

The Wine Makes It Flow

The bushes are scraggly. Not the kind you can hide behind if you need to hop out of the SUV to pee. Nope, slip behind one of these babies and you're likely to get scratched up. And *seen*, even near dusk. But the next tasting room on the wine trail is already closed, and there isn't much else around: scrub grass desert, a farm house or two, arid hills.

Oh, and a border patrol van, sitting like a green-and-white bug on the side of the dirt road as our SUV jostles out of the still-open mesh metal vineyard gate.

We speed towards the two-lane paved highway, you wriggling in your seat and me squinting at the post-card map that will tell us where the next vineyard is. I can't find my glasses in the travel-trash heap at my feet. You try to snatch the card from my fingers.

"Keep both hands on the steering wheel!" I mutter, and you giggle, giddy-nervous and high-pitched, because we've already been to a few tasting rooms, and really, after two or three, you realize you don't need to pay for *two* tastings when one shared one will do.

"I still have to *pee*."

I nod dismissively. I'm peering into the side-view mirror keeping an eye out for cops, but you never see any around here--not police cars, nor highway patrol. You'd think the rural back roads of Arizona's "up and coming" southern wine region would be easy pickings, trolled as it is with drunks. Because when have we ever seen an actual tourist bus, mini- or not, bellied up to these tasting rooms? Never. It's all SUVs, trucks, and sedans. Rugged connoisseur individualism.

On the other hand, we've seen three or four border patrol vans: driving past us down a two-lane highway, turning a corner in what passes for "town." Looking for Mexicans, obviously. But you never see any of *them* either, even though we're close to the border and some of them might come here, looking for work picking grapes or making wine.

The sudden horror in your voice blooms through my chest. "Oh, my *God!*"

The world telescopes to the space of the headlights: a human figure has loomed out of the bushes just ahead, shirt and pants grimy-gray. He blinks into the beams as if the SUV only merits a momentary glance. The car's momentum lunges against the force of the brakes. We pitch forward. The figure is gone, but the dull *thump* of rebounding force tells us where he's gone.

"Oh, my God, we hit him, we hit him!"

You crunch the parking brake. We leap out, engine running. Dust dances in the headlights. My all-everything bobs in numb, wine-soaked shock. We look under the nose of the car, but of course, he's not there. He's been thrown to the side of the road. He's lying there like he's taking a nap. The sleeper shifts and mumbles. I leap back. "He's alive!" I say it too loud, like a drunk talks, then worry like an idiot what he must think of us, talking about him.

Out here, you can see the lights of other cars arcing across the stretch of grass and fencing from hundreds of yards away. But there's no one. Just us. I tug your sleeve. "Let's go. We can call 911 in the car."

You aren't listening. You're wandering towards the bushes he jumped from. I burst in befuddled frustration. "What are you *doing?*"

"I have to go!"

Go. Go. *Pee?*

I grab you by the arm and push you towards the car. You make me push you like that, sometimes, and right now, I don't give a shit if you wet your pants. "Let's just go!" *We don't need trouble. We don't need trouble. We're not the types that ever get into trouble.*

You look at me as you drift back towards the SUV, because that's where you take your lead. I'm not driving, but I am, if you know what I mean. I bee-line it back to the passenger side door. We're back in the car. The wheels grip the gravel, crunching. You release the parking brake. We start forward again, breaths held. You—both hands on the steering wheel, eyes on the road; me, bringing my phone up and tapping out the numbers: 9-1-1. I won't hit "send" until we're a few miles away.

My mind is floating; I'm not thinking clearly. If I call from my cell, they'll know it was us. Or at least, they'll have a healthy suspicion.

"Drive to town," I instruct you. "There was a pay phone outside the gas station."

Your voice is cracked high panic. "I don't know where town is!"

Anger bites clear through the wine-haze. *Do I have to take charge of everything?*

"Drive until you see the highway 181 sign. Veer left. Then I'll tell you what's next."

We drive.

"We shouldn't have left him there," you say. You're upset. At me, at this moment, at life.

"Hush," I hiss. My whole world had become the road ahead of us, the gas station we're headed to, the pay phone. I won't let myself feel anything until after this one task is completed.

The Border Patrol officers saw him on the side of the road as soon as they flipped their headlights back on. They pulled up just short of his darkened lump. First things first: check the man's condition. One look, and it was evident: this was the man they'd been searching for all day. They'd driven around to several of the farms and sat waiting for long stretches, hoping to catch him when he came out from behind one of the buildings. They hadn't expected to find him like this.

"I'll radio in the other car," his partner said. "White SUV, Arizona vanity plates, two women in the vehicle."

"No. Just call 9-1-1," the driver said. He checked the man's pulse, which was thready. Made a cursory scan for broken bones or bleeding.

Don't hassle the tourists. They hadn't been told that in so many words, but it'd been implied, over and over. Only one thing kept the money flowing through these dusty back roads, and it was golden-clear or red as the blood thickening on the crease of this man's twisted knee. "Then call dispatch and tell 'em we'll have another one to send back."