Road Songs

(final version for *Golden Heart Parade*; Santa Fe Writers Project, 2021)

In this revision, the father is meant to sound like an embittered grifter, one who fabricates or at least exaggerates his past. In turn, the naïve narrator might be a little more charmed with him. There's more dialogue, though most of it's summarized. 876 words.

Rick and I headed west on a two-lane highway while the sky was still cloudless and blue. We passed by farmhouses and muddy fields, small ponds on which the ice was receding. Rick steered with a spinner knob on the wheel, which lay almost parallel to his lap. The CB radio crackled on with coded, taciturn messages, background noise like a birdcall in sunlight.

I asked what was so special about Amish furniture. The craftsmanship, Rick said. It's built to last. Was it always furniture in back? No, he said, he was a contract driver. He'd driven grain trucks and hauled cattle, timber, lumber, granite slabs. He was not a corporate driver, though he'd moved new cars and heavy machinery, turbine blades and fifty-foot augers. "This is only temporary," he said. "Driving truck is not my forever career."

He asked if I played baseball. He said he'd played shortstop for a Single-A team in Wisconsin Rapids, and in only half a season he'd set the league record for inside-the-park home runs. "That's not an official record," he clarified. "They weren't tracking it back then." He said if the ball even touched the outfield grass, he could stretch it into a double. Then the week before he was set for promotion, a guy named Rincon slid hard into second trying to bust up a double play, snapping Rick's ankle. "And that ended that," he said. "I was a contact hitter. Speed was my game." But not for a minute did he believe this Rincon character was playing fair. "These boys will mow you down just to level the field, remember that."

After that he toured with Paulie Knox and the Best Boys, a rockabilly band as he described it. Rick handled keyboards and steel guitar, even sang backing vocals. He and the boys

played beer joints, street dances, county fairs. “We’d set up in an empty lot and have a hundred people dancing by dusk.” They’d even met Bon Jovi in the early days, and everyone said it was a coin flip which band would break out first.

“I never heard of Paulie Knox,” I said.

“You can forget Paulie Knox. The man was a rodent.”

“What did he do?”

“Tell you what he didn’t do,” Rick said. “He didn’t write the music *or* the lyrics.”

The band’s claim to fame—passing fame—was a series of regional anthems all meant for specific radio markets: “Smokin’ in Spokane,” “Little Miss Missoula,” “The Boys from Boise.” He sang me a chorus, which was catchy but unfamiliar. The songs weren’t meant to be silver records, he said, but some of them sold almost five-thousand copies. “Fort Collins, Provo, Reno, Coeur d’Alene … I could draw you a highway map of the royalties I rightly deserve.”

Then there was a rodeo league. Rick himself was not a cowboy, but he was a founding board member and managed all the franchising—venues, sponsorships, licensing. “I took every photo on those trading cards,” he said. The league competed on Fridays in the fall, with rosters from Alberta to Oklahoma. “Well, not Oklahoma. But we were getting there. It was in the plans.” By year three they’d nearly cleared their debt, but then an old cattleman named Butch Wagner forced Rick out in a power grab and the league soon folded. “Their loss. I was this close,” he said, showing with his thumb and forefinger, “*this close* to selling the TV rights. Now we’ll never know.”

By then the sun had fallen over the western plains. The night had turned dark, starless and moonless. We’d been through Pierre and across the river, through Fort Pierre, further south. We rolled over buttes and bluffs, past icy lakes and penned-in cattle.

"Well, well," Rick said. "Look at this."

He flashed the high beams. Out ahead, a line of white-tailed deer had blockaded the road. There were a half-dozen of them at least, standing still as lawn ornaments, their neon eyes glowing in the lights.

"Slow down," I said. "Rick, stop!"

But he only drifted toward the center line. He pulled the horn and flashed his lights. And in the moment before impact, in the time it would take to snap one's fingers, the deer split like a parting river, their cottony tails bobbing into the ditch. I looked back through the side-view mirror but saw only the running lights of our trailer.

"Fucking crap," I said.

"They know better than we do," said Rick. "They ain't stupid."

"Sure looked that way."

"I been doing this a while," he said.

We turned west onto the interstate. Rick cracked his window and lit a thin cigar. The radio was tuned to a livestock report, with talk of steers and heifers, hogs and poultry. Our headlights shone on billboards and fenceposts, long fields of native grass.

"Do you think you and Mom will ever be a couple again?"

Who said that? I must have said it. But it was a naïve thought that shouldn't have been put to words. Rick cocked his head like he'd misheard me. Ahead of us, an old sedan on the shoulder was flashing its hazards, and we passed it without slowing down. The AM radio crackled, blurring the space between me and Rick.