

Ride With Me

Soundings Review, Winter 2015

“I like the back roads.”

“Its faster to take 64 east over to I25,” he said.

They took the long way, Colorado State Highways to Walsenburg, then connect with the Interstate. He knew he could never give her what she needed, what she deserved. She liked the road though. He could give her that. They spent one night in Santa Fe, another in Taos. She drove all morning. He lost himself in the landscape. Houses scattered over spacious, open land. Tres Piedras, Antonita, Blanca, Alamosa. A person could start over in one of these remote places where wind and heat whipped around your life and great sheltering mountains stood in the distance. Majestic things to contemplate, like remote possibilities. He wondered about the winters.

He took the wheel in Fort Garland. A few miles out the road climbed approaching La Veta Pass. Curves grew sharp and bordered steep drop-offs overlooking the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. He knew she didn't like this part.

“It freaks me out a little. Especially if there are semis around.”

And there was an eighteen-wheeler in front of them and a truck pulling an R.V. in front of the semi. Still he sped up, staying as close as he could to the semi's tail. Closer than was safe. He glanced over at her.

“Jesus Christ. Can you slow down please?”

He grinned. “I just need to get around these guys.”

Her face was tense and that pleased him just a tiny bit, in some dark corner of himself. He steered through a jagged section and saw the road straighten briefly ahead. He stepped on the gas, flooring it as he passed the truck and R.V. just before the next hairpin curve and drop off.

“See, no problem,” he said.

After La Veta Pass the landscape opened up, flattened out and they cruised into Walsenburg. Five years, they’d been together. Whatever that meant. Drifting in and out of one another. They were both thirty-six years old.

“What do you want?” she asked him one time.

“You” was what he wanted to say but he didn’t.

“What do *you* want?”

Eventually she quit asking. Still, a deep connection.

“Just you and me kid,” he always said, “against the world.”

“Fuck ‘em all.” She smiled.

He pulled into a Flying J service station in Walsenburg.

“Lets stay here tonight.” She pointed to a motel across the street.

“It’s only a couple more hours to Denver. We can make it easy.”

“It’s like the motor lodges my family stayed in when I was a kid.”

The motel was an old dilapidated lime green semi-circle of rooms with a gap in the middle that looked like a driveway but was an outdoor laundry with a row of washers and dryers on one side and storage rooms on the other. A large yellow sign with black letters read “Stay Inn.” The place gave the appearance of being closed down and in the process of refurbishment except for a car parked in front of one of the rooms.

“You want to stay *here*?”

“Yea, it looks cool. We’re not in a hurry anyway.”

“Whatever. At least it will be cheap.”

Forty-five dollars a night with free coffee in the morning from a pot on a flaking Formica table in the front office.

“We’re historic,” the leathery-skinned woman at the check-in counter said. “Some photographers from National Geographic were here a couple of weeks ago.”

#

He watched her as she slept; beads of perspiration formed on her forehead. Two single beds and a desk filled the room. A three square foot air-conditioner mounted in an opening cut out of the back wall, control knob missing, labored to blow semi-cool, but the atmosphere was heavy with late afternoon heat. A frayed wire hung from its side to the electrical outlet. He brushed a strand of moist hair from her face. His fingertips followed a streak of sweat as it made its way along her temple, down the side of her face, to her neck where his hand came to rest. He put his index and middle finger over her carotid artery and felt her pulse. An earworm played in his head. *Good day to you, my fine young lady. May I help you comb your long hair, sweep it from that brow so cool?* The Kelpie song. Jethro Tull. Semis on I25 swooshed in the background.

A person could disappear in one of those little towns, he thought again. Nice people probably lived there, folks who didn’t expect too much. Content with life. He liked the A-frame they had passed in Antonita, sitting a little ways back from the highway. Liked the way it made him feel. Good that a place like that still existed, hadn’t been bulldozed over for a strip mall or Jimmy Johns or an addition to the state university.

He hadn’t told her that he didn’t remember leaving Phoenix. It couldn’t have been too long ago. A few days? A week? Two weeks? A thin mist covered his memory before Taos. He

pictured the Chilean Mesquite that covered most of her front yard, spreading its branches like an umbrella, overhanging the street and her driveway, touching the two smaller Palo Verdes. He saw this in his head behind the fog-film like a faded postcard. But no actual memory. He knew they were heading for the Twin Cities and that he wasn't going back to Phoenix. He hadn't told her that either. Maybe she'd stay with him. That's what he hoped.

He touched her cheek. She was almost beautiful. She opened her eyes and looked at him. The color of moss, streaked with lines of hazel brown spreading from her pupils. What do you want? You.

#

The tank was almost empty when he pulled into the parking lot of the Corn Crib chicken restaurant just over the Iowa border near Shelby. He had no idea how long he had been driving. Temperatures in the high nineties all the way through northeastern Colorado and the entire state of Nebraska, the air conditioner quit working somewhere around North Platte. He remembered the road sign "Welcome to North Platte." Hot air undulated in trippy mirage-like waves, almost iridescent, across the mid-western plains; it blew through the open windows and filled the interior with dust and the smell of heat and dead corn. The entire country had turned into Arizona desert. Brown, baking. Dying crops as far as the eye could see.

He must have been in the car a long time. His legs ached to touch the ground. A big hand-printed sign that read "No Pets Allowed" hung on the front window of the Corn Crib. Run in, pee, order the first thing on the menu, to go. Waylon would be okay in the car for a few minutes. He turned to the back seat, to make sure there was water in Waylon's bowl. Plastic bags with clothes, stacks of books, some towels, shoeboxes with CDs filled the seat.

No dog.

Something irrevocable clamped to his chest and radiated down his center. Knowledge that a bridge had been crossed, a moment met after which nothing could go back to how it was before. His mind had yet to form this thought, but his body knew. He closed his eyes and rested his head on the steering wheel. He breathed slowly, deeply. He was very hungry.

The menu consisted of two large cardboard posters on the wall behind the cash register, each item hand-written in bright red marker. Everything contained some form of chicken. Southern fried, barbequed, roasted, sliced chicken breast sandwich with homemade gravy and mashed potatoes, chicken fingers. A choice of sides; corn on the cob, cole slaw, baked beans. Various combinations. Too many, he thought. Dinner rolls came with all orders.

Mail had been piling up for a long time. He remembered that. Overflowing two large plastic pails in his living room. A few weeks worth, a couple of months, maybe longer.

“Jesus, don’t you ever open your mail?” She had looked at it as if it was a dead body.

“Its mostly junk.”

“How do you know if you don’t open it?”

She was right. At some point he would sort through it. Fucking horrifying all that mail, a whole dimension of life confined in sealed envelopes. Temporarily. Waiting to burst.

“Are you ready to order, Sir?” The woman behind the counter looked at him, her smile patient. Had he been standing there long?

He decided on the sliced chicken breast sandwich with the one side of corn on the cob and a large cup of coffee. He picked up a six-pack of Arrowhead Spring water. Then he remembered. He had stayed in Kearney, Nebraska the night before. At a Best Western. A little more expensive than he liked but he had been dead tired. Right off of Interstate 80, the first

place he saw. Room 219, second floor facing the freeway. Two queen-sized beds. Spacious. She liked nice big rooms like that. Of course she had been with him, though the night blurred in his mind. Walsenburg to Kearney. A long drive.

He paid for the chicken dinner. That pain again, just behind his left shoulder shooting down to his pinky finger like an electric jolt. It only lasted a few seconds but a sensation lingered. He saw her face, her smile, the glimmer in her eyes, smelled the scent of that shampoo she used. Vanilla-almond, a vague presence of lavender. She was so much more than he deserved. Beautiful women had crossed his life. Flawless features. Commonplace beauty. They all began to look the same after awhile, smell the same, feel the same. She was different. Almost beautiful, but he wouldn't have changed anything at all about the way she looked. Not one thing. Maybe other things. Like why did she care what he did with his mail? It wasn't any of her business was it?

#

"I had to put Waylon down." He remembered telling her this before they left Phoenix.

They sat on the dock at Goldwater Lake in Prescott; their feet hung off the end. A fishing pole between them. He couldn't be sure how long ago. But, Waylon was gone.

"Oh my God," she said. "I didn't even know he was sick."

"He was. And old."

He moved closer to the edge of the dock; his feet dipped into the water into a school of shiner minnows. He tried to scoop up one of the tiny creatures in his hand but it was too quick for him.

"Yea, he was old."

“I loved that dog. Why didn’t you tell me?”

He looked at her, waited for her to cry.

#

Some asshole at the Corn Crib stared at him as he walked out. Short, pudgy guy with black curly hair and John Lennon glasses. He wore a t-shirt with the words, *Are we out of options?* printed above an Aspen leaf and www.aspeninstitute.com. A tall, slim guy stood next to him wearing a similar t-shirt.

“What the fuck are you looking at?”

He put the bag with the chicken sandwich on the front seat and the water on the floor in the back. Fucking assholes. His stomach gurgled but his appetite was gone now. He positioned the coffee between his legs as he got back on to Interstate 80. The highway was empty except for a few trucks, which he quickly passed. He had the road to himself. He pressed hard on the accelerator. Things were dropping away from his life. Shedding. Dead skin.

They must have had an argument, a big fight. She probably stormed out of the motel room. Was it in Walsenburg? Kearney? It must have been very bad. Bad enough to make her leave, turn around and go back to Phoenix or on to the Twin Cities. Call her. Of course. Her cell phone. He leaned forward and retrieved his phone from his back pocket. The car swerved as he scrolled for her number. It rang several times, then her voice. “This is Karen. Please leave a message and I will return your call.” He called five times within the next few hours. Maybe she was already in the Twin Cities or back in Phoenix. If she had gotten a bus to an airport. Colorado Springs or Denver or Lincoln or Omaha. He should call her friend, Carrie, in

Minneapolis; see if she was there. But, then he'd have to explain the fight. The fight he didn't remember. And he didn't know Carrie's number.

Moisture collected between his palms and the steering wheel. Knees braced against the wheel, he wiped both hands on his pant legs. Her face was so clear in his mind. As if she was sitting next to him, wind whipping through her hair. The scent of vanilla-almond. Lavender. *My fine young lady. Ride with the kelpie, I'll steal your soul to the deep.* So much more than he deserved. Fuck. Where was she?

#

"You just quit? Out of the blue?" That look on her face. As if he had done something incredibly stupid. Like a kid leaving the milk out on the counter to go sour or bringing home a bad report card.

He shrugged. "The place is fucked. A bunch of flunky assholes. You try working there. I'll get something else."

"It's better to look for a job when you already have one."

"Yea, well."

He saw broken glass as he said this, lamps flying across the floor of the Lighting and Ceiling Fan aisle at Home Depot, customers looking at him, moving out of his way. Security rushing toward him.

"Jesus Christ Tony." His boss. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

What the hell *was* the matter with him? He couldn't remember what had happened. Some asshole customer said something to him.

They didn't press charges but fired him. Sent a bill for damages. A big one. That had been several months ago. He never paid. Didn't even look for another job. There was probably another bill in the pile of mail at his house. Fuck Home Depot. Thirty hours a week, minimum wage. Sorry ass place for sorry ass losers.

"Let's get out of Dodge for a couple of weeks," he said. "Head up to Minnesota. We can stay with my brother. You can visit your friend Carrie."

She had agreed. "Lets go through Sante Fe and Taos. I've never been to those places."

"Maybe we'll go up to the boundary waters too." He pictured the vast forest and waterways, sensed the peace that such places had within them.

#

A storm was coming in to southern Minnesota. By the time he pulled off Interstate 35 at Albert Lea the sky to the north was velvet black and streaked with ripples of silver. The bag with the chicken sandwich sat unopened on the passenger seat. Only two hours to the Twin Cities. They could talk. If she was there. She'd like the wavy, sterling weave across the dark sky. Something she would notice. He liked that about her. The things she paid attention to.

Before they met, he worked in real estate. Dressed sharp and frequented the night spots in Scottsdale. A charmer, athletic body, good catch, good lay. He never felt anything. Always wanted them gone after sex. But, he wanted her to stay, wanted to give her something he couldn't quite articulate. He met her five years ago when he took Waylon in for a rabies shot at Alameda Vet in a decaying strip mall a few doors down from the Yucca Tap room where he stopped for beer sometimes after work. She worked the front desk. He'd poke his head in and say hi and she seemed pleased to see him. He began to think that she might understand about the

void at his center. The blank spaces. Thought he could maybe even tell her about the Ironwood Tree in the back of his grandmother's house and the dead cat in his lap.

"I've got issues," he told her after they had been dating for a couple of months.

"What kind of issues?"

Monsoon rain hit the corrugated metal roof on her back porch. They sat on an old, frayed love seat.

"Stuff from the past."

She didn't even ask what stuff. Just nodded. As if words were unnecessary.

Everything was new then; as he said the word "issues" the voids flickered before him and receded.

"But, now I've got you." He pulled her into him, whispered into her hair.

"That's right. You've got me." She slipped her fingers under his belt, ran them along the skin below his waistline. He liked how he was able to collect all his scattered parts when he was with her.

He wished she were with him now to watch the storm coming in.

#

He had been staying with his grandmother the summer Bob the cat died. He couldn't remember exactly why. His parents worked a lot; his dad drove a semi back and forth across the country, his mom put in time and a half on the assembly line at Motorola. He was ten years old. He liked his grandmother's place, the open desert, the sky at night. She read him a story about a mythical horse-like creature that lived in rivers and lakes. The Kelpie. Seaweed for a mane and hooves on backwards. A beautiful creature that warned of storms. In the children's book a young girl sat on a rock at the waters edge; long auburn hair framed her face. Almost beautiful.

The Kelpie's graceful body poised over the water, mane hanging down its back as it approached the girl. He was taken by the story and the images. Only later, back in his school library and on the computer, did he learn that the Kelpie was a shape-shifter that changed into human form. It enticed humans onto its back where they stuck to the glue-like skin as the creature plunged into the water, disappearing under the surface, devouring them. In human form it seduced beautiful women and dragged them to the water to die.

#

An RV park stood adjacent to the motel in Walsenburg, a large open septic lagoon next to it for wastewater. The woman at the desk apologized in advance for any odor that might drift into their room. "We'll be getting a regular sewage system when this place is all fixed up," she said. He noticed one beat-up camper on a rusty pickup parked at the RV lot. The camper looked empty.

No fence or barrier around the septic lagoon. Grass and weeds grew right up to the edge. He thought of Goldwater Lake in Prescott and fishing from the dock with her. His feet sunk a few inches into the soft, mushy ground around the lagoon. The smell was nauseating. Decay. His breath came hard and heavy. He almost retched. The peaks of the Sierra Mojadas visible in the distance watched him. Something pulled against his left shoulder at an awkward angle. A muscle or ligament strained and then a sharp pain. A neon orange light from the Flying J flashed in the darkness, the only sound the white noise from the interstate.

#

Hard to say when the unraveling began. The mail. The job. The anger and missing pieces. It seemed they had always been there.

“I don’t know what this is,” she said the first time he disappeared for a couple of weeks.

“What?” He had stopped at Alameda Vet to say hi.

“Where were you?”

“Nowhere. I was just hibernating.” She deserved better.

“Hibernating? What the hell does that mean?”

What *did* it mean? She said he had been gone two weeks. A complete void. Blank spaces he couldn’t fill in, secret places hidden even from himself.

The first one he remembered was the summer he stayed at his grandmother’s house. She lived on the outskirts of Tucson surrounded by miles of open desert. He sat on the cool earth under an Ironwood tree, looking out at the hot emptiness. Bob, his grandmother’s big orange cat, lay on his lap. He didn’t know how long he had been sitting there. When he moved to get up Bob didn’t budge. He stood up and Bob tumbled, limp and heavy to the ground. He carried the dead cat to the arroyo several yards into the desert and covered it with sand and creosote branches. His grandmother would have been devastated to know her Bob had died. Better to think he just wandered off

“I don’t know what it means,” he said. “Just gone. Hibernating.”

#

The clouds let go as he got back on to Interstate 35 out of Albert Lea. He rolled the windows up. They quickly fogged over and he cracked the back two. Visibility was bad, taillights a bloody red blur. But the speedometer rose, as if on its own, to eighty miles an hour,

more. He sped through the storm, unmoored from his surroundings, exit signs and mile markers along the sides of the highway sinking into the past.

Karen was the one he came closest to telling about the voids. That afternoon in Walsenburg in the motel when she opened her eyes and looked at him, his fingers gently touching her cheek. Tell her. Clean slate. He couldn't do it. Still time though. They were young enough. He'd get back into real estate. Really hustle this time. Get another dog. Work stuff out. The wind picked up and slammed the rain at an angle across the highway. It rushed through the back windows. Pain seared down his left arm again. He could barely see. He put the defroster on full blast, rolled down the front windows, clutched the wet, slippery steering wheel. *I may charm you, not alarm you. Tell you all the fine things and more. Up, ride with the kelpie. You and me kid. Against the world.*