

The Hole in the Dash

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for the Burbees

I keep staring at Barry's face though he has repeatedly asked me to stop. "It's fucking distracting," he tells me.

He's trying hard to keep the wheel steady in his hands but he's shaking. I watch a great tremor run the length of his right arm and travel to his fingertips. A quick, violent spasm grips him, sending the massive truck veering off the highway and onto the shoulder. Barry wrenches hard at the wheel and a great plume of dust and debris scatters high into the air. I watch it soar in an updraft and dissipate in the wind.

I'm gripping the twill bench-cover and whispering prayers in pig-latin while the Chevy fishtails back into the center of the eastbound lane.

In the stillness that results my sense of everything heightens. I feel the blood beating its steady course through me. I can smell the stink of the oily floor mats, the acrid grit of blown gaskets, and forty-years of diesel drip, drip, dripping. Monosyllabic bits of words bounce around in my throat.

The engine shudders beneath the strain of Barry's uneven footing. The dry, cracked pavement swells and ebbs and another liquidy mirage shimmers in the distance.

I stare at him again. He squints and I see his eye lurking about. I turn and fix my gaze on the horizon. Frames of a yellow countryside flicker past.

It happens in less than a second. I'm not paying attention and then comes the swinging fist of the passenger window colliding into me as we swerve off the highway narrowly avoiding another collision with one of the many evergreens lining the roadway

as uniformly as painted wooden soldiers. In the cracked side-view mirror I watch another cloud evaporate in the sky.

I steal a glance at his hands. The knobby veins look apoxic and ready to burst. His skin has yellowed. Why don't I say something? I light a cigarette and crack the window.

It's hot. It's midsummer. Tall pines arch high above us. A course odor heavy with pollen streams through the open window. Barry speeds along the empty highway while I smoke and tend to my overwrought senses. Each drag brings with it an odd trembling calm as we continue looping our way into the mountains.

Every few miles there is another dilapidated house invariably surrounded by a sprawling and unkempt plot littered with old cars and rusted dishwashers and mangy retrievers dozing in the small splotches of shade. Some of the houses are empty, abandoned. I look at them and imagine the blue specters of lives past dancing in the rotten kitchens.

Matchstick barns lean against a wide and cloudless sky. Much of this land was used for grazing, and they use to grow alfalfa and corn out here. They let the cattle, sheep, and alpaca troll the hillsides in the cool mornings until it got hot, which sent them migrating down into the flatlands where they'd sleep beneath the massive oak trees. Now the fields are overgrown and wild with waist-high grass turning to seed. It's not ugly. Everything is golden, and staring at it brings to one a sentimental pang, an ignorant longing for Old America. It looks like kindling.

Careless, I flick the butt of my cigarette out the window then cringe at the thought of it finding one of those matchstick barns.

We're going to Barry's house for his wife's prize-winning stuffed meatloaf. I've been working for the Taylor Temp-Agency for one week and since starting Barry has been teaching me the trade of hanging drywall. I can't say I like it, but there's *something* very satisfying about building something. I can't quite get at it, though it comes through in the work. Barry has been at it for nineteen years. When the group attached to the construction of the Sherman Woods Mall outsourced to Taylor Temp-Agency, I was given a job and Barry immediately spotted me for a protégé. At least that's what I've gathered. We've worked closely over the past five days. He did most of the talking and I rarely got more than a word or two in, so it came as a great surprise when he asked me over for dinner.

Barry lights a cigarette and so do I and for a second it seems as though his hands have stopped shaking. A reassuring softness settles down over him and I feel the red hot coils in my back start to cool. A gauzy film layers the inner surface of the windshield. The atmosphere turns blue in the smoke.

I puff on the cigarette even though I've just had one and do not want this one. Barry has a daughter about my age—we keep on into the mountains where Barry's home is located—and I distract myself with the image of sitting across from her at the dinner table, forking oversized hunks of meat and slurping up gravy while she and I caress with our feet. I don't know what she looks like but I'm not sure it would matter.

I drop the thought and turn to see the wheel dancing in Barry's hands. He squeezes. I watch it start out slow at the fingertips. Then it moves to his wrists and suddenly both arms are shaking and I am preparing myself for another self-obliterating encounter with death.

The Chevy kicks then jolts sideways and swerves onto the shoulder. I'm thrown toward Barry and I'm going to crash into him except I grab and hold onto a knobby protrusion extending from the dash. It turns out to be the latch to the glove-compartment. The tiny door lifts and tears away and everything inside falls into a heap on my lap. Barry steers us back onto the road. It takes a second for the dumb moose of a truck to reorient all four tires.

This is horrible. I don't understand what's wrong with him. I drop my eyes to the pile in my lap and start shoveling things back into the hole in the dash. In the mess of dusty miscellany I spy the Serenity Prayer printed on a kind of plastic credit card, and suddenly I get it. Barry doesn't say anything. In the resulting heightened state of silence he watches my hands tremble.

"We're making a pit stop," he says.

I agree and light up a cigarette and cough up the first drag.

Barry's house is about thirty minutes east of town along Highway 126. Other than the old broken down farms there's not much else out here, though there are a lot of wineries once you get over the mountains, about a hundred miles from here.

The Chevy labors up a steep incline that curls north. Barry is hunched over the wheel; his forehead might as well be resting on the windshield. We reach a plateau and barrel along due east. The rolling hillsides look painted in gold-leaf. My heart aches for America.

Over the past five days Barry he has aged five years in appearance. His eyes have lost all color and they seem to have sunken into their orbits. The creases on his face are

more defined, and there are so many burst capillaries that his nose is stained purple. He seems tired all the time, and his moods, unprovoked, swing wildly.

I peer into the glove compartment. I try fitting the door back onto its busted hinges but it falls off. There is a blue handkerchief with the initials B.H.P. embroidered onto it. I take it out, feign a quick scouring, and toss it back in. I am trying to conceal the plastic card with the evidence on it, but I miss:

Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will.

There is a rumbling in my stomach; it feels like a finger twisting in my gut. Barry slows and turns into an empty parking lot outside a splintered and crooked-leaning convenient store. Such timing!

There are broken, yellowing poster boards in the windows advertising Marlboro \$1.99; Budweiser 6-Packs \$2.95. I leap out the truck and into the sunlight. I savor the gritty feel of it on my skin. I record every crack and groove in the concrete in case I never again set foot on the Earth. Barry is already inside the store.

Without noticing, it has gotten late. It is still warm. The sun has settled into the western quadrant of the sky and the shadows have grown long. The early evening light is golden and everything glimmers with a magical sheen. I make note of this in case I don't get another chance.

A car whips by and backfires and I duck. I turn and there is a man in the yard of the large house across the street, mowing his lawn. The shot must have been the lawn mower starting up. I don't know why but I watch the man for a while. He is meticulous with his mowing. His lines are perfectly layered onto each other; I doubt he is missing even a single blade. There is a colossal garden full of many colorful flowers and a long

circuit of a driveway with a Rolls Royce parked in it. There are large white statues situated at the ends of the driveway; I believe they are Freemason symbols. Yes—I've seen these exact ones in a book about secret organizations that rule the world. I watch the man mowing his lawn while my thoughts turn to conspiracy. I glare at him and at his large house. These are the men that make my life suck, I am thinking. I imagine murdering the man and taking his Rolls Royce. I pick up Barry's daughter, drive to a spot that looks out over the valley and we hump in the back seat. I spill my semen on the leather upholstery. What's wrong with me?

I push through the door and a rush of stale Freon hits me like a wall. Something by Warrant throbs out speakers embedded in the ceiling. A neon cascade of colors shocks my senses. I can't quite focus my eyes. I dip into an aisle and stare blindly at the odd shapes there. When things start to make sense again I grab a package of Zingers and a quart of milk from the cooler.

Barry comes tripping out a door in the back of the store, holding a bathroom key in his hand. He actually looks much better. He grins at me. I smile. I nod. He grabs a six pack of tall silver cans from the cooler and makes for the checkout.

Near the ceiling, tucked into each corner, there are big mirrors shaped like fisheyes. In the mirror above the slushy machines I watch Barry pay and rush out the store with a brown paper bag clutched in both hands.

The air smells like fried cornmeal and the plump, sweaty tubes of meat turning on hot-rollers. I breathe in the pleasant scent.

From an inconspicuous vantage point I watch the checkout girl busy herself behind the counter. She is restocking cigarettes kept behind a thick plexi-glass window. I

stare at a bag of rye chips for a while then back at her. She is fitting a roll of lottery tickets onto an empty spool. I am surprised by how attractive she is. It makes little sense to me that someone so decently attractive would end up out here amidst all the decay and ruin of a countryside in disuse.

I get closer. I peer at her from between two boxes of instant rice. I am overjoyed seeing that she is even more attractive at a close proximity. She has long, messy blonde hair held in a loose tussle above her slender shoulders. They are bare and slope delicately. She's tiny, almost diminutive. Her hands work fast in strong and fluid movements indicative of much experience. I can just barely make out the shape of a breast obscured behind the ugly maroon apron. The name tag reads *Amanda* and it's covered in tiny stickers.

I'm suddenly arrested by the thought of approaching her. I back away from my rice box stronghold. This is always so much easier in my imagination. Quickly, I assign her a tired face, dull, listless eyes and a sour disposition. I make her unapproachable so that I might checkout and leave and not feel bad for not having said something smart or charming, something that made her laugh and remember me. I could just leave but I don't. I stare at her hands—hard at work—as I move through the hideous, raw fluorescent lighting.

I place my items—I have totally forgotten what I am buying and why I am buying anything at all—on the mustard-colored countertop and smile.

From a position near the floor she looks up at me. She is restocking tins of chewing tobacco into a plastic dispenser. Her eyes are green and very round; she has a lot of eyeliner smeared around them. "Okay," she says. "Just a sec—" She rises and as she

does I can't help but stare at her breasts. "Sorry 'bout that— Celia's got me doin' stock on top everything else." She flashes me a hard, sidelong glance. I don't say anything. Her eyes soften. "But I know ain't nothin' 'bout no doctor's note. Probably that pug-face dog of a new boyfriend she got— Anyway, sorry 'bout all that."

She has a southern drawl. It sounds like something sun-kissed and maybe Georgian. It rises and falls with an exhilarating lilt. I'm dumbstruck, standing mute with my mouth open.

"This what yer eatin'?" she asks.

She holds the package of Zingers between two fingers as though they were something that belonged in a Hazmat bin. She scans them with the big gray gun that emits a pulsing ruby beam like something from the future. Her painted lips are slightly curled. I want to absorb the sound her voice makes and so I listen to the sound of it rather than to the words, but it's time to speak. I say, "Yup."

Her eyebrows lift and she smiles at me. I think I smile too. I say, "But I'm going over to my boss' house for dinner, so this is just a snack till I get there." I look at the lottery tickets kept beneath a clear window in the counter.

"What about when you ain't headed over to your boss' place for dinner? You getting' anything good in yer diet?"

I don't know what she means, but the air of concern feels like a warm wind. She is still smiling and what I notice more than anything else is how one eye-tooth sits out in front of the rest of her teeth. I know it's a flaw, but I can't help but think hers is the most perfect smile I have ever seen.

“Milk is good for you,” I say. I hear the words and visions of running into the street and throwing my body beneath a truck flash then are gone.

“That’s true,” she says and giggles. “Two ninety-fav.”

I reach into my pocket and tell myself not to forget the way it sounds when she says *fav* instead of *five*.

She leans over the counter; her chest is pushed into her arms and she extends her hand. I pay and when I drop the money into the hand my forefinger comes into contact with hers and I record the feel of it into my memory bank.

“You don’t live out here, do ya?”

“No, I live in town.”

“Well you should see this place at night—all the stars.”

I take the little bag she has loaded with the Zingers and carton of milk and leave her with a stupid grin and no words.

“Hey—” she calls as I’m about to exit. “You need your change?”

I bristle at the prospect of facing her again, but can’t help inwardly gushing at another chance to come near her. Perhaps this time I could leave my hand there a little too long. Maybe she’ll know what that means and ask me if I want to come over to her house later tonight to look at the stars. Maybe she’ll make this happen. But, no—I say *no* and I exit and immediately flinch at the heat that grates at my skin like an abrasive.

Soon the sun will set and the sky will fill with so many stars that going back to the city will seem like some kind of blasphemy. That’s what I focus on as I head toward the truck. Barry is waiting inside. The Chevy starts up with a roar and Barry revs the engine.

I glance across the street at the cultist still mowing his yard. I place Amanda into the back seat of the Rolls and remove Barry's daughter, for whom I still don't have a face. I feel a tingle ride up my leg and enter my groin.

Barry gives me a nod and an odd smile as I fasten the seatbelt and tighten it about my waist.

"Counter chick was checkin' you out," he says and winks.

"I don't know about that."

"Well I do. She give you an opening?"

I think for a second and decide she probably did. "No," I say. "Or, if she did it wasn't enough of one."

For a while we follow the same road, but then Barry slows and turns north. The road turns to gravel and the incline is enough to put us in first gear. The Chevy's engine whirrs like a turbine as we climb up the mountainside. The expression on Barry's face reassures me that he knows where he's going. I take a look at his hands. They're shaking, but now I can't tell if it's from withdrawals or excitement. It's all the same I decide.

The road is pot-holed and the shocks in the old truck creak and squeal as we bounce around like rag-dolls. The crude path evens out then opens up, revealing a green expanse that drops abruptly onto a sweeping view of the valley. I can see the city beyond a system of rivers that snake through the lowland like crude surgery scars teeming with gangrene.

Barry pulls up to the cliff-side, kills the engine, and lets himself out.

Where am I now? How do I end up in places like this? I don't decide these things.

The skyline is orange now. Distant treetops zigzag across the horizon, their cartoon cut-out shapes draped in shadow. City lights flicker on as the light outside dims. The glove-compartment seems like an endless hole in the darkness. I get out. The rusty door scrapes on its hinges.

Barry is leaning against the hood of the Chevy and has one foot propped up on the bumper. I come round and, similarly, assume of relaxed position against the front of the truck. I tear through the packaging and stuff two of the little yellow cakes in my mouth. Barry seems calm. For a moment I think he is staring at something in the valley until I see his eyes are closed. His biceps shudder, a shiver runs through his forearms, and I look away so that he doesn't have to see me see it.

All around us is sagebrush and tall, elegantly deformed oak trees that somehow look both poisonous and holy. The sky turns purple and fills with a somber energy. I hear a hiss and then the crack of a can opening. Barry guzzles down the beer. The muscles in his neck bulge. They look like knots of rope moving beneath his skin.

I heft myself onto the hood of the truck and gulp down the entire quart of milk. Barry lets out a belch. He sighs and reaches into the bag that sits behind him on the hood, pulls from it another silver can and cracks it open with a finger.

“How old are you anyway?” he asks.

“Nineteen.”

“Not even old enough for a beer,” he says and turns back to the horizon.

He brings the can to his mouth and slugs down the entire thing. He lets go a monster of a burp and grins, turning to me. Gripped in the smile, his eyes turn clear and dazzle in the muted glow of early evening. He is finally calm.

The sun drops onto a mountain and turns amber. The sky above us has faded indigo and there are stars that look like tiny pockmarks of light streaming through holes in a ceiling. It makes me think God is a kid shoveling bugs into a Mason jar.

Beside the rivers in the valley, where the currents take a severe turn, there are many oxbow lakes that have dried up in the heat of summer and are empty now. Empty and ugly and brown. They fill up in the fall and freeze in the winter, and in the spring they are teeming with life and people go hunting for duck and geese in the areas around them. I learned somewhere that an oxbow lake forms when the current of a river has to shift in order to overcome some kind of natural barrier; it's a piece of a river that had to be sacrificed so that the rest could survive and eventually make it to the ocean. Something like that.

I crane my neck and gape at the stars. I wish I had said something to that checkout girl. I wish I was sitting on a rooftop somewhere imagining ways to escape reality with a girl I'd just met. I'd like to know what it would have felt like to have her head on my shoulder. I put my hand there.

Barry crushes a beer can in his fist, belches, and then staggers forward.

"Alright—fuck—let's get out of here," he says and reaches into his pocket for his keys.

The sun is an amber puddle twinkling on the mountaintop. And then it's gone.

When Barry moves to leave I don't even think about it, about getting into the truck and driving to Barry's and meeting his family and eating his food; or even about his daughter, and whether or not I could fit her into the image on the rooftop. I turn—and he is angry and cussing, he even waves a fist at me—and I walk home.

It takes a long time and most of that time I am terrified, but there is a lid of stars reeling overhead and they move with such precision and certainty that I can't think to care about myself. It is a stupid and reckless thing for me to suddenly do. But I think that is the point.

The next day I don't go to work. I don't even call.