To the Driver

Liz Stinson
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She tasted like salt, but sweeter, and then more bitter. People can never think of a comparison that does justice to the taste of a woman. Your own sweat will remind you, but it will never be the same.

Chris didn’t like her. He never outright said it, but you knew. She took you away from the drugs, just a little bit. She was your type of drug.

You could never trip with Chris. Grass was alright, but you never wanted to see him cleaning his ears on acid. Fuck. Disgusting. Remember the first time you smoked together? The shack in his backyard and the Doberman next door that would not shut up. And then Chris, “Look at how big my fucking foot is. How big do you think it is?...fucking huge, man.” He smoked you down, and then his dwarf Chinese grandma found you out there at 3am—scarier than waking up to God. I don’t even know what she screamed at you, the woman never learned English, but you were so freaked out you left your fucking shoes. You twat.

Jess laughed about that. Her sweet laugh. Your mother liked her laugh.

Your mother is in a shoebox in your sock drawer. You know that it is sad, but the cardboard box of ashes is not bloody or warm. It is not really your mother. Your mother is your long fingers and your dark eyes.

Jess couldn’t handle that. Jess, who didn’t know her own mom, she fell in love with yours. And after the hospital bed was empty, after the sheets were changed, she couldn’t look at your eyes. And then the crystals and the unbaked bread, the raw juice, raw knuckles, raw everything. You never even cried. She could not stop.

One summer night, before things got bad, you were driving the country roads, away from the city lights, to show Jess the stars. You saw the gray rabbit just before you hit it. So did she. She made you run over it again and again. She made you turn around on the empty road until you couldn’t even find what was left. She said she couldn’t stand to see it twitch. “It’s better for it to die.” And she cried.

Fuck. Now you’re going too fast—getting worked up.

But, she’ll disappear soon anyway—graduation, her summer job, and then college. And you’ll be...? Stamping out car doors, making sandwiches, selling suits? This fucking city reeks of cars.
The cleanest thing here is Jess. Can you explain that? That there is smoke and ash settling on her house and the grass in her dad's yard? Her organic apples and tomatoes are tainted. If she could just exist without need. Your mother was not a saint. If she could just let it go...

Not a saint, but better than the rest. She always came to your hockey games, she never talked that much trash about your deadbeat dad, she knew you smoked and she let you. But people die—and does it even really matter? You could jerk the wheel right now, and would it matter? Maybe you would end up in a sock drawer, and you wouldn't care. People act like it's a crime that you have not spread her ashes, but why spread death? Death might not matter, but spreading it around seems unfair.

One thing you remember from the English class, the one you had with Jess and sat behind her and noticed that her brown hair had strands of red—you remember your old teacher talking about the Holocaust for some reason, and he said that we are still breathing in the ashes of the people that burned to death. Their ashes are trapped in the atmosphere and we are filling our lungs with them. Maybe if you could put your mom up there, let other people breathe her, maybe then you would take her out of the sock drawer. Maybe that would be alright. She wasn't any angel, but she was better than the rest.

Maybe if you still had Jess you wouldn't miss your mom at all. And actually—isn't it almost your mom's fault that Jess left? If your mom were still here, Jess would still come over, she would still sleep in your bed and leave her rings on your dresser. She would still crave Slurpees at four o'clock in the morning and make you get up to drive her to one, both of you in boxers.

Jess didn't leave because you wouldn't cry, but she might have stayed longer if you had. And the smell of her shampoo is fading from your pillowcase. And the smell of your mom's perfume is fading from her room. It's not that you miss her that much, your mom, but now that there's no one around, you're lonely, that's all. If Jess were still around, it wouldn't matter.

Maybe you could've done things differently with your mom. At least that one time—when she showed up in your first-hour class with your notebook. You didn't even need it, and you could tell she was still in her nightgown under her coat. That was after she knew she was sick, but before you knew. You were an ass to her, you were embarrassed. And that wasn't something she would normally do—she was so shy. And she could be so sensitive. She probably cried when she left—because you embarrassed her to save yourself. You didn't have to make her cry.

And now Jess is hanging out with that new guy, the one from out West. You can't convince yourself anymore that they're just friends. Fuckin asshole. One of those straight-edge pussies. But maybe that's what she wants—to want something pure. But none of us are pure, except maybe Jess.

And she was so good for you, and this punk is just some phase. But maybe that makes you a phase too. The bad-boy sex in the backseat trespassing on
playgrounds awake all night skinny-dipping first love that someone has to move on from. And maybe when she said that she would love you forever, she meant that she would love you until your mom got sick and wasted away and left you with a mailbox full of sympathy cards and a shoebox full of ash. Maybe she meant that it wouldn't be forever, but that she would laugh for you and give you more than the rest of the world could. Maybe she meant that she would take pictures of you at the beach and write poems for you and not want them back. Maybe she didn't mean it at all.