How Far is Home
ROBIN CAIN

Her younger sister, Beth, met a Venezuelan man at a wedding, where she was a bridesmaid and he was the best man. He lived in Charleston and she lived in Phoenix. Beth spent several weekends with him in the South, walking around on strings. "I am so in love with him that it feels like I am in the middle of an electrifying dream," she told Meredith. "He is my media naranja."

This, Beth told her, was the Spanish idiom for "your other half." Meredith liked Jon, she really did, although she felt alienated when he confessed to her that soon he and her sister would only speak in Spanish, as would their children. No one else in Meredith's family spoke Spanish—both sisters took Latin in college.

Beth and Jon continued to spend their weekends together, flying in and out of Charleston Douglas International Airport. They enjoyed missing each other. Several weeks went by where Meredith didn't even see Beth, which was unusual since they lived on the same block. When Jon came to visit, they spent all of their time together. No problem, Meredith told her, when another week had gone by. Just enjoy it!

Charleston was familiar since she and Beth had grown up nearby in Summerville, leaving when their father's company asked him to transfer. She remembered the blue hydrangeas that bloomed in front of their green one-story house. They used to buy fresh shrimp next to the grocery store, while their mother flirted with the Shrimp Man in
her white beach cover-up. It had been at least fifteen years since she had lived there, but Meredith remembered the South vividly—poolside memories that were slow and colorful and thick. Her family had left in a rush, as if they were running from something.

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After Beth made her decision, Meredith offered to drive cross-country with her. She would help her sister move in and see Jon in his own comfortable environment. Beth packed her life into a Suburban and the sisters drove through the guts of Mississippi. Beth’s golden retriever, Duke, sat between them on the hump.

Beth gripped the oversized steering wheel and Meredith navigated. Beth was doing it, driving across the country for a man, and they were speeding back to the state where they were born. Meredith breathed in the caterpillar smell from the open window, one she recognized from Summerville. She remembered walking to the pool with her sister, the sidewalk hot under her rubber flip flops, watching the caterpillars crawling out of the earth. The edges of her sister’s hair used to turn green from chlorine, the texture like gossamer by the end of summer.

Meredith watched her now, dancing in the driver’s seat. Her sister wasn’t graceful but she was someone who moved with ease. Beth drawled Mer in a funny voice and Meredith propped her feet up on the dashboard of the brown Chevy, a rental car. If she had to name the car she would call it Slow as the South, as if the heavy car were a horse in a race.

Slow as the South rounded the curve of the highway with composed leisure. Meredith tried to ignore the clicking sound coming
from the air-conditioner, as, hour-by-hour, they ticked steadily
through New Mexico and Texas and now Mississippi. Her sister
patted the dashboard, “You can do it, Suburban.” The car had made it
over a thousand miles.

“That would have been a good exit,” Meredith said, glancing
behind her at the gas station that was stowed conveniently off the
highway.

“We just stopped an hour ago.”

“It seems like longer,” she said, absentmindedly flipping through the
atlas. The dog slept next to her, his head on Beth’s thigh.

Driving along I-20, Meredith had déjà vu when she saw a sign for
“Peaches and Fireworks!” She remembered the sign from another car
trip with her sister. Had they been visiting her grandmother? Why
had she been on this road? The same songs from the early eighties,
Summerville songs, were still playing on the radio. The sisters sang
loudly, driving on the long stretch of highway. Beth rolled her
window down and pushed her foot on the accelerator. Meredith didn’t
mind if they were moving slowly, but her sister had somewhere to be.

She studied the map in her hands. It was almost, not quite, a
straight line across the country between Phoenix and Charleston. She
inspected the atlas closely. If she drove back by the Northern route,
her travels would form a lean and pointy triangle. Triangles, it
seemed, tended to have mysterious or complicated associations, such
as ships lost at sea, lovers deceiving each other, the Pythagorean theo-
rem. Her trip, on the other hand, seemed to have a simple purpose
and that was to deliver her sister and all her belongings to Jon.

Meredith pointed to a dried-up sign for Homestyle eggs and
Momma’s own bacon!
Beth turned her head to see it. "Que se come eso?"

"I have no idea what you are saying," Meredith said. She hoped that learning Spanish might be a phase in her sister's evolving love for this man. A photograph fell from the map onto the floor of the Chevy.

"I didn't want it to get bent," Beth told her. "That's our best picture." Meredith picked up the photo with two fingers. Jon was a nice enough looking fellow, tall, slim, and winter pale, his face slightly pockmarked, his back slightly humped. Beth had straight brown hair, her physique curvy and muscular. Together, they didn't look quite right together, maybe because Jon was not yet familiar. Beth's body was full and warm, and Jon's a bit emaciated. He ate like a high school wrestler, either gorging himself or strictly swearing off anything solid.

She had first met him when her sister invited her over one night for drinks. It was a cold day in spring and Jon had been wearing a sports jacket. "What do you do, Meredith?" he asked. "Who are you, what are you about?"

Flashing his thin teeth, he said, "I know you are a paralegal, but what really makes you tick?" He paused. "And what is a paralegal?"

He was pleased with himself, cutting through the bullshit, getting down to the essentials. She explained to him that she was an assistant to a lawyer, a paper shuffler, the one who compiled boxes of paperwork for a court case.

Jon laughed. "So I guess you're not worried about the trees. You know, and global warming. Little things like that." He talked from the side of his mouth, his arms held stiffly from his pockets as if guarding a doorway.
No, she said. In fact, her job wasn’t eco-friendly at all. A paralegal filled rooms with corporate trash, printed emails and documents and things that should be electronic. Her job consisted of gathering paperwork to implicate wealthy corporations who fought over vast sums of money. But right now the job was paying the bills, while she figured out if she wanted to go to law school.

“What do you do, Jon?” she asked, a bit too sharply.

He told her about his career selling pop-up ads on the Internet. She thought, this guy is giving me a hard time about my job?

“I find that my career allows me a unique perspective on consumer culture that not everyone has, I am able to see beyond the—”

“Pop-up words?” Meredith interrupted him. “It sounds like you really have a calling, Jon.”

He smiled. “I know what makes Beth tick,” he had said, rolling the stem of his wine glass between his long fingers. He cocked his head. Apparently he knew what made Beth tick, more so than Meredith, who had known her for twenty-six years.

“Well of course,” she said. Everyone knew Beth’s devotion to her business, making furniture for homes. She had been making chairs and tables since she was a teenager, and after college she opened her own store.

“Nope,” Jon said, smiling. “It’s not what you’re thinking. That’s not it.”

“Yes, it is,” Meredith said.

“No.” He grinned so that she could see his thin lower teeth, too. “I make her tick. Tick, tick, tick. Right Bethie?”

Beth laughed. It should have been a joke, but Jon’s tick sounded controlling, final. Beth’s laugh sounded too high. Meredith knew she
had to be cautious with her criticism, since, after all, it looked like this was pretty serious. If Beth's other boyfriends had made the same comment about ticking—Rick, for instance, or Roger—she might have thought it was just banter. But Jon had a glistening sliver of saliva on his lip.

At the dinner table she tried again, tried to engage him in a conversation that was warmer and rounder. Jon ate only gravy that night. He said it was part of a new diet he was trying. He explained the diet to her, answering her questions while she filled her wine glass again. Her sister nodded in agreement and told her about the salsa lessons they were planning to take when she moved to Charleston. She rubbed the dog's neck. "Right, Duke?"

"When you move?" Meredith exclaimed.

"Well, we're just talking."

On her way back to her apartment that night, she called her mother, who lived about twenty minutes away. "Beth is under a spell," she told her. "She's talking about moving back to South Carolina."

"I wonder what our old neighborhood is like. Remember the hydrangeas—"

"I loved the South. I feel guilty. I want to like him, you know."

Her mother made a clicking sound on the other end of the phone. "I wonder who still lives in Summerville. It might be fun to drive and take a visit."

"It's not a drive, it's a plane ride. You can't just hop in your car and drive to South Carolina unless you want to spend several days on the road and even then—"

"You can't stop her. Guilt is just a way of having control over something, Meredith."
Wincing, she moved the phone to her other ear. Okay, doc. Her mother counseled strangers on a couch for a living, and also freely dispensed advice to her family.

"How's Ben? You haven't mentioned him lately."

Ben was fine, she said. Meredith had pulled into her driveway and told her mother she was home, could she call her later? They both said I love you and she dropped her phone on the passenger seat. Resting her hands on the steering wheel, she had stared at the rock garden in front of her home. The sign in front of her apartment complex read, "Waverly Gardens." She could smell the sulfur from the well.

Maybe her mother had been right. Maybe she was just being too judgmental.

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"Only about 200 more miles," Beth said, patting the steering wheel. Meredith pointed out a billboard for a theme park where they had vacationed years ago. Beth had walked around all day with an elephant trunk protruding from her head. Now, looking out the window, everything was tinted purple in her purple-tinted sunglasses. She took them off, wiping the sweat from beneath her eyes.

"I hardly even remember South Carolina." Beth said. "I was only ten."

Meredith saw a sign for a store that sold cheese and thought about her grandmother, who liked flavored cheddars. The quicker you stop running from yourself and start running to yourself, the better. Together, you'll get along famously. Her grandmother had said this to her mother while sitting on a white swing porch. Her mother was slumped beneath a large floppy straw hat, talking in hushed tones.
Meredith played rock, paper, scissors with Beth, sitting on brown wicker chairs. Her sister was a tiny ball of muscle, with her bangs cut straight across her forehead. Her lips were stained purple from a blue-raspberry slushie from the Little Cricket down the street.

The heavy Suburban passed colorful signs for pecan logs and one for Dave's Bridal Cave. Meredith wasn't looking at individual days anymore, but starting from the first point in Summerville and looking in between. The starting point seemed crucial. She had told her sister that she needed time away from her job, that she wanted to help her move. She needed this trip, she told Beth. She wanted to smell the South again.

No one in her family had remained in Summerville. Everyone had passed away or moved on. Meredith had spent her first thirteen years there, polite and sunburned in one of the nation's oldest towns. Even the dogs had seemed old, as if the sun was keeping them warm. Why, then, was it so important to go back?

The Suburban galloped along a curvy stretch of I-20, past an exit for Pelahatchie. She wanted to ask Beth what she was doing, moving across the country for a man she had only known for four months, but this would make her sister retreat into silence. The shorter the line between Phoenix and Charleston, the less likely she was going to say anything negative about Jon.

Anyway, no one had asked her how she felt. No one had asked her if she minded if her only sister moved for the Venezuelan. If she told them, she would look like an ass. She had no right to articulate these feelings, no rights at all. She chided herself, are people supposed to ask you, before they fall in love?
Beth fumbled to find a bottle of water behind her seat and Meredith turned and found it for her. The bottle was hot to the touch, as if it had been cooking in a kiln. Her sister took a swig of hot water and then turned up the radio. She didn't seem the slightest bit nervous about having her life crammed into a Suburban.

Meredith opened her mouth and closed it. She spoke carefully, "I could leave my life at anytime too, no strings attached . . ."

"What about Ben?"

It was an on-again, off-again relationship that had been dragging on for years. He, too, was a paralegal at the law firm. "Ben isn't going anywhere."

"So move to Charleston with me."

"Hat! I could sit around all day eating gravy while you and Jon talk to each other in Spanish."

Beth rolled her eyes. Meredith looked out of the window, admittedly pleased that her sister had asked her to join her. Finally.

Beth slowed for a toll booth, rolling her window down all the way. The freckled woman in the booth ignored them, joking and laughing with the man in the booth on the other side. He was a compact, bearded man who looked too large for his booth.

"Toll booth workers in love," she whispered to Beth. "You know they've been flirting across the road all day."

They both looked on, watching the flirtation. The sign next to the highway said "Skitter Creek," but Meredith didn't know what state they were in. Someone had sprayed graffiti on the booth in red letters—"I love Jim." A grey billboard stuck up from the mountain, *Hard Time for Gun Time*, but otherwise the scene was picturesque. The toll
booth was tucked between the hills, as if it had been carved out of the earth itself. Meredith felt small in the mountains, like a brown and unidentifiable mushroom.

Her sister was mesmerized by the toll booth couple, probably thinking about Jon. It was a big deal to be moving across the country. The toll booth workers twittered and giggled and the freckled woman moved lightly, as if each movement brought her enjoyment.

Meredith reached across her sister's lap and tapped on the car horn.

Beth smacked her hand away. "Meredith!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the worker said, extending her hand to accept Beth's bill. "Cute dog!" she added, smiling at Duke.

"Thanks. It's not a problem, really."

Beth took her time, rolling up the window. She turned to face Meredith. "What? You have some place to be?"

"It's going to be dark soon."

Beth revved up the Suburban and shot back onto the highway. Meredith felt tired, as if she was towing the car behind her. Something sickly sweet was in the air, rotting fruit, and she rolled down the window.

"Roll it up, sister! It's outside, not inside."

Meredith rolled the window up, but the smell didn't go away. The grass on either side of the highway looked dry, burned by the sun. She thought about Waverly Gardens and her new project at work, collaborating with Ben. He would spend long nights at the law firm drinking bad coffee from the vending machine. By the end of the case his eye sockets would be hollow and blue. He worked too hard. She often told him that the lawyers were using him, and after he burned out they would find someone else; another paralegal who worked too hard.
She yawned. "So, is Jon supportive of your job? I mean, it isn’t a typical job, you know, a woman working with tools. He sits in a cubicle all day selling Internet ads."

"I think he likes it." Beth turned the radio dial several times before settling on a sad, alternative band. "When we talk on the phone, when we’re apart, all I can think about is being near him."

"You know, no one ever says, ‘I’m calling long distance’ anymore. We just take it for granted."

"It’s only a three-hour plane ride to Charleston—"

"Our family is going to be spread out all over the States, but instead of moving closer together, we will just find ways to stay closer, long distance. Do you know what I mean?" "Sure. You want to drive?" Beth asked her, changing lanes.

"Why don’t we stop and get something to eat?" She had been eyeing fast food restaurants, knowing her sister wouldn’t want to stop.

"You want to stop again?" Beth frowned. "Come on, you know I’m on a strict diet." She had packed a cooler with cold chicken. A truck horn blared and Meredith jerked her head to see behind her. Beth switched lanes. Duke stood up and pressed his nose against Meredith’s side of the window, barking.

"Duke!" Meredith yelled, trying to push the dog back to the hump. The truck pulled a loaded fuel tank and the driver grinned at them with two teeth. Meredith stared at the crosses decorating his passenger seat; he had strung up white lights in his cab, in the shape of crosses. Apparently he had scooped up a homemade highway memorial and used it to plaster his cab. Fake flowers and stuffed animals filled his dashboard.
It reminded her of the truckers she passed every morning on her way to work, alone with a cup of coffee. This was the time of day when she was clear-headed and also soft with memories of her dreams the night before. Admittedly, she would have been afraid of the graveyard trucker without Beth next to her. She rolled up her window and the air conditioner in the Suburban coughed lukewarm puffs.

Next Rest Stop, 105 miles, the sign read, and next to it was a painted blue billboard for boiled peanuts, shrimp, fried doughnuts!

Drumming her fingers on the atlas, she asked, “Do you think Mom ever slept with the Shrimp Man?”

“Que?”

“Beth.”

“Who’s the Shrimp Man?”

Meredith turned to face her sister. “The Shrimp Man. The one who sold shrimp next to the grocery store. He had a white beard. He was always unhealthily tan.”

“I have no idea who you are talking about.” She scratched Duke’s head.

Meredith couldn’t believe she had such a sharp memory that her sister didn’t share. “I always thought that’s why we left,” she said.

“Why would Mom have sex with the Shrimp Man? That guy looked like he came in with the tide, with the dead fish and the driftwood. He looked sandy.”

“So you do remember him!”

“Vaguely. I haven’t thought about him in years.”

“He was a fisherman who used to have a day job and then he quit to sell shrimp. He called her Doc.”
“Doc and the Shrimp Man.”

“There was definitely something between them.” She pictured him, scooping up pink shrimp for her mother.

Beth waved her hand, as if she were shooing away a pesky fly.

“Mom knows too much about relationships to unexpectedly fall in love.”

“He was—”

“Mer, I don’t want to talk about, why would I want to talk about it? Why would I want to talk about the Shrimp Man.”

Meredith let the conversation drop, surprised. She was speeding back to a moment when they were kids, and Beth was rushing ahead. She was time traveling all over the place and her sister had a destination, someone waiting for her to arrive. Meredith felt angry with herself, and a little bit guilty.

They passed a clump of gas stations and hotels. People’s lives were happening off of the exit ramps, plots that had nothing to do with them. She felt disconnected; no one in their family knew where they were, not even one person. Dusk was settling on the lone stretch of highway and the air felt wet.

Ever since they had rushed out of Florida when they were kids, and every time they moved, which had been often, Beth withdrew more from the family. Then she started dating—Rick, Allen, Roger, that one guy who always wore a backpack, Tim, Dominic. A guy named Wilder. Was his name really Wilder or was that his last name? Meredith couldn’t tell if her sister’s behavior was part of a healing process, or if it was self-destruction. Or maybe she was wrong about everything; Beth’s cycle of boyfriends, her impulsive love, her willingness to drive cross country. Maybe Beth was simply living.
“Beth, let's stop—Duke has to go,” Meredith said, scratching him behind the ear.

“Just a few more miles, then we'll stop.”

“Look at that field, it's perfect.”

Beth sighed and pulled off the exit. They rounded the highway's curve and Meredith pointed to their right. On one side of the road there was a Holiday Inn, a breakfast restaurant, and a gas station. This side of the street looked to be new. Across the street, however, there was a red blinking light, “HO EL,” over a one-story grey building. Next to it was an empty parking lot covered in weeds, stretched out like a threadbare carpet. The red HO EL light sizzled on and off.

“Let's stay on this side,” Meredith said.

At the Holiday Inn, led by a young girl, a black pony trotted around the building. “I guess that hotel allows pets,” Beth said, pointing.

Meredith laughed, thinking it was something her mother would have said. Leaning against the car, she stretched, wrapping Duke's leash around her wrist. As an afterthought, she grabbed a tennis ball from the glove compartment. Beth ran inside the gas station to use the bathroom, yelling that she would “be quick.”

A teenage boy walked his puppy nearby, a pit-bull. Meredith threw the yellow ball, watching Duke bound after it. The sun was shining down on her and she massaged her sore arms, glad to be out of the car. The puppy ran after the ball, too, and she threw it for both of them, watching the dogs run side by side. The puppy yipped and snapped at Duke's heels as he ran to the edge of the green field.

Jogging in place, she felt her muscles releasing tension. She and Beth had always been healthy when they were young. They had taken
it for granted, covered in beach and backyard. They were strong, they raced around the block, they hit each other. Meredith looked at her watch. What was taking Beth so long? She had been speeding on the highway, racing at every turn, and now she was lingering in a gas station. At the side of the field, Duke sniffed the ground and wolfed something down.

“Duke!” she yelled, clapping her hands and running over to him. Then he lay down and rolled around in whatever he had been eating.

“No, Duke, no!”

The dog ran toward Beth, who was strolling toward him with a large fountain drink in hand. Beth reached out her hand to pet him, but drew back abruptly. She put her hand over her mouth. “Is that Duke?”

The smell was overwhelming. “What is it?”

Duke ran in circles. Without acknowledging the sisters, the teenager quickly scooped up his puppy and took it back to his truck.

“We can’t get back in the van like this,” Meredith said. Duke smelled terrible. The dog’s tongue lolled out of its mouth and he sneezed several times.

“Let’s check into the hotel and bathe him,” Meredith said, holding her arm over her nose.

“That one?” Beth pointed to the Holiday Inn. “The one that allows pets?” The joke about the pony didn’t seem as funny now. The pony was nowhere to be seen. “I’ll find the towels in the back of the van and just rub him down.”

Duke sneezed again, his hair sticking up in patches.

“Are you kidding me? He’s covered.”

Duke jumped up on her sister’s leg. Beth pulled back, disgusted,
wiping her jeans with her hand. “What if we just dump him in the hotel pool and —”

“Just slow down and be rational for a second.”

“That’s what chlorine is for. It’s a dead animal.” Beth let out a long sigh. “It’s part of life.” She sniffed her hand.

“Part of life,” Meredith repeated.

“I’m sure that pool has seen worse. Duke, why now?” Duke jumped on her leg and Beth pushed him back down, roughly. “Couldn’t you have waited? What is your problem?”

“Why can’t we stop for the night and take care of the dog?”

Beth walked back toward the car. “If you weren’t here we would already be in Charleston. You over-think everything, you want to stop every five minutes.” She was speaking quickly now, her face contorted in an unattractive way. “Why did you come?”

Meredith gave a sideways glance at the dog and pressed her lips together.

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The moon was bright, and the sky was freshly raked of clouds. Meredith was curled up on a lawn chair by the pool at the Holiday Inn, her hands crossed over her chest. Secretly, she had been hoping for some kind of godly intervention, something that might turn the buggy around, but this wasn’t what she’d had in mind. Her sister was scrubbing Duke in the overly air-conditioned hotel room.

Next to the metal fence around the pool, droplets of water glinted on the hydrangea petals, wet and electric blue. Why did some of them bloom in purple, some of them in pink, some of them pale green? It had something to do with the soil, something to do with the
acidity of the earth and the amount of lime. In Arizona, they 
bloomed white and dry.

Her sister walked out of the hotel lobby, minus Duke, and 
slumped down in the lawn chair next to her. Meredith stared at the 
water, a thousand miles from home. Her sister was angry with her, she 
knew from her silent, stiff walk. But, you know what? She was angry 
with her sister too, and she didn’t care if Beth knew how she felt. 
This guy, Jon, wasn’t good enough for her and she should know this 
before she moved in with him and ate gravy all the time.

She got a whiff of the Duke smell on her sister.

"I’ll drive you to the airport," Beth said. "You don’t have to go 
the rest of the way with me."

Meredith winced. If she told her sister that she smelled like 
death, she might stomp off and not talk at all.

"I think you should go," Beth said.

Her sister was giving her an ultimatum. The triangular trip would 
cut the airport. But no matter what she decided, her sister would 
still live across the country, a plane ride away. On the way back to 
Phoenix, she would spend a few hours staring out the window at the 
ground below. Maybe she could order a five dollar cocktail and think 
about all the good times, such as when her sister’s dog rolled in a 
rotting animal and they got in a fight on her way to live with a 
Venezuelan lover.

Meredith covered her nose, trying not to breathe in the stench, 
wondering if she should suggest a swim. Glancing at the sweet-
smelling hydrangeas, she thought about her mother. Why couldn’t she 
just tell her sister she was being a fool? That she was making a mistake?

"Come on, let’s go for a swim," Meredith said.
“A swim? You want to go for a swim, now?”
Meredith turned to face her sister. “Beth, you really smell.”
“What?” She looked confused.
Meredith didn’t say anything, waiting for her response.
Beth sat up in the lawn chair, slowly. “I do?”
“You smell so bad!”

Her sister laughed, and Meredith joined her. They both laughed, laughing until Meredith’s side hurt. “Seriously, jump in the pool.”

She watched Beth hold her nose and jump in the water. Meredith took her shoes off and sat at the edge of the stairs. Tentatively, she dipped her toes in the cold water. They stayed outside for a long time and enjoyed the moon, the cool water, the silence. They drove on in the morning.