

# New Fiction—"Stuck" by Rose Servis

written by Guest Contributor | June 26, 2017



Rahim rubbed his fists in his eyes. Might have lost the wallet back at the gas station, when he'd stopped to fill up. Unless it fell out his pocket sometime after, while he'd been riding down the highway. And if that's what happened—well, shit. That'd be how many miles to retrace?

Air shot out of him, and one fist fell to the handlebar, the other to his hip. He half-turned in the stalled motorcycle, looking back. Two-lane road. Quiet, empty. A straight shot through cornfields, for 70 miles.

He rode slow, tending toward the left lane because that's where his eyes were at. And then he spotted something dark and small along the shoulder. Swerved completely—

Toed it. Dragged it around in the gravel with his boot and then kicked it away. Just a scrap of old cloth or tire.

Riding on. Rahim kept the visor of his helmet flipped up and looked to both sides of the road, head turning, eyes darting. Left. Right. Because the wind could have carried the wallet. Another car could have sent it flying, all the pieces—god—the bills, cards, IDs, and the driver's license, scattering.

Big fucking crew cab got right up behind him, laid on the horn, and all the bones, the tight bits in him shaking. He lifted from his haunches tasting blood. "You fucker," he yelled.

"You Goddamned—"

An hour later, at the gas station, no wallet. And this lady behind the cash register was not in the least bit curious. She managed, without the slightest movement of her head, to turn her gaze past him, to the four-level glass tower displaying all kinds of bracelets, beaded and pewter. Cool air touched Rahim's gums. He was baring his teeth, almost laughing. The fan on the counter now rotated its head away from him, toward the woman, and he watched globules of sweat along her jawline flatten, spread upwards, forming pale streaks to her cheekbones. A dream catcher twirled at her right ear. It reminded Rahim of the one he'd made of pipe cleaners in preschool, although this had a Christian fish in its center. Three long feathers dangled from it—red, white, and the blue one fluttered into her damp, venous cheek and remained stuck there. Watching her, Rahim thought she looked stunned.

"Gabriel!" she hollered. "You put in that order for a new p-v-q? Because I'm looking at the slat-wall and I'm not seeing any—"

Rahim left. Walking on past the motorcycle parked at the pump. Head chock-full of sound, compacted, like he's crunching gravel in his teeth, not under heavy boots. A little stone worked its way into the right boot, clung to sock. He's stripping off his backpack, walking on the side of the boot, searching the backpack again, but the damned miracle pebble kept on the sock, wouldn't dislocate. From the pack, he now took out a hardback and shook out the pages, nothing falling out of course, and yet the little bastard pebble bit and bit. With the toe of his left he stomped on the heel of the right and flung the book out onto grass, so freaking green, each blade looked lit.

Followed by shaving kit, crushed sandwich, keys to his dad's place back in Portland. Another set recently made for the sublet in Brooklyn. The burner he'd purchased for the move, and then the smartphone he still hoped to get fixed. The boot was half off his foot when he kicked his leg out, sent shoe flying. His foot sunk into turf, and it felt bright, felt cool, then the thin teal sock was sopping, gumming between his toes. The backpack he upturned, shook. A toothbrush landed on a beard bib, which in turn covered several spare lip balms and private medicines, and then out shot his passport. The very last item fluttered down—an extra undershirt that blanketed the mound, gave it a snow-white top.

He fell to his knees, digging through the stuff, but there was no wallet to be found, no wallet. He clutched the phone and passport to his chest, all five knuckles in contact with his ribcage, automatically kneading an ache there. Briefly lifted a knee. It now pinned a corner of the bag, his left hand free to fully unzip an inner pocket, but when he moved to drop in the phone and passport, the ache expanded from its concentrated point. He grew dizzy. Brightly, ecstatically afraid. Hundreds of miles left to travel. No money to get him the rest of the way. And food? What about that?

His gaze dropped to the sandwich in the grass—flattened to the point of translucence, the peanut butter showing through rips in the white bread. His stomach growled, just as he forbade himself from eating the sandwich, the last in a series of eight, made in his dad's kitchen three mornings ago.

"Are you sure you'll be OK with just the backpack?" his dad had asked. But there wasn't anything more to take, now was there? They'd shipped all the other stuff to Brooklyn—books, clothes, the notebooks Mom kept in the last years of her illness. The old man had nodded at this explanation. But he still couldn't look his son in the eye, a fact which deeply irritated Rahim, who imagined ditching the pack and leaving Portland with only what he had in his pockets.

But he had been grateful for the sandwiches later that day, when crossing into Idaho he saw a vision of the apocalypse. Dead land. Distant mountains. Not a glint of metal and plastics, of human life. Sandwiches were meant for times like this—for awesomely lonely stretches—emergencies.

And yet, just this morning, riding like a goddamned prince into Indiana, he'd scarfed down *three* for no other reason than to keep clear of another pancake house. One hundred and forty dollars in that wallet. Two credit cards, recently activated, my god. He clenched his jaw and flexed his fists. Idiot. Fool.

Rahim gathered up his things. He recalled seeing a door to a men's room around the side of the gas station building, and walking over to it now, he passed a red pickup that hadn't been parked in the lot before. A stranger leaned against the hood, hands in his pockets, toothpick in his teeth, something short of a grin on his face.

"You the boy who lost his wallet?" he asked as Rahim passed in front of his truck.

Rahim acknowledged him, about to continue on, but movement in the man's face made him linger. The muscles in his cheeks were leaping, sliding, as if he were still speaking, but no words came out. The ball cap he wore had strange insignia. Nothing that Rahim recognized, a "G" in the center of an oval, so that it looked like an eye. But what made the man's expression hard to determine, Rahim suddenly realized, were the man's eyes—couldn't see them. Hidden by darkly tinted shades.

But Rahim felt uneasy when he saw the dog—a mutt, short-haired. It sat in the cab, in the driver's seat, its round and glassy eyes fixed on him. The dog made him uneasy, so incredibly—the quivering tongue and black gums. The exposed row of short and square bottom teeth. Rahim wanted to step forward, get to the bathroom.

But the man's next question stopped him.

"You checked your bag? Searched through it?"

Same as before, the jaw still moving after the question. As Rahim had with the first, he answered the second question with a short cough and a nod.

"And on your way to New York City I heard. Riding there all by yourself. Where is it you're from? California?"

Rahim cleared his throat. "Portland," he said.

The man's face stretched into a wide smirk. "Yeah, headed for the big time. And that's your ride at the pump?"

Rahim cleared his throat again. "Sorry," he said and coughed yet another time. He pointed to the bathroom door. "I've got to—"

"Sounds like you could use a cold drink," the man said.

Rahim nodded, face burning, eyes tearing up. Several half-blind steps to the bathroom door. And relief filled him when the knob turned.

Rahim was back outside five minutes later, taking in the sight of the empty parking lot. A halting breath. He wavered. Then staggered forward to the vacant space alongside the gas pump, where he put his hands on his knees and threw up.

Shaky on his feet, he walked into the store.

"My bike is gone," he told the lady behind the counter.

"Stolen," he added, when she didn't seem to hear him.

The lady's eyes widened by a barely perceptible degree. Air from the fan hit her face, and her cheeks undulated.

"Huh?" she said.

The deputy clicked and unclicked his pen. It hovered over a clipboard, poised to write.

"Describe this man to me," he said to Rahim.

"He had a red truck. And a dog."

The deputy set the pen down and leaned back from the desk. The chair creaked under his weight, and the blue-black tendrils of an overhanging plant gently stroked his balding head.

"A man with a truck and a dog," the deputy repeated back. "Kinda par for the course around here. But . . ." His blonde moustache twisted, and his bright wet eyes leapt to the upper left side of his head. "Any chance this dog was missing a whole hunk of its head? Like an ear plus?"

"I don't know."

"But you saw the dog."

"Yes."

"And you didn't notice a great big *hole* in the side of its head?"

Rahim said nothing.

"I wonder son, did your motorcycle go missing or are you just—How many fingers am I holding up?"

The deputy's fingers remained wedged in his armpits.

Rahim said, "The man had a hat on. A ball cap. It had this logo of an oval with a 'G' in it."

The deputy leaned forward. "Then that dog was definitely missing an ear," he said, reaching for the phone. "And for the record, I was holding up *six fingers*." He winked.

The deputy punched out a number.

His voice leapt from him—

"Hello, Jusdin! Deputy Caruthers here! I got a young man at the station who—yep, out-of-town . . . Uh-huh. . . Uh-huh . . .

"You don't say.

"Yeah, OK. That'd work. . .

"All right then. Bye!"

Deputy Caruthers put the phone back in the cradle. He looked at Rahim straight on.

"Jusdin's got your bike. Whole thing is a misunderstanding, seems to me, on account of your political sticker."

Rahim frowned. "My what?" he asked, and then quickly inhaled. His face heated up.

"You seem like a nice kid," the deputy continued. "Probably come from a good family, nice mom and dad. But this isn't Portland, Oregon or California or wherever you—this is Banton County, Indiana, and we're proud of our country here."

The deputy pointed his finger at Rahim.

"You'll get your bike back, sure. But I supremely suggest you keep that dumb sticker off it for the duration of your trip and, if you know what's good for you, for the rest of your natural born life."

A loud, ripping exhalation—the deputy's throat was cleared. "Let's get the paperwork moving along," he said, and once more picked up the pen. "I'll need to see your license and registration."

Rahim, face still burning, couldn't look at the man.

"I don't have it," he finally said.

"You don't have it," the deputy flatly repeated.

"I lost my wallet."

"You *lost*," the deputy straightened in his chair, "your *wallet*."

"While I was driving." Rahim struggled to catch his breath. Chest tight. Nearly panting. "I keep it in my windbreaker, but it must have fallen out on the highway."

"That's a problem," the deputy said.

Rahim dragged his hands down his face.

"Who's to say you are what you say?"

"I've got a passport," he croaked.

"Who's to say *who* owns that motorcycle?" the deputy continued, not seeming to hear Rahim.

Rahim swallowed, trying to regain his voice. "I've got copies—"

"Eh?" the deputy barked. "Can't hear you!"

"—of the registration, my license. My dad has all that back in—My registration, I said! My license! The copies are all in Portland, my dad could send them!"

The deputy rolled his shoulders. A series of sharp cracks as he rotated his head at the neck. "Tell you what," he finally said. "There's a little store down the street run by two brothers I've known all my life. Decent men, sound business, and they have a fax machine. They'll even do you a wire transfer if you need money to pay them."

The deputy nodded slowly, swiping his little tongue tip along the base of his mustache.

"You see those brothers, and come back here, and we'll get your paperwork going."

Rahim walked past the Fowler Library, the Fowler Court House, and then a plot of dead, undeveloped land. The sidewalk broke apart, and he was walking in the street past a freestanding RadioShack. One hundred yards later he came upon a grass lawn, clear of any buildings, stretching to a distant road.

He stopped, turned, and walked back to the red brick building.

This must be the store. Unlit. Door sign flipped to CLOSED. But normal business hours had the store open from 9am to 9pm, Monday – Saturday. He

checked the time on the burner—6:05pm.

His gaze returned to the door. Another sign, a piece of white butcher paper, had a drawing of a birthday cake on it, with blue butterflies and what looked like a weeping crescent moon, until Rahim realized those runny black tears were probably long lashes on closed eyelids. The moon was asleep. And the lines were shaky, done in crayon, with occasional smears of lime green glitter glue. But underneath the cake, insects, and moon, a steadier hand had written a message.

6/13 Closing early 5pm

6/14 Closed All-Day

HAPPY 80<sup>th</sup> BIRTH-DAY

MR. PRESIDENT!!

Elsewhere on the window a series of identical signs advertised "\$200 Cash Advance for \$20." Smaller signs for Sirius Radio, US Cellular, and cash 4 gold. A letter board simply said, "Taxes."

Rahim peeled off an older, yellowing flyer.

*"Free Photos with Santa on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 12-4pm. Every Child gets a Christmas Goodie!"*

He walked with the flyer crumpled in his fist, and he told himself to call Dad now, better call Dad now—crumpling the flyer into a tighter and tighter ball.

The line crackled when Rahim took a breath, pausing to pinch the bridge of his nose and fight rising panic or worse. And then again, when he was all done and had not sobbed and had spilled the beans, more or less, his ears filled with the sound of lightly crumpling tissue.

Several seconds of this. Had his dad heard him? Was he there?

But then the old man's voice came through.

"What's the name of this town you're stuck in?"

Rahim shrunk backward against the library building. "Frowler," he said.

"And you don't even have a decent phone." His dad sighed. "Here's what you do, Rahim. Find a place to stay for the night. You can pay them in the morning, after I wire some money to you."

"I don't think there's anywhere to stay," Rahim said. "There's nothing here."

"Frowler, you said? Hold on. I'm looking it up."

The line crackled, and Rahim winced, bringing the phone down. His eyes narrowed on the display. Only one bar. The battery was cut to half.

Hearing his dad's voice, tinny in his hand, he brought the phone up.

". . . seem to have found something. Looks like a bed-and-breakfast, kind of dopey." The line crackled. "Rahim? Are you there?"

"I haven't even told you about the bike," Rahim said. "And the cop . . . something's not right here."

"Nothing's happened to you that we can't figure out, Rahim. I'm right here."

His dad's reply seemed to answer some other concern—some other, smaller person. Rahim shook his head, unspeaking. He kept his hand across his eyes. His father was saying, "Now tell me what street you're on. I'll guide you to the inn."

The woman put down her knitting, a bitty pink something, baby's sock, wee rat cap.

"But you got to have a license. Can't check you in without your license," she said.

"In the wallet," he said, and gnawed the edge of his thumb.

"Well then I just don't know how I can . . ." her voice trailed off as Rahim swung his backpack up onto the desk, digging through it.

She kept her lips pressed firmly together, eyeing the passport that Rahim had taken out and slapped on the desk in front of her. A soundless fluctuation of nostrils and her hands were plumbing the pockets of her jean shirt jacket, pulling up a pair of reading glasses, the frames very peach, flecked with magenta, which vanished on her face, also deeply peach, flecked with magenta. He should say something about her knitting. Compliment it. It was, he realized, just exactly the size, color, and stitch of the little sweaters on the kewpie dolls all around her. Kewpies on the desk. Kewpies on the shelves, squeezing out the rose-and-thistle pattern teacups. Kewpies attached by Velcro to the sides of the brand-new iMac, others pitched forward on the keyboard. Pretending to type? None were naked. Rahim imagined other rooms.

"Do you sell the sweaters or—"

"As a matter a fact I do," she said, opening up the passport.

"DressToKillEmKewpie on Etsy, and DressToKillEmKewpie-9 on eBay." She nodded to the soap dish filled with moss green business cards in front of Rahim.

"Take a card—or not. Makes no difference to me."

He took one. And she turned her attention back to the passport, her eyes flickering between the photo on the page and Rahim's face, but then she quickly turned to the next page, then the next and the next, eyes scanning the many colorful stamps, which filled all but the last few pages.

Flipping back to the beginning, she tapped a finger against one of the stamps. Rahim strained a little to read it—Singapore, 10 June 2011. A trip to visit his mom's side of the family.

"Father, come here," she called.

A man emerged from the back room. Blood and grease streaked the white apron he wore, and the smell of bacon hung around him. He stood alongside her, leaning his meaty forearms on the desk, looking down at the passport in her hands. They went through each page slowly, the woman's fingers occasionally tracing a stamp. Neither said a word until they got to the blank pages at the end. Then they looked up.

"What's it for?" the woman asked.

Rahim blinked. "What do you mean?"

Their staring made Rahim flush. He stammered, "You need it to go places, other countries."

Her eyes flickered down again. "You been to all these?"

The man took the passport out of her hands. He flipped to the first page and read, "Raw-him Walters. Raw-him Walters, Mother. What kind of name is that?"

Rahim took a deep breath. "*Rahim* is—"

"No," the man said firmly, "them together like that."

The woman said, "We can find you a room for the night but I don't know what you expect for tomorrow. We're all of us headed to the capital for the birthday."

"I had a second cousin marry a *Walters*, first name *Peter*," the man said. Then he shook his head. "Thing is I never seen him, so..."

Rahim glared at the passport still in the man's grip. "Can I have that back?"

The man closed the book, and Rahim swiped it from him.

"You got any money?" the woman asked.

"No."

She threw her hands up, blowing air out her mouth.

Walking away, Rahim heard her call out, "Hey, I know. Go to the RadioShack. See if the brothers won't have some way for you to—"

Rahim walked down the main road, past the municipal buildings. Better luck in a bigger town, maybe? More likely that stores would be open despite the damn holiday. He could get money, get the faxed documents. Come back for the bike.

He unwrapped the last sandwich, as he headed out of Fowler. He took slow, tiny bites, stretching out the moment.

"You know this stuff happens," he added quietly to his thoughts. He was talking to himself, just himself. He knew that. But imagining Mom was with him, that he had to talk her down too, had a comforting effect. He licked the peanut butter off his thumb. "Anybody who's travelled as much as you knows—"

A car coming up the highway behind him. He twirled on his heels, walking backward in the dirt with his sticky thumb out.

"Hey-0!"

He checked the time once the sun began skimming the cornrows. The battery was down to a quarter bar. Even airplane mode was draining it, the piece of—

Another car coming. On the pivot to look back, his feet got tangled. He tripped. Grit, stone, mashing in his elbows and palms, a lot of stinging, something probably bleeding, but he didn't spring back up. Just sat there, crabbed on his forearms and feet.

The truck went by fast. Rahim squinted after it, sure he was now watching the red speck slow and turn off into the corn.

Twilight when he reached a mailbox, the name "J. Draeger" written in white-out on the black tin. Its position in front of rows and rows of dense corn struck him as strange until he looked across the road and saw the driveway.

The drive was unpaved, spotted with inky puddles. It sliced through lawn, then turned into trees, where a house began—a porch with one chair and no light.

Rahim crouched next to the mailbox, waiting for the sun to go down.

The porch went dark. A breeze picked up, whispering through the cornfield, and Rahim waited, he waited, but no light came on. The moon, he saw, was slivered like the one in the poster, half-alive and barely shrugging its light. Still no glow to the porch. He took his hands out his pockets, shook out his shoulders. Cracked his knuckles and stepped out into the road, slow and easy. Be cool, he told himself, but each step that made a crunch made him stop where he was, pulse thrumming. He flinched at a light—lightning bug, a

few more rising up from the dirt to cross in front of him.

He followed the bend in the drive. The house revealed itself through the trees: a one-story in shadows, no red truck out front. A light in a far window—changing in brightness and color. Rahim decided that a television was on.

He passed unlit but uncovered windows to get to the back of the house. In one of them, a dark shape moved and Rahim went cold. The shape grew larger and the glass fogged, the pane shuddered. Dog. Dog in the window. Rahim took a step and the dog didn't howl and he took another step and it kept silent and Rahim bent forward, his nose inches from the glass and that dog, that dog, it—Rahim crumpled. Hands on his knees, dry heaving, having seen the choppy waves, what looked like a deep chasm, when the dog turned its head to the side and trotted away.

The cats in the barn—he'd come through the open doors and seen them laying about, on clumps of hay or cloth or high above, in the rafters—were all of them deformed. Just the one yellow eye, just part of the jaw. He approached the red truck and disturbed a tabby on three legs. Another without a tongue stretched its upper canines and rasped.

He covered his mouth with both hands, trembling with giddy relief. The motorcycle was in the bed of the truck. And the truck's tailgate was a ramp. Easy to unfold it, wheel the bike down and out. Just needed something to see by.

But that was going to be easy, too—

He stood on tiptoes, reaching into the cab to dig in the bike's saddlebag for a flashlight. In the corners of his vision he saw shadows darting, leaping. He got the rodent chills, reminded himself *not* rats, and had the flashlight in his grip. Turned it on. The sibilant pressure in his head was the sound of them all—something wrong in their heads or brains, affecting the purr. He flashed the beam across the scrambling cats, pointing it to the front of the barn. He cried out—

A hound was slowly coming through the open doors, dragging its legless rear behind it. The creature bared its teeth, snarling, and cats began dropping from the rafters like loose clumps of snow. They lay stunned for a moment and then scrambled up, joining the others in flight to the back of the barn, where a door off its hinges offered a narrow escape. Rahim looked back over at the bike, for a wild moment wondering if he should ignore the insanity. Finish unloading the goddamn bike. But the dog's snarling graduated into lunatic barking, and now humans—a man, maybe a woman—both shouted not far off. The flashlight fell from Rahim's hand and he was running with the cats.

Out the back of the barn, stopping short of a sheer drop to creek. Hearing shouting to his left, Rahim took off at the right and ran around the barn. He saw the house lit up ahead, and kicked his knees up, pumped his arms faster.

The ground beneath his feet went from lumpy lawn to soft dirt, and there was the highway up ahead, the dark veil of cornfield.

His feet touched asphalt, and he registered the shot he'd heard, the sudden cramp in the back of his shoulder. But he didn't feel much, no—it didn't nearly hurt. And he was still running—

His body hit the corn. With the slapping stalks, he felt the first throbs of pain from the gunshot wound and then a building intensity up and down his back that made him slow as he cut through the rows. He staggered down a lane. But then dirt was in his mouth, the tall black stalks whispering above him. He heard a distant shot. He heard . . . He struggled to roll, to roll, to . . .

He regarded the sky. Blue, bright, no way to determine when it was, or what day, or how long he'd been lying there. And the corn just confused him. He struggled again to sit up, and the shooting pain took away any understanding that he might have come to just a moment earlier. He closed his eyes, trying to keep as still as possible. In this way, in this quiet and immobile way, some understanding could come in, something to tell him how long, why.

He was, of course, not so much a fool, or so far gone, as to believe it was her. But the apparition of his mom remained with him during this time, stooping to whisper in his ear. Her voice brought hot, clarifying tears to his eyes.

"Are you smiling for them? You got to smile for them," she murmured.

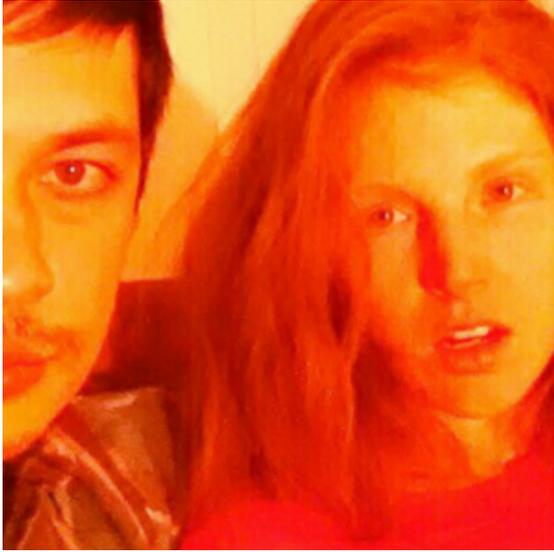
Kids' voices now, the sound of little feet running up the rows. And Rahim's mom, the lingering feeling of her, was all used up. "Found him, Daddy!" a child yelled, the voice filling the place of her. Then another said, "Can I do it this time?" And Rahim saw brown boots near his face. He heard a gruff voice—

"No, Child, this one's too advanced for you. Looks like a shoulder cut."

Rahim blinked at the shotgun being set in the soil. A hand reached into the boot and pulled out a fix-blade.

Jusdin traced what he planned to cut out with the tip of his knife. Then he leaned forward, the maple syrup on his breath sweetening the air between them, and told Rahim how he and his children would help him.

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**Rose Servis** recently studied in the MFA writing program at CalArts. She has fiction published or forthcoming in *Entropy*, *Phantom Drift*, and *Trop*.