

The Navigator

“Comanches,” he says.

She ignores him and looks at the map using the dash lights. She knows the rules of night driving with her father:

1. *The navigator doesn't turn on the interior lights to read the map.*
2. *The navigator gives the driver warning before turns.* (Her mother amended this to include stops for root beer floats if turns are missed because the navigator is doubted.)
3. *The navigator must accurately calculate the miles between two points.*

She's never been the navigator. She counts the miles to the next town—twice—and comes up with different numbers before giving up and watching the evening's light drain to a thin line on the horizon.

Her mother and brother sleep in the back. She peeks at them. At the last service station, her father handed her the map and told her mother to sleep. So she now sits in the front, alone and safe in the insular world of her father.

4. *Stay awake.* (This is achieved differently by each navigator. To her mother, it means boring conversation or romantic banter, both equally irritating. To her brother it means reading from *Popular Mechanics* with, hilarious intervals from *Madd Magazine*, both of which her father and brother deeply appreciated.)

What will she do? As the youngest, she's always slept during the night drives. She has no store of conversation, no interest in mechanics or the antics of Alfred E. Neuman. The car is quiet. Her history with her father, though as long as her life, entails being carried on his shoulders through the pastures, whiskery five o'clock kisses, occasional bouts of algebra homework which they both abandon as soon as they can, and stories. Her father is a consummate story teller. Her mother says she was only hours old when her father told her the first story.

Restaurants go quiet when her father spins tales for his children. But the stories he tells on vacations are the best. They never know when he'll capture one from a distant ridge or from the wavering shadow of some bird that travels with them for a few brief moments. One minute, they are in the car, hot, tired. The next, the landscape is alive with Comanche warriors. (Her father is particularly enamored with Comanches.)

They catch glimpses of them as they scurry from sage brush to rock melting into the wilderness to bring back reinforcements. Her father points out ravines and dry washes where he spots small bands of them. The family's progress toward the next town becomes an exciting gauntlet of thrilling near misses with one noble savage after another in hot pursuit. Speeding over the final miles to reach safety, her father would shoot his tanned arm out the window in a salute to the chief of their worthy adversaries calling out to him in the noble tongue, "Algonquin, Pawnee, Demerol, trigonometry, slàinte, greatee-greatee."

The car would fill with that electric silence that vibrates with imagination. Her father, resting his arm on the open window, would look into the distance as though he could see buffalo, his jaw jutting, his steel blue eyes squinting into the hot Western sun.

“Did you know him?” her brother would say, breathless.

He would nod. “When we were boys, we hunted together.”

Her brother and she would gaze sightless out the windows, loath to leave the world he created for them. Her mother, her hand resting on her father’s leg, would slyly wink at him. And he would place his hand over hers, acknowledging the other invisible world that she and her brother did not know, their intimacy.

She realizes later that those moments after his stories were the closest thing to stasis she would ever experience. Sometimes the spell would last until the car was unloaded at the motel or until they walked into a café for dinner.

“Warriors,” he repeats. But she is almost twelve, too old for childish distractions.

“It’s dark,” she says tersely.

They drive in silence. When the air is cool, they roll up the windows. Her father nods knowingly at lights in the distance, a ploy he’s used before.

“Dead Horse Ranch Campground,” she says quickly thwarting his opportunity to create a make-believe Comanche village.

He sighs.

She reaches for the radio, hesitates, and sits back into the silence. They pass a road sign. He looks at her to be sure she’s seen it and then looks back to the road. She is the night navigator. She knows where they are.

From the corner of her eye, she watches him. He scans the gauges on the dash, glances out the window to see the darkening plains, stretches his legs, and rubs the back of his neck.

Surprised, she realizes he's tired. She's never known her father to be tired. But then, she's never looked at him. He's always just there carrying her sleeping from the car, checking her temperature at night when she's sick. When he isn't working in town, he's working on their farm: plowing, repairing the barn roof, fixing the tractor. He's one of those men who does everything.

Once she sees his fatigue, it's like dominos after the first one falls. She sees the lines at the corners of his eyes, the thinness of his hair, the sagging shoulders that once carried her. She blinks, bewildered and then outraged. *Who is this ordinary man?* He can't keep her safe from Comanche warriors—or the world. She leans over and puts her face into the air from the vent and gulps big draughts of it.

“Sugar,” he says softly. “Pour daddy some coffee.”

She twists around in her seat to reach the thermos and feels her eyes burning. Her mother and brother lay curled into themselves sleeping. *I should be sleeping in the back seat*, she thinks petulantly and then is ashamed. She's almost twelve. It's time for her to take her turn as the navigator. She fills the cup and hands it to her father.

Abruptly, the night feels dangerous. The cars speed too fast, too close. Her brother snuffles in his sleep. She jumps, startled, turns to see her mother's face in the dark but can't. When she looks back, her father is watching her. Tears well in her eyes.

He looks at her with such sadness. She stares into her lap to shut out the misery. Silently, he takes her hand and rests it on the seat between them his eyes never leaving the road. Finally, she sleeps. She wakes as they stop at another service station.

“Sweetheart,” she hears her mother’s sleepy voice from the back. “Need me to navigate?”

“No,” he says, “our girl’s doing fine.”

Under the street light, he figures the mileage and enters it into the vacation log. When he finishes, he asks her, “See any Burma Shave signs to put in?”

“No,” she says.

“We’ll go an hour more and then get a motel. There’s one right on the river that your mother and I stayed in on our honeymoon. We’ll stay a couple of days. We’ve all the time in the world to get where we’re going.”

She nods.

On the way to the motel, in the soft, matter-of-fact voice he uses when explaining algebra, he teaches her how to figure gas mileage and estimate the time it will take to drive from one place to another.

The moon is waning when they get there. For the first time, she isn’t under the spell of one of her father’s stories as they take their suitcases from the trunk. She’s just a young girl taking her first tentative steps into adulthood. She’s the navigator, and there are no Comanches.

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