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JOSHUA DOLEŽAL

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## THE ROAD TO BILLINGS

“Force is equal to the change in momentum per change in time.”

—Sir Isaac Newton

I WAS DRIVING with the window cracked, because Aven’s car had no air conditioning, when we lurched forward. Something smashed against the door and I heard a dull scraping over the hum of the road. I glanced in the mirror and saw a tire bouncing down the road behind me.

“Good grief,” Aven said. He watched the tire through the rear window. It spun past us and into the ditch as I bore down on the brakes.

I eased the car to the shoulder, but the driver’s door would not budge. Aven slid out his side as I fought with the latch.

“Door’s dented shut,” he said. “You’ll have to use mine.”

The car, as I remember it, was a Mercury in the late ‘70s style, boxy and huge, so I had room to swing my legs onto the seat and scoot out the passenger side. It was late August, and dust caked the fenders. We were somewhere between Thompson Falls and Plains, Montana, on a flat stretch of highway.

The rotor left a groove in the asphalt after the wheel bounced away. It looked like an action line in a cartoon, an arc from the driving lane to the shoulder.

Aven raised his hands with a grin that said *what can you do*. We spread

out to search the ditch, and soon Aven bent into the knapweed and came up with the tire.

I jacked up the car and helped him screw the wheel back on. Then I slid across the front seat from the passenger side, Aven piled in, and we were on our way. We had more than two thousand miles to go from Montana to Tennessee. It would not have been too late then to turn back. We were just two hours from home. But if either of us had that thought, we did not speak of it. By the time we filled the tank outside Missoula and hit I-90 East, we were like children on a sled, inching over the crest of a hill then picking up speed, two bodies in motion.

WHEN AVEN PULLED up in my driveway earlier that day with an overheated radiator, my first thought was not to question his plan to take me back to college. He was a diesel mechanics major at Bob Jones University, an evangelical school in South Carolina that monitored student conduct so closely it was often compared to a minimum-security prison. I was studying English at a Presbyterian college in Tennessee, and Aven said he could drop me off on his way.

Aven came from a large family in the Yaak Valley, a wild place in northwestern Montana that borders Idaho and Canada. He was a tall young man with dark wavy hair, prematurely thinning, and eyes that changed color depending on what he wore. Sometimes they were the grayish blue of river ice. Other times they seemed as green as a mallard's head. Our families attended the same church, so we had occasion to talk now and then, but we did not

know each other well.

He had a confidence that seemed imperious, but which cracked under scrutiny, a bravado that I have recognized in myself and in other people who grew up poor in the Mountain West. It was the very defiance that made me believe, without question, that I belonged in college, a willful blindness that allowed me to overcome my shock at being surrounded by classmates who vacationed at Myrtle Beach, bluffing my way through the first semester until I learned how to leverage my difference to my advantage. I had absorbed that way of thinking while keeping pace with my father as he tracked elk through deep snow. You did not whine, you did not question whether you could take the next step. You took it, and the next, and the one after that, and soon the day was done.

When Aven suggested that he could drive me to Tennessee in a car he had purchased for fifty dollars and rebuilt at the diesel mechanics shop at Bob Jones, I heard it as the kind of dare I had been accepting from my father for years, which was not so much a challenge as a self-fulfilling prophecy. *We are going to do this thing.* So, on that summer day, when I heard Aven's car crunching over the gravel and went out to find steam boiling from beneath the hood, my thought was to get him some water for the radiator, pack my things, and go.

My parents stepped out to see us off. It was late afternoon, and the south side of the garage was coated with boxelder bugs. Aven filled the radiator, slammed the hood, and wiped his hands with a rag.

“Don't set any land speed records,” my father said.

Aven grinned. “No, sir, we won’t.”

THE PLAN WAS to drive straight through in shifts to save time and the cost of a hotel. I had volunteered for the first shift, and when Aven took the wheel for the stretch out of Missoula, I slipped into the back to rest. The sun was setting behind us, the timbered ridgelines magnified against the burning sky. The red light caught the dust on the rear window like blinds, casting stripes of shadow and color over the back of Aven’s head. Soon the car was dark and the world shrank to the column of light from the high beams, the interstate corridor, and the dark lines of mountains against the stars. I burrowed my pillow into the duffels stacked next to me and slept.

When I woke, we were sitting still. The dash said eleven o’clock. Were we getting gas, taking a bathroom break? A rest area, from the looks of it.

“It’s the radiator,” Aven said, before I could ask. “There’s no water. We’ll have to wait for someone to come along.”

We sat in silence for a moment, and I tried to distract myself by imagining the traffic on the interstate by sound. The growl of a diesel pickup. A tractor trailer moaning and rattling by. The whine of a sedan.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Outside Butte.”

“It’s a lonely stretch between here and Billings.”

Aven said nothing. He had taken on the quiet resignation that we had both learned growing up. Stick to the plan, nose to the grindstone, don’t complain. Someone will happen along. It was a way of turning helplessness

into resolve, refusing to weaken, the way we sometimes convinced ourselves that we felt sorry for people with money. It was how we turned hand-me-downs and mended clothes into badges of honor, even superiority. *We can get by with less than you. We don't need what you've got.* I was looking forward to professors asking me about my travels. "Great," I'd say. "Drove back with a friend who fixed up a car he bought for fifty dollars." Then the look of surprise. Two thousand miles in a junk car? *Yes*, my expression would say. *No problem.* The trick was to turn poverty into a story, a conquest, a depth of character that no one else could claim.

So I sat with Aven in the dark. We listened to traffic blowing by in both directions on the interstate. And we waited.

I MIGHT HAVE drifted off again, or might have been just about to, when Aven's shout jerked me upright.

"It's a fruit truck!" He pointed through the gloom at a white rig whose brake lights flared, then faded. "He's gotta have ice in there!"

Aven scooted across the front seat and out the passenger door. I watched him run after the driver, who stiffened and spun around. Aven slowed as he approached, and I watched them talk in pantomime. The driver stood with his hands on his hips, one leg forward, like an outfielder ready to break in any direction at the crack of the bat. Aven rocked back on his heels and slouched, his hands low, waving as if in surrender. Then I heard the driver's laughter and they both relaxed and walked together back to the truck. Aven waved me over.

The driver unbolted the back doors and climbed into the bed, which was packed with coolers. He opened one and took out two Ziploc bags of melted ice.

“Keep the bags,” he said. “And take some cherries with you.” He drew a half gallon of fruit from the chest and handed it to me. They were Rainier cherries, yellow with a red blush, probably picked that morning in the Flat-head Valley. We thanked him.

“You kids take care,” he said.

Aven filled the radiator, and we piled back into the car. I joined Aven in the front, waiting for my next turn at the wheel. We each ate a handful of cherries as we pulled back onto the interstate, tossing the pits out the window into the night. Both of us knew, somewhere deep in our bodies, that there would be more of this, that we could not count on a fruit truck every time the car boiled over. We knew that whatever mishaps might come were our own doing. We were the ones pressing ahead, daring the night and the long miles between towns. Yet we let ourselves laugh while eating cherries, happy to be in motion, glad to pretend that we belonged with the others on the road. When the car boiled over again, we would feign surprise, and if we needed help from strangers, it would be with the shrug and the look that said *what can you do*. We could not have seen then how deeply the pattern would root into our identities, how difficult it might be later on to keep a career, a marriage, our own children from following the same arc. To make your own luck, I would learn, requires more than blind effort. It requires the ability to see down the road, to stop while you still can, before

a foreseeable mistake turns into a self-sealing fate.

SOON THE SIGNS for Butte rose in our high beams and fell away. I could feel the empty space of the Anaconda Mine in the dark, terraces cut from the mountain like giant steps of rock and dirt. At the bottom of that staircase was the Berkeley Pit, a reservoir holding some of the most toxic water on earth, so thick with heavy metals that copper could be mined directly from the lake. I remembered playing baseball in Butte, watching the minor league team, the Copper Kings, and marveling at the mansions built by the mining barons in their heyday. Like much of Montana, Butte had become a national sacrifice area, the copper scraped from the shelves above the Berkeley Pit forged into wires that powered televisions, clocks, and coffee makers in homes across America. I wondered if the children of Butte grew up with a sense of pride about that or if they wondered where all the money went.

It was after midnight, and Aven drove without talking. The engine overheated again near Three Forks, and he cooled it with water from the fruit truck. When he turned into another rest area near Bozeman just an hour later, I looked at him, alarmed.

“Just want to check on something,” he said. I got out, so he could slide across the passenger side, and he popped the hood. It was dark and windy and cold. I shivered in my short sleeves. Aven mumbled to himself as he fussed with the guts of the car, jerking his hand back from the heat. I knew nothing about engines, but I could hear worry in his grunts and sighs, the hiss of his breath. He leaned down, like a veterinarian trying to deliver a



breached calf, and groped for something—a hose, a belt?—with his eyes squeezed shut. Finally, he let his breath out, made a clicking sound with his tongue, and slammed the hood. We got back in the car and eased onto the interstate.

Aven and I had learned from surviving other pickles of this sort with our families that there were stages of accepting reality. The first stage was to deny reality, and by denying it, to transform it. We knew that we were poor, but we refused to accept this as a limitation. We took audacious risks because the alternative was resignation and powerlessness, a loss of imagination. Aven and I had enrolled in colleges nearly as far from our homes as they could be, and our families encouraged this. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, nothing experienced beyond the tight corral of poverty. Taking the risk with any chance of success meant ignoring the possibility of failure. *We are going to do this thing.* Then doing it against the odds.

But sometimes reality could not be changed, and when this became an irrepressible fact, we began to brace ourselves for the certainty of failure by thinking beyond it. Ever since the tire had fallen off, we had been ignoring the dented driver's door and the jerky action of the brakes on the damaged rotor. But now that Aven was worried about the engine, the facts piled up. The radiator. The tire. The brakes. We weighed these things against the miles between us and Tennessee, and without saying a word we both accepted that our goal was now to get to Billings. When we got there, we would call our parents and work it out. There would be no anger, no tears. We would all know that we had been gambling, that the cards had been bad

since the flop, and that it was now going to cost us more than we had hoped to save. At the time, I would have been proud to say that nothing about this shift in perspective admitted defeat. But now I understand that because I did not experience setbacks like this as failures, I never learned from them. I can almost see myself smirking in the dark, imagining how I would tell this to my Southern friends in such a way that it would have the same effect as if we had really pulled it off. I could hear them saying, “Wow, you did what? No way.” The story would be triumph enough.

AVEN HAD BEEN driving fifty miles an hour since we had left Bozeman. It was the odd time of night that is also early morning, and traffic was light, save for the semis that moaned up behind us and blew past. Neither of us could escape comfortably into our own thoughts any longer. The past and future had fallen away. We listened to the engine the way a man who has felt a stabbing pain in his chest waits for the vise to cinch down again. I asked Aven how he liked Bob Jones, whether it was fair what everyone said about it being like lock-up. It wasn't far off, he said. The campus was fenced, and students had to check in and out with security if they left.

I wondered if the car might have helped Aven forget about the walls, losing himself in the project for hours in the university garage the way a prisoner might embrace routine to escape time. Aven did not strike me as a Bob Jones man. He was not deeply religious or political, so far as I could tell. He was conservative, and this made him polite. But he, like me, had a lifetime of practice concealing discomfort and shame beneath a confident

air. I cannot say I knew him well enough then to say who he was. Who I was then is mystery enough.

The stretch of road between Bozeman and Billings that I shared with Aven has haunted me of late, maybe because time has carried some things farther from me than the mere distance of years. The illusion of conquest was gone. We were trying to minimize the damage, and for the time being the two of us were working together in ways that we never would again. Aven married a woman he met at Bob Jones, and the two of them are raising a large family in Alaska, where Aven works as a mechanic and sometimes appears on reality television. I am a professor at a liberal arts college in Iowa where nearly everything I teach would brand me, in Aven's world, as one of the fabled and feared elites. From my vantage now, I can scarcely believe that we took turns sleeping on the same pillow in the back seat of Aven's car, that we were, for that stretch of time, fundamentally of the same mind. *We will do this thing. We will beat these odds.* I wonder how many other decisions since then, which have carried us to such different destinies, have been driven at least in part by the same stubborn view, the same bluster and defiance that had been set in motion years before. When Aven arrived with his car boiling over, the more surprising choice would have been to call the whole plan off, back away from the dare, do the safe thing. Everything we had been taught up to then pushed us into the car and on down the road.

FOR A TIME the car seemed to find its stride. Aven and I talked off and on. We ate a few more cherries. The mountains fell over the western horizon.

We drove along the Yellowstone River, the rim of the Great Plains, the part of Montana that inspired the name Big Sky.

Just before the exit to Billings, something blew in the engine. Aven hung his head when he heard it. The car crept to the shoulder, and he disappeared once more beneath the hood. The wind was steady and cold, and I got back in the car. Now and then I rocked in the backdraft of passing trucks. The darkness brightened without the headlights, and I could see the shape of the land, the long sightline across the plains to the violet ribbon of sky. The hubris and adrenaline had worn off. This was the truth. Aven would jury-rig a cover for the blown engine cap. He would drive us slowly, carefully, up the exit to a garage, where he would abandon the car. We would call our parents and wait, call again and wait some more. I would catch a flight to Tennessee the next morning. Aven would take a Greyhound to South Carolina. We would tell ourselves that it could have been worse.

Some memories are like mountains, their presence unchanged when they rise again in our thoughts. I have not spoken to Aven in many years, and the memory of him on that long drive to Billings is more like a rock chiseled from our past, the kind that might show silver, quartz, or fool's gold, depending on how the light strikes it. I speak of it now to remember when I still thought of myself first as a Montanan, how I got into trouble that I should have seen coming, how I made that trouble worse by not turning back when I had the chance. Even now that I ought to know better, after finding myself stranded in a dozen different ways over the years the way we were that night outside Billings, I still have to guard against the gambling

instinct that I learned as a child. It never tells me to fold 'em, to walk away, or to run. It tells me that losing is just a chance to double down. At the right time of night or in the pale light before dawn, I almost forget it's a lie: that everything is possible, that we can wake from history as if from a dream, that the bigger the chance, the greater the odds, the better the story that will come of it all.