

## **Gridlock**

*Conor Stuart Roe*

There weren't any clouds to block the sunlight, and it gleamed off the shiny exteriors of all the cars standing stolid, bumper to bumper as far ahead as could be seen. The pavement was dark with moisture in spots like maybe it'd rained a little in the morning, and the air was heavy and humid and weighed down sticky against skin. The air conditioner was on, but it was old and sputtered and the air only came out of it a little cooler, not enough to make anyone much more comfortable. His fingers thumped a little rhythm into the wheel as they idled and waited to go.

"It sure is warm today." she said.

"Yeah. I thought after last week we were gonna be cool the rest of the year, but it is damn toasty today!"

She glanced at her makeup in the mirror of the visor, to see how it was holding up in the heat. After a moment the car in front moved twenty or so feet, and they eased up behind it.

"So when's your flight again? Three?" he asked.

"Ten after, yeah. It's just one now."

"Alright, we've got time then." Then he added, "crazy that there's so much traffic. I wonder if there's an accident or something."

"Mmhm."

A wasp landed on the outside of the windshield and waggled its antennae around for a minute. There wasn't anything of interest on the glass and it flew off.

He turned to her and put on a smile. "So, you looking forward to it?"

"I don't know. It's something." She let out a long sigh. "It's probably for the best in the long run."

The curvature of his mouth faltered. They were stopped, and he took one hand off the wheel to rub her back. "You'll get a say in it, if they can move you in a year or two, right?" Her eyes stayed fixed gazing out of the window, to the horizon.

"She told me it's basically reapplying to other places in the company. That's not a guarantee that I could come back to St. Louis, though. Their operations aren't very big here yet, and she told me they're working on it, but who the hell knows." Her lips were stretched thin.

He looked at her with concern for a moment. "Damn, I thought it would be more definite than that. I hope they get bigger here and you can move back."

"Yeah, that'd be the easiest way, wouldn't it? I just feel like it might be wishful thinking. But worst-case scenario, I can always apply to things back here after a little while, and I'll get better offers after doing this."

"So how long would you be gone if you did that?" The car started moving again, slowly.

"Still probably a while. I might have to work for like two years before anyone else takes the experience seriously."

"Two years." he looked ahead at the road, but his face was preoccupied. "That's a long time."

Neither said anything as they drove for a few minutes.

His voice broke the silence. "So what's the job like?" He glanced over at her with another smile, but it faded from his face once he looked ahead again. "You'll be traveling a good amount, won't you? Maybe you'll get to travel here for some things!"

"It's management consulting, I'll be like helping businesses figure out staffing mostly. It sounded like junior associates travel more, but most of the assignments are a couple months in one place so unless I'm lucky I might not be back in St. Louis too soon."

"Well.." He thought for a moment. "Traveling will be fun anyway. You probably get to meet a lot of people!" He took her hand in his and grinned.

At his touch, her previously serious look broke - with a half grin she moaned, "Awwhh, but you know how much I hate meeting new people!"

"Sounds more interesting than sitting behind a desk!" He smiled brushed his hand along her leg before pulling it back up onto the wheel and looking out over the road again.

She sat for a moment, then rolled her head back against the seat and glared at the roof. "Ughhh. It's just annoying to restart everything. You're here, Nicole and Erica are here, everybody's here.

Like, I've known Nicole since college. I'm just not gonna become close to other people like that right away."

"Even if you don't have new super best friends in a year, you won't necessarily be lonely. You'll make friends at work!"

"Work friends are work friends. It's just different when you're all serious and whatnot every time you're around people, and so many people have kids or whatever, it's hard to hang out outside work. I bet if I came back to the hospital in two years people would barely remember me!"

"Aw, I don't think so! Anyway, you spend so much time with me and Nicole here, if you go there and try to make new friends I'm sure you'll find some people!"

"It just sounds annoying."

"Yeah. It's tough. But maybe it could be good to - I don't know. Space can be a good thing sometimes. It's just for a while, anyway. I'll still be here when you come back."

"Yeah, I know. I just wish things didn't have to change."

"Nobody's making you go."

"I know. It sucks, but I think this is the only thing I can do unless I want to be in shitty healthcare admin jobs for the rest of my life. Like if it weren't for the location, I'd be so happy about this job, consulting is so hard to get into mid-career. This is my best shot at not-living-in-a-studio-apartment-with-broken-everything money, and I want to be able to settle down at some point. I mean, don't we want life to be different at some point not too long from now...?"

"Yeah. It's tough that it's been so hard to find anything here."

They didn't say anything for another minute, and the only sound was the air conditioner thrumming. The sun was bright in their eyes, and little beads of sweat formed on their lips and foreheads.

"Damn, I don't know why we didn't bring any water for the road. It's so hot." She lifted her shirt up to her belly button and fanned it up and down two or three times.

"Yeah, if we were going faster we could roll the windows down but that wouldn't do anything for us right now."

"I wonder if there's a spot we can stop off to get water not too far off the highway."

"I bet. We probably have time."

She reclined her seat back as far as it would go, which wasn't very far, and shielded the sun from her eyes with a hand.

For a moment he turned his face to her body stretched over the seat. With a deep breath he asked, "So, did you think any more about what I said the other night?"

With closed eyes, she said, "Oh... a little. I don't know."

"I'm just worried we'll both feel lonely while we're apart. Maybe it's best to make the most of a bad situation."

She sighed. "You don't think things would be different when I came back?"

He took a minute to respond. "I don't think we'll get along any less well, or be any less right for each other. It just seems a little unrealistic to think we'll be a happy cheerful couple if we're apart all the time."

She didn't respond. She twirled her hair in between her fingers tensely and closed her eyes tight.

After a minute, he looked back at her. "Just because we're together and still love each other doesn't mean you can't meet new people there. You don't think it'd get sad just thinking about each other all the time if we can't be physically together?"

"But then what? Are we even together anymore at that point?"

"Sure, we'll still talk all the time, and I hope you would want to come back."

She sighed and put both hands over her face, rubbing her eyes. "God. I just like things the way they are. I like life here and I don't want things to change too much. I'd rather live two dumb, miserable years than not be able to come back to this."

"Things won't change, not really. I'll still be here and when you come home it'll be like nothing happened."

"I don't know... maybe that's true. How could we be sure though? It's just hard. One or two years is like exactly the wrong amount of time."

"Yeah."

Outside, the dark green trees lining the expressway sagged in the sun. Flies buzzed around something on the shoulder of the road, just outside the passenger window. After a little silence she stretched and sat up again and her eyes wandered out of the window, but she didn't spend very long looking to see what the flies were excited about. "God, this heat is giving me such a headache."

"I'm sorry," he took a hand away from the wheel and clasped her fingers in his. "We'll stop off at an exit and get some water."

The lane started moving again gradually. They rolled along past one milepost before slowing to a standstill again.

"You're not worried you'll be lonely?"

"I won't be alone! I'd still have you guys, and I want to try to come back a lot of weekends."

"That'd be nice. Maybe I can even come up sometimes too! I'll be curious to see your new life!"

"It just might be harder than you think to meet new people. People are like getting married and having kids by now. It's about the time that people get tied down. Stuff gets harder as you get older."

"I guess. I still think it'd be possible."

"I just don't know why. I don't really want to, and I don't think I'm going to want to."

"Do we just want to be sad sacks sitting alone in our empty apartments wishing we weren't apart, for who knows how long? Like... I don't want you to miss out on interesting people there because you're stuck thinking about all of us here."

"I won't! I swear I'll try to make friends. But isn't this different?"

"Yeah, you might be right. I don't know. I think maybe we should try but we don't have to."

"Why can't we just figure it out in a little while? Moving is already too much to think about right now."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Maybe the only thing is for you to get there and we'll see how it is."

"I just want to feel sure that if I want to just keep things how they've been that you'll want to, too."

"I will! I want whatever's going to make us both happy."

"Okay. It just sounds like you don't totally like the idea."

He was silent for a minute and looked up at the sky. The air was cooling a little. Slowly, he said, "I don't want you to think I'm glad there's space between us. If it were up to me you'd be here with me. It's not like I'd be looking forward to it. I'm not even thinking about what I would do. I'm just trying to think of what makes sense."

She was looking out the window. "I don't know. I'm just going to get there first. Let's talk about it a different time."

The cars had started rolling again by then. In the distance ahead, in the thick, wet air, a dark mat of clouds had formed.

"Okay."

They drove for a while without saying anything, and after a few minutes there were raindrops on the windshield, first a few, and then a heavy downpour.