

The Hail Mary

— AN ESSAY BY —

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I graduated high school in 1999. The Internet Bubble was fully inflated, the federal budget was balanced, and a gallon of gas cost ninety-eight cents.

I graduated college in 2003. The economy was in freefall, the job market was a bad joke, and 9/11 had created an atmosphere of doomsday paranoia.

I had triple-majored at Tulane University, but all of those majors were in the liberal arts. I probably could have found a nine-to-five job anyway—nothing satisfying, something that at least came with a decent paycheck—but I was one of those annoying millennials everybody was starting to rail about who had the nerve to want more than that. One of those millennials who remembered adults crowing that she could be anything she wanted to be, even though all those adults seemed now to turn around and say, “Just kidding. Suck it up.”

I got three part-time jobs. My highest pay rate was \$9.75 an hour. I’d get done closing a bookstore around 11:30 at night, hop in my dangerously old Honda Civic, and head for a 400-square-foot studio sublet with a sad, shitty air mattress.

And sometimes, I couldn’t do it. Sometimes, I kept driving. One night, as a sunflower field flew by and the moon was a lonely slip of itself, I thought of a story I had written when I was in high school. More of a sketch, really, about a girl named Rainy, a crabby millennial like me.

I was too poor to buy a computer, so I went to the public library and used one of their study rooms with an ancient PC. In four months, I finished the first draft of what would one day become *Blood Highway*, tears streaming down my face as I wrote the last lines. I was twenty-two years old.

But then I put it away, and I tried, for a period of about three years, to live a normal life, to be anything other than a writer, as Lorrie Moore says one must. I failed.

After that, having gotten my own apartment for the very first time, I read the novel again and realized how bad it was. But it had a heart, and it kept calling to me still, insisting that I become adept enough at the craft of writing to let Rainy and her story see daylight. But how? I was a nobody with no publications, living far from the book world's epicenter. No old friend from Yale I could call. No sorority sister who knew somebody in publishing.

Of course, the life I'd created for Rainy was a lot worse than mine, and, weirdly, I resented her for that, for stealing my misery-thunder. Maybe that's why I gave her my face and kept rewriting. Maybe that's why, despite the fact that I wrote eight other books—also not published—between the ages of twenty-seven and twenty-nine, I returned to Rainy over and over again, putting her through brand-new dimensions of hell.

Because that stubborn little bitch just wouldn't die. I'd throw everything I had at her, the darkest nightmares from the darkest pole of my imagination. We'd get to the end again and she'd be on the ground, soaked, hurt, shivering. Then she'd grin up at me with blood in her teeth. And she'd growl, "That all you fuckin' got?"

It took me twelve years to start listening to her. It took my agent—who'd sold another novel I'd written by this point—asking me, in a proposition as ingenious as it was terrifying, "How about first person?" It took me growing up, took my admitting that I came of age in a cold house and in a frightened era. It took me embracing that angry, combative, hyper-verbal smart-ass who lived inside my mind, and it took some of the greatest friends anybody's ever had, helping me in ways large and small: encouraging me when I wanted to give up, buying me lunch when I couldn't take another bowl of forty-cent ramen, putting a roof over my head when I had no money for rent.

And man alive, it took an editor, Chuck Adams. He went Rambo on this thing. He massacred every darling and made the manuscript read like a thriller instead of like a Volkswagen Beetle dragging ten dead horses through a swamp. There's no way he could have known what was really going through my mind as I told him about *Blood Highway*, but it was something along the lines of, "It's my baby, it's my candle in the window, it's my lighthouse on the rocky shore, it's the one thing I have to see in print before I die, please!"

So. Thank you, Chuck.

Rainy Cain is seventeen. She lives in Minneapolis. After her mother's suicide, the father she's never met shows up and takes her on a cross-country odyssey to hunt for the four million dollars he believes is buried somewhere in California. A good-hearted cop is right behind them, haunted by his own demons, intent on bringing her home. But as time and miles go by, Rainy's road trip becomes a fight for survival. And whether or not she'll make it hinges precariously on how much she's willing to give up to save herself.

I've thought about this book and its impossible journey a lot. Here, at the real ending, it reminds me of a football game—like the ones where I'm from, in the uppermost Midwest. It's November and the weather is miserable. As you huddle for warmth, snow seems to blow sideways, tiny ice pellets that sneak through any minuscule gap in your four layers of clothing so their edges can cut you before they melt. On the field, some backwoods B-team is getting their butts kicked. There's two minutes left in the third quarter and they're twenty points behind. But the people in the stands figure, "Hell, I've probably caught a cold already." And the hot chocolate's good, and everybody's cheeks are rosy.

And they are incredibly impressed that their skinny quarterback is still taking snaps. Her nose is broken and her head is bleeding and she should've stayed down after the last devastating hit. But instead she's smiling a little in the huddle now, saying: "We might not be much. But goddamnit, we're here."

She goes to the line. It's third and goal. It's so son-of-a-bitching cold, and the wind is howling so loudly she has to scream to be heard. She takes the ball in chapped fingers, as the crowd gets to their feet and raises a cheer, and as her teammates dash over the muddy field, looking up toward the heavens like they truly believe a moment lived right can live on forever.

My dear reader, we'll win this game yet. Catch.