

Chocolate Star

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Chuck Naylor was an officer. Specifically Highway Patrol. There is no magic to that fact or the color of his uniform but it is a detail that allows the story to begin. Chuck Naylor was also from a small town in Texas, small compared to the Houstons, Austins, and Dallahses of the world. He was positioned on highway 59, too far from Marshall. People that drove through the town-- before civilians had access to police radar detectors and GPS-- had a sixth sense that told them to slow down or else they'd be pulled over and receive a ticket. But, in present day, despite all of the avoidance equipment sold, business was good. Chuck Naylor was one of those officers that waited on those speedy types travelers whose DNA didn't contain the 'slow down for cops on this stretch of the road' gene.

The good thing about Chuck Naylor was that he was universal. A He-Man type, justice for all. He was as far from being a racist cop as one could be. In fact he was sensitive about the southern highway-patrolman stereotype that "big city folk" projected on him. In truth, he never referred to people that lived in cities as "big city folk" but he did have a crush on that Hollywood trope. He was also sensitive about his coworkers that seemed to flirt with that image. He didn't voice these thoughts and complaints on the job, nor did he soften his approach to anyone that he pulled over. No matter their color, colour or sex, whether brown or blue, Chuck was focused on justice.

Now, it is safe to say that no one, not even the most committed officer that follows everything by the book, is truly perfect. Human beings are too quirky and mischievous for eternal straight lines. And if there were one stand out fact about Chuck Naylor that was worth writing about, it'd have to be his passion for the funk. Funk meaning the music. Not the sanitized sound that wedding bands rely on to get the older crowds dancing to rhythms that might seem stiff and archaic to younger audience members. That "Play That Funky Music," it was-- it was too safe for the funk that Chuck Naylor was into. He'd nod his head to that Pre-Republican 1980s James Brown funk. He'd drive with his windows down to that Parliament funk.

On his off days, he'd slow his Tundra -- He preferred it over Ford F-150 because it was made in San Antonio-- to a crawl, roll the windows down-his left elbow resting on the frame of the truck door and his body and the truck would sway to the subtle hesitations in the groove. The space after the One. This was the Bootsy Collins funk. For those that might smirk at this, you have to realize that Chuck was a connoisseur. He knew that Bootsy and Catfish both played for and recorded with James Brown as teenagers. He also knew that Bootsy grooved and marinated with George Clinton and the Parliament Funkadelics. Without those juxtaposed musical legends helping shape Bootsy, Chuck Naylor would have more than likely felt emptiness for the majority of his life. He imagined that he would always be brooding or dancing with hesitation. The wordless lectures from those musicians: It was okay to color outside of the lines. And the majority of humans cannot follow straight lines forever.

Admittedly, even at work, he'd program his iPod to the speaker settings and nod his head while he waited to pull someone over. The sound was minimal, to be honest, it was more the comfort of the faint snares than the actual melody. His memory filled in the whispered lyrics and the dangers of his job melted away, the ups and downs of being an adult, all his troubles were gone for small increments of time.

During those contemplative moments he'd think to himself and sometimes laugh, he wasn't sure when or where his love for Bootsy Collins came to fruition but from his earliest memories, when his friends were rebelling by listening to the new Tupac CD or reaching back to the stripped-down country of their fathers' generation, he'd be nodding his head to the static cries of a far-reaching late night radio station as his parents slept. Even now, in the present, after work Chuck would lie in bed, his eyes barely slits, his mind lost in a headphoned world. The sounds of "Vanish in Our Sleep" accompanied him while he fought off dreams.

Chuck's relationships did not suffer from his obsession with the funk. He had done his share of dating—to the delight of his mother and father. He was aware that some of the women did have a man in uniform complex and that the majority of them ended up thinking that he was peculiar. Being used to and accepting his obsession was one thing, well two things, but the women were not used to fucking to the rhythms that Chuck was obsessive about. That was and is an entirely different thing. The funk was slow but when the bass strings were plucked hard and aggressive, a necessary response was expected and for these poor girls—well the majority of them—this rhythm was too hard to learn in all of its subtle glory. They simply did not grow up hearing it.

For the ones that became girlfriends, a tentative truce was met. Their insecurities and questions of where and who had taught him these moves were not asked and in turn for the short but passionate moments, dating, not the lessons in rhythm but during those rare gems of time when they were lost in the moment, the united couple shared something raw and beautiful.

When Chuck was sitting in his highway patrol unit watching the cars move by, their brake lights tapping as they slowed out of respect for him, he'd reminisce about those girls. The ones that he truly loved. He would hope they ended up with someone that breathed music. He wanted them and the person that they belonged with to appreciate the voodoo in the notes. The abrupt transitions.

Chuck sat and daydreamed about sound, wondering how far it had to travel until scientists stopped defining it as sound. Faded waves that eventually lost themselves into others? Possibly. As Chuck wondered, the other protagonist began to play his part.

Brian was from Flint, Michigan but, at the telling of this story, Brian found himself driving on Hwy 59. He had left San Antonio 10 hours prior to his predestined—but not planned—meeting with Chuck Naylor. The reader can assume that this meeting was not on Brian Daniels' mind. Well, in a sense it was but he had no idea which form of law enforcement he would encounter on his journey. If anything, Brian, the quiet agnostic despite his Southern Baptist upbringing, prayed that he would not encounter

anyone on his trip from San Antonio to Detroit. The reason for this? He had thirty pounds of marijuana in the trunk of his car. This was not by choice; this was by, in his mind, necessity.

Brian Daniels had a Master's Degree in Creative Writing. It was the type of degree that his mother would not brag about and his grandfather did not understand. They would however brag that their blood had made it to graduate school. A badge. But Brian's memories of his time spent obtaining an MFA held a different type of distinction. There were feelings of mistrust in himself and his teachers, uncomfortable and misunderstood conversations with classmates, and the fact that he could not and did not know how to survive on what a typical graduate student focused on creative writing would make. But the exposure to books did help him become a better writer!

Despite the silver lining, a year after graduation Brian found himself tempted to run pounds of marijuana to his home state. Being broke did not make him a smarter writer. It was a reality that the graduates who were not natural editors or adept at obtaining fellowships had to face. Money. Being a smarter writer was not the issue. For the bottom of the barrel so to speak, it meant there was a yearly scramble for adjunct teaching positions at local community colleges. In some of the more heartbreaking places these jobs paid \$1700 dollars per class...per semester. When Brian realized that he could not secure four teaching classes per semester with one institution-- with four classes he estimated that he could eke out a small living but which employers want to provide benefits?-- he, to the shock of his close friends, networked and arranged shipments of marijuana during the summer of 2012.

There was a drought in Michigan, drought meaning a shortage on exotic strands of marijuana and even a need for low-grade schwag – the spelling of this slang term has always been contested. Brian's hometown connections were willing to pay \$750 dollars per pound. Unbeknownst to them, Brian was able to secure the merchandise for 500 dollars per pound and, in turn, he would make \$250 dollars for every pound that he delivered. Brian understood the risks but the IRS, student loans and hospital bill collectors did not understand unemployment or the life of an adjunct professor.

Brian was no fool. The danger did not justify the cost and this made him very nervous. His life was in danger. His future. Some of those hometown friends and the girl that he was currently dating tried to persuade him to not take the job. If anything went wrong with the deal, Brian would owe some well-connected people, who had always been close associates but never true friends, a lot of money. They had to answer to people who did not know Brian. People that reached their status in their particular fields because they were very efficient at collecting money and sending messages that would protect their business brand. Their-his associates-- easy smiles would not greet him kindly on his return trip to San Antonio. If he were to return. Prison. Well, if prison were the outcome...at least he'd get time to write.

The trip, despite Brian's unsettled mind, was going relatively smoothly. The hills of central west Texas were giving way to trees that danced with colors he was not used to. If there were one complaint, it'd be that he left his iPod. That musical mechanism

had been left at his girlfriend's house. Her arguments against him going, her claims that they would be okay – financially and spiritually and her overall optimism made Brian angry. He regretted it now, not the way they had said goodbye to each other but the leaving of the iPod. He was stuck with one CD to listen to for the entire trip. Technically it was a double CD, 2Pac's 1996 release *All Eyez on Me*, but the first CD was damaged and Brian had to skip every song at one point or another. Maybe it was not fair to call it a complaint considering that the CD had been around since he was in the 6th grade. However after ten hours of driving to monotonous radio playlists and listening to the second CD from 2pac's box set, Brian smirked, wishing he had been meticulous in his care for his junior high CD collection. He was a third of the way into his trip and he had already listened to "Rather Be Your N.I.G.G.A." twenty-seven times. Slightly more than 111 minutes of Brian's subconscious was dedicated to that song. Initially he didn't know why he kept replaying that specific song but, after being on the road for so long, his mind wandered towards the strange and abstract. Tracing his sixteen year relationship with a 2pac song helped Brian keep calm and the minutes rolled by. After the 60th listen, his memory kicked in.

In 1996, Brian's mother dated a man named James. James was an avid listener of music – live music-- and P-Funk was one of his passions. One day as James waited for Brian's mother to get ready for their date; James overheard 2Pac's CD being played in Brian's room. James asked him the name of the song. Brian mumbled the title to James. Brian smiled as he reminisced about the story because, at the time, he did not want to say N.I.G.G.A. in front of his mother's boyfriend. He did not want his music to be confiscated. But James had other intentions. He nodded his head when Brian told him who it was. Catching the essential rhythm of the piece, James smiled, and walked away.

A week later, Brian found a Bootsy Collins album that someone slid underneath his bedroom door, *Stretchin' Out in Bootsy's Rubber Band*. There was a note taped to the CD. It read: Track 4. Brian stepped around the typical clutter that invades most teenage bedrooms, and stood with his right ear toward the CD player. The fuzz-tinged bassline blew him away. Instead of N.I.G.G.A. the chorus' "You" was powerful. It was the first time that Brian could remember hearing where his rebellious music came from. If Brian had been more meticulous with his music collection, he would have been able to switch out *All Eyez on Me* with "I'd Rather Be with You." Instead, Brian continued to press repeat. Unfortunately the repeating of that song helped cause Brian's unwanted meeting with the forever waiting and forever listening, Chuck Naylor.

When Brian felt inspired, he would speed. Usually ten to fifteen miles over the speed limit. As an undergrad, back when Wu Tang Clan still had its grips on hip hop culture, Brian was pulled over repeatedly for speeding. His car full of laundry, clean or dirty depending on whether the trip was to or away from home. Music had that effect on Brian. And now, at the time of the telling of this story, music became nostalgic for him. Yes, he was aware of the special package in his truck and he had been careful throughout his journey. But, as history will attest, human beings are strange creatures and, at times, they abandon common sense. Some are just plain and simply attracted to chaos.

As the song played, Brian began to feel good about his life. There was hope. Bills would be paid. He'd have time to write. He could rent a cabin somewhere-- somewhere with snow--and truly be alone with his own thoughts. There would be no responsibility except for him to wake from his dreams and attempt to write down what his brain could remember. The words that were being rapped faded away. The individual instruments fused and the groove grabbed hold of his memory. It shook away all of the doubt that had buried him. He nodded his head, and for a few moments, was almost too free. Driving with his eyes closed for more than a few seconds, he tested the black highways because he felt like there was something out there protecting him. His windows were lowered; the night air caressed him, his foot pressed harder on the pedal. Brian was going to be alright.

Chuck was sitting in his patrol unit and thinking about the last girl that he had slept with. Her name was Chrissie. Things had not progressed into a relationship but he was fond of her. They'd meet up every few weeks. She was a college student in Nacogdoches. Chuck imagined that she had a college boyfriend and when they would fight, she'd storm out and find her way to him. He wondered how long it would last, her escaping to him. Wanting to stay. The moments before things would fall apart. Before attachment became fear and she'd want more of his time or he would want to see her more often. He prayed that things would remain the way they were for at least another month or two. Chuck was attracted to the peaceful times.

He took a breath and then squinted. Headlight beams past a dip in the highway floated up at a dangerous speed. Dangerous enough for Chuck's naked eye to recognize and accept that he was about to pull someone over. His grip tightened on the radar gun. More than likely it was someone who was just trying to rush through the night. If he were poetic he would have said that they were chasing the hidden sun. But human beings are unpredictable and he had to expect the worst. This is why he took deep breaths. Always thankful because he never knew if this would be his last traffic stop.

The combination of Brian's speed and the hills brought to mind rollercoasters. It gave the feeling of childhood magic and wonder. A time before scientific explanations. The relationship between the car's headlights and the white striped pavement created an eerie fog-like effect in his peripherals. Every few seconds he had to shake his head from second-guessing his path, but his foot never eased off the accelerator pedal. He felt confident, testing nature, battling his mind, hoping his memories lasted for a few more moments. His hands squeezed the steering wheel. He continued to smile and nod his head to the groove. The flickering lights that erupted behind him in the darkness did not initially register. Once they did, he slowed down and started to pull over to the side of the road, Brian Daniels was not scared. He was sad, knowing that he would not have a feeling of freedom like that for a long time, whether he went to prison or ended up teaching at a university for the next 30 years.

Chuck ran the plates on Brian Daniels' Toyota Corolla. There were no priors or tickets but the back of Chuck's neck was tingling. Something was off. The driver hadn't turned his music down. He didn't dig in his pocket for his wallet or scramble to the glove compartment for his car insurance. All he did was nod his head to a slow bassline that tickled Chuck's memory.

Brian watched the officer approach from the driver-side mirror. He was expecting the officer to be much older. He had never dealt with an authoritative figure that was in the same age range. He knew not to engage in unnecessary conversation, answer questions with a simple "yes" or "no" and not to make any sudden movements. This would have been easy to do if the guy were old. But his age? Giving tickets? Brian was the amiable sort, a part of his mind calmed and reassured him that everything would be fine. The other half was quiet and this caused each heartbeat to reverberate throughout his body.

The officer walked slowly. His hands were spread, thumbs grazing his hips, his other fingers pointed towards the road. Each step seemed measured but it wasn't hard for Brian to believe that the officer's legs were coiled and ready to spring if anything unusual were to occur. Brian's breathing quickened. If he were taken in, what would he say? What wouldn't he say? The loan would have to be paid. Iron bars couldn't stop that debt. But how would he pay? There was a thought – a small electronic pulse caused his toes to flicker. How many seconds before the turbo charged vehicle caught up to his seasoned Corolla? If he stayed, how would the officer know about what he was carrying? Didn't Jay Z say that the officer could not search his car?

His breathing slowed to the tempo of high-hats and snares. 2pac was not the best choice in this situation but Brian thought reaching for the stereo knob might piss the officer off. It would be easier if he followed instructions. And, so, he sat there with 2pac bragging to a muse in a moment that was recorded twenty years before.

The officer's footsteps seemed to coincide with the kick drum from the song. This crossed Brian's mind more than once, but Chuck's mind was racing with embarrassment. Chuck kept trying to walk off rhythm but the song guided his steps as if he were hypnotized. It was a bastardized rhythm of something he'd grown up with. He didn't want to prejudge and say that it was a Hip Hop sample. And if it were, he was not the type to bash sampling. He appreciated all forms of creativity and was savvy enough to know that all musicians borrowed, whether sampled or through "taking licks" from other instruments. He hoped the driver was not smirking at him for walking like a penguin. The driver seemed calm as Chuck angled himself by the car door. He hoped that his authoritative image was salvageable.

"License and insurance?"

"Yes sir."

Brian searched his glove compartment. Once he found his registration, he handed everything to the officer. The officer returned to his vehicle to examine Brian's information. There was fidgeting in the Corolla. But again all went quiet when the officer's footsteps walked in link with the temp of the song.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"No sir. I do not." Brian found it odd that the officer did not ask him to turn the music off but he kept his hands on the steering wheel.

"You were speeding. I clocked you at 100. That's 25 over the limit. Is there any reason for that?"

Chuck nostrils flared.

Brian's stomach dropped. His foot wasn't on the gas pedal; this didn't stop him from flexing it hard against the floor, his toes curling into his shoe. If he turned on the car would the officer shoot?

"I'm sorry officer. I did not know that I was going that fast."

"Yeah." Chuck's jaw flexed. It seemed like he was chewing his teeth. "I'll be right back."

Brian's eyes flickered with nervousness between his rearview and driver side mirrors as the officer walked back to his patrol car. The officer's silhouette paused. He placed his left hand against Brian's trunk and sneezed. Brian wanted to rub his eyes and wrestle away whatever the hell situation he'd found himself in but his hands remained still. Deep breaths. Fingertips still keeping time with the high hats and snares. His foot tapped on the accelerator pedal. How far could he get? He wouldn't be able to return to his apartment or to the girl he was dating. But what was he returning to anyway? What awaited him? A violent ending after he explained his predicament over and over to people that just wanted their money? His San Antonio friends who had fronted him the product-- relationships built off of drunken nights and schemes that were never meant to come into fruition-- would stand as silent witnesses to Brian's fate. He pressed down on the pedal, trying to be as quiet as possible. His hands tightened on the wheel. He closed his eyes and said a prayer. It was not the first prayer he'd said since being exposed to academia but it was the first one that he believed in.

The knock at the driver's door frame seemed to shake him from a dream. Chuck had a smirk on his face. "I didn't lose you, did I?"

The driver smiled. "No sir. The music. It's just, well, I'm sure you get stories all the time and I'm not giving you reasons. I've just been lost throughout this trip. One of those few times that music seems to matter these days. You know?"

"I've made that drive to San Antonio before. Back in O-seven. When the Spurs won. I was trying to get to where my friends were at. I got so lost in the drive; I ended up driving through downtown without even knowing. Told myself--never again at night."

"Not the worst drive to make at night. I'll tell you where-you ever made it up to the Northwest?"

Chuck shook his head. He'd always wanted to drive around the country but he could never imagine taking that many days off unless he quit. The thought still tickled his mind on occasion. His posture relaxed. If someone were to drive by, they would have thought two friends were catching up on the side of a highway. The officer pulling

a prank, the two of them laughing about it and getting nostalgic about how fast time passes.

"Nothing like those mountains. Down I-10 and then up in Washington. Passed through Idaho at dusk. Drove down a mountain as night grew. Never again! You could feel the road rise and the slope...man...crazy. Your stomach quivers."

"I'd like to make that drive one day." Chuck adjusted his hat as he said those words. He had been talking about making that drive for at least 4 years.

"Do it as soon as you can."

"I imagine I'll have to retire to get that much time off. To really enjoy it."

"You've gotta find that time. You get on the road and on a night like this, there doesn't seem to be anything else moving. If there are random lights passing you by, they are finding their way just like you. All you got is this." Brian tapped the stereo.

Chuck laughed. "Maybe I'll quit tomorrow." Chuck bit the inside of his lower lip. It was becoming a strange traffic stop. He shrugged the thought away with a slight shake of his head. "What is that song that you have on repeat? It sounds like something I've heard before."

"2 Pac? The rapper?"

"I know who 2 Pac is."

"Oh. I didn't know. I mean...no offense but snap judgment...wouldn't expect an officer of the law to listen to this. Even growing up. But I guess that people change."

"We do. That backing track, that's a sample from an older song though, right?"

"From the seventies I think. It's called 'Rather Be with You.' It's by this old-school cat named Bootsy Collins."

"I knew I knew it from somewhere!"

"You've heard of him?"

"James Brown, George Clinton..."

"Yeah sir! That's what I was about to say. But if you listen to the groove, they didn't even sample it. It's an interpolation. Well I think that's what you call it." Brian felt strange calling someone close in age sir but the celebratory nature of the moment allowed him to push past the awkwardness.

"You ever hear the Bone Thugs and Harmony song using that sample? Came out around the same time."

"I know exactly what you are talking about. Did they use a real bass for that one though?"

"Man I couldn't tell ya. I listened to it because they took from Bootsy but I just prefer the original."

"If I took better care of my CDs I'd still have it."

"Amen to that." And just like that, a small laugh brought them back. Chuck glanced at the trunk. Well at least Brian—his registered name-- wasn't nervous anymore. The engine was calm again. For an instant before the conversation Chuck had a feeling that he was going to have to draw his gun or give chase. "Well, look Brian, slow down. Wherever you are headed, take your time. It's hard driving out here at night. Nature has a way of messing with the mind."

“Yes sir. Well...thank you officer. I guess I’m just looking forward to getting home. It’s been a long time.”

They shook hands. Brian waved before he drove off. His speed in check. The same song playing. That interpolation...the original was slower...the warmth of the live instruments...Catfish’s guitar...it was an unfair comparison but the essence of the song intact. Brian’s car lights eventually faded. Chuck’s imagination still carried the melody.

Chuck sat in his car for more than a few moments. He sighed. How many people were able to stay within the lines forever? To explore and then return to the root note—landing on the ONE as his heroes described it. It seemed like humans had to push the boundaries because they had to feel where they were going. Being lost in the moment was unnerving to some. But if you were lucky, you would find your way back and the feeling could be considered exhilarating. If you were lucky...sometimes you had to hope. That thought was pushed towards the back of his mind. Instead he pulled out his phone and wondered if he should send Chrissie a message. Maybe he could visit her on his next day off. Half of the words were typed when he placed the phone down. Chuck sat there, his radar gun positioned but his mind drifting. Tension spread, triggered by the sight of lights rushing towards him in the distance. He’d figured he’d send the message at sunrise.