

DANA SCHULTE

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Adam was standing in shadows in the parking lot. A lamppost next to his white car created a contrast. The light concentrated on his face and faded into darkness as it worked down his body. As I watched his body sway from side to side, I could feel the blood drain from my face and my eyes squint as they fought back tears. Following his near collapse to the cold concrete beneath him, he sheepishly walked closer to me, reaching for a hug. Instead, I gripped his arm in the palms of my hands, hoping to support his body. I knew if he fell I could not do anything to help him. I would be crushed beneath his solid figure.

I slipped his keys out of his hand and into my pocket. He complained as I walked to the passenger side of my Aerostar and opened the door for him, commenting sarcastically about my gentlemanly gestures. I ignored him, shutting the door on him mid-sentence. I watched him fumble as he tried to find the seatbelt behind his right ear. Rolling my eyes, I walked to the driver's side door, letting myself in.

The smell of liquor on his breath burned my nose. I laid my head on my steering wheel and gazed at him. He grinned at me, and I sighed as I sat up and turned my key in the ignition. The van was instantly filled with loud music. I hoped it would fill the lack of conversation, but it didn't. He turned down the music as if it interfered with his ability to think. I hesitated, holding my breath, as the volume slowly declined. The staggering rhythm of the piano solo was blocking my own thoughts, and I didn't mind. I desperately needed the deafening music to distract me from my own reflections. In the silence all I could think about was our time in Mexico, and that was a painful thought.

Missouri to Mexico is a lengthy twenty-two hour drive, and it would have been spent in agony without Adam sitting next to me. We were faithful van buddies, always saving two seats so we could sit together. Adam was the silent bonding type, very mysterious and introverted. He liked to enjoy the company of others without engaging in a deep conversation. He was light-hearted, laughing as his eyes disappeared with the emerging of his smile. Adam spent a significant portion of the trip in a slumber, allowing his head to rest

on me. The weight of his head always caused my arm to fall asleep around the same time he did, sending tingles up and down the surface of my skin.

Even our delay at the border didn't ruin his sunny disposition. Our trailer of supplies was not registered to leave the country, and we were stranded for the day. My pale skin was scorching from the sun's heat that bounced off the black asphalt. We sat on the curb outside a local market observing the activity around us. I was asked continually if I needed water or an additional layer of sunscreen. I was already drowning in the sunscreen that had been smeared on me, the excess never absorbing into my skin.

Four hours after being stranded, we piled back into the vans, covering the seats with sweat and sunscreen, and continued three hours further into the heart of Mexico to the church that would serve as our home for the next week. Stepping out of the van was like stepping into an alternate universe. I could feel the excitement and adrenaline building inside me as my heart began to race. I stood silently as I tried to soak all the details into my memory.

The townspeople had been living in ruins long after the hurricane passed through. Many houses had been torn from their foundations and were now floating in the muddy ocean that was once blue. Now it was brown and murky and held the belongings and memories of once comfortable families. One particular family had been left without a home, forcing them to live in a small shack that consisted of scraps of wood and pieces of tin that had been nailed together, creating the semblance of a wall. The attempt at a roof looked as if it could fall in on the family any moment. Children surrounded us. They laughed and kicked around balls of paper, playing soccer. These children greeted us, ecstatic at our presence. Their feet were bare and plastered with mud. Their pants were too short and covered in gaping holes. Most were not wearing shirts. I could not imagine what they were so happy about.

Adam climbed out of the van behind me, grazing his hand across the small of my back and chuckling when I jumped from the shock. Just the touch of his hand made my stomach twist in an unfamiliar way, and I experienced butterflies for the first time. Watching him smile and look around triggered a smile of my own. I could feel how genuine my smile was, stretching across my face.

The light in front of me changed from yellow to red as I slowed to a stop and settled back in my seat. I felt my chest quiver as I struggled for breath. My sharp inhalations came more quickly than normal, and I struggled to keep my breathing steady. My left foot rested on the edge of my seat, and I ran my thumb back and forth across the hole that was wearing in my favorite blue jeans. I put my chin on my knee and turned my head to look at Adam. I watched him fidget and rock his head back and forth until he caught my eye. A devious chuckle slipped through his lips as he reached down to unbuckle his seatbelt. By the time I reacted and reached over to grab his arm, it was too late. He had bolted from the side of my van and scurried across the street.

I dropped my left leg back to the floor and rolled down my window. He was standing next to a blossoming carnation plant. I put my arm out the window and motioned for him to come back to the car. My worry built to rage as he folded his arms across his chest and idly rolled his head from side to side. My demand for him to come back to the car came out in a low roar. I hoped it would make him feel threatened, but it didn't. He nonchalantly sauntered back to my car, flaunting the fact that I did not intimidate him. I could feel the heat on my face as the waves of rage flooded over me.

When he returned to the van I studied the excitement on his face, and my heart felt heavy. He smiled and brushed my hair out of my scowling face. I couldn't tolerate his touch anymore. A touch that once sent hope and adrenaline rushing through my system now only caused my body to stiffen with tension. While I leaned back, avoiding the stroke of his thumb on my cheek, his other hand revealed a flower. He placed the white carnation behind my ear and smiled. I felt a twist in my stomach that I never wanted to endure. I shifted my body away from him and turned the music up, hoping it would hide the sound of my sniffles that were slowly becoming uncontrollable.

It was time to get back to the real world, back to home where the possessions we take for granted everyday are things that these people only hope to have in their dreams. I couldn't believe this was it. The week was over and we'd done as much as we could in the time we were given. As I pulled off my pinstriped hat, I wiped the sweat from my forehead and a tear from my eye. I stared at the accomplishment that stood before me, one of three houses we had

built from the ground up in the last five days. It stood with pride among its surroundings, but it was nothing special. It was nothing that we would consider a home.

It contained a single room where the parents and all nine of their children would sleep, their eleven bodies forced into the single queen-size mattress we had bought them. Their bedroom was also their kitchen, their living room, and indoor plumbing was not even feasible. The outhouse sat behind their new home and consisted of a bucket behind a doorway, and small tub filled with water, murky from the dirt of the skin that had been washed clean in it. Unlike the other aspects of their lives, their new home stood tall and proud. Cinder blocks on top of cinder blocks, framed with unpolished wood and a tin roof. I looked at the tears that were being shed in the mother's eyes. She could not convey her thoughts, but the emotions are universal. She stared at one particular present we left her with, a Bible. The inside of the front cover had the signature from every volunteer who had lent a hand in rebuilding her home. Her young children tugged on her dress as she cried, running her hand over the top of our writing.

I stood next to Adam, leaning on his shoulder as his arm draped around me. As emotionally and physically draining as the week had been, I still found comfort in his presence. The chemistry between us ignited. We were both gleaming in sweat, barely standing, and yet still content under the violent afternoon sun. Our dripping arms were pressed together, our fingers practically intertwined. My body's heat rose with every minute our clammy bodies stuck together but neither of us wanted to separate. When we were together I didn't worry about anything.

A horn blared, and I quickly slammed the brake pedal to the ground, snapping back from the memory to this conscious nightmare. I waved an apology to the man in the small car next to me, embarrassed by my negligence. I sucked in a deep breath of relief, but Adam only laughed. I glowered and wondered what had changed in the last few years. He used to be so generous and kind. He was the type of guy that every girl wanted to be with. I thought that week in Mexico had taught us how to live our lives to the best of our ability, not to take anything for granted. We had seen firsthand what life could be like. I felt my hands tighten on the steering wheel and could see the frustration as my knuckles

became ashen, drained of color.

The girls' bedroom was suffocating. The air was thick and stale, making it hard to breath. On our last night in Mexico, the house rules were shattered. The blending of "pink" girls and "blue" boys created "purple," which was strictly forbidden. We decided to sleep outside together on that last night. As the sun started to set we watched the changing of the colors from the second-story patio. Leaning on the wooden rail, we studied the sky as the cool colors were replaced with pinks and yellows. The warm shades of the sunset blended together to imitate an oil painting above the ocean. I was paralyzed in awe at the artistic expression being spread above us, until the last hue of color had left the sky. With the absence of the sun, the chill of the breeze became more obvious. All of the air mattresses forced to fit on the patio created one large bed for the group. We laid out together, draped in every direction. I had Christian's legs on one of my legs, Caylea's head to the side of me, and Adam lying right next to me.

The poverty of the town left it without a light source after the sunset. The only luminosity came from the fish fry at the house behind us. Adam and I rested nonchalantly by the railing at the end of the concrete. We didn't want the family to see us watching them, but we were curious to observe their culture. We kept our cheeks close to the mattress and stared through the gaps of the wood railing. The family stood around the fire, scraping the skin from fish as they laughed at things we could not understand. I wished more people interacted this way. They seemed so simple and content. As they scraped away the fish scales and wiped beads of sweat from their faces, they smiled. The family's glow in the illumination of the fire burned an image inside my memory.

The potent odor of the fish continued from behind us and was accompanied with the briny scent of the sea. The water was calm, but the ocean breeze rolled over us in waves, saturating us with its cool wind and leaving the taste of salt on my tongue. We did not talk. Rather, we spent our time listening to the environment around us. A young boy sat out by the street and invaded the silence with his acoustic guitar. The flamenco melody put a bounce in my toes, swaying my body side to side as I danced with Adam without even standing from our inflated mattress. I laughed in a low chuckle that

was almost too hushed to be heard.

As the whispered laugh faded from my voice, I lay there, tranquil in the night, resting my cheek on his arm. There was something about the way his smile was crooked. One side lifted into a smirk while the other remained entirely serious. Not being able to read his expression invoked a mystery about him. The chocolate color of his eyes was rich and passionate. They could never hide emotion as his smirk did. They always revealed the truth in their shade and intensity. These were the little things I loved about Adam. His skin was chapped and rough, not allowing my fingers to smoothly slide over his arm. I could see the scar on his arm shining in the light of the fire. They were the parts that meant nothing to him but everything to me. There was a certain way he brushed my hair out of my face, gently stroking my cheekbone as he did. He leaned into me, carefully, nervous just to be closer to me. He was near enough that I could smell the mint aroma on his breath. The scent from his gum was overwhelming and my nose twitched from the tingle. We remained awake through the night, content with being together and bonding through the silence.

The enchanting sky was like something I'd only seen in my dreams. It was a place that I escaped to when the chaos of the world was crashing in on me. The dark blue sky glowed with stars, far too numerous to count. The Milky Way was discernible, a gray smudge across the sky. Meteors started to appear. Each streak left a trail of shimmering dust behind it. Seeing each meteor pass through the heavens was like witnessing a miracle, living in a euphoric moment that I wanted to last forever.

The howling of dogs accompanied the acoustic melodies in the darkness. I stayed next to Adam, the adrenaline rushing through my system. I could feel the electricity between us every time his arm touched mine. It was like experiencing love for the first time. Every little touch made me flinch, as if the sparks of chemistry actually burned my skin. The gusts from the ocean tossed my long brown hair across my face. The cool wind raised goose bumps across my hot skin.

Just thinking about that night made my heart race, and I could feel the corners of my lips turn up, stuck in a wistful smile as if I were back in Mexico for that night, frozen in euphoria. I slowly pulled myself from my recollection. My lips returned to their frown

as I pulled into Adam's driveway. Home again, we climbed from my van. I watched him shiver in the chill of the night and briskly march up his driveway. I walked slowly and paced my steps as I hummed that flamenco melody to myself. He waited for me outside the door, opened it, and let me walk in first. It briefly reminded me of the guy I used to know. I settled him in on the couch, covered him with a multicolored quilt and filled up a cup of water that was cold enough to fog the outside of the glass. I sat down on the couch, slowly handing him the water, careful not to spill. He laid his head on me just as he had on that never-ending drive and smiled up at me with his familiar crooked smile.

I tried to smile but the memories wouldn't allow it. He lifted his hand to gently brush my hair out of my face, but only managed to rigidly graze my nose before his eyes closed against his will. His hand dropped from my face and he was suddenly unconscious, lying in my lap. My stomach twisted into a knot. I didn't know what the future held for us. For that night I just stayed with him, this time brushing his hair off his face with my right hand, while my left tingled beneath the weight of his neck.