

The Other Side

The music slows the swirling world down a little. I now have a center to zero in on, even though it's a center I don't know. There's a man with a deep voice, playing a piano. That's all there is, but his words transfix me. He tells me I should take something off a ship. At least that's what it sounds like. Padma and Hannah talk, but all I care about is this song.

"Feeling better?" Padma asks.

"Much." The sun shines in, letting all sorts of light into my eyes. I close them for a moment and let the light play against itself. "There's a shadow puppet show in my mind, and I hope it never stops. I want to let in as much light as I can, so I can keep it going."

"Good. I think we've got it all taken care of."

"All what taken care of?"

"What does music sound like to you?" Padma asks.

"Not a lot different," I answer. "But this isn't really acid music."

Padma smiles. "I guess it isn't. Good luck getting Hannah to listen to-,"

"Masturbatory hippie crap," finishes Hannah. "Those assholes had their 'fuck the man' thing going, but they became the man. Goddamn sellouts voted for Reagan, and we're still supposed to see them as the all-time greatest. Fuckwads." Hannah drives on, now a little faster.

"The man sticks it to the man," I suggest.

"I like that," Hannah replies. "The man sticks it to the man. Nothing worse than a reasonable rebel."

Hannah stares out the rearview mirror, changing lanes every so often. She's got to be going around ninety, but things are slowing down for me. Just the slightest bit. I'm starting to understand myself as separate from the car and separate from others.

“Wait til we robotrip,” Padma says, and my reverie shatters. “It’s even more intense than acid.”

“We’ll put on the original version of this song,” says Hannah. “There’s a lot more going on there. Musically, I mean. This one’s all about the voice. Not like there’s anything wrong with that. If this voice was a guy, it could bang me all night long.”

“Do we have enough Robitussin?” I ask.

“Enough to get an elephant tripping balls,” replies Hannah. “You two should hardly need any. First-timers and all. I’m the one who needs half a fucking bottle. So I guess that makes me an elephant.”

Padma and I laugh.

“When will we take it?” I ask.

“Soon enough. Maybe next weekend, if you’re up for it. But make sure you’re up for it, because it’s quite a trip. You’ll feel like a robot.”

“Really?” I ask. “I don’t want to feel like a robot. I want to feel like a person. Having metal and wires and circuits in me doesn’t sound fun.”

“Nah, I’m just yanking your chain.”

“Hold up,” says Padma. “Are we talking the Terminator or C-3PO?”

“Little of both,” answers Hannah. “Imagine being a badass killer robot who bitches about sand in his joints. We’re almost to the museum, by the way.”

I stare at the dashboard light. The green amazes me. I’ve never seen green like this anywhere else, ever. Just on dashboards. Maybe in a few old sci-fi movies, but pretty much nowhere in real life. I wondered why? It’s a little yellow, the green is, but mostly green. I see Hannah turn a knob so it gives out more light than usual. As my eyes let the light in, I think

UFOs. I think...

“Shut up, Ash,” Hannah snaps.

“What was I saying?” I ask. Was I saying that out loud? Out loud? I thought for sure that had been in my head. I don’t recall hearing my own voice. Strange how that turned out. Strange indeed.

“Something about the dashboard light,” Padma explains.

“I’m such an idiot, aren’t I?” I ask.

“Actually, I’d never thought of that before,” replies Padma. “But come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve seen that shade, either.”

We both hum alien sounding music, like in those b-movies from the ’50s. Even Hannah gets in on it by the end.

Padma’s a pilgrim. She’s been to the other side, and has returned to report her findings, a scout into new and uncharted territory. But this soil is yet virgin to me. I am still planting my flag. I hope I can be forgiven for my lack of understanding.

“These eyes,” I say, “they take some getting used to.”

“Ash, you’re so blown, you’re making me trip,” says Hannah.

“Is that possible?” I ask.

More laughs. “Nah. Too bad. You sound like you’re having the time of your life.”

“I am,” I confirm. “There’s so much light. And if I close my eyes, shadow puppets and fireworks.”

“What else is going on in there?” Padma asks.

“The rearview mirror,” I explain. “The lights. These ghosts of the cars on the road that stretch out infinitely behind us. The sparkling lights that float above the freeway, just barely,

every light a driver. Incredible how each driver is a consciousness like me, consciousness converging on the freeway.”

Hannah groans, so I stop.

“Are you finished?” Padma asks.

“As finished as I can be with thoughts like these. They keep coming. But I’ve annoyed Hannah, so maybe I am.”

“Consciousness converging,” repeats Padma. She rolls it over on her tongue a few more times. “I like that. You should write a poem.”

“A poem? I’ve never written a poem. At least not since I was a teenager.”

“No need to be shy. We’re all friends here.”

“All right.” It’s true, we’re all friends. I’m part of all this, inside this consciousness that belongs to the sparkling lights, or maybe the sparkling lights belong to the consciousness. Either way. “A haiku.

Consciousness converged

on this proud Midwest highway.

Loneliness no more.”

They celebrate me and I celebrate myself. It is the same, really. I appreciate myself because they appreciate me. Consciousness indeed converged.

And yet, if we are at peace, why has Hannah gripped the wheel more tightly? Why does she constantly look at the rearview mirror? She doesn’t appear to be following the lights. Her blue eyes dart around the mirror, around the replica of the highway contained inside it, as though searching. But for what? Does she need help? Is she not at peace?

“Is everything all right?” I ask her.

“Fine,” Hannah says. “They’ll never catch me.”

“Who won’t ever catch you?”

Padma takes a glance out the back window before she turns to me. “You,” she begins. Swallows for a moment. “You know how Hannah gets sometimes.”

If she’s fine, I’m fine. Her knuckles have whitened, yes, but maybe she wants a tight grip on the steering wheel to get by on the freeway. And her clenched teeth are bared, but it could be that she wants to look like an aggressive driver. But why would she need to be aggressive? We’re just going to the art museum. Hannah darts into the other lane. Cuts someone off. Why is she doing this? Someone could clip us. We could all die. I almost tell her this, but I don’t want to throw her balance off. Maybe she’s just trying to pass someone.

I don’t want to look at Hannah anymore. I don’t want to think about her white knuckles or her clenched teeth or how we’ll get clipped if she keeps driving like this. So I close my eyes again. The shadow puppets are back.

There had been, at some point in the trip, a drug store. Hannah picked up a bottle of something. An employee was showing Padma and me another aisle. She was friendly. The yellows and reds of the cereal boxes seemed vivid. I even recall picking a box up but being snatched away. But I don’t remember leaving the store.

I do remember the way my heart beat. I could feel it. Every single beat. The tremors felt like they would tear my body apart. But Padma told me it was okay, told me it was over now, told me to ignore the sweat I felt could drown me. Padma sang me songs. We got on the freeway. And as Padma sang, I grew entranced with her voice. It wafted up and danced around the car and calmed me. Her voice contained all the light in the world.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “The trip just got off to a bad start. We all feel a little funny after it kicks in. All that’s happening is your pupils are letting in more light. This means you see more, which might give you the feeling that time has slowed down. That’s all. Your pupils are just letting in more light.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Sorry if I made a scene.”

“It’s okay. There’s nothing to worry about. It’s all behind us now.”

The dashboard entranced me. It let in more light.

“How fast are we driving?” Padma asks Hannah.

“How fast can we be driving?” I ask.

Now that I’m completely on the other side, there’s the issue of movement. All the moving parts of my body have a center, and that center is me. I am the whole, but I am also each individual part of the whole. The machine, but also the one who runs the machine. That gives me a lot of power, but also a lot of responsibility. I have to make sure the machine is maintained properly and fix it in case it breaks.

“Ash,” Hannah cuts in. “Don’t start again. All right? Just don’t. I need to focus here.”

“Focus on what?”

“I’ll listen,” says Padma. “I’m curious about this speed thing.”

“Look,” I say. “Aren’t we, when we think of it, a part of this freeway? Speed’s distance over time, I get that, but how can we travel any distance on something we’re part of? Do you at all see what I’m saying here?”

“Shut the fuck up, Ash!” Hannah screams. I’ve upset her. Terrible of me. I owe her an apology.

“I’m really sorry if I upset you,” I tell Hannah. “I don’t mean to throw off your mood or anything. I just wanted to answer your question. I’m stupid, I know. I’m just a small part of things, really. I shouldn’t have opened my mouth.”

“I just need you quiet for a moment.”

“Let me handle this,” Padma interjects. “Ashley, no one’s trying to put you down, or take away from what you’re saying. It’s very interesting, and you’re not stupid. Hannah and I just need to work something out.”

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“No need to worry, just enjoy the ride. After Hannah and I talk for a moment, everything will be fine. Okay?”

“But I want to know what you and Hannah are talking about. I don’t want to be a burden, and I’m so sorry I’ve been one, but it would help if I knew.”

“Are you finished?”

“I guess I am.”

“Then tell me what I told you.”

“After you and Hannah talk a moment, everything will be fine.”

“Perfect.” She turns her attention to Hannah. “You’ve broken a hundred. I’d slow it down just a little. That might make things worse.”

Hannah doesn’t slow down. “I’ll be fine,” she says.

“And the rest of us?” asks Padma. She keeps calm, somehow.

“Why might it make things worse?” I ask. I know I’m breaking the rules, and I know that Hannah and Padma had this all planned out, but I have to know.

“Remember what I told you,” Padma tells me. “Close your eyes. Rest. Things will be fine

in a moment.”

A moment? How long is a moment in a state like this? For that matter, how long is really anything? A moment might as well be a year on the other side. You go to sleep and wake up and it feels like you’ve slept for hours, but you look at the clock and see it’s only been ten minutes. That’s how time passes on the other side. It sputters forward in a car with a broken-down engine. And here I am, another sparkling light on the freeway. It’s strange here with my eyes closed. I’m inside of myself, or as close to that as you can get. The shadow puppets are gone, but now there are spider webs here. Not old, dusty cobwebs you just want to brush aside, but more nets with me at the center, drawing in all that comes my way.

But shudders wrack my body, threaten to collapse my spine. I breathe in machine gun bursts. My eyes pop open and let in even more light. I can feel how fast we’re going. Too fast. A scream’s trapped inside of me. It claws at my throat. Wants out. But I know I shouldn’t let it out. If I scream, then Hannah will scream, and then Padma will have stern words with her. The balance will be upset. But the car’s going too fast. We’ll die like this. I know it. We’ll smack right into the truck in front of us. It’s slowing down. Every car on the road is but ours.

“Slow down,” says Padma. “You’ll get us all killed.”

“Listen,” says Hannah, “We’ve both got our jobs here. I drive, and you keep Ash calm. I won’t tell you how to do your job. Don’t tell me how to do mine.”

Hannah slows down and swerves around the truck. We sneak in between it and a sedan in the left lane. Just enough room for us. Hannah keeps the car at a normal speed through this tight lane, then swings back around the semi once we’re far enough in front of it. The scream I was holding back dissipates in my throat. Hannah guns the engine once again.

“Shouldn’t we have gotten to the museum a while ago?” I ask.

“This is the new one,” Padma explains.

“I didn’t know we were going to the new one.”

“Well, we are,” says Hannah. “Plans changed.”

There had been pieces at the first museum that I had always wanted to see on acid. This change confused me. I didn’t know what was at this new place, if there was anything worth looking at with my new eyes. The answer was probably yes, but that didn’t help my confusion.

“What’s wrong with the new place?” Hannah asks.

“I want to go to the old one. That’s all.”

Hannah hits the wheel. “Dammit, Ash, get back to whatever the hell’s so fascinating about your inner world.”

“Don’t take that tone with Ashley,” says Padma.

“But mom, she’s driving me crazy!” Hannah’s words drip sarcasm.

“I’m sorry I’m getting on your nerves,” I say. “I’ll shut up now.”

“No,” insists Padma. “It’s okay.”

“I caused this, didn’t I?” I ask. “I upset Hannah and I’m so sorry.”

“No, you didn’t,” insists Padma.

“Then what did?”

“It’ll be okay. As for the museum, modern art.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” adds Hannah. “My figure drawing professor was there, and he was talking shit about it. That’s how I know I’ll like something.”

“There should be plenty to look at,” adds Padma.

But there’s already plenty to look at: a new set of lights in the rearview mirror. These lights flash red and blue, and are accompanied by a shriek. I don’t like the shriek, but I love the

lights. Hannah, on the other hand, seems scared of them. She guns the engine, only to slam on the brakes. She nearly rear-ends the car in front of us.

“Is that a police car?” I ask.

“It’s not coming for us,” says Padma.

“Then why’s it following us?”

“It,” she pauses. “It just wants us to get out of its way.”

“Why don’t we?”

No answer. The police car slides up alongside us. Hannah tries to change lanes, but rockets right back into ours when another eighteen wheeler’s horn blares.

“We’re gonna die,” I gasp.

“Shut the fuck up!” barks Hannah.

I don’t know what to say. I start crying. Why is she screaming at me? Why does she hate me?

The police car signals us to pull over. Hannah tries to change lanes, but another police car is there, leaving us nowhere to go but the shoulder. Hannah pulls over. Two officers step out of their cars. I reach for the wheel.

“Please don’t stop!” I scream. “I want to get to the museum!”

But Hannah’s foot is on the brake. We’re not going anywhere. The driver’s side window rolls down, letting in more light.