

John Thursday

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Driving now and I've time to think, thank God. That demanding house...with the warm bath and all the other trappings of married life. Out of the bath and back on the road. Alone... in the van. Right here. Birth and death in her red velvet cabin and the whole world passes outside like a roulette wheel. Red, black, red, black, red... On to get dinner; Chinese food and a stop at the grocery store, to take back to that house...with her there, loud as fuck, all the time. I used to play guitar in that house. That and sex. Now this van. She warms up after a half hour or so. And she runs. Runs like a limb. An extra appendage. She's an organ. A second heart. It isn't her age, it's her passion.

The wife buys me multivitamins. I could take them. There's too much smoke in my diet anyway. Where am I playing tonight? That house. This one. The one I'm in. The van keeps on bringing me home. That's how she works. Point her in the right direction and she goes. So I'm in her. All the way and flying. A missionary. Keyla (that girl from the church trip to the beach). love. To love like a child with nothing but time and faith and summers. God. The Ocean. And maybe if I drive there she'll still be there too. Wondering where everybody went and why they never call for devotion anymore and why she doesn't recognize anyone until she sees me. Me looking exactly the same as I did then. And her smiling as we hold hands and walk down the beach again. I can't wait to see the ocean again--with her. So I take the multivitamins and throw them in the console between the driver's and passenger's seat and I'm back on the road. Headed to the beach.

There is a little town called Quinton, AL. I've never been there. It's a half hour drive to the north from that house. I'll know when I get there. A little town-full of county folks and a Walmart just south of the highway. Highway 22 goes east and west and when I'm in the van I'm headed West or I'm headed home. I'm looking for a radio station in Quinton. And a truck stop. I should go ahead and stop and look at the oil and kick the tires and all that. This far and I'm in it. When you're in Quinton, you know you're going somewhere. Then I remember; the beach is to the south. And she's down there. I'll get there.

For now there is the tom-boy cashier at the grocery store. I had forgotten she worked there until I finished checking out and saw her in the next lane. My heart skips a beat and I wish I could return my goods. I'd make small talk and see if she'd look at me. If only I could see what expression she makes. Maybe we'd drop off the groceries at my house on the way to Quinton. Maybe she was from Quinton. She'd know what station to put the radio on as we passed through. We'd stop off at her grandmother's house, where she lives, to say goodbye and grab an extra pair of socks or a jacket and a blanket or something. She grabs the pillow off of her bed and I know right away she loves me.

So now it's the two of us. She asks where we are going. I tell her about the girl on the beach. She asks why we're heading West if the beach is down South. I tell her it's just the way I want to go. She fluffs up her pillow and stuffs it behind her head and leans on the window with her feet on the dashboard. She calls me the captain. I tell her it's a titular post. She disagrees but won't argue. I think about the beach again and notice I'm speeding. There's no point in hurrying so I slow down. The cashier is asleep and I'm glad I'm not alone. And we're headed to Tupelo to camp out in Elvis's back yard. Under the Mississippi stars with the van doors open and the sound of Elvis practicing in his bedroom.

The cashier is awake and looking at the map. I find her comforting. Tupelo is just up the road. We left late, it's dark and we're not in a hurry so we start looking for ghosts. I pull over and we're in the back. She tells me who she is. It's the same every time and I love that she tells me and to die becomes redundant.

The sun comes up on us in Tupelo and we slow down even more. Memphis lay an eternity away and eternity lies with us. The van effortlessly resumes her motion and I no longer have to drive. I climb over the arm rest and into the back. The back is as dark as we want it to be. Helios himself steers us West and we embrace. There is nobody but us and all that lies between is forever and what a gift. An eternal trip. The long way around all of time.

*It sucks when you know it.* I started.

*How you're gonna die?* she knew.

*Life is full of surprises.* I continued, *But if I make it to a certain point, I'm definitely dying of a heart attack.* Her still silent, knowing. *So am I to be a Buddhist? Not give a care to any of it? Knowing it's all fleeting and therefore pointless?* I was formulating thoughts, but they weren't the right ones. I disappeared for a minute, returning a bit thinner.

*Where'd you go?* I expected her to ask. She didn't.

*Cancer.* I let out. *Forget what I said about heart attacks. I don't know anything.*

*At least you know that,* she grinned.

I looked out the front of the van from behind the driver's seat. It was neither night nor day and I was getting hungry. I thought about Chinese food. The wife would be waiting. Eternal and ageless, not quite a ghost, she would wait on the Chinese food. And more important almost than the food itself was an extra side of sweet and sour sauce. I show up lifetimes later with

generations in tow, filling the front lawn with the bastard children that I'd made with the cashier on the way from Alabama to Florida by way of California and several lifetimes over and the first thing she asks is if I brought the extra sweet and sour sauce. Of course I hadn't. I'd been all over God's creation as well as everyone else's. I'd had cancer, written books, plays, songs, invented a new language and resurrected several dead ones but I'd forgotten the sweet and sour sauce. She goes back inside the house, ageless children sitting on the porch staring out at their half siblings standing on the lawn. I follow her back in the house having been gone, actually and completely, gone. I turn to look back over my shoulder. The yard is empty and the van is still warm. The cashier is back at work and our bastard children returned to the ether to wait back in line.

*What a gyp!* one of them complains in the rustling of the leaves on the trees lining the street.

*Take it easy chap,* I reply. *We've plenty of time for your return. There's plenty of time for your comeback.* I sing the lines, closing the door to the house behind me.

*"Plenty of time for your return, plenty of time for a comeback,*

*Plenty of time to stand in the sun, plenty of time for all that."*

Stepping over a sea of toys I make my way to the kitchen and set the Chinese food on the table. There is a band playing in the bonus room; a lively set with notes soaring into the kitchen and exploding over the room. I hang on to one or two and look over at the wife already spooning noodles onto plates for the children and tapping her foot along with the beat, smiling peacefully.

*Why do you have to go in tomorrow? Can't you just call in? You never call in.* Her comportment is playful but she is serious. I grab my guitar and join the band in the bonus room. I miss smoking. But cancer. The drummer is smoking like a chimney and grimacing with every cymbal crash.

The bass player stares up at the ceiling seeing stars. I join in on the down beat, just a smidge early, to announce my arrival and pull the band off measure just a bit, just to hear them pull it back. I love the way it sounds. The sound of the next second, coming just a second early, a foreshadow, a prediction, a blessing. The bass player grins, the drummer inhales, and we're off. The trip is on. These are the ones I am taking to the sea. And this is a far superior mode of transportation.

*Plenty of time for your return, boys. On four. And a one, and a two, and a three...* I look down at the house becoming smaller and smaller as the band and I fly higher and higher. In the center of the table, in the center of the kitchen, a golden light shines brighter the higher we fly; a beacon at the center of the universe— a 5 oz cup of Sweet and Sour sauce.

*Nice night for music,* a passing traveler hollers over the music.

Just as we were about to tear into the heart of the set list the drummer looks up, announcing,

*I gotta take a leak.* The bass player, who didn't have to look up to see the stars anymore, nods his head that he too needs a pit stop. I looked down and see the bright lights of a truck stop. I love truck stops. All the trucker stuff that I have no use for I just love to look at. CB radios and antennas and window wash and free showers with the purchase of 75 gallons of gas. And landline phones built into the booths of the restaurant so truckers could eat and call home.

*It's slop compared to your cooking baby,* the weary truckers would mumble through mouths full of canned collard greens and quick-mix cornbread. *I can't wait to get home.*

The band and I settle to the ground in a dark corner of the parking lot and make our way towards the entrance to the truck stop. The drummer finds the restroom and is dragging the key,

which is attached to a life sized statue of *The Thinker*, behind him. The bass player walks over to the drink cooler as I make my way to the trucker section to have a look around.

*They have Jolt Cola!* the bass player yells from across the store.

*They have a "no lot lizards" bumper sticker.* I reply. The cashier is watching us, not suspiciously, just interested. I pick up the bumper sticker as I hear the scraping of *The Thinker* being dragged back into the store. The drummer looks relieved. The bass player meets me at the cash register holding three cans of Jolt Cola and a King-Sized Snickers with four small bars in the package.

*You can have two,* he said before I could ask. *You need your strength.*

*Did you know they still use Electro Shock Therapy in some states?* The band and I are on break as we pass above Memphis. "It shocks everything right out of you, not only the depression. When you wake up you have no idea where you are and sometimes even who you are." I continued talking as the lights of Graceland twinkled far below us. I was sitting on my amp looking down below and thinking about my time in the mental hospital. Not as a patient but as an employee, a "mental health counselor," which meant that I had gone to school and studied the kind of things that put me on the right side of the clipboard when I finally found myself in the psychiatric emergency department.

*What brings you here.* I would begin my line of questioning always the same.

*My brother dropped me off, or I drove myself,* would inevitably be the reply.

*No.* I would respond, almost by script, *Why are you in the hospital?* And then the story. Always a nail biter. And always with the same ending. Us talking. Once, on the way to see a patient that was waiting for me in one of the small rooms I noticed the entire wing of the hospital seemed to smell like peppermint. Usually the place smelled of waste and crisis but now all I could smell was

the medicinal smell of clean. When I opened the door to the room holding my patient the smell hit my nose like smelling salts, and I thought how pleasant it was to have a patient that was able to care for himself. Turned out he had been found passed out in a dumpster after drinking two bottles of Listerine because “it’s easy to steal.”

*I lost it all sir,* he began. *Wife, kids, house, owned my own business. And then I started drinking.* I was just happy he smelled decent.

*Did they give him Electro Shock for that?* the drummer asked between drags of his smoke.

*No, no, sorry, I digress. The mouthwash guy didn’t get ECT. That was in Atlanta and they don’t use ECT in Georgia. He was just a drunk.* I turned my words over in my head. Was calling him a drunk callous? He had other problems but nothing the medical community could fix. They generally just caused mental illness. If you wanted to feel crazy, seek help for mental illness with a physician. Their combined egoism and tunnel vision causes them all to make the same mistake. Typically, someone would show up at the Psych ER and be given a series of drugs that make them chill out and sleep. Being asleep is being cured so they would wake you up and turn you loose with a prescription for the same drugs they knocked you out with in the hospital. These drugs eventually (sooner than later) stop working but you keep taking them and the side effects really ramp up. So if you thought you felt depressed before you sought help, now you are seeing things that aren’t there and unable to sleep more than a few minutes each night. So then you go back and get more medicine for sleep and hallucinations and then those medicines have side effects and so on and so on until you are so messed up you can’t get through a day without a handful of pills and the initial problem you sought help for looks like a common cold compared to schizophrenia you now have because of the pills they gave you. “Sounds about right,” The bass player is looking at me now. I look around and notice we’re coming up on a town. It’s

smaller than Memphis and perched atop a group of rolling hills. The air is warm and I am standing with my guitar. “How about we get back to it?” I ask. But before I can finish, we’re playing. The music is good and I forget all about mental health and hospitals and sickness.

*Let’s go to Wichita!* I suddenly exclaim and begin to sing. *I am a lineman for the county. And I drive the main roads. Searching in the sun for another overload.* The band is still playing; the bass player brings out a small fiddle and manages to play the string parts while keeping the bass going. The drummer switches to brushes and God knows where the horns are coming from. We’re soaring! Headed straight into Wichita as the years fly backwards at such speed that we land in an empty park downtown sometime around 1952.

*Wait a minute!* the bass player, Bob, exclaims. *This is Fairmount Park! Hot dog! Let’s go see Betsy!* The drummer, Brad, is okay with pretty much anything as long as he has cigarettes, which he does, so he nods enthusiastically in agreement with the plan. I am hungry as I remember I haven’t eaten any of the Chinese food I brought home. We decide to walk towards Bob’s house, just north of town.

For no particular reason it was now getting close to noon in Wichita and a beautiful late Spring Day. Just ahead is a white building, more of a hut, with a sign outside advertising “Butter toasted Dog and Shake.”

*Hey Look!* I shout to Bob and Brad. *Butter toasted Dog and Shake!* There is a Budweiser sign hung on a pole jutting perpendicular to the white hut to which it’s affixed.

*That’s all I need.* Brad replied. *Beer goes great with cigarettes.* I have to agree.

*Chocolate shakes go great with butter toasted dogs.* Bob is bemused. *Now where the hell do I live??* He’s looking around. It’s been some time since Bob’s been back to Wichita in 1952.

*We'll figure it out over food, Bob, okay. You'll remember.*

*Sounds fine, John, just fine.* Bob replies. That was my name. John.