

brothermonkeys

We pulled into the Texaco around midnight. Lost, and had been for hours, ever since I'd started taking a series of lefts and rights chosen at random. Big Zach and I were coming down a little, while sober Gibran, even bigger than Zach, was finally driving. When he fell asleep, it was twilight and we were getting gas. He woke to me driving in the ditch, no town, no lights, no map to guide us.

Zach had gotten so sketched when the cop cruised by he chucked the map out the window. He sat there, glazed and numb, staring at the handful of mushrooms in his left hand.

“Jesus,” I said. “Least you got your priorities straight.”

“Here,” he said, holding out half.

“Serious?”

He smiled, motioned again, and there I was, lost in the desert with a fat man grinning like a kid with a candy cane.

I laughed, took my share, and crunched the first cap.

About the time we hit the ditch doing almost ten miles an hour, Gibran stuck his head up with a tired *what the fuck?* Backseat imprint patterns danced across his face.

He looked in the mirror at me. “Why exactly are we in the ditch?”

“What ditch?”

He looked harder in the mirror, sleep clearing, and lifted the empty sack of mushrooms. “Driving with your fucking eyes closed again?”

Zach exploded, laughter tears drowning thought. I tried making words fit understanding. “You should’ve seen that turtle.”

“And the tree, tell him about the tree,” said Zach.

“Yeah, there was this tree that had glowing fingers and pearl teeth...” I turned around and looked seriously at Gibran. “He said we’re going to the mountains.”

He looked away, knowing he was beaten. “Mountains, huh?”

Zach and I nodded.

“Shit. Better let me drive.”

Two hours later, parked at the Texaco, I looked in the mirror and saw huge pupils with thin circlets of brown iris. We piled out, letting Gibran go first. In through the out door and there we were, Gibran beaming at the checkout girl, Zach and I frozen by the giant wave of light that drenched us on arrival.

Zach turned his deer-in-the-headlights gaze on me then bolted for the bathroom.

“Bastard,” I whispered, sidling up to the magazine rack. I grabbed the closest and opened to the middle, pretending to read. I stood there, listening to Gibran’s god-awful pickup lines and praying Zach got out of the bathroom before I totally wiggled.

“Sucks working the weekend,” said Gibran.

“It’s not so bad,” she said, with a look of *just let them buy their shit and get out*.

She shifted her attention. “Gonna buy that?”

I closed the magazine and saw I’d been staring deep into the pages of *Teen*. “I

was just, uh, there was this article or something.” Backing away from the rack, it occurred to me she could tell us how to get to the mountains. “You don’t happen to know the way do you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, I know *where* to go, but I don’t know *how* we were supposed to get there.”

I looked to Gibran with an I’ve-got-this-under-control look, and saw absolute horror on his face. Without hesitation, I turned and walked straight to the door.

Outside I lit a Camel Light and took two long drags. Better. Christ, what a nightmare.

“Trying to find the way, huh?”

I jolted so hard my cigarette went flying, end over end, tracing circles against the stars. And there’s this old man sitting against the wall, long hair coming down in silver thickened braids.

“Headed for the mountains?” he asked.

My hands smoothed my shirt from chest to waist. “Do I know you, friend?”

He smiled through me, and his teeth of pearls struck something in my blood.

“Stay on this road.” He rose and peered north into the night. Nodded once and turned to leave, “This is the one.”

“Wait,” I said, “How do you... what’s your name?”

He laughed, water trickling over stones. “Thomas. You can call me Thomas.”

And I wasn’t finished, hell, barely even started, but the door swung wide behind me and I turned to see Zach and Gibran rumbling out. Gibran started laughing the second he saw me.

“The hell was that?”

Magazine memories brought the blood to my cheeks. “What did she say?”

“Not much. Zach came back and I figured I better get to him before we had a repeat.” He smiled at me and everyone felt the start of schoolgirl laughter.

As we were getting back in the car I remembered. I turned to look but knew already.

“Thomas?”

Nothing. Thought better of asking my boys if they’d seen an old man talking to me when they came out. I sat next to Gibran in the front seat and lit another cigarette.

“Who’s Thomas?” he asked.

“Tell you later.”

“Alright then, which way from here?”

I sucked my cigarette and pointed to the north. Zach leaned in from the back and I could tell he wanted to ask. “Tell you later.”

“Fair enough,” he said, and turned up music to carry us through the night.

Their outline loomed heavy in the thinning air. Somewhere in the night they had gone from a distant dream painted on the horizon to a full-blown reality demanding attention, defining everything else by being. Somewhere in the night they had crept up on us and now stood, close enough so we could hear their whisper, a deep breath that coasted down the slopes and whistled over the highway.

Gibran was passed out in the passenger seat. His baby face shone in the early sun,

only partly from the oil and grease covering each of us. His left hand twitched, almost reaching.

I bent my head to the wheel, listening to Bob Marley mingle with the mountain whisper and Zach's irregular snoring and the car's rattling engine. The rattle was growing louder, missing a few more times than usual and everyone knew it, pretended not to notice, the way we pretended we weren't all getting older, month by month.

I smiled at Zach's sleep apnea-induced snoring, a halting, choking sound that had become my lullaby over the years, silence meaning he was up and I should be. Like the morning we left Normal, the stillness of the room waking me. I rolled over and he was sitting in his bed staring at the sunlit crack in the curtains.

"Hey guy."

He looked over and smiled. "What's up?"

"You tell me."

He swung his feet to the floor and sat up. Real straight. "Lets get out of here."

"You hungry?"

"No, I mean *let's get out of here.*"

"You mean, like, the apartment?" He shook his head and I finally got it.

"Serious?"

He shrugged.

I laughed. "What about Gibran?"

"He'll come," he said, and I knew he was right. But there was no reason to leave, and I almost said it, until I realized there was no reason not to. Which in itself seemed like a reason. At least then it did, and five hours later we were headed west on I-70

across the Illinois border.

Zach missed a beat, choking on his own air and coughing himself awake. He sat up, growling and shaking out the sleep. I glanced in the mirror, saw him look up at the mountains before catching my reflection.

“Morning,” he said.

“Hey.”

He looked back out the window, quiet for a moment. His finger traced the peaks on the window. “When we get there,” he said, “what then?”

I watched him, then the road. Then him.

He looked at Gibran. “It’s just... aw, fuck it, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

But I did. Our world was going to change and there was nothing we could do about it. We were going to change, and part of me wanted to turn around, keep driving forever, never growing old or apart or any kind of different.

The car’s nose, painted in years of bugs and birdshit, had started trembling about halfway up. Zach reached over and raised the volume.

I ran my hand along the dashboard feeling for the groove that fit my hand, that came from years of patting, caressing, cajoling him to a few more miles, a little further down the road.

*Attaboy, everything’s gonna be alright*, I whispered, and his nose shook again and I thought about driving with friends in the back, hot Kansas wind blowing through mops of hair in the summer, sitting and listening to the big thunder rumble of the engine and

the roar of wind whipping past our ears. Or in February when the frost hardened like skin on the paint and we blew warmth in our hands, tracing words and dirty pictures in the fog on the windows.

Through the mist of memory and the ink of night, I saw him sitting cross-legged in the middle of the road, lifting one brown hand. The car shuddered to a halt. Maybe it was the thin mountain air that finally choked him, clogged his lungs and killed him. Maybe it was heart failure, brought on by years of hard driving and harder living. And maybe because no one else saw him, Thomas didn't really exist, wasn't really waiting at the mountaintop.

I slipped my hand into the groove, turned the key. Nothing.

"Hey," Zach said, sitting up. Gibran clutched my shoulder from the back.

We climbed out, stones crunching beneath our feet as we shivered in the cold. I stared at the car, like he would rumble back to life and take me where I had to be tomorrow, next week, next year.

Gibran put one giant hand in the small of my back and shoved me towards the hood, pushing me to the center and sitting on my left. Zach dropped himself on my right and flipped me the lighter. We sat and smoked and watched the night sky.

Zach laughed. "We made it."

Gibran looked around. "And what exactly were we supposed to do here?"

They both looked at me, like just because I talked to the tree, I should know what the fuck was going on. I took a deep drag. "Tell you later."

And there we were, on top of a mountain, rolling in dirt and leaves and whatever animal shit or roadkill happened to be around, three greasy, sweaty monkeys who smoke

too much and eventually ended up gasping for breath and trying not to laugh.

Weeks of travel seemed to settle on us all at once, and the cold mountain breath convinced us to cram back into the car, the big guys in back with the seats folded down and me sprawled across the front, Zach's heavy breathing lulling me to sleep.

I could tell that fall was setting in. Seemed to happen overnight. A dusty blue pickup roared past, not even pretending to slow. I sat on my backpack and waited for the next one. I already missed my boys.

We had decided there was no way we were going to walk back down. I remembered a part in *On the Road* where Dean and Sal would coast down mountains, so I figured we could give it a shot. They were skeptical at first, but the options were limited.

With only a few minor stalls we reached the bottom and rolled to a stop about a mile and a half from a convenience store. We gathered on the hood for one last smoke, a slacker funeral pyre.

"Now what?" Zach asked.

Gibran kicked at the dirt and mumbled, "Thinking about heading back to Normal. Maybe saving some money so I can move for good."

Zach nodded and I knew he was going with.

I squinted up at the sky. "Better get you guys some bus fares."

Zach started to say something but changed his mind. He stood up and slapped me on the shoulder. "Alright then, it's a long walk."

At the store, Zach and Gibran got a hold of their parents and had money wired to the next town. I went in and, after careful deliberation, came out with a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon and package of twinkies.

Zach laughed when he saw me. “Selling your ass for twinkies and beer?”

I nodded and tossed him one.

We walked to the next town, finishing the beer, and stumbled into the bus station, wired money in hand. The bus showed and we braced ourselves.

“Sure you won’t come?” Gibran asked for the first and only time as we hugged good-bye.

“Not this time.”

Zach grabbed me and squeezed hard.

My throat tightened and I pushed him away. “Alright, get the hell out of here,” I said. “I got a road to hitch.”

And as I watched them ride away, something inside broke.

A semi came rolling by, snapping me awake, and actually pulled to the side. I slung my bag over my shoulder, running for my ride.

Jared Ward