

## *Sudan de Ville*

He pulls off the road, the state sign announcing “run-away ramp” and a requirement for drivers to check their brakes before descending the 8% grade into the valley.

He isn't testing his brakes. He could, but he tests his brakes all the time. Every time he needs to stop, he tests his brakes. He pulls over because he drives a truck and the sign says the truck drivers must test their brakes. He gets out and looks at the map on the sign illustrating where the sandpit is located. He stretches his arms. He cups his chin and cracks it back and forth popping the vertebrae in his neck first to the right then the left. He rubs his trucker's belly—barely a belly on his wiry frame but he's working on it.

Now, the real reason he stops is because he wants to get a good look at this country he has been driving through. He looks out across endless mossy ridges of so much abundance it surprises him still. Up until now his route has been a slog hammering through crumbling middle-size towns, miles of industrial park before plunging into countryside consisting of an endless warren of trees and speckled sunlight, the highway narrowing as he, digging deeper into the state, coached his truck pitching and bobbing like a boxer through the undulations of the road weaving around rivers and through cuts in rock ten times as tall as the top of his truck and that stands at 13'6" according to the warning on the driver's side written backward so he can read it in his rearview mirror reminding him to pay attention to the tunnel and bridge heights.

But the trees don't heed warnings or care how tall his truck stands. They wave low-slung branches swatting the sides of his rig like he remembers the old women doing to their sleeping mats every morning in a futile attempt to fight the desert back through the fence that surrounded the camp—to beat the war back into the desert—and the trees, like the old women always lose, because he is driving a truck, a big, powerful diesel-driven truck. And he will drive this truck

where he has been directed and if it means following a two-lane highway through the untended jungle of Pennsylvania no tree is going to keep him from delivering his cargo to its destination, because without a steady supply of Happy Meal boxes, soda cups and a million other wrappers, an entire segment of hard working McDonald's customers would begin to shift and grow restless. He knows the damage that happens when food supply lines are disrupted. He has seen the riots. He has even take part in the stampedes running for the tents ignoring the screaming disheveled Red Cross workers who cried and tried to reason with a unreasonable mob. It wouldn't happen here, not on his watch.

He hadn't noticed how high he has climbed. The only hint he's had of the rise was the grumbled churning of the fine motor of his Peterbilt 382 and the speed with which his fuel gauge dropped. At one time he thought he must have gotten bad gas because during this last stretch the truck crawled slower and slower until he had to turn on the hazards and let cars pass. However, the truck is well serviced and there is no bad gas in America. America gets the good gas. Only the watery shit gets sent to Africa. And only now, looking down at the furrowed green of endless life with the blue haze swimming through the gorges, does he realize he has been climbing almost the entire drive.

A few other cars slow, peer at the expanse, extend a cell phone out a window, pop a quick picture, then continue down into the valley.

He is aware of every driver, every passenger who gets out of the cars. He has to be. The company has foolishly plastered an enormous sign on the side of his trailer. A carton of timber-sized French fries oily and golden lay next to a burger with meat juices glistening below a blood-red tomato and violent green lettuce leaves. The whole trailer looks wet—succulent. Below the picture written in two-foot tall lettering is the message "*Hungry Yet?*".

“It is an invitation for disaster,” he thought when picking up the delivery order. “You are going to send a single man to drive a truck—defend a truck—that looks to be full of hot French fries and steaming burgers through the back country where even cell phone reception is sporadic at best?”

He keeps the content bill next to him on the front seat at all times to prove to anyone he is only carrying paper products cups, wrappers and plastic toys and even they had to be put together. It is his only defense, as he’s not allowed to carry his machete under his seat.

This is when a truck pulls up next to him. It is a big truck, not a “big-ass truck” like his, it’s a pickup, a private truck, shining red like the tomato with a silver ram on the hood and a grill gulping air like the mouth on a carp. The dual rear wheels stick out beyond the sides giving an otherwise tough looking pickup truck the bearing of a wide-hipped woman trying to stay squeezed into her lane.

However, he won’t mention this observation to the two men who get out of either side. Smiling, they walk toward him. The driver, a thick stub of a man, wears a denim jacket that matches his jeans. He wonders if the driver bought them at the same time and he is reminded of the chubby toddlers he sees at some of the restaurants wobbly in their little outfits while the mothers chase them before they get too near him.

But now, these men seem to want to get near him and they approach until the three of them are all standing and looking out at the mountains. Mr. Denim could be fifty he thinks though he can’t really tell if the hair under his cap is dirty blond or just gray. He can never judge people’s age in this country because people don’t hollow as they get old; they just keep puffing out until it all drops at once.

Mr. Denim folds his arms and smiles to the vista long and languid. Finally, he speaks without turning to look at him, “Hungry Yet?”

This makes Denim’s passenger nearly “bust a gut”. The passenger is a younger man, son, maybe? His teeth are worse than Mr. Denim’s and he seems to be trying to grow a beard though now it just looks as if dryer lint has stuck to the smear of his oily face.

He smiles, suddenly aware of the chilled air rising up the face of the mountain.

“It’s just paper products.”

“Not burgers and fries?” the skinny passenger laughs in a high-pitched whinny as if this was a late night comedy act on the television.

“I have the freight order you can see it if you like.” He tries to smile even as he remembers the feeling he had on first arriving in this country when jokes were told and he laughed simply to feel a part of something, America, or something.

“Ah hell,” the driver says carving a line in the gravel with the toe of his boot, “I was hoping you were selling burgers out here.”

“No. Sorry.”

“Where you from?” The young one suddenly changes his tone. The question, cast friendly enough, is tribal—is historic—is a line with so many sinkers attached that it drags on the bottom of his soul and often keeps him staring at the flecked ceiling of the apartment he shares with four other men that the Friends Outreach helped him rent. It’s a question he has asked himself many many times in the dark when he would force himself to look at the faces of his mother and sister to remember their stillness throwing the question back at him, “Don’t ask a child that question.”

“The Northeast Regional Paper Products Distribution Center 13.”

Now he's the comedian who makes both Mr. Denim and his flecky bearded passenger, "bust a gut."

"That must be a long way off."

And they both laugh again. Mr. Fuzzy Face leans against his rig like it belongs to him and he thinks he should never have left it running with the keys in it even though the company told him a motor that size doesn't like to stop and start too many times. Besides, in America, as is being demonstrated right now the way Mr. Denim lets his truck idle empty but alert, it's preferable to keep motor running than turn it off and let the air-conditioning go warm. He's saving for a car of his own. In this country a car means everything. More than a house or an office. A car means freedom. A car means you can go anywhere you please. He wants a nice car, maybe a secondhand Cadillac.

But right now Mr. Fuzzy Face is making himself comfortable on the step-up of his truck and Mr. Denim is scratching with his boot in the gravel and the sunlight is growing heavy and the other cars have driven off and he needs to deliver these paper products and toy prizes.

Mr. Denim looks up and grins. He's not looking anymore at the vista but at him and steps closer and he's seen this smile on men riding in the back of a pickup—not new like this one, but dusty and pockmarked—and the men smile at him before he drops his eyes because he's walking with an English aid worker to the camp with fences.

"We just came from camping."

"We have a camp," chimes in Fuzzy Beard.

But they don't look like campers. No bundles in the truck, no canoes—nothing that looks like camping to him except the gun rack mounted on the back of the cab.

Mr. Denim points across the green mountains heavy with life and water and clean air to where the power lines cut along the crest of the next ridge.

“We have a big camp with a lot of friends,” says Denim.

“Nice?” he tries to sound casual but his voice wavers for reasons he can’t defend.

“Real nice.”

“What kind of camp?” But he regrets asking because now he’s thinking about the tribesmen in the truck.

“Sort of a self-improvement camp for the improvement of society,” says Denim and this tickles Fuzzy to no end.

“There’s a lot of hungry men up there.” Denim spits into the groove he’s dug and glances up at him with a grin.

“Yeah, you should take some McDonalds up there. You could sell a million burgers, and fries and chocolate shakes,” says Fuzzy too loud and too sure of his joke so that it loses its punch.

“Yeah, chocolate shakes,” Mr. Denim repeats and now they both laugh and he’s not getting these jokes.

“I just deliver paper products.”

“Well, next time you tell ‘em to send you with burgers and fries.”

“And chocolate shakes.”

“And you can make a mint.”

“Shamrock shakes!” Fuzzy gets off the running board of his truck. He’s been scratching something into the nice paint of his fender with the tool he was cleaning his nails with and now he’ll have to explain it when he gets back.

The two men move toward the pickup. The breeze has stopped and the air is compressed with diesel exhaust from the two idling motors.

He smiles but this time he doesn't look at the ground but stares directly into the squinted eye of Mr. Denim.

“Remember!” shouts Mr. Denim before getting into his pickup. “Burgers! There's a whole lot of hungry men up here!” Fuzzy giggles silent inside the cab.

He pulls himself up into the cab of his rig. The pickup truck guns to life. But now, he jumps down and again walks directly toward the grill of the pickup. The two men watch him approach until he stands at the driver's open window. He rests his elbows against Mr. Denim's door and leans forward. Mr. Denim puts both hands on the wheel silent.

“Sudan,” he states. “I come from Sudan. And I'm going to own a Cadillac—brand new.”

The two men look at each other. Fuzzy shifts.

He walks back to his own rig grinning at his awesome truck that stands 13 foot six.

The pickup truck spits gravel and digs a groove the shape of a crescent moon before speeding off.

He reaches to downshift in preparation of the steep descent but his hand is shaking and he grinds the gears.