

DISCONNECT

by Jon Boilard

The Malibu fishtails then stops and the man says, You need a ride? His radio is playing music from Northampton and you get in. He says, It's a hot one. He tells you his air conditioning is on the blink. He's pretty sure it just needs a shot of freon, but he hasn't gotten around to it. His mouth is so thin and straight it looks like it was made with a sharp knife. He keeps his left hand on the wheel, steering with his wrist, and he takes the back of your head with his right, holding your hair so tight your eyes water. He puts your face in his lap and says, Don't move a muscle boy and won't nobody get hurt. Then he turns onto SawMill Plain Road just past Sitterly.

You hear a flat-bed from Austin Brothers, but all you can see is the underneath of the Malibu's dashboard that is mostly angry red wires spitting a finite copper venom. His shirt smells like dandruff and fabric softener. He waits until a couple cars pass and then he cranks the wheel and under the hood a loose belt giggles sinfully at the apparently familiar predicament. He sets you on your side, undoes your trousers, pushes them down below your hips. He tugs your underpants down, too, and stretches the waistband trying to get his greedy fingers exactly where he wants them. You close your eyes against the sunlight and sense the afternoon:

Hobo zooms his crop duster over Tapscott's fields. You hear the thresher out in Fat Matty's hay and that old FarmAll tractor is coughing up a lung. You hear the rolling words of some Puerto Ricans hired out of Holyoke as they gather around the water pump for their break. You smell the manure pile at the edge of Thurow's property and hear Peter Junior shaping it with a backhoe. You smell the diesel fuel in Paul Soloski's pond from when his nephew got drunk and tried to set it on fire. You smell the exhaust fumes of RVs with New York plates as they back into position at the White Birch Campgrounds. Jimmy LaPinta's Willy's is skipping a cylinder in idle as he pitchforks heads of cabbage into the back. They thump and bump against the makeshift rails he's constructed of particleboard and plywood scraps. He'll try to get a load to Oxford Pickle before supper. Williams is having trouble with the Jamaicans he busses in from Hartford for the harvest so his corn is still high on Meadow Road and it swallows you.

The long stalks rustle forever until you emerge, spent from the guts of that seasonal green beast. You skirt the landfill where Chet Pellovic is known to nurse a nip of Jack Daniels in the woodshed, waiting to collect the next random toll. Fat black horseflies and blood-drunk mosquitoes buzz like power lines and Big Billy Borden's far-off hammer secures the frame of Doc Compton's new house out past the drag strip. The red vinyl seats of the Malibu scorch your skin that's exposed from where the stranger has skillfully maneuvered your clothes and they moan when he moves you against them. Your face chafes against the lap of his pants. A September gust stuffs the car while his cold fingers still wet with anticipation are the legs of a spider that poisons then makes a meal of you. Then the Deerfield River is privy to bigger secrets that you will never tell. It shushes you and shoves trout down toward Stillwater Bridge where fly fishermen in hip boots wait patiently smoking Swisher Sweets. It's running high because they've let the dam out at Quabbin and it hisses and spits and slithers on its stark white belly across Franklin County, from Bardwell's Ferry to Bloody Brook to Cheapside.

Then the hum of Wingo's milking machines is a transitory lullaby. When you get onto Lee Road the melting sherbet sun drips through the driver side window and you feel it on your tongue. There is something else, too, that tastes like a ten-penny nail. Another electronic click

in his steering column signifies the new stop sign just propped up at 116 and Lee, and he guns the engine, no longer careful. Then the Malibu slows down and he says, Sit up now boy and fix yourself. He's coming up on Settright Road and he says, Which one is it? So you point it out to him and he says, That's good. He says, Now I know where to find you. He licks his fingers like after Sunday potluck at St. Matthew's and smooths out his eyebrows. He smiles sluggishly and says, Don't tell nobody boy or I'll come back and pop one of them nuts.

The Malibu u-turns and throws ghosts from its tail pipe. Your mother's forsythia bush sobs soft yellow blobs that scatter, the weather cock wrestles the wind and your father's El Camino is backed up to the long barn, which means you're late filling Addison's grain and water buckets. You check the salt licks in the north pasture. Beyond Ostroski's patchwork fields the sun slips behind the saw-toothed scalp of Sugarloaf Mountain and the sky is spilled pink lemonade. You hurry up and tell your father a lie, that they kept you after school again. He turns to look at you and in the near dusk his face takes on a blue-metal hue and looks like it's made of the stuff they make shotguns from. Stray cats so skinny they're just brown bags of sticks hide in the shadows high up on the rafters and watch you vanish with vampire eyes.

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