

Diseased Vehicles

By Matthew Savin

THE ONLY CAR ON THE ROAD FOR MILES, the run-down sedan made its way through the ink-black sky of the night, leaving a trail of noise in its wake. All was quiet until the vehicle moved on to the broken roads in the midst of the 3 AM haze. The two men up front were silent, their vocabulary consisting of shared glances that conveyed exactly what they needed to. In the back was a third; someone considerably younger who looked like he was barely out of high school. Fitfully sleeping, he tossed and turned in the confines of the rough and frayed seat belt that laced around him. The trio were miles from Pittsburgh now, the area where the highway turns into rural streets. They passed through many small towns, places where the main drag would close before sunset, with the ghosts of empty storefronts and abandoned cars as the only company. In about four hours they would be across West Virginia and move quickly through the thin strip of land that separates them from North Carolina.

They were in a radio dead zone, and that is how the driver preferred it. He didn't need any distractions from the road. Out here, the lack of stimulation and summer heat were a dangerous combination, and the events of the last five hours had already made him weary.

"Pull over Joe," the man in the passenger seat said. "I gotta piss."

“Can’t you just hold it?”

“C’mon, man, I gotta piss real bad.”

“Fine.”

The delicate brakes didn’t want to cooperate, and it wasn’t until Joe raised his leg and slammed it down that it made a full stop. The other two lurched forward, and the man in the passenger seat’s head whipped back and forth. The one in the back moaned as the jerking woke him up.

“Well Len,” Joe said, motioning his head to the fields on the side of the road. “Go piss.”

He turned to the one in the back seat. “And you, I think you should get up and stretch your legs.” It wasn’t a suggestion, but more of a command. The younger one complied.

The night air was thick with the smell of manure and stagnant, with no breeze. The lack of life proved itself with the permanent sense of decay around. The pavement was cracked, and the lone road sign was unreadable with all the dirt that covered it. Even the moon felt like it was coated in a layer of grime due to the dulled light emanating from it.

The younger one hopped out of the back and looked up at the moon. Peering over, he made sure the other two weren’t looking before he stretched. He didn’t want to prove them right by showing that he needed to do so.

“Well,” he said when he was done. “Where the hell have you taken me now?”

The two men looked back at him for a second. In the headlights, their shadows became exaggerated caricatures that stretched to the horizon. They returned to their conversation without an answer, which was typical. Then the lights clicked off, and he was back to needing his eyes to adjust to the dark.

At his feet, where the grass border met the pavement, someone had shoved a small cross into the ground. Now it was askew, leaning slightly towards the left, and half of what had been pearly white paint had chipped away. He took a step towards the object. Attached to it was a tattered blue ribbon hanging on by a thread. Up close he could see that slivers of wood were sticking out from it. He leaned down closer towards the small icon. Though there was nothing remarkable about it, he was still entranced by it.

“Well look what Andy’s got,” Len said. “He found himself a toy.” He plucked the small cross from the ground.

“Who could be stupid enough to die out here,” Joe said.

“You gotta be real dumb,” Len said.

“Probably why this *‘memorial’* is such a piece of shit.”

“Don’t be an asshole, put it back,” said Andy.

“Aw c’mon, I think it’s cute. Could be a nice good luck charm for the next part of our trip.”

“Next part?” Andy scoffed. “I doubt you’re smart enough to keep us going for the next *hour.*”

“I will with my new lucky charm,” Len said, rubbing his thumb across the small thing. Suddenly he hissed and grimaced, retracting the digit from the cross.

“Fuckin’ thing gave me a splinter.”

“Yeah, some luck for you,” Andy said.

“It’s a piece of trash, Len,” Joe said. “Just drop it.”

“Alright,” Len said. He wound up his arm and tossed the cross into the field where it landed in silence; too small and insignificant to make an even a light thud.

“Nice throw,” Joe said.

“You think I could make it to the MLB?”

“Nah, they don’t take trash like you.”

Andy stared in the direction of the thrown cross. He looked down to where it once had been in the grass, but now he couldn’t even see the indentation in the ground where someone had stuck it before. Truth be told it was probably just a gesture of goodwill at the moment and hadn’t been visited since, but Andy was still pissed off.

“God’ll get you for that, Joe.”

“Look at this idiot copying what he hears on the TV,” Len said. “Bea Arthur is more of a man than you will ever be.”

“Just remember that it’s your fault I’m here,” said Andy. “Besides, don’t you have to piss? --that’s the reason why we stopped.”

Andy turned around and heard the sound of a zipper being undone and the sound of liquid hitting pavement and Len sighing with euphoria. He turned his attention back to the field, where he noticed a small movement on the horizon line. He squinted, trying to focus on whatever it was but from his perspective it was minuscule. He just stared at the silent amoeba-like blob, waving two small appendages in the distance.

“There’s someone out there,” he said.

“I don’t see anything,” Joe said.

“Me either,” Len chimed in.

He watched again as the figure began to wave. He couldn’t tell if it was the distance or just a trick of the night, but the waving seemed to become more frantic. His chest felt heavy with the weight of realizing that he was the only one who could really see anything. Andy took in his

surroundings; the land was flat and stretched into eternity. At once every act that his body performed unconsciously came to the forefront and he could feel everything. He felt the sensation of every single blood cell rushing against the delicate walls of his veins. His breath stopped midway through his diaphragm and formed a large mass. The machinations of his stomach stopped and the burn of acid and bile spread their unnatural warmth throughout his abdomen. Finally, his mind flashed him back to the events of the previous night and he's back on that sidewalk on Allegheny Avenue keeping watch while Joe grabs his shoelace, makes a loop in it, and shimmies his contraption between the door and the frame to hook around the lock and pull it up.

They had a good thing going at that point, Andy would be the little teen beggar on the street asking for money, the Oliver Twist asking sir if he could have another, and when some good Samaritan would reach out with a dollar Joe and Len would rob them for everything else they had. It was a good plan, a great one even, until tonight when someone decided that they wanted to try and fight back.

He could smell everything; the aging grease from the dive bar around the corner, the trash that had piled up on the street, and the stench that came from his pores as he tried to sweat out every ounce of fear and guilt over what he had just seen.

“Get in!” Joe says. “And quick.”

Though he wishes he wouldn't, in his vision, Andy complies and jumps into the backseat of the piece of junk. Whoever owned it would probably be glad to get rid of it and could use the (presumably meager) insurance payout towards a new car. Len jumps in as well and the trio speed off towards the highway.

And then he's back on the side of the road staring at the figure in the field, with both of his "companions" yelling something that he can't make out.

"We have to go out there," Andy said. "Make sure that they're alright."

"To make sure who's alright?" Len said. "There's no one out there-- now get your ass back in the car."

"He's right," Joe said. "Now why don't you do what he said and then we can go."

"No."

"What did you say?" Len said, stepping closer.

"I said no," Andy said, realizing now that his mouth was filled with the salt of tears.

"She's following us-- it's her, I know it's her."

"Now listen, kid," Joe said, appearing behind Andy. "You've had a long night and you're just acting crazy. Get. In. The. Car."

"I'd listen to him-- now quit your crying and get in."

"This is our punishment," Andy said. "We're being punished for what you two did. Let's just go back, explain everything-- they'll understand if we admit it all. Then everything can be alright, they'll go easy on us."

"Listen up, you little shit," Len said, pushing Andy against the side of the car and grabbing his shirt, pulling Andy closer. His breath was a mixture of tobacco and an unknown meaty smell. Once again Andy turned towards the field and stared at the figure, still waving silently.

"I don't know what you think you're trying to say here, but you get it out of your head this instant. What happened, happened, and you can't change it now. Just like you didn't try to change it then."

The words stung, and as Len let go, Andy slumped against the car.

“I have to help her, I have to make it right,” he whispered.

“You know what, go out there,” Joe said. “Go out and see if there’s someone.”

Andy took a step into the grass when he heard the sound of a car door opening. He looked back to see that both men were getting in, and the engine rumbled back to life. The headlights came back on and illuminated the road. He ran back to the car and started to pound on the windows.

“Hey! Hey! Where the hell are you two going?”

Len rolled down the window. “Oh you thought we were gonna stay while you were on your little adventure? You keep talking about what happened-- you know that we have to keep moving.”

“You know what?” Joe said, shifting the car back into park. “Let’s give him a chance.” He faced Andy. “You got five minutes to make your choice.”

Andy stared back at the field. He began to question himself. Was the figure still there? It looked like it was, but were they still waving their arms? The area stretched into a darkness where the line between horizon and land blurred into each other and Andy wasn’t sure he could trust his own senses anymore.

He gulped and took a few shaky steps into the grass before Len called out to him.

“Are you sure you’re making the right choice?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well,” Len said, sticking a cigarette in his mouth and cupping his hand around his lighter. “Can you be sure that someone is going to see *you*? Let alone something you’ve made up.” He smiled as tendrils of smoke curled from his shaggy lips.

“He’s right,” Joe said. “You’d just have to wait for someone to come by and notice you. Hey, can I bum a cig?”

They were both tragically correct. Andy instinctively knew that this was the perfect place to go missing. If he went out there he would have a perfect view of the road and all the occupants that had happened to wander down it, but they’d have to want to notice him in order to help.

It was then that Andy had finally gained an awareness of where he was. He hadn’t seen a sign of life for miles. He wasn’t sure where he was or what direction he would go in to search for help. To his left, he had finally noticed that there was a mutilated deer carcass on the road. Another car or different vehicle must have hit it recently. The creature’s neck had been snapped and the body slit open all the way from the carotid artery to paunch. Exposed viscera had spilled out and fresh blood was still leaking, and Andy looked back towards the field. His vision blurred in panic and he wasn’t able to discern what was part of the crops and where the figure in the field was. A gentle breeze wafted the smell of copper towards him, which, combined with the smell of the cigarette, made him feel faint and unsteady.

“I mean,” Len said. “You could always stay with us.”

“Yeah, you could. I mean you’d have to try and keep up.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just saying, you know what we’ve done, and what we can do. We don’t need anyone holding us back.”

Andy ran into the field.

“Hello?” He called. “Hello, is someone out there? I’m just trying to help.”

He turned in multiple directions but all around him was just grass, and he couldn’t distinguish where the road was anymore. Every direction provided the same view of dew

twinkling in the light of the pre-dawn moon. Something ahead of him moved and he was finally face to face with the figure that he was looking for. As he approached, the figure reached out their hand.

“Oh thank God. Are you al-”

He didn't get to finish his sentence before a loud pop stopped him in his tracks. The smell of smoke and copper appeared once again, and he collapsed into the grass.

Len emerged from the darkness and threw something back into the field. It landed with a metallic thud. He eased himself back down into the passenger seat.

“So was there anyone out there?” Joe asked.

“I was a little busy with something else.” He produced something out of his pocket. A small wallet, with three initials sewn into the front. He rifled through the worn-out thing and produced a series of bills in various denominations. He looked again for anything special but gave up and returned it to his pocket.

“When we get to another state, I'll throw this thing away.”

“Len,” Joe began, “I don't want to sound like a pussy, but did we do the right thing?”

“Right? No.” Len said. “Best? Well, I think that one is more fitting.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. Besides, he wasn't the first.”

“Hm,” Joe said, shifting the car into drive and speeding off. The car bounced as it went over the dead deer, which dislodged something from the car that scraped along the road. Neither of them cared. “I guess you're right.”

“He would’ve spent the rest of his life waiting for someone like himself to come along and save him. And lord knows that’d take a long time.”

And off they went to their inevitable destination.