

RIDING REFLECTIONS

Jody gasps, and we roar onto the canopy-covered highway, away from the open fields lined with barbed wire and the moon that peeked over the tallest hill on the horizon. The briar thicket and rhododendrons replace fences and suddenly we're in the dark, the only light beaming off the front of the bike. We lean out past the old motorcycle, forcing it down around a curve that turns on itself.

We blaze past the wooden dinosaur cutout that reads JESUS, on the way up Hell's Hollar where the road thins like hair on an old man's head. The figure's a silhouette at night, but I know what it says. The one word warns me not to proceed for Jesus' sake, and that if I do, I'll need His mercy to make it through the pass. Jody doesn't know any better. She doesn't know how many Nayhemites have died up the hollar.

When I was a boy, people made a big fuss over the cutout, about what sorts of cleaning solutions wouldn't damage the paint and where, if at all, they could relocate it to attract more notice. No one here in Naymen ever touched it though, except when a few dared to put their hands on it while praying. Strangers used to come from all over the state to take pictures with the Jesus dinosaur, but it hasn't gotten any attention in years. No one ever figured out who cut, painted, and concreted it inside the guardrail midway up the hollar. I'm not sure anyone tried to. I suppose people thought it protected them. And when it didn't, nobody talked about it anymore. I heard there was even a metal sign next to the four way stop in Unaka that beckoned people over and through the pass. After the rash of wrecks, I'm sure someone took it down.

I have a bad habit of drifting when I'm riding. I don't focus on the road. I keep so much on my mind—deaths and getting the hell out of this place. It's not always the hard times or the events

that brought me here throttling through these gears around curves with a girl ten years younger than me clinging to my shoulders while my wife's asleep with the kids at home. I suspect they both love me; they're both better people than I'll ever be.

Dewey died six years ago with his sister driving a hundred down The 107. That highway's full of broken hallelujahs, from a joy almost spiritual to the defeat when the world drives them back here. A hundred people have taken to it thinking they could go someplace and live better, but everybody comes back to Naymen if they don't turn around as soon as they see how the trees thin out and give way to the barren marsh and overflowing creek beds.

I visited the wreck site a few days after the funeral. The skid marks from the pickup tapered off into the woods where a few saplings lied broken on the moss. The crash didn't harm the trees, except for a few marks on the oak where the back of the tailgate wrapped around and met the passenger side of the cab. Pieces of the truck must have been ripped off and thrown in every direction. A red triangle of plastic from the brake light sat on top of a patch of mud; half of the back fender stood straight up in a row of briars.

I'd only come to pay respects, but I went down like a deer shot in both its lungs—with spooked eyes, the forest bearing down, and knowing that someone enjoyed watching life wither away. My knees sank into the mud, and then, there were no sounds. I hunched over. I wanted to cry, but I was too aware of my own thoughts. What if someone were watching? What if no one was? I couldn't cry because I knew I was supposed to—because I was outside the moment and thinking about the meaning of everything. I put my face in my hands and visualized the scene: Jen fell asleep with both hands dangling over the wheel, the truck cut through the shrub, the tires bit into the mud for traction they couldn't find and left a wavy trail of tread marks, Jen woke up and wrestled with the wheel, the truck spun sideways and crashed so hard that it curled around the thick body of the

oak. Finally, my eyes welled. I sighed and pulled my hand across my mouth. I was lightheaded when I took to my feet.

I've thought about leaving. At first, I tried to put the notion out of my head, but it dug its way back in like a roach infestation. It's corked itself in my mind, rooted deeper than a willow by a brook. And every time I lose something, I want to leave more. I've got Christine and the kids at the house, but I sleep on the couch. I work all day so they got food on a table that's scuffed to hell and broken underneath where the extension used to unfold and make six seats. It's not like we have guests over anyway. The 107's got my name on it.

Sometimes I think I could strap a guitar to the sissy bar and head on out that-a-way. Maybe I could play the main square of some other town until I'd stashed enough money in the guitar case to put the down payment on a two-bedroom apartment in Nashville or Memphis. I could go somewhere the wind blows a clean mist through the trees, some place I could breath without remembering all the past I can't burry as long as I'm here in Limestone. But there's nothing out on that highway but pain and rejection. I've never known anyone that beat this town.

We enter the stretch of road that runs by the river for two miles up the hollar. Even at night, I can see the white rapids breaking over the rocks, carrying sticks and stones down towards the dam that borders the town. I bet the river's cold. I think about veering off the bank, the sensation of hovering above the water before the wheels touch surface and plunge, stealing whatever peace could be found there. But the river won't wash away the suffocation.

Jen lived for a while in the hospital, but the doctors said brain trauma killed her at the moment of impact. She left this world two weeks later. After Momma died of a heart attack that spring, I was the last one left.

Every year, I go up to Bell Cemetery. I remember the ceremony in the rain, and the array of Dewey's favorite possessions we put in the casket: a red pocket knife, a pack of guitar strings I never

strung on his electric, a book he never learned to read, a water pistol I gave him for his sixth birthday, a Gideon Bible, and six collector's die cast model cars I was saving for Christmas. Every year on his birthday, I go up to the cemetery and dig around in the long grass for the cars I've been putting on his grave marker. I mow the plot with the toys in my pocket, and after I've put on a sweat, I lay them back on the stone.

Jody didn't grow up in these parts. I'm still not sure how she came to be here, but I don't complain. She's five-two, brown-haired, and vivacious. She pokes at my accent. She talks about California like it's the greatest place in the world. Someday, I'll get mad and tell her if she loves it so much, to go the hell back. I don't know if I'll mean it.

We push through the wooded section of the highway and back out into the moonlight. The air's crisp and damp, a little chilly. It tastes like lemon water, smells like brand new shoes. Everything's quiet except the engine rumbling. You can't hear the crickets over it. I don't remember a summer night before I paid that seven hundred dollars that I didn't hear the crickets. I don't miss them.

In the evenings, Jody fucks herself on a webcam for perverts. I convinced the pastor at First Church of Naymen to rent her the room he'd had in the paper for six years. Told him she'd wandered in from California, that she was a good girl and needed somewhere to stay, that even I'd seen how vulnerable she was, and didn't want the men in Naymen to take advantage. I knew she wasn't a good girl.

He took her in, though he warned me I'd better not corrupt her; he told me to think about the kids, to consider what I was getting into. We were in his office at the church. I convinced him I had no interest. I stepped toward his desk and leaned over the stacks of pamphlets. He eased away until he was cornered. I raised an eyebrow. I wanted him to know that I knew about his

transgressions, and so, I told him that if he had any similar urges, I'd kill him. I laughed; he laughed but cringed—and his eyes seemed to burn a little, clenching and exposing the lines and dark circles that years of serving God had given him. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd proposed a girl—something about his pledged celibacy attracted women and he obliged, tossing as much woo as he could muster. Which wasn't much.

These days, he stays at the church mostly, even sleeps there when he needs to spend time with God or women, and Jody runs her webcam six or seven hours a day in the spare bedroom. It's not something she hides, though I found out by barging in on a show. Must have been awkward for her perverts. That night, we parked by the lookout at the peak of Hell's Hollar before it descends down through the curves with no guardrails. She told me the perverts pledge money, and she gets about thirty percent—brings in about forty grand a year.

“I wish I had a vagina,” I said. “I'd quit roofing and start screwing myself.”

She laughed.

“You wouldn't want this job,” she said. She looked at the ground, and all the muscles in her face seemed to sink. But she collected herself. She smiled and stared up at me. “Plus, you could never fit that thing up your ass.”

I think about Jody's body often, how I could take her tiny frame and destroy it only to build it up again and again. But I haven't known which way to feel about Jody since she came to town. Sometimes, I could love her in all the passion I used to love Christine with, but when she's on the bike, I could swear she was my daughter—and I was showing her the ropes as a person I could teach or save from a life no one should live.

On the eve of Dewey's death, the sun set over the deck where I sat in a lawn chair, throwing down beers. The porch was nothing more than a four by six foot dilapidation. The paint chipped

along the cracks in the boards, fading the barn-red to a rusty orange. The lattice fell off right after we moved in. Weeds followed building a matrix of growth in between and above the trim boards I took off the walls when we tried to renovate after we bought the trailer from a junkie for five hundred bucks. Christine used to bug me about fixing the porch before one of us fell through. I never got around to it.

The night was quiet. The rain brought mist at dusk—just enough to feel clean. Until the telephone rang, there wasn't a sound but my own breathing, heaving in and out like pistons oscillating, like an old man whispering in his sleep. Christine said hello and went quiet as a church mouse. I heard the phone hit her roll top and her heavy footsteps. She was moving fast, and the next thing I knew, she'd plunged through the storm door and cut open her abdomen from love handle to love handle just below the belly button.

"Jesus," I jumped out of the chair. I staggered and grabbed the railing like it was an animal I meant to strangle. "Jesus, Christine."

She didn't answer, but fell back onto the trailer carpet—the motion ripping bits of glass off the door and out of her skin—lucky that she collapsed on her back so her guts didn't fall out. She bled more than I knew any person could. The pool saturated the carpet and grew from the size of a half-dollar to that of a dinner plate in a few seconds. There wasn't any reason to see if she'd died. I stumbled down the hill to our neighbor's trailer and knocked on the door.

"Whadju want?" he said. I could hear him rustling around, snapping the lever down on a recliner, and stomping towards the door. "I got a gun. I ain't skeered of no theivers."

"Christine cut herself," I hollered. "She cut her gut all over the goddam door."

"Mel?" I didn't answer. I'd already begun turning the knob. "Get on in." His voice trailed off until he talked through his teeth, and I could only hear the gravelly whisper and his drool-greased lips smacking.

I struggled through the doorway and made my way into the living room where I braced myself against the wall and slurred our address three times before the call clerk could make it out. The ambulance scorched up the gravel road fifteen minutes later, and they kept Christine stable until the doctors tweezed out the glass and stapled her up. I didn't find out about Dewey until the morning. Christine still has a nasty scar.

Last week, I came home after pulling a sixteen-hour shift. Four of us on a crew tore off two dump trucks worth of shingles on a four-thousand square-foot job, laid the black pad down, and threw up seventeen rows before the sun went down. I walked in, and she was cooking something smelled like dog shit. I told her. Dewey, my youngest, sat in the highchair and screamed, flailing around. Christine set a bowl of mac and cheese down for him, but kept her back toward me. When she turned around, I saw how her face has sagged over the years. She still looks sexy from the back, but when she turns around, her breasts sag down to her stomach and her potbelly appears. She doesn't have huge love handles—more of just that pooch in the front. That's what she calls it, too, and it drives me crazy.

She used to look nice. Christine was a cheerleader, and I played running back. We married straight out of high school. I used to sit up at night and think about robbing the gas station, maybe the bank if I could pull it off. I just wanted something to change the way we'd always lived, but never found a way. I felt dumb. I felt emasculated. I felt emaciated. We were living off a few hundred dollars a week. When I bought her engagement ring, it was cubic zirconium, and Don at the pawnshop gave it to me for nothing. She pretended to love it, but I knew better. She was a better person than me. Sometimes I wonder if being around me all these years has made her what she is. I only get angry because it's my fault. She made good grades in high school. She could have done lots of things besides sitting at home with two kids, crying over a husband that ain't never

around. I swore I wouldn't be like my father. The years make me understand him. My kids won't ever get out of this goddam town, and if they do, it'll follow them forever like a rainstorm, the black clouds cutting out the daylight and the crisp air moving in like a razor blade. Christine thinks she can save them. She doesn't hope to make a life for herself anymore. She's convinced she feels sixty. "I can't see past forty," she tells me. "There just doesn't seem to be anything for me there."

I remember the black lace-up dress she wore to prom. It was simple, neat, clean. She used to put on her face every day. Now she sits on her ass all day, I guess. Or she gets up every fifteen minutes, works for five, and sits back on her ass. I don't remember the last time my day didn't last twelve hours, and all I get is a twenty-minute lunch break and three five-minute chances to smoke.

When I was young, Momma did the best she could. Joe, my daddy, left her with sore titties after having the three of us, all just a little over two years apart. I was the oldest. I felt obligated to take care of my brother and sister—especially after Dewey turned four and the doctor broke it to us that he would never be right in his mind.

At sixteen, he'd grown obsessed with outdoing me, but I obliged. I couldn't feel threatened by him. One afternoon, we stood on the front porch of Momma's trailer while I fed him cigarette after cigarette. He smoked them up like he ate candy. I didn't think it could hurt him, though Momma would have killed me had she ever seen. We'd been silent a while, and Dewey never tolerated silence. He looked up at me.

"Why doesn't anybody like me, Melly?" he said, sitting cross-legged and thumbing his cheek.

"You're fine," I said. "Everybody likes you fine; they're just all busy. People have to work and have sex, or the world would stop dead in its tracks."

"You love me, Melly?"

"Is a bluebird blue?"



What we did that night was more to fool his mind than to make us brothers. If anything, we desecrated some ancient ritual, a pact between men who fought, bled, and died in anarchistic times. But I wanted him to feel bonded to another human being. I wanted him to have someone to always go to, even though that was already me. I didn't know what I was doing; I acted like a mentor, but didn't really know.

Dewey and I both took a turn with the knife. He dug over and over with the tip in the soft of his palm until he'd opened up a sore. I clenched my fist around the blade and pulled it fast. The blood trickled out at the bottom of the cut, down under my smallest finger. The bourbon helped us bleed, but it wasn't something we'd thought about until we were gushing all over the trailer carpet. Over the years, the cheap flooring had faded into a salmon shade with blotches and stains—not unlike the way the colors spread on the white rag I put over the wound. I tried not to drip any on the ground. Dewey wasn't oozing much; he'd become fascinated with catching the drops in his right palm. He craned down between his hands to watch the liquid build up until gravity drove a bead downward where it splattered into the fine lines of his milk-colored skin.

Years have gone by since Dewey skid off the road and died, but I struggle to rid the memory. I don't know how I got here. All of my family's in the ground. This town's dead and growing. People used to care. They used to talk to each other. The Casey boys and I helped all the neighbors carry hay bails and stack them on trailers for five-dollar tips. I cut tobacco leaves for Mister Richards for a dollar an hour until the government bought him out and shut down the company. Now, there are only old warehouses waiting to be razed. I pass by as often as I can—to remember the days when men bustled around those buildings, straining and sweating, carrying crates through the garage-style doors and stacking them in trucks. People who worked in tobacco used to live in the houses around the silo and storerooms, but when everybody got bought out, the workers

left. Relators tore down all but a few homes, and the ones that stayed are like tiny ghost towns. Kids dare each other to run up on the front steps.

We're coming up through Haddie's fields, about a mile before the lookout where the road descends like a roller coaster. Across the landscape, there's a pond we fished when we were kids. We breaded and baited hooks, but we never could catch the three-footer that squirmed the bottom. Catfish sometimes mouth muck around the leaves and mud looking for scraps of dead tadpoles and baby bluegill. That bastard wouldn't bite any of the baits we through at him. Dewey even landed his chicken liver hook right in front of the fish, but he swam on by. We ordered a lure from one of Momma's magazines. She never knew. We waited by the mailbox every afternoon for three weeks until the postman finally handed us that little brown package. We told Momma we were going out to play on the swing set, but she knew we were up to something. She didn't bother to find out, though, because she didn't care. Between the meth and Xanax, she never paid attention. Sometimes she would scream at me for balancing on the top of the swings, but only on those rare occasions when she felt like going outside. I stood up there and spread my arms and the breeze blew my t-shirt. I always opened my eyes after a second so I didn't fall, but I wished I could stand on that metal frame for an hour.

We pass by Haddie's apple trees, and I can just make out the sound of train chugging along. The tracks divide the town behind us. I hear the whistle blow. It's the loneliest sound in the world because it's always at night when nobody's around. And if by chance you ever are, you feel like the last person on the earth. Even with Jody, I can't help but wonder if I am the only one who doubts there's a reason why we do anything, if we're all just out here completely by ourselves—even with all these people. That's why I'd rather just be alone, or at least with Jody—cause she's hardly there anyway, always off somewhere in her mind. Some place I've never been.

