

Tim West

Don't Say A Prayer

This is what the world is, I think, these roads out here in the open desert that don't demand that you define yourself in a box. These roads that aren't Dad clomping down the hallway in his work boots to kick open the bedroom door, factory smell drifting in: the smell of grease and metal coolant. Bellowing as the door slams against the closet behind it, "Where the hell were you tonight?!"

"I was. . . ."

Pow! He never gave me a chance to speak. He reared back his angry fist and released all his frustration in blows to my back and face. My ears filled with the humming of blood rushing to my head. I could barely make out his, ". . . went out on a limb for you. . . you're not going to

embarrass me. . . tired of all this bullshit. . . !

He used to want to be an artist. He showed me drawings of cars and sketches of places that he'd been before he met my mom, once. They reminded me of something inside of me, a driving, raging, destructive impulse to create, that could only be followed to where it would lead. Every time that I'd try to write all that would come out would be endless descriptions of my father and me, showing up in restaurants and speaking through characters that had nothing to do with him and myself. He'd be gone within a few minutes and I could lie there and bleed.

Some nights I'd be lying on my bed when he got home, and he wouldn't even get angry that I'd skipped work. He'd

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knock twice and then casually push the door open, looking sullen and worn-out, and say, "I admire you, I wish I'd have gotten out of it when I was your age."

Dad's memories of what he once was, memories of the mother and wife that walked out on us one day, would sit there in the room like a waft of rude cigar smoke and choke back our words. His eyes focused dully on some ancient regret, on the primitive past of everything that he could not let go. Then he would turn away and walk out the door, slowly closing it as he left.

He had found letters in my bedroom last week and had stayed calm through it. He just laid them carefully on the table and said two words, "Get out."

His eyes had faded from their normal chocolate brown to gray. He stared through me and into some translucent past. I'd like to think he remembered me, at age fifteen, hitting the game-winning homerun in the County Championship game, he and mom taking my team out for pizza and cheering just as loudly as the boys on the team. It's possible that he thought about me sitting on his lap at age three, reading *Captain America* while his whiskers brushed my face. That was all another day.

It was hard to not say, "Fuck you!"

I didn't know who I'd be saying it to.

Right now I'm disappearing into a bottle of brown liquid. Grainy, like looking through the lens of an old time movie camera, a home movie of me, the sad wanderer, having a beer at a dirty wooden bar next to a Texaco station in

Godknowswhere, New Mexico where my car has died.

I'm wearing the same white dress shirt from a few days ago. Unbuttoned at the top and ringed brown with sweat on the collar and under the arms. It looks like Hades here. Back home I had belonged to a gym that had a sauna, but when I open the door here the heat doesn't disappear. A heat that concentrates your mind so that all you do is think and sweat.

"We don't get many visitors in these parts."

The man speaking was a beautiful Mexican with sorrowful brown eyes and a small mouth. His nametag said James, and I pictured him bowing at a small altar in Mesoamerica. Felt his life and livelihood coursing through him as he continued to smile at me. He knows me, I thought, I know he knows me.

"I've always wanted to come here," I said.

"Well, have fun with your stay. There's a bar over there if you want to have a drink," he replied.

I'm not sure how many nights and days passed while I was on the road. White-shingled farmhouses with basketball rims nailed on barns turned into open fields of grain and barley turned into small, middle-class North Texas football towns. All of them places that I passed through seeing images of youth and families picnicking under shade trees.

Now I'm getting drunk. The car should be ready at three o'clock, and I think of how much money I have and how much I will need. I see a cactus and two wrinkled Indians in Hank Williams

cowboy hats, colored western shirts, and tennis shoes. I tip my beer to them, and the one in a purple cactus pattern nods his eyes and looks away. I'm nothing but a pale face, I think. They could probably care less. They're discussing John Wayne movies. *The Green Berets*, where the sun sets in the east. "That's something you don't see every day," the purple shirt one says.

A girl I used to know said that I was always eavesdropping. I was seventeen years old and she was the most beautiful girl at our high school. She had short brown hair and a sweet smile. She used to bake me cookies and invite me on family outings to the Great Lakes. I was a loner, though. Kind of a dorky, serious kid with an interest in keeping things tidy and to myself. She'd tease me and say that I did it so that I could always be eavesdropping. "Maybe you're a spy," she had said.

One time when we had been making out in my car after a movie she told me that she could picture herself married to me. "It'll never happen," I had said.

Dad had liked her, had smiled his big smile that he saved for strangers and company every time that she came into our house. She represented some kind of preservation for him, and he'd show her pictures from photo albums and hang out with us on the living room couch.

After that, I would sometimes dream that her and I were standing in a small, Methodist church in our wedding clothes. My Dad was there, and he was so proud of me. Proud of this beautiful girl being in love with me, and proud of

the fact that I was everything that a good man is supposed to be. You could see it in his eyes that I had achieved his dreams. An image of the face of God would appear in my curtains and ask me if he could forgive me. "I want to be a good man, Father," I'd say, but it always turned out to be just a dream.

James from the Texaco station comes in just then. "Evening fellas," he says to the Indians.

He's smooth and elegant and they both tip their hats and say, "Evening, James."

He sits down on the stool next to mine and orders himself a whiskey straight with a beer to chase. "You pay," he says smiling. "I'll get the next round."

I'm smiling back, touching my face to find a connection, to stay awake, to focus on what I'm doing here beside this man who knows me. "Beer six, señor," I say to the bartender.

"It's seven, guy."

Everything's obsessively seven, I think. I face east out the window and begin to sing under my breath while James taps the metal sides of his barstool. Our souls feel meshed here in this smoky, grainy place, and I've put a few beers in me. I picture a minister preaching about the Holy Trinity. "I love you," I say.

"Whatever you say," he says smiling.

Everything is swimming and surreal and the bar is turning on its side and fading in and out of my vision in conscious streams. What could happen, I think. He knows me, I know he knows



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me. I lean next to his ear and say, "Take me back to your place."

I want to go away with him. To swim naked in a pure spring and fall asleep with my arm near his face. Be alive, James says in my mind, that's all it takes. He understands me. Understands that I had white picket fence dreams once. Dreams where I didn't feel like I was constantly catching my breath. He understands the mornings when I stand in the scalding shower and scrub my body so hard that my skin bleeds. Understands why I keep the patchy scabs as reminders of what shouldn't be me, and he forgives me.

I'm sloshing drunk and don't really know what I'm saying. He looks disgusted, his nose curled up and his eyes narrow and disbelieving.

"Thanks for the drink," he says as he turns away from me.

The wall of the bar has a poorly put together shield with buffalo horns tied onto the top. More than one thousand miles away my dad works sixty hours a week in a factory. Three years ago my high school girlfriend got married and finished a pre-law degree. Last week in the local newspaper there was an entry for a same-sex union in the Lifestyles page. Two months ago my former lover Lee contracted HIV. Two days ago, I drove all night and wound up in the desert.

I remember one time when I was sick with the flu my dad sat up all night with me. I was coming in and out of consciousness and don't remember much of anything about the first couple of days.

Once, though, I remember waking up and seeing him just sitting on the chair

and looking at me. His eyes were small and sad, the way that someone looks when they can't control life. "Feeling any better?" he had asked.

"I feel really sick, Daddy."

"I wish it was me, son," he had said.