

Big Trucks

“And then, then the shortstop for the other team wasn't paying attention or something, and then the ball was coming towards him and he didn't even see it, and it bounced up and it hit him right in the crotch!” Petey smiled big as he laughed at his own story, and to Wade’s eye his son looked absolutely adorable with his almost cartoonishly rosy cheeks and a four noticeably-absent teeth.

“This happened at practice?” Wade asked. He flicked the windshield wipers on, just to get the mist off.

“No, Dad,” he snapped. “I told you! It happened at the game last week!”

“Whoa. Cool it, bud. I'm sorry.”

Petey had been doing that more and more to Wade, get ticked at the slightest miscommunication and bite Wade’s head off. That didn’t happen last year.

Petey continued. “And then, the other team's coach came out because, because the shortstop was on the ground, because even though he was wearing a cup I think it hurt his nuts.”

Wade shot a glance back to him quickly, but didn't raise his voice. “Petey, you can't say 'nuts' like that.”

“How come?”

“Because that's a bathroom word.”

“The kids on my team say it. They all say way worse stuff.”

“Well,” Wade said, “fashionable poison is still poison.”

“What's that mean?”

Wade was looking for his next turn. They were headed out into the country now, and Wade

never came out here. “It means... Do you know if I have to turn again or it's on this road, Petey?”

“I don't know. I never ate there before.”

“I thought your mom said you guys went to this place once. Didn't you go there with your mom?”

Wade watched for Petey's reaction and while keeping an eye out for passing street signs.

“She musta gone there with Richard,” Petey said.

“Oh?”

“Maybe. I don't know. I never been there.” His face gave no other clues.

Petey looked so much like Wade had when he was his age, especially in that Little League uniform. Wade's old under-eight baseball photo was up at his mom's house last time they'd visited her, four weekends ago. She'd called Petey ‘Wade’ three times in an afternoon. The resemblance was strong, but when Wade had been Pete's age, he'd lie and fib and, in retrospect, manipulate people to get an advantage. There wasn't that side to Petey, Wade thought. Maybe the complete opposite. Wade knew Petey could be very, very honest.

The rain started up in earnest now, and Wade had to squint even harder out the windshield.

“You did really good today, Petey,” he said.

“Thanks, Dad,” he responded, hardly enthused.

“Even when you struck out, you had a real good eye for the ball.” Petey said nothing back. He was fiddling with his cleats, trying to undo a double- or triple-knot. “When's next practice?”

“Tuesday,” he said without looking up, “but Mom says I can't go.”

“What? Why not?”

“I forget. I gotta go to something for her work. Other kids'll be there.”

Vicki never told Wade anything. He hated having to hear about everything from Petey, and it wasn't fair to make him her messenger. She'd only meet face to face if Wade begged her, which he was sick of having to do. She preferred him to pick up Petey from school every other Friday and drop him off there on Monday and never have to cross paths. So she wouldn't be forced to acknowledge they'd ever had anything in common at all. So she could pretend Petey was a virgin birth.

Suddenly, they passed the restaurant. It had an old-fashioned neon roadsign with flashing bulbs that looked like they moved, but it was blocked by a swaying oak from the direction they were coming. Right after they'd passed it, they both saw the bright pinks and blues in their mirrors and exclaimed "There it is!" at the same moment.

The boy yelled at him, "We just passed it, Dad!"

"I know, I know." Wade looked over both his shoulders, actively maintaining calm. "Okay. Now I just gotta... find a place to flip a U." As was often the case, Wade thought, he couldn't find one. The road looked to continue straight and uninterrupted until it disappeared into the rain ahead. "Oh, geez."

Petey turned to face Wade, his legs bunched up underneath him. "We drove past it already, Dad! It's back there!" There was such anxiety in his voice, like the fate of the world hinged on getting back to the restaurant as soon as possible.

"I know, Petey, but I can't get back there until I find a place to turn around." Wade decided to turn this into a teaching moment. He spoke in what he thought were cool and measured tones. "Because I need to turn around, right? But you're not allowed to just make a U-turn in the middle of the street. I have to find a driveway or side street where I can turn in and then we can head back. That's the law."

Petey didn't respond.

Wade glanced at his rearview mirror and noticed an old pickup had sped up, and was flashing its lights just a few feet off their tail. “Ah, shit,” he muttered, forgetting Petey's presence.

“Dad!” Petey gasped. “That's a bathroom word! That's worse than a bathroom word!”

“I'm sorry, Pete. It was an accident. I shouldn't talk like that. It's not good.” Wade knew he was in for it. The boy was going to pounce on him, take advantage of his dad's momentary lapse and not let him forget it. He winced and waited as Petey contemplated his next move.

He looked confused. “That's way worse than what the boys on my team say,” he said, and paused for deep thought. “They don't even say that on TV.”

Wade had sped up to get the Ram off his ass. “Petey, I told you it was an accident. I know it's a bad word, but it was a mistake, and when people make mistakes, we forgive them and move on.”

Petey stayed silent. Was he thinking what to say next? How to use the situation to his advantage? Or had the message gotten through?

Nothing. No response, no sound but the whir of the tires on the wet road and the quick swish of the wipers.

“Okay, Pete?”

“Okay.”

Still though, Wade swore he could see the gears turning behind Petey's brow. The boy had won this, he felt. Wade wasn't allowed to speak now, wasn't even allowed to crack the silence by turning on the radio.

The road stretched on with no turnouts in sight. It was now an elevated roadway with narrow shoulders between what he assumed were tomato fields, maybe lettuce. Bunches of green shot up between muddy rows of soil. Wade couldn't help but feel like the day was conspiring against him.

Petey surprised him by saying, “Thanks for coming to my game, Dad.”

“Ah, sure thing, Petey.” Wade looked at him from the corner of his eye. “I love going to your games, kiddo.” He didn’t know if his son had any tells when he lied.

But the truck was back on his tail now, catching up and getting wildly close before backing up and getting close again. The rain was coming down too hard for this. “Petey, I’m going to have to make a U-turn now even though there’s no driveway or street here, okay? Because there’s a truck behind us that really wants to pass us and he’s driving dangerous.”

“I thought you said that was against the law.”

Wade prevaricated. “He’s driving too dangerous. I gotta get out of this lane ASAP. You know what that means?”

“A sap?”

“ASAP. It’s an acronym. That means it stands for a bunch of other words. And ASAP stands for ‘as soon as possible.’”

“Oh.”

Wade put on his left blinker. The truck was still hanging on tight. If Wade wanted to do this without making a three-point turn, he’d have to speed up, swing far to the right at the sharpest possible angle, and then pull hard to the left. He put on the radio, just a really loud commercial, hoping to distract Wade however much that was possible.

And then he did it.

The car swayed one way, then the other, and it was over. Quick.

“Whoa,” Petey said. He had gripped on to the center console.

“Not so bad, huh? And now we’re on our way back to the restaurant, so we can get you some

dinner.” Far up ahead, he saw the blurry, rotating lights of the diner. In the rearview he saw a set of brake lights pulse, before the headlights swung around and were coming on fast. The truck had made a U-turn as well. “Ah, geez.”

“What?” Petey asked.

“Nothing. No big deal. Nothing.” Wade quickened his pace to five miles over the speed limit. Maybe it was too fast for this weather, but he didn't like that Ram. Beads of water banged against the roof, thick and heavy. The sooner off the road the better. “You gonna get a cheeseburger, Petey?”

“I don't know.” He was playing with his laces again, and didn't notice the big pickup shining its highbeams at them, almost bumping Wade's fender. This time the guy hardly ever backed off.

“I heard they got good milkshakes at this place. The kind where they give you a little extra in a big aluminum cup on the side. You know what I mean? They give you a cup of, like, bonus shake.” Wade didn't check for Petey's response. He kept his eyes dead ahead. How slow was he going when the guy starting tailgating him? What had he done to piss him off? Stupid hick. Wade was driving with a little kid. People died doing this sort of stuff. They could all end up in a ditch. Almost there, he thought. Almost there.

Once he could make out the letters on the neon sign, Wade put on his turn signal, and braked to just a few miles under the speed limit. He veered into the diner's broad driveway and felt the crunch of gravel under his tires. He pulled into the first available space; it felt good to shut the engine off.

And there was the goddamn Ram. The truck had pulled in right behind them and found a spot.

Wade thought he might have to be heroic at some point, but wanted to avoid it. “Petey, get your coat on, quick. We're gonna make a dash for the restaurant, okay?”

He grabbed his team windbreaker and slid his arms in. “How come?”

“I wanna race you. I saw you running for those ground balls and I wanna race you to the front door. Ready?”

“Where's your coat, though?”

“It's the trunk. I'm okay without it. Ready?”

“Ready.” He had his hand resting on the door handle.

“1-2-3. Go!”

They bolted out into the rain. It was warmer than before, or maybe it was just Wade's nerves. Petey was a few steps ahead even though he'd started on the far side of the car. His boy was quick. Through the splatter of the rain, Wade heard Petey's cleats scrape and clack against the gravel, then on the concrete doorstep to the restaurant.

“I win,” he yelled as he yanked the door open and flung himself in. He smiled. How many teeth did Petey have left to lose?

Wade followed his son in and shook his arms to get the rain off.

The skinny, skinny middle-aged waitress surprised him by asking, “Two?”

“Two,” Petey answered.

Before they could follow her to their table, the door opened again. In walked a teenager with a down orange hunting vest and fierce acne. Wade stopped in his tracks and looked at him. What a hideous thing being a teenager had done to him.

The waitress asked him, “You getting dinner, Dean?”

“No.” He faced Wade. “You the man in that Plymouth?” He spoke so quietly, so evenly, that Wade thought maybe he'd tailed him just to tell him something, to give Wade back a slip of paper that had flown out his car window, to return a bit of change he owed him.

“Yes,” was all he could manage.

The boy, or was he a man, stepped in so close to Wade's face he could smell the soily, acid fragrance of chewing tobacco on his breath. He spoke softly still. “You were driving like a real prick out there.”

Wade backed away an inch, but the teen reclaimed it. Wade started to speak. “I- I-...”

“You what? You were driving way slower than the limit on a country road and you didn't make room for me to pass. Then you go and swerve like a damn, like a damn madman and flip a U-turn out of nowhere.”

Wade was backed up against a jukebox now, stuck. “Hey, man. There's no need to get upset. I'm sorry.”

“Who's upset? Do I seem upset?”

He didn't. The teen moved a wad of dip with his tongue. Petey stood a few feet away with the waitress, waiting and watching.

Wade was at a loss. “What do you want from me then?”

“You're a menace. Out on my roads driving like a menace. People get killed driving like that.”

“I thought the same thing about you tailing me like that.”

The young man looked down and laughed softly to himself before he looked up and said, “I ought to knock your fucking head off.”

“Hey, buddy. I'm with my son.” Wade tensed up. “Now whatever I did, I'm sorry and I didn't mean to upset you or drive bad or... I don't know. What do you want from me?”

Dean backed up and shook his head and raised his voice for the first time. “First, I'm not your fucking buddy. I don't have buddies that act like such pussies.”

The waitress spoke up. "Dean, get the hell outta here. You're making a scene."

He faced her and held up his hands. "I'm almost done, Gretchen." Turning back to Wade, he said, "You got anything you want to say to me outside?"

"No, man. I'm with my son, just trying to get some dinner."

Dean chuckled. "I think it's pretty funny you think I give a fuck about your fucking kid." He was loud and each 'fuck' sent just the smallest bit of brown spittle onto Wade's face. He flinched at it.

"Anything else you got to say to me?"

Aware he'd been defeated, he shook his head and said, "No."

"Thanks." He patted Wade on the cheek. The final insult. Wade's face flushed red. Dean turned to the waitress. "Gretchen, tell Mark he needs to bring my pads to practice tomorrow. Coach is gonna run my ass all day if I don't have 'em." He opened the door and walked out into gray rain. Wade was stone still for who knows how long. His mind couldn't move and he didn't notice.

"I'll seat you now," the waitress said.

"Yeah. Yeah," Wade

She led them to a booth in the corner. They cozied into the red vinyl seats and she set the menus in front of them. She turned to Petey and asked sweetly, "You want crayons?"

"No," he said, and in that one syllable it was clear, at least to Wade, that Petey saw himself as far too old for drawing at the table.

"Can I get a coffee to start, please?" Wade asked. What else could he do but order a coffee?

"Sure thing." She looked like she knew she should let them be, but before she did she said, "Don't worry about Dean. That kid's got a screw loose. His parents... Pretty ugly situation. He's always getting in trouble. I'll apologize for him, because I know he won't." She clicked her pen and left.

Wade mouthed, and maybe said, "Thanks," as she walked away, and they sat there silent. Could Wade ask what Petey was going to order? Could he tell him what he was thinking of getting? Should he talk about what just happened? What was running through Petey's mind? Wade was frozen with a hundred questions.

Petey was looking at the rain against the window. Wade joined him. One small drop would splash and starting running down into another and they'd join a bigger drop and start running downward. Over and over.

What should he have done? Fight the guy? He hadn't thrown a punch since college. And that hadn't gone well. Visions of Vicki nursing his black eye surged through him. What was this kid's problem?

The waitress returned with two waters and one mug of coffee. As she set them down, she asked, "Ready to order or you need a couple more minutes?"

"Couple more minutes," Wade replied without looking at her.

"Sure thing. Cream and sugar's right there."

Petey finally spoke. "Why'd you let that guy talk to you like that, Dad?"

Wade didn't know the answer, he knew that much. He thought maybe he should say something, since it was depressing as hell saying nothing. "It's never worth fighting someone for something they say to you, Petey."

"Yeah, but he swore at you and asked you to go outside and fight him."

"They're just words, Petey. You've got to be the stronger man when someone wants to fight you. And the stronger man avoids fighting someone at all costs. They're just words."

"Yeah, but he touched you, Dad. He touched your face and he was so close to you when he

was talking to you. I woulda beat him up. I woulda beat him up so hard for talking to me like that. Why didn't you beat him up?"

Petey didn't care about the answer, Wade thought. The boy was separating and distinguishing himself from Dad. Wade tapped his fingers on the table and pondered what to say next, believing it probably wouldn't matter. "I don't know, Pete." He was looking down into his black coffee. "What would have happened if I went outside and fought him? Think about that."

"I woulda gone outside and beat him up and he'd never talk to anyone like that again. I'd punch him in the face just once and he'd get a cut above his eye and he'd be on the ground and he'd say, 'Pete, don't do it! I'm sorry!' And I'd show him mercy, and he'd run away scared."

"Well, I don't ever want to hear about you fighting somebody. Ever. Is that clear?" He was surprised at his severity in his voice, and felt his delayed anger surfacing now.

"I don't care, Dad. I don't care." He stared intently across the formica table. "No one's ever going to talk to me like that, and if they do, I'd punch them right in the eye so they'd never do it to anybody ever again."

Wade was unable to keep up his anger, and shook his head. "I don't know what to tell you, Petey."

"You don't have to always tell me something, Dad. Sometimes I can tell you things and sometimes the things I tell you can be good things. And when I say, 'I would do this,' you can say, 'Okay, Petey,' because I know that if anybody ever touched my face like that, they'd deserve to get punched in the eye. And they'd beg me to not hit them again and I wouldn't because I'd be the good guy and that's what good guys do."

He wanted to explain that he'd thought that once too, that he'd fought people before and that it

was so satisfying, that he'd gladly let someone punch him in the face again if Vicki would tend to him after, that he used to look just like him, that he was sorry for being scared and wishes he weren't ever scared, that he was so sick of being scared.