

BEFORE DYING

by Jon Boilard

You are toast. You're in a 1962 Impala that was your dad's before he split. It's on cement blocks in the back yard. There's a heat wave going on, it's Indian Summer. It's muggy as hell and mosquitoes are still fat and lazy but everywhere. Your mom serves beers at the VFW and doesn't get home until after midnight. There's a washing machine in the back yard, too, and a dog on a chain and lots of dog crap in hard piles. NRBQ is in the Dwire Lot doing its last couple sets. You fire up another doobie. The dog watches you from the end of his chain with his head cocked. It's your mom's dog and she named it Shithead, she says after the old man because they have the same disposition. You suck on watermelon Now and Later's with your knees against the back of the front seat. Your big brother is behind the wheel with his hands at ten and two like he's old enough to drive. He adjusts his mirrors. He moves his head to the drum solo that you can barely hear past the trees and the schoolyard and the train tracks and the long line at the beer tent. A warm breeze is like the restroom hand driers at the BP Diner. You stuff the roach in your pocket and pretend you're riding to Virginia Beach where your cool cousin Floyd got herpes.

You wait behind the packy in the dark with a handful of singles that smell like gasoline. The back of Fat Mike's Chevy half-ton is piled high with flattened cardboard and he's sleeping in the cab. Arnold Ogletree who works the register on Friday and Saturday opens the door when the coast is clear. He hands you a pint of blackberry brandy, two bottles of Boone's Farm and a twelve-pack of Budweiser. You give him the cash and a joint that is mostly oregano. You hear him lock the back door as you duck around the side of the building. Fat Mike never moved a muscle. Then you sit in the town common that isn't lit and drink your booze. The baby blue half-dollar moon is sitting on top of St. Bonaventure's spire like a fixture. You keep an eye on the police station, the firehouse, the pharmacy and the Hot L Warren. You listen to Hank Williams coming from the jukebox in the Bloody Brook. You smell the pickle shop, the plastic shop and the tannery. You drink until you get dizzy and loud and smash empty Boone's Farm bottles on the stone borders of the wishing well. Your brother talks about the 1971 Nova in front of Gregory's Gas on 5 & 10 for when he turns sixteen. He says that's his only wish.

You eat Cheese Puffs and sniff model airplane glue on Danny Sternofski's mom's garage sale couch when she's pulling third shift at the plastic shop. Sterno's kid sister who you felt up on the rocky bank of the railroad tracks after a dance brings you meatball grinders and Jolt colas from Rogers & Brooks because you're too twisted to ride the ten-speed bikes you stole from Eaglebrook. You watch *Deputy Dawg* and *Batman* and fall asleep, then wake up with a bloody nose. Then you get to third base with MaryAnne Baggs behind the grammar school utility shed during the Labor Day barbecue. She smells like coconut suntan oil. You break the button off her Daisy Dukes. She says, We'd better get back. You drink keg beer from red plastic cups and watch the old Polacks dance, drunk on vodka tonics. You tell your brother about MaryAnne Baggs' penny-color nipples and pink nylon panties. You smoke a fatty walking home. Then you eat a whole sheet of chocolate chip cookies your mother had baked for her new boyfriend from the Shutesbury Rod & Gun Club. You piss in a two-liter plastic Coke bottle and pass out on the floor.

The farmer who owns the land around Red Rock has put up signs that say Keep Out because some college kid from Amherst drowned himself and his parents got a lawyer from Springfield

and sued. You don't keep out, though, and your brother says if the old coot comes down with his pepper gun you'd better be ready to swim to Stillwater Bridge. You smoke a fat one with Tony Waznieski by the ropeswing and blow up Michelob bottles with firecrackers. Later the Big Wazoo as you call him lays a patch of rubber about two inches thick because he's selling his 1970 Charger since he's joining the army. You cheer and watch the heat in translucent strip-of-bacon shapes coming off the blacktop of North River Road. You sit on towels in the backseat and kill a warm pint of Southern Comfort that Waz keeps in a speaker hole he cut with a razor.

There's a bonfire at Hoosac's. You're out of your tits when you hear about the crash. It sounds like your mom's 1974 Comet. She'll have a fit. She doesn't even let your brother practice with her car because of the pickup he stole with Lester Little, but she's over to the VFW and he had an extra key made at Elder Lumber when she was napping. You ride by in the back of a police cruiser and blow chunks when you see it. You know right away he's really toast this time.

It's horseshoed around a hundred-year-old maple and the windshield ripples outward from where his head hit, like pond water disturbed by a stone. They use the jaws of life to pull him free and the torn metal roof is the mouth of some angry backwoods brute with sharp and misshapen silver teeth glinting and grinning, spitting your busted brother into the hands of men who cannot save him. The fat tires of the boxy and refrigerator-white rescue vehicle hurry and crunch over shards of glass that are a million fallen stars and you wish on every one of them. Then sweaty men in muddy boots yell instructions at the driver of the yellow wrecker from Fisher's Garage and as you pass they all look up. They shake their heads and say he never felt a thing.

At Cooley Dick in Hamp he's gone but for a machine and your mom is there with her stained apron and she looks at you like you put that tree there. Nobody says anything except her new boyfriend from the Rod & Gun who calls you a waste. The halls smell like Pine-Sol and those little plastic packs of grape jelly from the first-floor cafeteria. They unplug the machine the next day and everybody cries at the funeral. His hair is wrong and his clothes are wrong and one side of his face is a peach that has been dropped. You sit outside on the curb and swat at hungry horseflies and look at limousines. Then you sit in church. Then they bury your brother on Thayer Road across from Boron's Market. They stick him in the ground two stones down from Robert "Hawk" Wilson and right across from Eugene Canning's mother. Four old townies use straps and metal bars and globs of black machine grease to drop the handsome box into the fresh dug dirt. The sad sun shivers in the sky like a reflection of itself in a slow moving current.

The green leaves of Olzewski's corn scratch the skin on your arms. After the corn comes the trees and the hill then the Deerfield River. The path to Red Rock is worn and narrow and your brother is behind you. Your shadows consolidate in the smoky dirt, like you aren't two separate people anymore, like he's becoming the strong blond part of you. The water is clear and rushing and three or four fish are facing upriver, sleepily feeding in the drift. You take off your t-shirts and jeans and boots and pile them behind a buttonball stump. An eddy chug-a-lugs. You're under and you push downriver past stones and licorice-quick eels and then come up for air a few short strokes from the red rock. Sitting on top the sun dries your hair and deciduous leaves whisper secrets. Mapleseed helicopters soundlessly descend into calm pockets. Some strange daddy long legs panics and scampers and dances on the surface. You are alone together one last time but for the echo of a carpenter's hammer and he says, You're the one who's going to notice it most. In the distance, Mount Toby is orange and red and

yellow, always most glorious just before dying.

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