Why was he throwing a gun? The shooting had stopped. Because the gun was on the floor of my ice cream truck.

I leaned out the window again. The tail of Jarvis's red shirt disappeared as he turned the corner at the end of the block. "Kyle! Jarvis!" I shouted again, but everyone had vanished, even that frozen old guy next to my truck. The street stared back at me. I didn't even know where those kids lived. All I had ever given them was ice cream.

I opened the door, kicked the gun out of the truck, and drove until I didn't recognize the street names.

But I kept orbiting the neighborhood, like a crow circles a carcass. I finally pulled over in the pocket parking lot behind the Church of the Living God and ate five ice cream sandwiches, letting the wrappers drift wherever. The blazing streets reflected the sun and heat all around me.

Who had fired those shots, and why? Kyle was the one with the gun, but Jarvis was the one with the job, whatever it was. The "job." I should have kept the gun. The police were probably dusting it already, lifting Kyle's tiny fingerprints.

And Big Sundae Cup, oh God. I was the stupidest person on earth. Not stupid, blind—conveniently, desperately so. Nobody had fooled me but me, the fool. I stared at my fists in my lap, veins and bones covered with flesh so white it was almost transparent, like gelatin, like the skin of a ghost. I wanted to close my eyes at the sight of myself, but I couldn't. It was better to be awake than to dream fake dreams. It was better to see this than nothing at all.

It was five o'clock. I didn't turn the truck south to Icee Treats like I was supposed to. Instead, I drove back into the neighborhood. I inched down every street, every alley, avoiding the flashing lights on Ames. Those kids wouldn't be near there, anyway. I didn't know what to do if I found them. Could a six year old even fire a gun? Of course he could. It just takes the spasm of an index finger and all possibilities collapse into the shape of a bullet going in one direction, too fast. After that, what were his chances?

After an hour or so, by some sort of instinct, I ended up by the empty auto parts warehouses near the highway. When I turned a narrow corner, two familiar figures huddled in the late afternoon shadow of a warehouse bay.

My relief immediately transformed into fresh worry. The kids looked dirty and small. Kyle cried and coughed. Jarvis rubbed his back, leaning in a posture of persuasion. Go to a doctor, maybe he was saying. Go to the police. Go to Mom. Go to Big Sundae Cup. He'll help us. No he won't. No she won't. No they won't. No one, no one.

When I pulled the emergency brake, both kids looked up. Their gazes caught mine across the abandoned street, but they didn't run away. Jarvis said something. Kyle made a gesture I couldn't decipher, fingers curling inward.

At the south end of town, Icee Treats was just beginning to wonder where I was. It was eight miles east to Iowa—one night's drive to Chicago, even by back roads. I had a truck full of ice cream, half a tank of free gas, and a hundred dollars in each shoe. All we needed was the ride out.

I stepped out of the truck. The interstate pulsed beside me. The children stood and wiped their faces, watching. I pointed at myself, the highway, and the truck door I'd left open for them, and told myself, *These are chances.*



Much of “North of Dodge” is nonfiction. Between my second and third years of college, I was on suicide watch for a college friend who had flunked out and moved to Omaha. During that summer, I lived in a slum where a prostitute chased me halfway to work every morning, and I did briefly drive an ice cream truck for my job. I almost got stuck in Omaha permanently, unable to save enough money for the bus ticket back to school. And the little kids in the story were real. They’d come over at ten or eleven at night and threaten to rape me through my open window, while I scribbled their dialogue in my notebook as quickly as I could. I’ve worried about those two children for decades, even though they’re either dead or grown by now. I write a lot of stories to fix my past, to take risks and action where I’d taken none at the time. Maybe when I stop being such a coward, I’ll have no more stories to write. This is Bill’s BBQ.

—Erika Krouse

