

# What the Wind Carries

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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He was nineteen, driving back down the mountain at three in the morning with the windows rolled down even though it was November, and cold. Marcy loved him, she loved him, and he wanted to feel the freezing wind that made the black pines sway. He wanted no safety glass between him and the stars, wanted to be in the world where this was happening, where Marcy had invited him to come see her on a Saturday night when her parents were out of town. "If they knew you were here right now," she told him, "my dad would kill you. He really might."

He was in love with the danger, even if Marcy made light of it by shooting him, bang, with her finger and laughing into his mouth when he kissed her. He was in love with the feel of her hair in his hands, the smell of her perfume. He had loved her anyway, loved her for being pretty and funny and smart, loved her maybe for living at the Estates, for being out of his reach, but now he also loved her for loving him, *him!* He was nobody, from a family of nobodies. He drove a car that was held together inside and out with duct tape, and she had laughed when she had seen it, but there was no cruelty in her and now at three in the morning he knew that she really did love him.

He wasn't like his friends. He knew that, for them, the excitement would have been in *doing it*. Certainly, he thought it was wonderful, amazing, to have done what they had done. But the real wonder was that she loved him, that she would take such a risk for him, that she was so warm and held him so close and whispered into his ear. He took the hairpin curves coming down Lookout Mountain a little faster than he should, feeling the car slide wide onto the narrow shoulder, and he didn't think it would matter if he punched through the guard rail and went sailing into the black air, high over the colored lights of Denver. No matter what happened, even if he died taking the next curve, this would be the night when he lived forever.

When he drove under the stone archway that signaled the bottom of the mountain, he turned the car around and drove up again, just to keep the feeling alive. He gunned the heavy engine on curves, weaving back and forth, back up to where the radio towers flashed their lights like a red code for the sleeping city.

He got out of the car to feel the cold wind at his back, to watch the stars, and to shout Marcy's name so that the wind would carry it across the night. She was in everything, everything made him think of her, including the wind that gusted so hard that he could lean back against it without falling. He thought that if he jumped right now, high enough, the wind would lift him and carry him all night, setting him down somewhere in Kansas near dawn.

Fifteen years later, when he had been twice married and twice divorced, he returned to the Front Range-- not to Denver, where he still had family, but to Boulder. Boulder had the two things that he thought he needed.

One was the wind that roared down the canyon some nights, tearing shingles from roofs, shattering unshuttered windows, sweeping the streets below and scouring the skies above so that the stars on those nights would blaze with unmatched brilliance. On windy nights he would drive his van to an intersection where he could watch the signal lights buck and sway, where he could feel the van rock with each gust. The wind always felt deliciously dangerous to him, and he liked to imagine it suddenly tearing the city down, picking up his van and carrying him amidst the wreckage for a wild cartwheeling ride into the

plains.

The other thing that Boulder had was women. There was an endless supply of new graduate students, of summertime visitors, of women who felt drawn to the city for this therapy or that new school. By auditing one or two classes each semester, patrolling the right bars, browsing long hours in bookstores, he knew he would meet someone he could fall in love with, someone as young as he wanted to be again. He built his life-- the part-time job, the cheap apartment-- so that he would have time to make what he longed for real.

And he succeeded. He met Angela, and he fell in love. She was twenty-three, bright, beautiful, and he pursued her with enough intensity to convince her but not so much that he scared her off. The age difference, which worried him at first, only made him more complex and interesting to her. When he slept with Angela, he gloried in her desire for him. It didn't make him nineteen again, but up until the last moment, he felt more alive than he had for years.

But in that last moment, when she put her hands onto his hips and urged him into herself, looking into the eyes of the man who made *her* feel alive, who made *her* know she was loved, that was when he faltered. He entered her, and he did not love her. His movements were mechanical, a labor to maintain a lie.

Perhaps he should have stopped then, rolled away from her and said, "I don't love you," even though he had loved her just a moment before. But that would have hurt her, perhaps, even more than he would have to. He closed his eyes and thought of someone else, of a woman he had met in a Pearl Street bookstore, and only by thinking of her did he manage to spend himself.

Later, when Angela called in tears, humiliating herself with the number of times she phoned him, he couldn't explain it to her except to say that he had loved her, he really had, but now did not.

He thought he couldn't feel worse than this, and the pain of love gone wrong made him crave even more intensely the recklessness of love gone right. He called the woman from the bookstore. Her name was Katya.

He was convinced that this time he had found someone whom he would love forever. Her accent, her European education, made her seem far more worldly than her years. They spent months in a cautious courtship, a reassuring contrast to the mad rush with Angela.

But when she decided that she loved him as much as he loved her, when they found themselves in bed for the first time, his passion grew up to the moment he was inside of her. Then it was the same. He knew he didn't love her any more, and when he held her and said her name and poured himself into her, it was someone else he was thinking of, a student in the poetry seminar he was taking.

He was, he knew, becoming ridiculous: a skirt chaser at thirty-five, a fraternity boy forever. This was not what he wanted.

But he could not stop. Time after time, he was convinced that the woman he'd just met electrified him the way none of the others had, but that conviction began to feel hollow.

He turned thirty-six, then thirty-seven.

At thirty-eight, it horrified him to discover that some of the women were confused in his memory. Was it Ericka or Michele who had thrown a brick through the window of his apartment? How could he confuse a memory like that one? But whenever he met someone new, she was special, unique, impossible to ever confuse with the others. She was always the woman who would make him lean into the wind at three in the morning, shouting her name.

Chrissy was the latest. When she came to meet him at the Oasis, she brought with her a sudden gust of wind that held the door open long after she had entered. Her face was flushed. Her hair looked frayed and tangled. She stood near the entrance for a moment to collect herself before she hung up her coat and joined him at the bar.

"Don't worry," he said as she tried to get a comb through her hair. He touched her cheek. "Wind blown, you look more beautiful than ever." And he meant it. She would be the one.

She smiled uncertainly. "I almost didn't come tonight."

"No?" he said. "Developing a fear of older men? What do you want to drink?"

When the bartender brought her strawberry daiquiri, she sipped it through a straw. She had painted

her nails bright red, long nails that must have taken a lot of care. In that, she reminded him of Ericka, but temperamentally she was much more like Susan or Ronnie. Quiet. She preferred that most things remain unsaid, and she wanted to be coaxed. In spite of what she said about almost not coming, he knew that this would be the night.

Huge fans over the bar moved this way and that in unison like the oars of a Viking ship. That feature was a holdover from the days when the Oasis was the Elephant Bar. What had it been before that? Bars and restaurants came and went in Boulder, and sooner or later they were lost and blended in his memory like the women. At sea. He was lost at sea.

The wind made the Canyon Boulevard windows rattle. In the corner of his eye, he thought for a moment that he saw a face in the dark street, peering in. But no one was there when he looked.

"Come on," he said when she had finished her drink. "There's nothing happening here. Where do you want to go?"

She didn't know, so he suggested her place-- that would make things easier-- and they walked there together. She leaned into him as they walked slowly against the wind. Debris skittered past them on the street. He held her tight around her shoulders, let her hide her face against his coat as the wind gusted. He bent to inhale the sweet scent in her hair.

"I love you," he said, the wind whipping the words away as he spoke them.

"Do you really?"

"I do," he told her, pulling her even tighter. She held him around the waist, and the pull of her arm electrified him. She loved him, wanted him. Right now, he was alive. Right now, he existed. Let now be enough, he told himself. Maybe this time would be different.

Again he had the impression of a face off to the side, in the darkness. He looked, but there was no one there.

Her apartment was a shabby little place on west Arapaho, but no worse than his. The walls were so thin that as they fell to kissing on the one suitable piece of furniture, the bed, he swore he could feel the wind blowing through the room.

He loved the passive but liquid way that she kissed. He inventoried everything else that he loved about her, her shyness, her silences. It all might be over soon, everything he felt for her, so it intensified just then. He melted for her. He shuddered at her touch, and he whispered her name again and again into her downy ear. His hands memorized the shape of her legs, the curve of her waist. He put his hand behind her neck when he kissed her.

Now and then, they paused to remove some article of clothing. He liked it this way, prolonging what would be their best time together. When the last of their clothes were gone, still he kept exploring her with his fingers, delighting in every part of her.

She opened herself to him. Bit by bit, he brought himself more fully into her, and bit by bit, he began to fall out of love. Already, she was becoming a woman in his past. Even as she began to move with more enthusiasm, he was looking past her. She kissed him, not seeming to notice that he was no longer there.

He thrust mechanically, trying to forget who she was, pretending that the woman underneath him was someone new, someone he had just begun to love. Someone he burned for.

He imagined a face for her then, a face to see instead of Chrissy's face. An angular face, skin dark red like sandstone. Black eyes. Long black hair tossing in the wind.

His passion flared. When he kissed Chrissy and rocked with her, he imagined it was this other woman who said his name and moaned into his shoulder. When he stoked himself to a frenzy, it was this other woman that he poured himself into before he rolled away from Chrissy, rolled all the way out of the bed and onto his feet, padding to her sink to get a drink of water.

He came back and sat on the edge of the bed, letting her hold his hand and waiting for her to sleep.

Then he dressed and left.

On the way home, he was thinking about what he'd done, one more broken heart in his long, serial crime, when he again saw, without quite seeing, the face. Dark eyes. Black hair. He turned, but there was nothing there but the night and the wind.

The wind.

He stopped to feel it. He spread his arms, feeling the wind wash over him, closing his eyes to see the wind. As old as the canyon, as old as Boulder Valley, but with a young woman's face, a young woman's black hair trailing behind her.

The wind as a lover. How wonderful that would be. If the wind loved him, she wouldn't let him down, would she? He laughed at the idea, but he also walked home feeling the wind press at his back and caress his arms with each step.

"All right," he told the wind. "Let's see. Let's have a courtship." Here was a lover to cure him. Here was a lover he could not disappoint.

His old habits were hard to break. He still spent time in bookstores and seminars and the right bars. He still wrote down the names of the women he met, still fished for phone numbers. But it was just the habit that drove him. "I'll call you," he would say. "Maybe some time we'll have a drink together." But he didn't call.

When the wind came gusting down the canyon, he would go outside to stand in it, to let it wrap itself around him. His favorite nights were the ones when the wind blew hard past midnight, when he could walk the mall alone, up and down Pearl Street, leaning so far into the wind that sometimes, if she let up for a moment, he would pitch forward and catch himself, laughing, on the paving bricks. She had a sense of humor!

But she could be angry, too, pulling the limbs from trees and bringing them slamming down on the roofs of parked cars. More than once she hurled things near him-- sheet metal from a construction site, a section of fence, a branch as thick as his leg. With sudden gusts, she threw dust in his eyes, grit in his mouth, but he decided to love her for that, too, for the variety of her moods.

"I do love you," he told her. The more often he said it, the more he felt that she really could hear him, that the face he kept not quite seeing was more than imagined. He craved to see her plainly, ached to look where he thought she was and actually see her.

The worst days and nights were the ones when she didn't come at all.

He was thirty-eight years old, and he had traded women for the wind. So he was still ridiculous. But now, at least, he could be more secretly ridiculous. Who, in Boulder, would notice him, a man who took frequent walks in the night wind? There were so many more obvious eccentrics among the panhandlers on Pearl Street or the drunks sleeping it off on the lawn in front of the court house. This was better than falling in love with women who were younger than he was, increasingly younger every year, and breaking their hearts. And this wouldn't have to end, for how could he ever test this love?

So he longed for the windy nights, and when they came, he walked up and down the mall, feeling her all around him. "I love you," he chanted, and she carried off the words. "I love you." A fool. A crazy man, but happier than before.

At last one September night, as the wind stripped green leaves from the trees, he walked, hands out to catch himself, leaning into her, telling her again that he loved her, loved her. Tonight, he wanted her to be a woman. Tonight, he wanted to hold her. It was two in the morning. He was alone on the street, alone except for the wind, and he saw her in the corner of his eye. When he turned, she was still there for a moment, looking at him with her shining eyes.

Her hair was as long as she was tall, and it trailed from her like a black river. Her body was lean like a tree in winter, and she rocked slightly in time with herself. He took a step toward her, and she was gone so suddenly that he doubted he had really seen her. "I love you," he said to her. "Let me see you again!"

He felt her hair whip across his face. He turned, and she was standing between him and the mountains. As before, she vanished as he took a step toward her, but he glimpsed her again farther up Pearl Street, closer to the mountains, to the canyon. Upwind.

He chased her and kept catching glimpses of her just ahead, leading him toward the canyon. She outdistanced him, and he shouted, "Wait for me!"

But still she sprinted farther and farther ahead. How could he catch her, running right into the teeth of the wind? He kept his legs moving all the same, followed her onto Canyon Boulevard and into the mouth of the canyon. He heard the rush of the black creek, a counterpoint to the rushing wind in the pine trees. A paved trail ran alongside the creek, and he saw her, in the last light of the city, round a distant bend.

Still he ran, even when he entered the deepest shadows and only stars lit the canyon walls and he couldn't see where his feet were landing. He stumbled, but kept his feet beneath him. The black air roared around him. Threads of wind whipped his face and hands, stung his eyes, and he realized that it was her hair again, lashing him more fiercely now.

Hair filled his mouth. He struggled to breathe. His feet still struck the ground, still kept him moving, but he was lost, blind, exhausted.

He didn't know he had fallen until he felt the sudden jolt of stones against his hands, against his body. The shock along his spine told him he had hit his head. He raised his hand to feel his forehead. Wet. Sticky. There was a spot that throbbed when he touched it gingerly. He heard the crash of a windfallen tree.

The canyon had opened up, and the white water in the creek was gray with moonlight. He blinked the grit out of his eyes, then stood carefully. His knees were weak, quaking, unreliable.

She was gone.

And she was everywhere.

She filled the canyon, yes. But he could feel the rest of her, feel her filling the valley, too, tossing power lines and bringing down fences all over Boulder. She made the stars burn bright and clear. She made the air smell of pine trees and black soil.

She made the tears on his cheeks sting all the more and he said, "Come to me!" He promised, "I'll love you forever!"

As if she had been there all along, she was standing next to him. He reached out to touch her, and she didn't move away. Her skin was cold, and so were her eyes.

"I'll love you forever," he said, and leaned to kiss her. Her mouth was dry, but soft. She kissed him back. She closed her arms around him and pulled him close. She filled his ears, filled his mouth. It made him drunk, the taste of wind in his mouth. His clothes shredded and blew away. His fingers searched the surface of her, and her hair enveloped him, her legs folded around him. Black air rushed over every part of his body. He entered her, was inside of her and more than inside of her, was enveloped by her, rocking with her somewhere that was and was not the canyon, riding with her over the city, carrying debris-- fragments of his clothes, newspapers, leaves, loose shingles. He spun high with her, wove himself in and out of her high over the plains. She was his one great, his one true love, and it was she and only she that he thought of when he emptied himself into her, and emptied himself, and emptied himself like a pitcher that pours and keeps pouring, a pitcher that is overwhelmed and still pours and pours and drips and drips and finally is dry, tumbling high in the air, carried on the wind.

Over the wheat fields, she carried him. Higher. Higher still. They flew all night over the range land to the east where the wind blows wider and wider and at last gentles, at last grows still, and the debris falls into ravines, into expanses of yucca and sage where the odd paper bag, this or that scrap of newspaper, the papery skin stretched tight over bone and the yellow teeth in black gums will lie bleaching in the sun.

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