

“I LOOKED AT THE PHONE, silent on the nightstand, and for the first time since she walked out of my life, I thought about calling Gail. Never had I longed so much to hear her voice. ‘Alex Król,’ she’d say into the phone, the way she used to when we were young. I imagined her telling me how glad she was that I’d called, that she’d listened to the race on the radio, had watched it later that night on tape delay, and had celebrated with me. She’d go on to say that she’d followed my entire career, was proud of all that I’d accomplished, maybe even adding that she’d been foolish to worry about my getting hurt. I’d tell her it was okay, that I understood. Then I’d ask her to join me for dinner when I got back to town, and she’d sigh in that way she had, and tell me that she’d love to...”

Alex paused, and Alicia waited patiently for him to continue:

“But so much in life never plays out the way we envision it. My marriage was proof of that.

“I re-imagined the phone call: Gail’s father would answer. He’d congratulate me on winning the 500 – assuming he was aware of it. He’d ask how I was doing, and I’d tell him, ‘Great, I’m doing great.’ Then I’d ask about Gail. He’d tell me that she’d met a young man a year or so after we’d broken up, married him, and that she was now mother to two healthy toddlers, a boy and a girl. Then it would be my turn to congratulate him, for becoming a granddaddy. Maybe, to save face, I’d nonchalantly ask him to say hello to Gail for me, give her my best, hoping he wouldn’t, not wanting her to know that I’d asked about her. More than likely, I’d leave it at ‘Congratulations’ and simply say ‘Goodbye.’

“I rolled over, turning my back on the phone, and prayed for sleep’s escape.”