

Keep Driving

Nate Burch

Me and Reece and Jane are sitting outside the Quickie Mart, slurping some cokes. There's a railing there on the edge of the parking lot that isn't too comfortable but we get a good view of all the cars going in, out and past us on Lincoln Street. Reece says his brother's stopping by and he's keeping hawk eyes on the road.

I just walked over from my house two blocks away. I heard my mom ask me where I was going and not even listen to my answer. She's been slumped in her recliner all day on another downer buzz. Aunt Rita's got her hooked on those. She came over today on cocaine legs, said she needed to give 'em rest. Her and mom go upstairs a while and come down all red-eyed and worn. That's mom, with the slur in her voice, elegant as a tractor-pull priestess. Reece and Jane have to notice but I think they understand.

Me and Reece been friends about a year. He's a full-blooded Apache: lean, with a deep brown face. He moved from out west to our little town last spring, away from the desert. He lived on a reservation in southeast Arizona, between the Carrizo and the Canyon River, near Bear Mountain. Something happened there, I think, that sent his family running here, all their wooden chairs and clothes thrown in the back of an old pickup tied over with makeshift cords. I never asked Reece why they moved; his dad's eyes told me not to. That guy really looks thin, like he's sick of wrestling around with that piece of land he left behind him.

One of the few things Reece brought with him here was his drum. It's an old speaking drum, narrow in the middle and curving out towards both ends. There's hawk feathers twined all around the rim and its set with an engraving of an Apache chief, on horseback, crossing a river. He played it for me once. It has a deep welling sound like shackled thunder. When he hit the rim it spoke sharp little raindrops.

Reece tells me he takes this drum to the gatherings. He's played it all night before. He was fed water by women, with wooden ladles, who leaned around just right so as not to interrupt the rhythm of his arms. When he came out of his trance early in the morning, he wasn't tired. Reece said he felt the strength racing through his arms and his senses open, picking out threads of the night before, seeing things awake around him. A crow was flying a hundred feet over his head. He remembers looking up and seeing every detail: the

ragged edges of its feathers, the sharp jut of its beak. "And the eyes," he told me, "when I looked hard enough I could see a tiny reflection of myself in them, standing, staring up from that ground. And the crow's head was tilted down towards me, like he wanted me to see the reflection."

I imagine Reece's ancestors, long ago, staring up to the sky and the eyes of birds as they were slowly broken, broken by the same weight that's barreling down on us now: the weight of steel, of concrete Quickie Marts, of broken promises. If you don't follow me, look around.

Jane hangs out with me and Reece most of the time. She's one of the few girls I get on well with. Like whatever we want to talk about is fine, and whatever we plan for the night is all right by her. She doesn't expect us to be social giants.

Her parents left about a month ago for Tahiti. It was supposed to be a week's vacation. She got a letter last week, very brief, that said, "We're having the time of our lives! Wish you were here! Here's a check for bills and groceries." Nothing about being back soon, no phone number. Jane's dad had supposedly won a shitload in Vegas, enough to pay for this trip. That's what he said anyway. All Jane knows is he showed up late one night with a stack of money and she couldn't tell where he came in from.

Now she has that lofty house all to herself. The ashtrays are out and loaded and the dishes are working into a pyramid over the sink. Yesterday, Reece up and starts a wrestling match that ended when two legs broke off the sofa. Jane called us both toeheads and laughed it off. Her parents have been gone so goddam long it's like they're never coming back.

The sun is beaming down in this parking lot, withering the asphalt under our feet. Near the glass storefront there's two kids with a handful of candy. An old guy next to them is cursing as the starter turns over and over in his pickup. He keeps lifting up his dusty ball cap and wiping the sweat from his forehead. He gives up and heads for the phone. A Schwan truck pulls in. Reece has been following it with his eyes longer than me and Jane.

It comes to a stop near the kids. The driver hops out and goes to the back. He pulls a clean lever down on the silver freezer door, takes out two crates of ice cream and walks inside. And he leaves the engine running. What happens next is a mystery to me, to all of us. I don't know if one of us takes the initiative

or if it's just a single, simultaneous group thought, but we all drop our cokes and go running towards the truck. I circle around the driver's side and hop in the seat. No sooner do I put it in gear than Reece and Jane are right in there beside me.

I look over at the driver, through the window into the store. He's dropped a dozen boxes of ice cream on the floor. His jaw drops down and wavers, looks like it fell out of the sockets. All his expressions just melt away for a second and the cashier is right with him, with the same kind of look, her neck jutting out over the side of the register like a turtle. When I put the truck in reverse, the driver's face slowly turns ugly. That's the last we see of him, running out the door after us, then I'm on the county road, full-throttle.

What is running through my mind are bubble gum thoughts; I'm fooling myself with some childish vision as to why I'm out here on the road, with no motive, driving a Schwan's truck at 86 miles an hour, my two friends beside me shouting and throwing the driver's shit out the window. I sweep under an ancient, overhanging elm and all its leaves stream upward with our passing, like a great branch door taking us in. In the rear view, the Quickie Mart is fading off into the green.

The air comes cool and thick through the window. It reminds me of a breathless summer when my brother set out for the Rockies. He had an old Fat Bob Harley all packed up and ready to go. Mom was crying beside him. He told me in the morning that this was his own journey and no one else could take it for him. I was still trying to figure that out as he grinned at me from behind his shades and kick-started the bike. He took off slow, disappearing to the left down Chester Street, just as the sun was beaming through the trees. And we never saw him again. He got shot in a bar in Tulsa by some old drunk. Guess the whole thing was an accident. Like what we're doing now could be an accident, or already is one. Even after the adrenaline wears off, we don't say a word to each other about a plan. I look over at Reece for some kind of answer and he turns to me with a look that says keep driving.

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