



# Compass Rose

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## Longing on Hwy 10

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**T**he Shell station is a horrible ship going nowhere. She feels lucky that it is not a Mobil station or the irony would be too much. The cars drift along on their way to Hwy 10—the only road out of this—the only town—she’s known. She stands behind the counter shifting her weight from one foot to the other, leaning forward on the counter in front of her, backward against the wall behind her. No one realizes until they’ve worked in one how claustrophobically small a gas station is. It is this smallness, in fact, of the station, of her life, of the possibilities in this town that got her thinking about him in the first place.

She has heard a rumor that he came in here at least once before while she was working, and her Uncle Steve told him never to try it again. Steve is protective of all women that way. Like the Alpha male wolf in a National Geographic film, he is always chasing things away, and this is precisely why Lynn doesn’t know her father. The story goes that when Lynn’s mother was six months pregnant with Lynn, he grew restless—Lynn’s mother inserts other two syllable words here, depending on mood—stupid, foolish, horny—and left Lynn’s mother for another girl at the factory who had been a stripper before she had moved to Warner.

When he realized what he had done, he tried to come back, but Steve, then sixteen and almost as formidable as now, had met him at the end of the driveway with a muzzle-loader hefted to his shoulder, and her father had never come back.

Her Aunt Nell had told her to look for a light-haired, fair-skinned man about forty, but this was the Midwest, and there was no shortage of those. Some days she treated all of the men like they might be him, smiling brightly, and adding a word or two about the weather along with the “suggestive selling” she was supposed to do—on order from corporate—pushing a \$10.99 pair of sunglasses or a \$4.99 collapsible umbrella on people as well as offering to clean their windshields, though only out-of-towners accepted the windshield cleaning, with a confused look, as if they’d never had a notion that a teenage girl could squeegee bugs off a windshield.

One day a man came in and stared at her for a moment then fumbled around his chest pocket and his pants pockets—both front and back—before backing out sheepishly. “Forgot my wallet,” he’d smiled.

For a while she wanted that to be him. She saw enough resemblance for it to be a possibility, and the next slow shift she brought in her biology workbook and did numerous Punnett squares in the margins, and her algebra notebook—as if she could formulate a science of probability genetics there on the counter next to the “RC cola & a Moon Pie--\$1.99” sign Danielle, the day manager, had made.

Because this was the Midwest and nearly all men seemed blond and around forty, she did not flirt with older men the way some of the girls did. “How about this one?” Selena had teased as a tall, bony man approached from his beat up station wagon.

Lynn eyed her levelly. She'd told Selena, given her Aunt Nell's description, she could be any man's daughter. "Awww...you're no fun," Selena pouted. She unbuttoned her shirt a few buttons and grabbed a blow-pop from the lollypop tree next to the register, unwrapping it into the shape of a tiny superhero with a cape, and rubbed him over her tongue and lips while ringing up the man's purchase. He looked past Selena to Lynn who shrugged embarrassedly, and he trudged back to his car. As he pulled away, they both read "Honk If You Love Jesus" on the bumper and "Baby on Board" on the back window. The cushiony blue top of a baby seat was just visible as he turned right out of the station's drive, headed to the highway.

"Great," Lynn elbowed Selena, "Now he's going to tell his wife they're never living out in the boondocks. He'll say, 'All those small town girls are just whores looking to screw their way out.'"

"If he was your dad," Selena countered, "he's the pervert with two separate families twenty years apart."

Lynn did wonder about this occasionally—if she had brothers and sisters with a mother unimaginably different from her own who ended up with capital letters in their genotypes. Maybe her father had taken up with a Mexican woman who got tired of moving with the seasons, and she had half-siblings with dark, almond eyes that reminded her of the large glass eyes of the deer over the mantle. Uncle Steve had downed him with the same gun he had prodded at her father.

She was tempted to ask Steve who he was, but she'd never gotten the nerve. He'd changed since he'd been home. He'd always been a loner, but the loud type, guffawing at stupid movies or blasting his music in his room, but jail had changed him. He was a

loner now, too, but the too-quiet kind. The kind that neighbors talked about on the news after they said, “We never expected it.”

Even though it was a possible phenotype, she decided to stop putting out extra energy to men with brown eyes. Most of them were Mexican or Potawatomi, and she was sure she was too light for them to be her father. She used to say that she could get a sunburn from moonlight reflecting off of snow until Steve told her it was a tired line and got up, leaving her alone at the table.

She was iffy on how to divide men with hazel eyes. Maybe hazel eyes and red or wheat hair, yes—just enough energy to feel them out. She would be genuinely polite to them—try to remind them of something they may want to purchase at a gas station—cigarettes or a Hershey bar, but certainly not sunglasses or an umbrella. A man with eyes light enough to be her father would probably own numerous pairs of sunglasses—one for each car, one for the house, and maybe another pair for the office or woodshop—wherever he might go to escape the brazen sunlight that shone so intensely because it only worked in the summer, making the corn and soybeans grow before winter took over again, and the world took on a more sensible palette.

She didn’t flirt with any men who could have been her father—she even avoided men who could have been as young as thirty because they may have been, in reality, a boyish thirty-five, but this does not mean she was a prude. Girls like Selena, she knew, got reputations. That man with the “Baby on Board” and “Honk If You Love Jesus” signs probably prayed to forget about girls like that the way Jesus prayed for demons to be cast out of troubled people. She made sure only to have an interest in boys her own age or younger and never to talk, and never to do anything with anyone who would talk.

She had seduced Curt, the boy she was training to replace Selena, who was leaving for college at the end of August, within the second week of his working there. She was subtle, at first, unfolding the training manual over her chest and holding it open for him to read. When he smiled back shyly and couldn't make eye contact without reddening, she began training him on everything that happened in the room behind the counter—closing out the credit card machine, where you put any merchandise that you wanted deducted from your paycheck. There she would brush against him while showing him where the spare rolls of cash register tape were or the ordering forms for all the supplies and inventory. He would sigh and look away and stiffen with the same slow diffuseness with which he blushed.

One night, when she was in the back ordering an assortment of suckers for the lollipop tree, she sat on the folding chair, the order form on a three ring binder on her lap so she could press hard through the three layers of carbon paper, and she pulled him toward her, slipping her fingers into the waistband of his pants. She smiled, embarrassed, when he pulled the waistband to reveal a Velcro fly. A lot of boys who went hunting had “fast access” pants, and she wondered why? What was the rush to pee when you were all alone in the woods from dawn until dusk? He shook against her while he buried his fingers in her hair, then they both threw themselves together when they heard the crunch of gravel and headlights swept the wall above them.

“I think I'm trained okay for the register. You stay here.” He gave her a crooked grin.

She opened a Mt. Dew he'd left next to his merchandise and ran her fingers through her hair. At least since it was wavy, it always looked messy.

When Curt came back, he was red and trying not to laugh. He put his hand on her shoulder, holding her back in the chair. “Stay. Close your eyes.” He took a dew rag from the handkerchief pile—a stack of alternating reds and blues the old farmers her grandfather’s age were always buying—and tied it over her eyes. Her first thought was that he was younger, but he was stronger. He could gag her and tie her up and rape her here in the back room of the gas station, and Andy, the morning opener, would find her here tomorrow. Then she heard the crinkling of cellophane and was somehow comforted. The warmth of his hands and tongue around her thighs and stomach was causing her to float away from the gas station, up through the cirrus clouds above, when she felt something small and cold and speculative start to enter her. She started to pull her legs together when he kissed her neck and whispered, “Licorice whip—*your* merchandise pile,” and she relaxed as he twirled and sucked her and the licorice until she couldn’t feel the candy anymore and had to concentrate to believe it had been there.

The next year, at the clinic on the university campus where she will go with a quiet philosophy major to get her first prescription for birth control, she will first think of red licorice when the speculum enters her and will stifle a laugh. The doctor and the philosophy major will both ask if she is okay, and she will turn to the wall and blush, “Just cold—that’s all.” But that is the future.

Three weeks later Curt calls to quit the job at the Shell station. He has a girlfriend who is older, away at college out of state, and his parents tell him he has to choose one of the girls because this is not right. His mother has found a “suggestive note” from Lynn while doing laundry and does not understand all of the references to candy but still cannot believe how shameless a seventeen year-old girl can be.

Curt's girlfriend doesn't care about Lynn. She is twenty, and they have "an arrangement," which means that she is honest with Curt about whom she is sleeping with and uses protection while she waits for him to outgrow her. He doesn't, though. He is marrying her on a beach far away from everything he and Lynn know right now while Lynn's philosophy major plays funny songs on his guitar and makes mounds of french fries in his "Fry Baby" as she smiles and sobs her way through her first and only abortion.

Somewhere in-between this time—after Curt has quit the gas station and before Lynn has heard the words *philosophy* and *major* in conjunction with one another, a man comes into the gas station. He tops off with mid-grade and hands Lynn a twenty, wrinkled longwise down the middle. Before she can make change, he says, "Can you give me something to make up the difference? I have this weird spook about getting change back any place East of a certain point on Hwy 10." This is the oddest thing Lynn has ever heard. She chooses quickly but carefully. The items must add up exactly. She hands him a Skor bar, a Mr. Pibb, and a teddy bear keychain, pressing the soft fur of the minute bear into his palm. His eyes meet hers briefly. One of them is as blue as the sky, the other, as green as the sea.