

## Running Away from Home

Julie Whitehead

My attempt to run away from home May 2006 was successful—depending on how you look at it. Bob and I had gotten into an argument the day before about how I was acting and how I was handling everything with the girls. We'd just finished a complicated schedule of travel, my daughters' birthdays, and the daily grind of keeping up the house, the meals, the kids, the laundry, and my writing career.

My sister had gotten married two weeks before--we had gone to the wedding where my oldest girls were bridesmaid and flower girl, respectively. We had made a weekend of it, going to Lake Tiak-O-Khata and spending the night to stay out from underfoot of all the wedding preparations.

The following weekend was our two oldest girls' birthdays, with all the attendant commotion that brought—one party in the morning, another in the afternoon, and one more for the family the next day. It got it all over with but made for an exhausting weekend.

The weekend after that, Bob and I went on a little getaway vacation to Mississippi State, where we had both graduated and had fond memories of. We walked around campus and around town, and we went to three MSU baseball games—one of our favorite things to do while we were there dating

Bob told me later that he'd been hoping I was just overstressed by everything that went on in our lives. He thought a weekend without the kids would be the best thing for my mood and for us as a couple. And we did have a good time—but even then, I had read an article about one

of the MSU players and focused all my attention on him during the game—a dangerous thing for me to do.

Even after we got home, I was trying to look him up on the internet, find a phone number for him, what have you—not even understanding why.

Finally, that following Thursday, Bob blew up at me. He said I was making it obvious that I didn't care about him or the kids or I would be handling things better. I told him that I was doing the best I could—and he said that wasn't good enough. Then he said some words that chilled me to the bone: “I thought you were better when we went away last weekend. But you fell asleep in the car and when you woke up, it was like you decided it was time to be miserable again. It makes me wish we'd never gone.”

The next day I took \$1000 out of my savings account and filled up the Blazer with gas. My clothes were still half-packed from the trip, so I just snuck a few more into the bags and zipped them up and hid them in the messy laundry room where they'd been ever since we came back.

I woke up at 1:15 in the morning listening for sounds. I didn't hear any. Everyone was asleep.

I slid out of bed and went to my closet. I picked out my leopard-print top and a pair of black pants and tiptoed to the half-bath on the other side of the house and changed. Still no sounds except the hum of the air conditioner.

I picked up the suitcase I'd left out with clothes I'd put in it right before I went to bed while I was doing the rest of my laundry. I wanted to leave as little to do as I could after I was gone.

I kept the lights off as I went out to the garage to my husband's truck, a red 2002 Chevy Blazer. I had decided to take it since he was going to need the van for hauling around the kids from now on. I unpacked his glove compartment of his spare keys, his grandfather's handicapped parking sign, and other personal items I knew he would need. I made a pile of them on the dining room table where he could find them easily.

I opened the refrigerator door just a crack and pulled out a six-pack of 100-calorie Dr. Peppers. I knew I'd need the caffeine to stay awake while I drove. I put them and my CD's in the front seat along with my purse with Bob's .38 pistol in it. I'd gotten as many of my Harry Connick, Jr. CD's as I could put my hands on quickly—I enjoyed listening to him and knew Bob disliked him, so he wouldn't miss them once I was gone. I put the rest my luggage in the back seat.

I stood in the kitchen and realized how quiet the house really is—too quiet for me to raise the garage door and leave without waking somebody up. I look at my watch—2 a.m. If I wanted to get started, it was now or never.

I eased down the driveway with my lights off and didn't turn them on until I turned onto the street. I was running away from home to kill myself somewhere that my family wouldn't find me, and I didn't want anyone stopping me now.

I listened to my CD's and drove practically alone on the road except for the ever-present long-haul truckers. Every once in a while I'd wonder if Bob was out looking for me, and I would check my rearview mirror. But New Orleans wouldn't have been on his radar at all—I had only been there twice in my life, and he certainly wouldn't think of me attempting to get there by myself.

I arrived in the Covington, Louisiana area around six a.m. I finally got tired of driving around and parked in the parking lot of a volunteer fire station. Eventually, a man came out of the firehouse and started towards me. I rolled down my window.

He was ruddy-faced, decked out in a t-shirt, jeans, and baseball cap. He put his hand to the cap and adjusted it before he spoke to me. "Are you all right, ma'am?" he asked in a singsong Cajun accent.

I thought up a lie. "Is there both a Madisonville and a Mandeville?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Which one am I in?" I asked

He told me.

I put on my most helplessly lost look. "Could you tell me how to get where I'm going?"

He gave me directions to nearly Mandeville, a suburb so close that the towns overlapped. I thanked him and drove down the main road and took the left he told me to. Then I pulled a U-turn and came back to where I had been, but drove by the salesman's house only to see that his truck was now gone. New plan. I would find a hotel room, stay there, and call him that afternoon once he got off work.

I drove back into Covington and located a hotel off of the main road that split the town. I went in and asked if I could have a room for two nights. The desk clerk said I could but check-in wasn't until 3 p.m. I thanked her and went to eat breakfast.

The little café had a full breakfast menu, and I ordered pancakes and asked for grape jelly to put on them. The waitress handed me two packs and left me with my food. I ate slowly,

knowing I likely had a long day ahead of me. There weren't any newspapers around to read, so I simply stared out into space as I ate.

I went up to the cashier and paid, pulling out my wad of cash and handing her a fifty—the smallest denomination I was carrying. She counted out my change, and I picked it up and walked back out to my husband's truck. I was halfway between the door and the truck when I heard someone behind me. "Ma'am?"

I turned. It was the cashier. I wondered if I had dreamed that I paid her. She came up to me and proffered a bill. "You left this on the counter," she said.

I took it and looked at it—it was a twenty. She had given it to me as change and I had dropped it while gathering the rest together. I looked up at her and said, "Thanks. I appreciate that."

"You're welcome," she said and turned back towards the shop.

I looked at my watch. It was around 9:30 by this point, and I thought I had a great idea for where to occupy myself waiting for the hotel room to open up.

I backtracked my way to the edge of town and pulled into a Books-A-Million parking lot. All those books and all day to read them, I thought to myself. That's going to be great.

I found a poetry corner and settled down into a vinyl-covered chair. I flipped a book open at random and began reading.

But I couldn't seem to focus on the words. They seemed to run together on the page and slide into nonsense after a very few minutes of reading. I put the poetry book up and picked up a copy of the Urban Dictionary instead. Usually I loved reading about words, where they came

from, all such as that. But this one was different—it was gritty, nasty, and far too violent to suit me. So, I put it back as well.

In my paranoia, I had been imagining someone breaking into my car and stealing all of my luggage. I had packed up my favorite outfits as well as toiletries, pictures of my kids, and a laptop. I couldn't get the thought out of my mind that any minute now, someone was going to break into the truck. I would read a page or two, then get up and take a look at the truck. I wished there was a reading chair closer to the door so I could read and look at the truck at the same time, but there didn't seem to be one.

Finally, I gave up. I put the books away and walked out to the truck. I started driving around aimlessly, following side roads to their ends and turning back around to get to the main highway. What I really wanted to do was get online and check my email—I knew the hotel had free internet, but it was still going to be a while before I could check in.

I finally found a Starbucks coffee shop on one of my side road trips. Free wi-fi! I thought. That's where I need to go.

So, I went in, ordered a hot chocolate (it was May, but that was all right), and sat down with my laptop. I motioned to a fellow stocking the shelves of coffee in the bag and got his attention.

“How do I tap into your wi-fi here?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Sorry, ma'am. We don't have that.”

My shock must have showed on my face—he turned red. “We’re brand-new here—we built right before Katrina, and the hurricane kind of slowed us down on getting everything set up that we wanted to.”

I nodded understanding. “Now there’s a Fed Ex shop across the street where you can tap into the internet if you need to,” he said.

“All right,” I said. “Thanks.” I got up and left the hot chocolate on the table—their coffee may be outstanding but the hot chocolate left a lot to be desired.

So, I drove over to the Federal Express store and carried my laptop in. I located a clerk who tried to explain to me how to tap into their network using my credit card. I hesitated. Number one, I didn’t understand everything she said. Number two, I was trying to stay hidden and not leave a trail of any kind. That’s why I was carrying all that cash.

But I really, really wanted to check my email, so I ran the card through the slot and tried to connect. I couldn’t manage it. The woman who had helped me earlier was busy with another customer and the other employee ignored me as I looked around helplessly. I decided the hell with that, folded up my laptop, and headed for the door.

But my fears about using my credit card hadn’t been groundless—it was almost lunchtime, and my husband had the Brandon Police looking for me. They had issued a “be-on-the-lookout for” notice to area law enforcement, though I was already out of the state before they got involved.

They had been reluctant to get involved at first, citing the procedure that they typically waited for 24 hours before they considered someone a missing person. Bob tried to convince them that I was in serious danger of hurting myself with in that time frame. He finally gave them

the name and number of my psychiatrist, the one that had treated me at St. Dominic's and said he could give them more information about my condition. So they did, and when they called Bob back, they were ready to work with him to find me.

Bob had also told them about our last weekend together at our alma mater, Mississippi State University. So, Starkville Police were checking hotels and had someone watching the ballpark in case I tried to sneak in.

But my charge of \$1.62 was just enough to get them looking in the right direction. After some jurisdictional haggling, Brandon Police called the parish police in Covington and explained the situation. Once they finally convinced them that the situation might be serious and they needed to send someone to find me, I was long gone—eating a bacon-cheese spud at a McAlister's I had discovered close to my hotel.

I sat and ate my lunch slowly, enjoying every bite without anyone rushing me or asking me questions. I took a refill on my big glass of sweet tea, then went back out to Bob's truck. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 1:30. I decided to go back to the hotel and see if I could get on their wi-fi in the lobby so I could check email and surf the Web for a while to pass the time.

I walked up to the counter and asked about the lobby wi-fi. They explained the fee structure to me, but added that internet was free once you got into your hotel room. I said, "But you told me I couldn't get into my room until after three, and I want to get into my laptop now."

The desk clerks looked at each other, and the one that seemed to be the boss said, "Go check with housekeeping and see if that room had been cleaned up."

So, I waited at the desk until the underling came back out of the back. They conferred for a moment, then the boss pointed to me and walked into the back.

The young blonde desk clerk came back to me and said, “Your room is ready and we can go ahead and let you in it.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

“The fee for that room will be two hundred dollars,” she said.

“Can I pay it now?” I said.

“Sure, if you want to,” she said

I pulled out my wallet again and peeled off two one hundred dollar bills. “Here you go.”

I picked up my card key, shouldered my luggage, and followed her directions to down the hall to my room.

I plugged in the computer and checked my email. I didn’t reply to any—there wasn’t any use in that. I surfed around the internet for a while, looking at news sites and checking my friend Ali Gregg’s blog to see what personal rant she has posted that day.

I got bored looking at that and caught myself yawning. After trying to sleep and failing, trying to find HGTV on the TV dial and failing, and pacing around the room some more, I looked at my watch again. 4:00. Time to eat.

Drove over to McAlister’s again. I’d always loved their food even where they were just Bulldog Deli in Starkville and operated out of a converted warehouse. This time I ordered the nachos.

But when I looked outside after I sat down, I saw a police car pull up and park right by Bob's truck. I had no way of knowing that Bob had talked to them, but I was still seized by paranoia that the cop was looking for me. I watched him get out and walk into the store. While his back was to me at the order counter, I signaled a waitress and told her I needed a to-go box. So, I packed up my food and walked slowly and quietly out of the restaurant, back to the truck, and then eased out of the parking lot with no one noticing me, least of all the cop.

Now I was scared. I couldn't figure out why a cop would be following me and got more and more paranoid as I walked to my room.

I reached down into my purse for my cell phone but encountered my gun instead. I pulled it out and looked at it. .38 caliber, six-shot cylinder, thumb-cock mechanism and fully loaded like Bob always kept it. I sat and stared at it in my hand for a long while, fighting the urge to go ahead and get it all over with. But I chickened out. I decided to go online to information and look up a family friend to come and get the gun away from me.

I put the gun back and got out my cell phone. Immediately after I turned it on, it started spitting out missed calls to me—my parents, Bob, my sister—and I erased the whole log.

After three rings a woman answered. "Hello?"

I asked for him by name, and she said, "He's not in right now; can I take a message?"

I didn't know what to say. No, I didn't want to leave my request as a message, and I didn't want to ask where I could reach him. So, I just hung up and dropped the phone on the bed.

After a very few seconds, it rang. I looked down and didn't recognize the number, but it didn't have a Mississippi area code in front of it, so I answered.

He was on the other side of the line. It only took me a second to realize what happened—their home must have had caller ID, and she'd called him and given him my number to call back. Suddenly I was breathless.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“New Orleans. On the road.”

“I need your help,” I said. “I’m down here in Covington. I came down here thinking I was running away from home to commit suicide— “

“Wait a second,” he said. “What did you say?”

“I said I drove down to Covington with a plan in mind to commit suicide away from home where no one would ever find me. Now I’ve talked myself out of it and want to call Bob but I’m scared that if he gets angry with me, I really will go through with it. I need you to come here so I won’t do that.”

“Hold on,” he said. “Hold on. What is it you want me to do?”

He sounded panicked. I took a deep breath. “I want you to come get this gun!” I said.

He agreed, and I told him where I was staying and what room. He told me to sit tight and he’d be there as fast as he could.

I hung up and bent over taking deep breaths. I went and washed my face to try to get rid of all the crying I had done that day and redid my makeup, such as it was.

I had gone to sit back down on the bed and wait for him when I heard a knock on the door. I went and padded over to the door in bare feet and looked out of the peephole. Instead of him, I saw three police officers, one woman and two men, surrounding the door.

I couldn't believe it. Him calling the police on me had never entered my mind. Why would he have called the police?

I didn't open the door. I wanted to make sure of who I was dealing with. "Can I see some ID?" I said through the door.

Nobody moved. All three of them were staring at the peephole, waiting for me to open the door. I said it again. "Can I please see some ID?"

Again, nothing. I wondered what they'd do if I didn't open the door. I tried one more time. "I can look at you and tell that you're cops," I said. "I just want to see a badge."

The female cop shuffled her feet. I decided all that self-defense stuff I'd been taught didn't seem to apply down here. So, I opened the door.

They stayed in a semicircle around the open door. I don't know what I looked like to them, but I couldn't have looked very threatening in a flowered button down top, khaki capris, and bare feet. I stepped back a few paces, and they came in, led by the female cop.

She sat down on the bed and looked at me. "How are you?" she said.

"Feeling pretty stupid right now," I said without thinking.

"You're not stupid," she said.

"Oh, yes, I am," I said. "You have no idea."

"So tell me what's going on," she said.

So, I started talking, and once I did, I couldn't stop. I told her about getting up and packing that day in the dead of night, taking a six-pack of Dr. Pepper and my Harry Connick, Jr.

CD's to stay awake on the drive. I told her I pulled off the first exit I saw when I realized my car needed filling up.

I wound up with telling her about that last phone call and how the next thing I knew, here they were. She nodded like I was confirming something she already knew.

“So why do you want to kill yourself?”

And I told her the truth there, too—I couldn't handle life anymore—not like I needed to in order to be a good mom for my kids and a good wife for my husband. I wanted to kill myself but not at the house because they were going to have to live there after I was gone. I told her about my last try and that I had turned around and gone back home and wound up in the hospital for depression for several days. Yes, I was seeing a counselor. Yes, I was taking medicine. Yes, it was given to me by my psychiatrist. Yes, I was taking it like I was supposed to.

All this time I'd been aware of the other cops casually searching the room and all of my bags. I supposed they were looking for drugs or weapons of some kind. Another cop came up to the room as I was talking and I heard him say, “Her friend's shown up finally.”

All of a sudden I was desperate. “Let me see him—I want to tell him I'm sorry,”

I said.

At that point the lady cop intervened. “You told him you wanted to call your husband—do you want to do that right now?”

“Yes, ma'am,” I said. She took up my purse and opened it.

“Now there isn't anything in here that's going to jump out at me or cut me or anything like that?” she said.

“No, just the gun.” I said.

She pulled it out by the grip and handed it to another policeman—it seemed the room was full of them now. I wondered if they’d left anybody watching the store back at the station. Then she took out my cell phone. “Dial the number, I’ll talk to him, then you can. All right?”

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

So, I did. I handed her the phone once it began to ring, and I heard her start talking. I wasn’t listening, I was thinking about what I was going to say to Bob. Finally she handed me the phone.

“Sweetums, are you there?” he said.

“I’m here,” I answered.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes sir,” I said.

“Oh, thank God,” he said. He broke down crying then. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get you well. I don’t care what I have to do. I’ll even move to Starkville if we have to. I just want you to get well.”

By then I was crying too. I told him I loved him and wanted to come back home to him.

“I’m so glad to hear you say that,” he said. “Let me talk to the police again.”

So, I handed the phone back. I didn’t listen very closely to their conversation, though I guess I should have. I kept replaying in my head how he sounded over the phone. After a

moment, she handed it back to me. “They’re going to take care of you,” he said. “Just give him your keys and we’ll take care of the truck. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

“I love you,” he said.

“Me too,”

I handed the phone back, she hung it up and put it back in my purse. It seemed I was in the room again with the original three cops, and all of us were looking at her.

“So what’s your call?” one of them said.

She sighed. “She said she was thinking about it.”

A long pause went by. “I just want to go home and go to the hospital,” I said.

“We’ve worked out what we’re going to do talking to your husband,” she said.

“When have you talked to my husband?” I said.

“We talked to him before we ever got over here,” she said. “Who did you think called us?”

I called the name of the salesman.

She didn’t answer at first. Finally, she said, “We’re going to take care of you, don’t worry,” she said. “We’re going to walk downstairs and you can go on your own power, we don’t have to put you in a hospital bed or strap you down. We’ll take you to a hospital.”

“Okay,” I said. Like I had a choice at that point.

I didn't know it at the time, but the lady cop was over ruling her superior officer on how I should be treated. Bob told me later that they were supposed to release me to his friend's custody; he had volunteered to drive me back home so I could go to the hospital there. Bob said the guy in charge in Covington agreed to that with the chief of police in Brandon, where I'd come from. But I didn't know that. So, I walked through the hotel with a cop in front, one beside me, and one behind me. We got to the lobby; I saw two more cops at the door to the outside.

We walked past the front desk—the three clerks were standing behind it staring at the procession. As I walked by, I put my key card on the desk and said, "I guess I'm checking out."

We came outside, and I saw an ambulance pulled up in the breezeway of the hotel. Two more cops were standing outside, with Bob's friend standing in between them. I held Bob's car keys up to him. "Wait a minute," he said. "I'm here in my own truck; I can't take those."

"They said I was supposed to give these to you," I said. "I'm not the one in charge here."

We all stood around in a bit of a circle. I could hear the growl of the ambulance engine.

I looked at him and said, "I'm sorry."

He shook his head with a small smile. "It's okay," he said.

"What hospital do you want to go to?" one of the cops said.

I shrugged my shoulders, then looked over at Bob's friend. "We went to St. Tammany Parish Hospital to have our kid. They're real good there," he said.

I looked back at the cop and nodded my head. What I wanted to do was sink down into the ground and cry. Everything had gone so wrong; I couldn't understand how.

Bob told me later that his friend had wanted to ride with me to the hospital and the police wouldn't let him. He then asked if he could meet them at the hospital and was told he couldn't do that since I was in police custody. I'll always be thankful to him for trying to be there for me.

The cops moved towards the ambulance people, and I heard them talking about hospitals. The cop said they should go to Lakeshore Hospital, which wasn't the one I had said. St. Tammany's emergency room was full.

So, that was where we rode, me and my luggage in the back. No sirens, I was glad of that. The last thing I wanted to feel like was a spectacle even more than I had already made of myself.