

# Crashing America

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An excerpt from the novel

WE CROSSED ANOTHER BORDER and then came to a strange leftover place near Ogden, Utah. The bus stop consisted of a gas station and a crumbling, boarded-up brick storefront. Up against its wall leaned a girl, head-dressed with a plume of magenta hair, silver gleaming on her fingers, skin busting from balloon-colored clothes.

I couldn't resist this temptation, different than any offered at the places we'd been dumped so far.

As the bus driver took a break and smoked his cigarette, I left the other passengers and made my move.

I ambled over. "Hey."

She looked up, her skin a little ruddy and mottled, her eyes sluggish but alerted as she saw me. "You waiting for someone?"

"On a bus break," I explained.

On the highway a car raced by like a desert rat.

I leaned against the scorched wall.

She flashed her colors in the heat. Hot air bounced off the pavement and waved against her chartreuse top and purple skirt. Her top was torn and flapped to either side of her broad chest, revealing little heaps of cleavage.

“Where are you going?” I asked. Knowing I would follow.

She shifted between legs—one looked to be shorter than the other. It needed a boost from a taller, platform sneaker. “You got a ride out of here?”

“Do you?”

She told me she was waiting for a friend who was in a band. I asked her if they were any good.

“They have a gig in SLC next weekend. You could make up your own mind.” She rubbed her hand along her thigh. As if to challenge me, she said, “They also have an acoustic one in Dizzy Creek. Today.”

With relief, I retrieved my carrybag from the bus, got a schedule from the driver, and told the passengers, *Cheerios*.

When I stepped back onto the road, though, the girl had disappeared.

We hadn’t talked long, only a few minutes while the driver smoked, but I had thought she had asked me, more or less, to come along. Maybe I had misunderstood.

Should I run after my bus and bang on the door? It charged past, fumes in my face, engine lurching and whining.

I turned again to the hot brick wall where the girl had been. Now I wondered if she was a dizzy mirage.

My bus shot away like a bullet, charging until small and blurry, then absolutely nothing. A still highway, a hot parking lot, a blank line of horizon. Everything sank under the weight of the sun. No sounds and nothing around. I felt extinguished.

Across the highway—rocky, garbage-strewn dirt fields, smelling of burnt weeds and old cars. It was the only place to go. Dust flew over my boots as I started across the road.

From behind me, a yell. “Where are you going?”

I turned.

The girl’s uneven-leg thing turned her walk into a giant swagger. She thrust the tall leg and then swung the other up to meet it, each step propelled by her hips’ thrust. I ran back, so happy to see her. We were two girls in the wild west again. It was as if Cara had come back from the dead.

“That was weird. I thought you’d left.”

“I’m all yours,” she said. Her eyes sparkled and her skin gleamed, no longer so sluggish. “Don’t worry.”

As we waited for her boyfriend to come, we talked. Jessika was her name, “spelled with a special k” she said. The boyfriend’s name was Joey, and he had borrowed her car for a week, while she had been doing some work around town. I wasn’t quite sure what kind. Next she would follow Joey for a while, going to the concert tonight in Idaho and then to some bigger ones in Salt Lake.

It might all work out. If I got a ride with Jessika, I could stop off and crash with Meredith in SLC. And still be on my way to Nebraska.

As she spoke, Jessika's rings knocked together with a satisfying sound. She propped her weaker leg with its special platform sneaker against the brick. The small, puny leg made the rest of her body appear more full . . . as if she had started a scrawny winter tree—no leaves, all twig—then broke into bloom, full of summer flowering.

“I have this feeling that people think they can take advantage of you.” Jessika paused. “Do what they want with you.” She puffed up her broad chest and looked down at me. “Am I right?”

No one had ever said anything like that to me before. It was the exact opposite of how I thought I appeared.

“How about you? Want to take some advantage?” I said it without smiling, so she would think I was ready for her, ready to slide my hand up her short purple skirt and take her right against that wall.

Her lips smooshed outwards a little in response. “What?”

I tried to look away but couldn't. Everything about her was too delicious, clothes stretched tight and riding high to show a small pudge of tan belly and two thick pillars of thighs. Her height made it more majestic, made her gleam, defying this desert and dust.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

She paused. “Reno.”

“Yeah?”

“But I've been all over. I'm trying to get to every state,” she said.

“Yeah, sure.” She was like the people in the Haight, been everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

“You need something. Girl—that's your name, you said? Girl?”

I nodded.

The skin under the hollow of her throat glistened with sweat.

As she stood in front of me and put her hand on her hip, a magenta tangle of her upright hair blocked the glare of the sun. “Here’s what I think. You need something.”

“What you got?” I figured when she had disappeared earlier that she must have been doing some bright, speedy chemicals.

She swept her arm in front of her face and then opened it outward, palm up. “You hate being lost. Am I right? Maybe you need the Lord.”

JESSIKA TOOK THE WHEEL of her old orange Toyota. I sat in the back seat with my legs stretched, propping my shoulders against one window so I could look across to the other. I felt strangely at home, just going along, not knowing what was next.

Joey, the band boyfriend, wasn't much over five feet, with a dark curly wedge of hair and a raspy, New York accent that made him sound like a mobster. He twisted around to face me. You could tell he felt real comfortable talking to people.

Jessika chewed gum and laughed with him and floored the car, going over ninety through the straightaway toward Idaho.

Joey told stories about growing up poor in the South Bronx and stealing food from the corner store when he was five years old. "One day I wanted an apple, but my hand went so fast I got a *tamayta* instead." He made a raspy wheeze. "A little red *tamayta!* It squished in my hand before I could get it in my mouth."

"How'd you end up out here?" I asked.

Jessika snorted. "He had to go to rehab. Da-da-aa. And that's how he got saved. And he hasn't ever forgotten it." She rocked in the seat and I wished I could see more of her than a little bit of eye and smooshy mouth in the rearview mirror.

"For real?"

Jessika clicked her tongue. "What?"

"You're both . . . christians?"

"Is that a problem?"

Joey drummed the front of the dashboard. “It’s a need thing. When you are nice and ready, He comes. Be real *desperate*. He comes. You’ll see.”

I wondered if they were going to kidnap me and make me join some rifle-toting militia. “Yeah, sure.”

They discussed whether they thought I was damaged and humbled enough to have the Lord come to me. Jessika thought no; Joey, yes.

Little did they know. There had been a couple times, very desperate times, I had been lame enough to ask for god’s help. No dice.

Next Joey told his band’s history. The members of the Apostle Rods first met in Dizzy Creek, Idaho; Joey was doing bornagain rehab and the other band members were washing dishes at Godfather Pizza.

“Beautiful.” I could just imagine Joey preaching the gospel in a million decibels with his frizzy bat hair. I had heard there was such a thing as christian punk, but the closest I had ever come to it was a recording of an old Berkeley band called Econochrist.

“We’ve played around. Tons in Omaha. Haven’t been back to the Dizzy Creek for ages.”

They asked me what bands I liked.

“Fuck brand names.”

“*Aayyyy, muddafucca.*” Joey pretended to take offense and then gave me his intense, beady look. “So name something you do care about. Ga head.”

I looked out my window. “You trying to mess with me?”

“What’s the deepest? Name the deepest caring you feel—what is it for?”

“The stars.”

“Yeah, that’s good. Constellations. You like them things. You’re into them?”

I nodded.

“Good.” He turned even further, all the way around from the front seat and grabbed my hand. “Kmea. Do you have faith they will always be there? Even after you die?”

“Some of them. Yeah.” My hand was sweating.

“No matter what you do, those stars, they will be there, right?” He bore down on me with his intense eyes. “No matter how lonely, no matter if you are sitting in jail, no matter if you kill someone, no matter if you stick a needle in your arm, those pretty stars will still be there, right?”

I looked out the window again.

He let go of my hand and took a long breath. “Believe it or not, muddafucca, that’s the kind of faith I have. I pray to an angry brown-faced *gawdfadda* named Jesus. He forgives us all.”

“That’s your theory,” I said.

“Right. It’s my *theory*. I like that.” He turned. “Jessika, you like that?”

“I hate theories and I hate religion. I just like god.” She arched her head upward, shut her eyes and kept driving.

“Fuck, yeah. Look at her faith,” said Joey.

“Hey,” I yelled. Then closed my eyes, too.

Jessika whooped a priestess war cry. “Here we go!”

DIZZY CREEK APPEARED: a dung heap of smoking factories, strip malls, and parking lots pitched among smog-coated fields. On the outside of an abandoned department store someone had spray painted *Apostle Rods*. Local kids milled around, their faces bored as cows. We dropped Joey at the back entrance and parked. When the kids saw me and Jessika leave the car, they stared. Whole mini-herds turned their heads in unison as we appeared.

I attached myself to the colorful blast of Jessika and together we glided by the whole line, definitely in our own private Idaho. We went over to the side of the building, waiting to be let in by Joey's friends. As we stood at the door, Jessika showed me some dance moves.

Sometimes a new girl is enough to make me forget myself, but after waiting at the door for a while I turned freaky. And hot. Optimism about my adventure disappeared again into the sky, blank and stinking with Dizzy Creek's chemical overload. Everything beyouteefull was going to be stolen from me; I felt afraid my trip would be about finding the same ole stinking place of familiar. I untied the bandana from around my neck and wiped the sweat off my back. "Can't you get us inside?"

"Sure." Jessika stopped stretching and knocked harder on the rear entrance. A twitchy Apostle Rods member with a tiny head opened the door. It was pitch black and at

first we couldn't see anything, then we followed his flashlight down a long hallway with broken bulbs on the wall.

He took us into the main part of the store. Hangers and stands for clothes were strewn here and there; in the dark the abandoned racks looked like charred skeletons. The signs for merchandise still hung from the ceiling—we passed the sign for Kitchenware and then Office. The only light came from a large hole in the ceiling where the sun fell through.

I tried to chill my freaky nerves while the Apostle Rods set up.

Under the broken crown of ceiling, the band and their bouncers gathered. When they let in the kids, you could hardly see their faces. The musicians began to talk to everybody and yell at the crowd.

At last things started. The Apostle Rods tore into a set with a sick fever. No-wires, all plain acoustic. Old bat-hair Joey was pretty fierce on the drums. He had twice the energy of the twitchy guys that wandered around the stage and bumped into one another. The lead singer, the pinhead who had let us in, howled about pain, as well as Jesus and bloody nails. Jessika and I threw ourselves into the crowd. There weren't more than a couple hundred of us, and the music was quieter than I was used to, so it was hard to get lost. You bounced against the same people. After a while, the sizes and the rhythms of our bodies got in synch. Some of the boys tried to stomp too hard, but they were mostly skinny kids that weren't big enough to hurt anybody. Each time I slammed against someone, they slammed harder against me. We jumped on one another's backs and crashed around like escaped convicts.

Sometimes we got ragged at the edges of the group and jogged around, or stamped in place, but then another swell would build, and a new mosh would form, with everybody close and hot. It was pretty funny that I had left San Francisco and in less than a day and a half I was in the middle of it again. The thing was, it was even better, because everybody was looking at me in a hungry-interested way, and it made me feel pumped.

Jessika left the slamming crowd to do her own thing on the side, arching that broad chest of hers. As I watched, someone dug into my bare shin with his ankle chain. My leg dripped blood, and I went back to thrashing around. The kids were really laughing that I was bleeding: oldschool punk, I'm sure they were thinking. For revenge, I hurled my body into a cute, long haired, innocent angelboy.

The angelboy held on to me for a second. We jumped up and down, and a lot of people knocked into us at once. We got squashed by the crowd and squashed more, until we couldn't move at all, held up by the force of their push. We got rolled up high over everybody and I was laughing hard and holding on to my angel.

A girl flapped her arms and ran in a circle around us screaming, "I love Jesus."

Jessika torpedoed into the crowd. "Hey, everybody now!"

I pulled away from Angelboy and ran around with the flapping Jesus-yeller. Jessika skipped in her lopsided way alongside. The big guys protecting the band let her enter the sunlit stage space. She kneeled and raised her hands.

The pinhead banged his guitar and screeched, "Nobody knows my name but Jesus."

I ran up too, but a bouncer guy threw me back. Then Jessika asked him to let me into the stage space, and they beckoned. I rushed again. Looked out at everyone. Raised

my fists and shook them. Joined in the booming chorus of the song, yelling *Nobody knows my name but Jesus*. The sweaty crowd of faces shined with delight, and I soaked in all those staring eyes.

When the music stopped, Jessika talked with Joey, and I wandered around in the dark parts of the store. At some point, I realized the band was leading a prayer. Kids came up to get saved. Joey was putting his hands on peoples' shoulders and the other band members were kneeling.

I found Jessika and we went over and rested against an old cashier stand.

We were far enough from the sunlit ceilinghole that we were in total shadow. I didn't want Joey to see us anyway.

The kids looked relieved as bat-hair Joey touched them. Their faces quieted, like babies being fed. I could see it in how they dropped their heads back; in how, as he blessed them, they surrendered.

I couldn't help but wonder about sticking around with Joey and Jessika. Meredith would probably act like she's never met me. And what the hell would I really do on Randa's farm? It might be better to stay here and be part of something, even if it was all kooky Jesus bananas.

And who knew what could happen if I went up on that stage? Christian salvation appealed to me in some sick way. After all I think my mother joined a religious group before she died.

Maybe if I let gangsta Joey save me I could feel something new. The steady pulse of the world. Or something even better. Go on up to paradise and live forever. Get it over. Death take me now!

“Screw this. God wants nothing to do with religion.” Jessika spat into an old coffee cup on the floor. “Look at him.” Joey was kissing the top of a pretty girl’s head.

I came back to my senses. “Yeah. Who does Joey think he is, some stud christ?”

Jessika put her hands up like Joey was doing. “Muddafucca! I’m Joey, and I’m gonna start da revolution that will save da world.”

“Right!”

“Hey, maybe you should go up there,” said Jessika. “I want to see it!”

“You go.”

“Come on.”

I dropped my head onto Jessika’s lap and looked up at her face. “Religion makes people do some crazy shit. You better watch out.”

“Amen. Don’t I know it.” Jessika rolled away from me and stretched her weak leg in front of her. She pounded the muscle of her thigh, then massaged it. Her fingers strummed along with their million rings. “So, come on! Go up there before he finishes.”

I wanted one of her silver rings. Wanted to put it in my pocket, have a small pretty ring of silver of my own.

“Are you going?” asked Jessika.

“You go.” I couldn’t tell if she meant it. “What’s he think he’s doing?”

“Joey says, ‘Never stop speaking da truth.’”

“Yeah?” I thrust my hand into her thatch of stained hair.

She leaned against me but kept staring at Joey until the last kid in line got his final blessings. Then Jessika jumped up on her good leg, twirled around in a circle, danced real proud with her own brand of possibilitee. A showing for me in our dark hideaway. She

arched way back and her top spread to reveal more skin between her sweet mounds, a just-right place to plant my mouth, the fabulicious spot where ribs and breath started, where everything, I'm sure, was once first-born.