

“The Driver and the Passengers”

Georgie’s nerves felt like they were carrying an electric current. A hopeless sense of rage and desperation had been lying inside of him for a long time, and quitting smoking was only helping to extenuate it. Sitting in the back of Derek’s father’s car, he felt like he had shot his life, and now it was crumbling—slowly but more rapidly all the time. But sitting in the back of the car listening to classic rock on the radio was tolerable, despite his nicotine craving. As long as the car ride continued as it had been, he knew he’d be all right.

Jordan sat in the backseat with Georgie. Georgie was glad Jordan was his brother because he was a good kid that pretty much had things put together. Jordan’s girlfriend May sat in the front seat smoking a cigarette she had bummed from Derek. Georgie was scared of May because she was pretty and blonde and dangerous somehow. A real dish was how Georgie would describe her. Derek drove his father’s old Cadillac and wore Oakley’s and smoked a cigarette. Georgie liked Derek because the two of them didn’t have to talk about important things all the time or even talk at all if they didn’t want to. The four kids stared out the windows of the car as they crossed the bridge that led to the big city. Georgie was the only one out of high school, and he was aware of that, and it bothered him. He was glad that nobody was talking, but then May ruined the silence.

“I don’t like this song.” She turned off Supertramp and put on one of the popular stations. Georgie felt his rage flare up. As a general rule, people were not supposed to touch the radio in other people’s cars without permission, but Derek didn’t say anything. When the next song came on Derek changed the station back to classic rock.

“Hey, that was...”

“I don’t care. I control the radio, and I hate that song,” Derek interrupted her.

“Why don’t we just turn off the radio and talk?” May asked.

“I don’t wanna talk,” Derek said.

“No, no talking,” Georgie said.

Jordan didn’t say anything.

“Why don’t we ever talk while we’re in the car?” May asked.

“Because it’s my car, and I don’t feel like talking,” Derek said.

“It’s your dad’s car,” May told him.

“I don’t care, I’m driving it.”

“It’s an old lady car anyway,” May said viciously.

“This is the last time I’m driving anywhere with you,” Derek said as though he was stating a simple truth.

“Why?” May asked.

“Because sometimes I wanna open the door and kick you out onto the highway. You’re a real fucking bitch sometimes you know that?” Derek sounded like he was scolding a disobedient child.

May turned toward the window and quit talking. Jordan looked silently out of the window with his mouth slightly open, as it usually was. He looked like he hadn’t heard a thing. Georgie thought about what he would say if he had a girlfriend and Derek had talked that way to her. But May deserved it. If Georgie had a girlfriend he knew she would never deserve it.

“I was just kidding,” Derek said, but May remained silent.

Derek parked the car along side the street with the coffee shops and record stores. Everybody got out of the car and walked down the street. Jordan and May walked silently, holding hands. Georgie and Derek lagged behind a couple of paces.

“Fuck it,” said Georgie. “Give me a cigarette.”

Derek gave him a cigarette. Georgie lit it and inhaled deeply. When he exhaled the smoke he felt the electricity in his nerves go out with it. Then he chuckled bitterly to himself.

“That was hilarious,” Georgie said quietly.

“What?” Derek asked.

“You know.”

“Oh. I was joking,” Derek said. “I just hate it when people make fun of my car.”

They walked to a coffee shop where they met the rest of their friends, and Georgie ran into Caroline—a girl he knew would never change the radio station or make fun of his friends’ cars. But it didn’t matter anyway because Caroline was leaving in a couple of weeks to go to New York City for the rest of the summer, and then Georgie would be going back to college. Georgie and Caroline talked for a long time, and Georgie promised he would visit her before she left, but he never did.

-Thomas Braune

