

My Rig is the Wild, Wild Heart

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In this section, the narrator joins his previously absent father for a road trip from eastern South Dakota to Colorado. They're in the father's eighteen-wheeler. The father, Chuck, is meant to seem standoffish, and the truck is meant to seem claustrophobic. 528 words.

After an hour on the road, I asked, "Do you think you and Mom will ever be a couple again?"

Ahead of us, the sun had fallen behind the western plains, casting the low horizon in layers of orange and pink. We traveled along Highway 12, a straight two-lane bordered by snow-patched farmland and occasional lamp-lit farmhouses. It had been miles since we had passed another set of headlights.

He cocked his head toward me as if to answer, but then stared back at the road. Eventually the crackling AM radio—quietly tuned to a livestock-market report—blurred away the echo of my question.

"Is Aberdeen your hometown?" I asked.

"I graduated with your mom."

"You ever see your family, like your parents, when you're back in town?"

"They're gone now," he told me. I didn't know what this meant, if they had passed away or moved on. He didn't clarify, though in hindsight I wish I'd asked, even if it changed nothing. They are my ancestors too.

"What are you carrying," I asked, "in the back?"

"Furniture."

"Who's it for?"

"Just a company."

"You said earlier you live in Big Sky. How often are you there?"

“Why do you ask?”

“You got a nice place?”

“It’s small and uncomfortable and deteriorating by the day. I have the mind to get out and start fresh someplace new, maybe the coast. The Southwest. Who knows?”

He stared ahead into the dusk. Soon the Missouri River appeared ahead of us. We turned south, toward Pierre. Beside me was the wide river, black just then in the early nightfall. Out along the banks flashed the shapes of overgrown trees and clotted wildgrass.

“Well, look at this,” he said.

I squinted up ahead at the road, but saw nothing. Then, just a sparkle. He flashed the high beams, and a line of pronghorn deer—a half-dozen of them, perhaps—appeared on the near bank of the ditch. They were lined up as if to make a run across the highway, and the lead deer had gone as far as the shoulder. It stared blankly into the truck’s headlights, unmoving.

I turned as if to warn Chuck, but, without decelerating, he began drifting into the oncoming lane. He pulled the air horn and flashed between his low and high beams. I clutched the vinyl handle above the door, bracing myself for the worst. Then in an instant the lead deer turned away and bounded through the tall ditchweed of the embankment. The others followed, scattering, their white tails bobbing once or twice before they disappeared into the scrub. I looked back through the side-view mirror but saw only the running lights of the trailer behind us.

Then my father whispered something. He spoke so quietly I initially thought the radio had crackled in. “Love,” he said, “it’s just a decision, not an instinct like everyone would have you believe.” He stared straight ahead as if he were alone in the truck. “Affection’s what you can’t control. That’s the deep one, the one poets do wrong to ignore.” He dimmed the beams.

We rode on in silence. The night turned dark, starless and moonless.