

About 4,200 words

Avocado Highway

For a moment it felt as though he were floating down the highway rather than driving. They hurtled down the Interstate 15 through the boulder-strewn hills of the eastern San Diego County desert. And all so familiar--he had been down that stretch of freeway before, but he couldn't remember when. He heard his girlfriend speak to him.

"What's that?" he said, taking in the cars around them. The cars around him hovered in place, the wheels only spinning blurs over the asphalt. He squeezed his eyes shut and reopened them. The cars all simultaneously jumped into motion. His speedometer read 85 miles an hour.

"I just asked when you think we'll get there, and you didn't even respond," Sheryl said. "Are you falling asleep behind the wheel? Maybe I should drive."

How long had he been driving? He glanced at the clock but the digits told him nothing other than the current moment--he couldn't remember when he'd last checked the time. He shook his head to clear it. "I think I just had *déjà vu* or something."

"Pull over to get something to drink soon. I'm tired of sitting in the car." She heaved a sigh, rocked her butt side to side, and then reached over to fiddle with the radio. When she found a decent indie rock song she propped her feet on the dashboard and reclined the seat. "Do you think your cousin's wedding will be any fun?"

"It's a good thing she's at least drinking age, otherwise there wouldn't be any booze," Adam said. "Well, 23 actually . . . but still. Kinda young to be so sure."

"He's 25, and we're only three years older. And didn't you say that your parents got married at, like, 20 or something?"

“Twenty and 22, and they also divorced ten years later. Hope you’re not in a rush,” he said, winking at her. “Because I’m not.”

He thought Sheryl might playfully whack him on the arm, laugh . . . or just chuckle. A polite smile, perhaps? He got none of these responses. Instead he got the worst one: silence.

He continued staring down the highway as he drove, waiting for her to say something. Finally, he knew he had to address it, as he had had to address many other things recently.

“Something wrong? I was just ribbing you, you know.”

“It’s fine. You’ve been very clear about how much of a rush you’re *not* in, so don’t worry about it.” She turned her head to stare out the window at the rocky hillsides, the crevices marked with clusters of low-lying trees--some kind of crops, or maybe just gnarly, age-old oak trees. Occasionally they passed off-ramps that led into clusters of newly build suburban homes. Billboards advertised brand-new model homes--all peach-colored and bland.

They passed a plain green sign. Even from a distance, Adam could read the two words clearly: “Avocado Highway.” He chuckled and pointed.

“Hey look, we’re riding the avocado highway,” he said.

She didn’t respond, so he repeated himself.

“I heard you,” she said. “I just didn’t think it was funny.”

He sighed. They were only moments away from total meltdown. Soon they would be locked into an argument about the future, as they had been so many times. She would try to drag out of him some type of timeframe. He would get aggravated with how forced it felt, and he would tell her so. She would accuse him of shutting down. Two years together, and is this what their relationship had become--an endless merry-go-round about where the future is headed.

He loved her, but why couldn't she just roll with the future? Let it come to them as they traveled through life, just like letting the freeway come to them as they drove. But he knew her answer already, because he'd tried this metaphor on her before: "If you don't pick a destination, all you're doing is driving aimlessly." He cursed his decision to bring her to his cousin's wedding.

His mind drifted to his father. He supposed his dad hadn't had these fights with Adam's mother before they married. There hadn't been time for that since they were only a few years out of high school. Or maybe they had? Hadn't his dad said something about hitchhiking for a summer? He wondered how his mom felt about it at the time, his dad just taking off for months on end. But then they got married, and Adam was born, and his sister came a few years later. His childhood would be great until the fighting started, then it would be nothing but custody battles and not-so-sly efforts to win his love with candy and toys.

No, he wanted--he *needed*--to be sure now. He couldn't just hope his doubts would iron out after the wedding. But Sheryl didn't understand that. Her childhood was all roses and happy marriage and good parenting. Her parents probably told her nothing but how they lived happily ever after once they fell in love.

She continued to stare out the window, just waiting for him to say something. Well, he'd be damned if he let this silly huff turn into a full-blown argument. The best way to avoid it would be to distract her.

"Let's pull off and see if they've got some fruit stands around."

"*Here?* It's, like, the middle of *nowhere*."

"There's all these crops around. And we're on the *Avocado Highway!* There's got to be some avocados to buy. Besides, we're both bored and cranky; we could use the break."

“You’re the one who’s cranky.”

Adam let that one slide and merged toward the nearest exit.

Yet once off the freeway, they found themselves on a road that wound up the hill past a nursery for tropical plants, and no food stands in sight.

“Why’d you get off here? There’s nothing. Turn around. What are you doing? Just turn around!”

“Fuck, hold on to your panties!”

Adam inhaled to keep from losing his shit. “Just . . . I’ll turn around when I get a chance. Then we’ll just go across the freeway to the other side--there’s probably something there.”

“No, just get back on the freeway.”

Adam prayed for something, anything, to appear on the side of the road to make it seem like he had known all along what he was doing. They drove around a few more bends, and he could feel the heat rising from Sheryl’s side of the car. Just as she opened her mouth to demand that he turn around, they topped a hill to see table covered in produce under some oak trees.

“There. I told you we’d find something,” he said. Although, he wasn’t sure to whom exactly they were selling their products. They hadn’t passed any other cars since leaving the freeway.

He pulled the car to a stop on the dirt patch next to the stand. They got out and slowly approached the table. The woman behind the table sat preparing bouquets from the small pile of flowers on the table. She looked up when they reached the edge of the table and put down the bouquet she had compiled.

The table held little baskets of strawberries, a box of tomatoes, jars of honey, a dozen squash, and piles of both baby avocados and regular-sized avocados. He examined the bumpy green skin of the larger avocados, squeezing them. “They’re hard as rocks,” he said aloud.

“They go ripe in one week,” the woman said. “Soft. Like butter.” She was a dark-skinned Mexican-American woman, large around the waist with a round face. Her braided hair lay over her shoulder onto her chest, and she wore a light blue, very traditional-styled dress, though he couldn’t have said what sort of tradition. Mexican, he guessed.

She cut a slice from the open half of an avocado she held in her hand. She placed the slice on a small paper plate, sprinkled some salt over it with a shaker, and handed it to him. “Try,” she said.

With no fork, he just picked it off the plate with his fingers and slipped it into his mouth. Buttery, indeed. It smoothed over his tongue. And when the salt hit his taste buds, the flavor of the avocado exploded.

“Oh my God,” said.

“What?” Sheryl asked. “It’s good?”

“Just try it.”

She glanced quickly at the woman, and then at the avocado residue on his hands. “No, thanks.”

“Seriously. Try it.”

“Maybe later.”

He shrugged and swallowed. “Give me six.”

The woman placed the six avocados in a bag and handed it to him. He handed over a \$10 bill. She paused as she placed the five one-dollar bills in his hand.

“The fruit rots, leaving the seed to carry on,” she said, looking straight into his eyes. “The seed grows in time.”

Her pitch-perfect English surprised him. But he also couldn't let go of her gaze. “The seed?” he asked.

“Come on, let's go. We'll be late,” Sheryl said, pulling his arm as she turned back to the car. The woman watched them circle the car in the dirt and pull out on the road towards the highway.

#

The rocky desert hills rolled on. And on. Past the periphery of his gaze. It was hard to believe there could be a beach less than an hour to the west. His eyes were fixed on the road as the pavement rolled under him. It was as though he stood still and the world turned beneath his body.

“You alright?”

He squeezed his eyes shut and reopened them. He shook his head to clear it.

“You look like you fell asleep with your eyes open.”

The voice was deeper than he expected. He turned to the driver, a man with round cheeks and a mustache, wearing a trucker hat that said simply “Milly's.” Adam remembered that he wanted to ask if that was the name of a bar or a diner.

“What? Oh, I guess I spaced out. It's been a long trip,” he said.

“You were telling me about this girl back home, the one you been going steady with for a while,” the man said.

“Oh, right. Yeah, she’s all right,” he found himself saying. “A real sweetie, but man, we just get into it sometimes.” Adam wondered why he was talking like a stoned hippie. His eyes felt dry and his mind gummy. Maybe he actually was stoned.

The trucker laughed. “Sounds like all my exes. So it got so bad you went hitchhiking instead of staying with her?”

Adam thought back, trying to picture the face of the girl they were talking about. At first he pictured the high cheeks and blue eyes framed by straight dark brown hair that formed Sheryl’s face. That morphed into the round face of a brown-eyed girl with blonde hair pulled into long curls. The girl’s face morphed again, into that of a middle-aged woman who looked remarkably like his mother. Hadn’t his father said something about hitchhiking once?

The Bob Segar song on the radio, the trucker’s mustache, the hitchhiking. And in a flash, he realized who he was.

“I am my father,” he said, staring down the rolling highway.

“Aren’t we all. Eventually, anyways. Hell, my daddy was a sonofabitch, and look at me. Just another sonofabitch!” The trucker howled with laughter.

Adam suddenly felt as though he stood on the outside of a snowglobe, looking through the glass to a scene below him. He saw his father walking out the door with a backpack slung over his shoulder, his mother standing and watching him go. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen his father walk out the door with a bag in hand. It wasn’t even the fifth time, actually.

But something was different about this time. For one, they were both young. Late teens or either 20’s, he guessed. And for another, his father looked torn, not fed up. His father kissed his mother and said something like *I’ll see you soon*. His pulled the pack higher over his shoulder

and walked out. And Adam found himself inside the snowglobe now, the edges of his vision hazy as he stared down the road.

I just need some time to think. It was a voice within his head that didn't sound like his own. *I'm not walking away from her,* the voice continued. *I need to BE for a while. Do I love her? Yeah, lots. She's great. There's some kind of future there. And I'm already a man now. I need to get with living, right?*

The voice went on, alternating between expressing doubt and giving consolation. The voice was his father's, but it was far removed from the gruff tone Adam had grown up with. This was someone who was testing the ground as he walked. Adam realized that at this point in time his father was only about six months from marrying.

His mother had once told him about the day his father proposed to her--wearing a scruffy beard and long hair, and at least a week of grime on his skin since the last shower. Still, she had said yes. When she told this story, she always quickly followed it with "Don't get married until you're 30." Now, Adam wondered if she'd left out a detail, one maybe looking back she'd been embarrassed to admit: he'd proposed the day he returned from a long hitchhiking trip. Weeks (months?) without knowing where he was, what he was doing, and yet she accepted his proposal. A foolhardy youthful decision in hindsight; in the moment, a romantic beginning to a new life.

"Yeah, that girl of mine is all right," he told the trucker. "She's waiting for me, I know it."

"Well, if that's true, whatta you waitin' for? Marry the girl already."

"Maybe I will," he said, watching the paved highway roll under him. "Maybe I will."

As soon as he heard himself say it, the anger that he had always reserved for his father welled up in him. Why did he have to be so sure? He could've waited. His father was supposed

to be finding himself on this road trip, or something. And in Adam's experience his father had never really found himself. Always one to be content and then immediately discontent.

Adam wondered if his life would've been better if his father had never proposed when he did--or even proposed at all. Sure, Adam would've been at least half a different person, and probably with a different name. But he could've also been born to parents who weren't forever dealing with their youthful mistake to rush into marriage.

Yet here Adam sat in the body of his father through some kind of orthogonal time travel trick, and he was powerless to change his father's mind.

Or was he? Adam realized he hadn't really been trying to change it. He wasn't even sure he wanted to. Despite his father's flaws, and the turmoil between him and Adam's mother, he had mostly been a good father.

"How about some avocados? I know a place just off the next exit. Pretty little Mexicana has a fruit stand there with her daughter."

#

Adam swung onto the US route 365 as they left Temecula. Only a few pickup trucks shared the highway with them. In another hour they would be in San Diego. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but his hands gripped the wheel tight with a determination that told him it was true. He looked to the passenger seat and saw a young woman with her pulled into a tight bun knitting a sweater in her lap. In the rear view mirror he could see three boys in the back seat of the station wagon, the oldest reading, and the other two punching each other in the shoulders.

“Boys--sit quiet,” the woman said, looking over her shoulder. “Or we won’t stop for avocados.”

“Who cares?” the one doing most of the punching said. “Not like I give a crap about those things. They’re only good for chucking at people.”

“Watch your language when you speak to your mother,” Adam heard himself say. That was immediately followed by a thought in a stern, stoic voice. *That damn kid is a hellraiser.*

Adam glanced into the mirror again. His face was square-jawed and thin. He also had the yellow hue around his eyes of a smoker. Adam looked at his fingers and saw a cigarette between them. He took a drag and exhaled, only then realizing that he needed to roll the window down to let the smoke out.

The sooner we get there, the sooner I can go fishing, the voice in his mind said.

Adam looked again at the woman beside him, and the boys in the back seat. The picture that popped into his head was that of his grandmother, but without the weathered skin of age. The middle boy looked like photos he had seen of his own father as a kid. He realized that this time he had to be his grandfather. The grandfather he’d never really known, who had died from lung cancer when he was just a boy.

“Hours and hours he’d stand on that beach watching his fishing line in the waves. Never said a word,” his father had once told Adam. That was the most he had ever said about Adam’s grandfather. “The rest of the time he spent either working or watching TV.”

Yet here he sat within his grandfather’s mind. He probed the space, trying to catch other thoughts in his grandfather’s voice, trying to hear the man who raised Adam’s father and uncles. It was more difficult this time; more opaque, as though his grandfather were guarding his

thoughts even from himself. Wisps of imagery and words darted around, but little of it was reflective.

“Carter, your mother said to knock it off,” he said, when he noticed the boy who would become his father had again begun punching his future uncle Alexander. Finally, a clear thought coalesced: *kids can't leave a man alone for a second. Barb can take them to beach when we get there. The sooner the better.* And then his thoughts moved on to a problem he'd been having with a new design at his job as an engineer.

Adam's grandfather had died when he was only eight years old. A lifelong two-pack-per-day smoker, he had succumbed to larynx and lung cancer at age 59. Not that he had been a man of many words before the cancer seized up his voice box, Adam remembered. And after he lost the ability to talk, Adam got the sense his grandfather didn't mind. Adam's fondest memory of his grandfather had been sitting on his lap trying to catch with his hands the smoke rings drifting from the cigarette between his grandfather's yellowed fingers.

He rode along as he drove, watching his grandfather's thoughts turn to work and fishing. It was the polar opposite of his father on road trips--rather, his father was the polar opposite of his grandfather. His father often talked with Adam and his sister, bringing up events from the news and asking them questions about what they thought, trying get them to express their opinions. Adam would later become a prolific debater in high school, and even won a position on the school council in college.

He remembered the way his father would make sure to say, “I love you,” but always with a stiff and uneasy tone. To Adam, the phrase had always seemed forced, making him wonder if his father really meant it. After his father moved out of their house, Adam had grown convinced he was only faking, saying what he felt he must, no matter how many times he would say it. For

the first time he wondered if his father had actually been trying to break a family habit of stone-faced silence on the use of the phrase.

“Let’s pull over here, Al,” his grandmother said. “I just saw a sign for avocados.”

“Alright, if it will keep them quiet for the rest of the ride.”

#

When Adam opened his eyes he saw the rocky hillsides rolling past. He still felt groggy and half asleep. A green sign floated by: “Avocado Highway.”

“Hey, hey, we’re riding the Avocado Highway,” someone said, chuckling.

“You say that every time we drive down here.”

“And every time, you never laugh.”

Adam turned his head to see who was talking, and realized he was sitting in the back seat this time. In the driver’s seat sat a teenage kid, with shaggy brown hair. The kid wore one of Adam’s old black suits, and Adam had to admit he looked good in it. Adam caught a glimpse of the speedometer and reflexively said, “You’re driving too fast. Slow down.”

In the rearview mirror, he could see the kid roll his eyes, just as he usually did when Adam chastised him for anything.

“Hey look who’s finally awake,” the woman in the passenger seat said as she turned around. He recognized Sheryl smiling at him. “He’s only going 10 miles an hour over the speed limit, with the flow of traffic. Charlie’s doing a good job driving while his dad takes a nap.”

“So we did get married,” Adam mumbled. “That must have been a long time ago.”

Charlie snickered. “Uh oh, hope you didn’t forget to buy an anniversary present again, Dad.”

Sheryl frowned, though a touch of a smile remained on her lips. “I’m going to assume you’re still half-asleep.”

The years with Sheryl came to him in a flash. Consoling her in the bathroom after her sister made the insulting Maid of Honor speech at their wedding. Sleeping with baby Charlie on his chest for the first time after bringing him home from the hospital. Slamming doors and yelling at each other over the smallest of provocations, sleep deprived and exhausted as they tried to comfort their colicky newborn boy. Taking Charlie to his first day of school, and watching him make his first friends. Sheryl sobbing into the phone as she reported him missing to the police the night ten-year-old Charlie ran away. The five missedriages that resulted from their attempts to conceive a second child. Sleeping on the couch far too many nights, Charlie and Sheryl hiding in their bedrooms, when he believed drinking six bourbons a night was okay.

Adam remembered the night he sat with his father watching TV. *I don’t know if I can do this anymore*, he’d finally said, believing that if anyone would understand that it was time to give up it would be the man who had walked out on his mother. The silence as he waited for his father to speak.

All his father had to say, and all Adam had ever needed to hear, was, “The worst thing you can do as a father is stop trying.” He remembered the many nights after exhausting football practices, when his father had taken Adam and his sister for hamburgers. The camping trips to every National Park west of the Rockies. The pride on his face when his father and mother greeted him after he got off the graduation podium in his robe with a Bachelor’s degree under his

arm. The dinner his father bought him when he landed his first real job. The dinner his first bought his father when he realized it was his turn to be a man.

Adam got sober after the night he almost gave up, and had stayed sober for five years. Adam had finally found peace in his family. Charlie was maturing into a young man, ready to start his freshman year at the state university. Adam would retire in a few years, and he and Sheryl would take their first post-retirement trip to Europe.

The rocky hillsides were less barren than they had always been. People had moved into the many new white houses developers built into the hills, and the dirt had been covered over with the green grass backyards. He wondered if there would be any avocado farms for very long. *The avocado rots, leaving the seed to grow*, a Mexican woman had told him nearly twenty years before. The avocado trees had given way to a whole new generation starting their families in new communities.

Suddenly, Adam remembered why they were driving to San Diego this time, where they would meet with his sister and her husband, his uncles Ted and Alex, and a whole host of cousins and his father's friends, at the old cottage in Ocean Beach into which his father had eventually settled.

“Sheryl, hand me some paper, please. I know what I need to say for his eulogy.”