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JOHN OTTY  
**THINKING BIG**

The trucker with the handlebar moustache says to us that he doesn't anticipate a bloodbath, but if Erick and I want to make it all the way to Mulegé he reckons we'll have to learn to get along. "Perhaps it'd be better," he says, "if one of y'all comes out on top." Then he heaves the big doors shut and there's just the sound of boots on gravel and the ever-present rattle of the diesel. We sit on opposite sides of the container, and I listen for the rustle of fabric—anything to indicate movement. All I get is Erick's breathing. When the trucker sets the gears to grind, the rig lurches and I roll against the back doors. "Try sitting Indian style," says Erick across the blackness. To be sure I don't mistake this for kindness he tags on, "Idiot." I figure I'll let that one slide.

I'm the reason we're on this trip in the first place. All summer I'm on a ladder talking about how winter's going to suck when it comes—how there's no way to endure another season of drifts and ice with nothing to look forward to after the thaw than one more summer of slapping latex on the sides of houses. Erick can't find Mexico on a map, let alone Mulegé. But that word works on him. By mid-July, we might as well be saying *Camelot* or *Shangri-La* for all the hope we pour into those three syllables: Moo-Lah-Hey. All August we drink three Tecates each by noon, while scraping peels of paint from lakeside vacation homes. At the 7-11, we eat microwave burritos and pretend to speak Spanish, nodding knowingly when the other rolls an "r" with a mouthful of beans and flour paste. The deal is sealed the first of September when we pool what remains of our under-the-table wages and discover we have enough to buy a 1975 Ford Country Squire complete with fake wood panels from Ancient Walt, one of our painting clients. Todd's doing a remodel on his kitchen and when there's no other work, Walt takes pity on us and lets us loose restoring some old window frames he keeps in his garage. Since we get to sit while sanding, it's a job we relish. Off and on, we've been at it nearly two years, going from coarse-grit to sandpaper you could blow your nose on. Walt's a summer regular and the car's been parked in a shed on his property for eons, so we don't consider its age a liability. Besides, a quick check of the classifieds reveals a serious limitation on our options. We pay Walt in a heap of 20s and 10s that we've collected in a Folger's coffee can we keep in the bottom of a toolbox. The money was Walt's when the summer began and—given our work ethic—by rights it's still his. It's like getting the car for free. But Erick's not too keen on parting with currency under the best of circumstances, and this part makes him edgy. The old guy pockets the cash without counting it and dangles a set of keys attached to a miniature hula girl above my palm. "Learn to love her," he says. Then he points his slippers toward the main house and pads down the driveway.

I smile at Erick who's cradling the coffee can like an infant.  
"It's settled then?" he asks.

We work evenings to trick out the wagon. We tack ball fringe cut from an Indian bedspread along the ceiling. We remove the backseat and cover the cargo area in four-inch

foam rubber. We don't want to insult the integrity of the plastic wood-grained panels, so the exterior we leave pretty much alone, save for a few surfing decals and a bumper sticker that reads, *Nobody Ever Forgets Where He Buried the Hatchet*. We super-glue the hula girl to the dash, and argue briefly on whether to point her facing out or toward us. Over the years temperature changes have had a less than flattering effect on her plastic face so I get my way. She faces out, arms slightly raised, fingers fused together by the heat.

The last few weeks of summer, Mexico sparkles on the horizon of our imaginations like a gift wrapped in shiny red and green. We know there's something permanent about ripping it open—no exchanges, no returns. Impending departure brings several hurdles, not the least of which are Erick's misgivings about Laney, the girl he's been seeing since spring, and Todd, who's kept us in painting gigs and winter pick-up work for the three years since we bailed on college. I work hard to help Erick over both. The Laney issue is only slightly tricky. I tell him about fish in the sea, that he's just putting her on ice. Truth is, I had it in for Laney, too, and the winter was a long tug-of-war. I let the rope slip and she and I reversed roles as third wheel. Walking off on Todd is tougher for him to swallow. Loyalty has its pitfalls. At first I'm running up a wall of bricks, but then I get the bright idea to use his fidelity to my advantage.

We've been friends since first grade—since the day Erick dared me to put a thumbtack on the seat of Mary Daniel's desk while she grabbed a drink from the water fountain. She came back and sat down in a huff. Everything erupted. It took ten minutes for Mrs. Lawson to peel Mary from the ceiling tiles and another five to extract the tack from between the ridges of corduroy that covered her ass. Then Mrs. Lawson stood in front of the room, tapping her open palm with a ruler, waiting for a confession. Erick and I suppressed a snicker. But when Mrs. Lawson threatened no recess, Erick looked at me and nodded. In unison, we slowly raised our hands. Mine only made it halfway up. Mrs. Lawson took Erick by the ear and led him out the door. From the hallway I heard the slap of wood on flesh. At recess, we played dodge ball. Erick exacted revenge for my betrayal by blindsiding me in the ear from close range. It bled profusely and he could see the implication: causing bodily injury twice in one day would mean an immediate and protracted suspension. He tore a piece of his shirttail and offered it to me. I staunched the bleeding and clammed up when Mrs. Lawson saw dried blood on my shoulder during afternoon arts. I just kept rolling clay into ever-lengthening snakes, told her I had a bum ear—that it was always acting up. Even Erick can see Todd's history doesn't hold a candle.

In the darkness of the semi, I have to remind myself of this. Somewhere beyond my folded knees sits Erick, miffed and thinking God-knows-what. The tack in Mary's ass was his idea—a good one at the time, but when it comes to the big stuff, Mulegé for instance, I'm the one. We'd still be making half-money from Todd if I hadn't planted the Mexico possibility in him. Between us, we're constantly balancing the cosmic ledger. It's not so much assets and liabilities as it is transgressions and redemptions. As far as he can see, I'm to blame for the calamities, but there's usually room for debate—except for maybe the college debacle. Three years and I'm still paying penance for that one. My fault, I'll admit. But really, a future that hangs on a Mythology exam? The expulsion proceedings were swift. Within two days we were packed and north, heading home—tails tucked tight between our legs. Poor Erick refused to leave his parents' house. He sat in his childhood bedroom flipping the paddle on a ball-less pachinko machine. His parents were freaked sufficiently to rescind

the no visitation rule they'd imposed on me. I used beer to nurse him from pachinko to the couch where we watched Green Acres and Gilligan's Island re-runs until he started acting like someone with a vague sense of hope again. His dad got us the job with Todd, which I took as a setback. Erick accepted defeat by confusing it with opportunity. He's got ties to the hometown, too, though they're completely invisible to me. For him there's something safe and full-circle about being there. He's completely re-imagined the place and his position in it. It's a cancerous nostalgia. All through high school we talked about nothing but getting out—something he's quick to forget. My best view of that life is to see it shrinking in a rearview mirror, which it does for a while down Hwy. 395 the day we leave for Mexico.

We take turns at the wheel, guiding the station wagon down the ribbon of highway while gravity pulls at its heavy frame. Our heads are out the windows and we scream like madmen. The descent out of the Sierras is like gliding down a schoolyard slide—next stop's when our feet hit sand. Not altogether untrue, either. Mulegé's out there somewhere. We've been practicing for it. Labour Day weekend we sit in the yard around the fire pit on the disembodied backseat of the Squire, imaging we're on the porch of a seaside bungalow. We get quiet and listen to the wind high in the pines, tell ourselves it's the hiss of ocean. I have a spray bottle filled with lukewarm water and a couple spoonfuls of Morton's table salt. When the wind rushes, I point it at our faces and pump. Erick leans in and inhales to the point of sneezing. It's great to see him, face glistening in the light of the fire, laughing. He composes notes to Laney and his folks that we plan on posting before we cross the border. He doesn't write one for Todd, though, and this worries me—like leaving the backdoor unlocked when you go on vacation. I don't write any notes at all. I don't lose sleep over it either.

Outside Bridgeport, we pull over to piss. The size of Erick's bladder is something I've resigned myself to. He's not a big guy to start with and I'm willing to make allowances. We stand leaning against the car. A canyon breeze pushes back against my stream. I zip up and notice little wet spots dotting my khaki shorts. Erick, who's something of a shy gunner, sees this and walks off to piss with his back to the wind. We're not a hundred yards down the road when Erick starts making the case for a detour. He's seen a highway sign for Bodie, a ghost town thirteen miles down a dirt road. I remind him of the plan: Escondido by sunset. He gives me a lot of crap about it being the journey not the destination. "So long as one doesn't get in the way of the other," he adds. I see his point. Leaving was the biggest step of all. The rocket's launched. We're committed. A little sideshow might be the perfect diversion, give him a taste of the road. Besides, I want to keep him occupied. No telling what the wheels behind his eyes are spinning. I'm not about to let him start daydreaming of Laney or let the guilt he's feeling for finally getting out and living take hold.

Bodie's not altogether a bust. We walk the streets and peek in at the mercantile shop, the old school house. I take a picture of Erick standing in the doorway of an ancient wooden outhouse that's pitched at forty degrees. He looks serious, like he's about to get caught short and is disappointed to find the facility in disarray. Erick talks about old west architecture and city planning. That's one of the few aspirations he's shared with me: he wants to be an architect. I tell him it's not too late to follow his dreams. "That," he says, "is a *myth*." His reference is hardly subtle and he knows it. Just so long as he can get in a little jab here and there, wiggle the needle. Erick works by degrees. Sometimes I wish he'd just come at me swinging from the ropes—get it all out so we can be done with it and start over. I could spend a lifetime waiting, though; Erick prefers to simmer.

I suggest we climb a hill. “What for?” he wants to know. I tell him it’s to gain some perspective, but really I’m hoping to spot the cemetery. It’s a good way to impose some honesty on any situation. Here it’s irresistible. We ditch the dusty street for prairie grass and scabble up a knoll in silence. At the top, we turn around and survey the little town that was. Buildings are flung like dice across the landscape. Erick announces that the scene is depressing. But I can see the streets a hundred years ago, bustling with horses and drifters come to cash in on the mining. I can almost smell gunpowder and whores’ perfume. This is a piece of history, I tell him. But Erick’s been reading placards in town. He reminds me that William Bodey froze to death just a few months after his gold discovery—that a little girl, on hearing her family was moving here, left a note: “Goodbye, God. We’re moving to Bodie.” He dismisses the lot of them as “delusional suckers” who got what they probably deserved and kicks at the dirt for emphasis.

Suddenly, I don’t feel like a walk among the tombstones. In a flash of weakness, I concede Erick’s point. It’s hard to tell the trap from the escape. Maybe there’s a Bodie on both ends of the highway. I hate being tricked into seeing things his way. I fish the keys from out of my pocket and swing them against the orangey glow of the sky. “Let’s go,” I say.

There aren’t many curves on the desert highway, and it’s great to be zipping along with a solid band of asphalt pointing plainly in one direction. In the dusky light, the landscape begins to reveal itself. It offers up subtle hues of purple and greens that I suppose most travelers miss, dismissing the periphery as a means to an end. I think I can see the individual shadows cast by every sprig of sage. Even the tiniest rocks glint myriad colors. If I’d paid any attention in geology, I might have names for their mineral content. But that’s well behind us now.

Erick’s off taking another piss when the mechanic tells me there’s nothing much to be done until Monday when he can order parts. The only reason he’s out here poking his head under the hood is because we’re probably the first idiots to gas up here in six months and he’s starved for money or company—probably both. I tell him the thing’s a gem, but like most men in his position he’s not a generous prognosticator. Erick reappears, running his hand through his mop of hair and kicking at the tire every time the mechanic says, *Lookey here*, or *tsk-tsk* to himself. Erick stares at me with his hands on his hips, pool-eyed like he’s about to spit or cry. I distract him by putting him in charge of purchasing snacks from a vending machine. He skulks away muttering and shaking his head as if this is exactly what he expected—from me and the world together. The mechanic taps away with both ends of a screwdriver that’s as long as my arm. He leans farther into the engine, rattling off a list of parts that aren’t up to his exacting standards and shaking his head at me. I tell him I’ll take it under advisement. For the gas, he relieves me of some cash from the coffee can, warns me against driving at night. I pick Erick up by the office, his arms full of Funyons and Fritos. “All set?” he asks in a matter-of-fact way that makes me feel treasonous. “All topped off,” I say, and rub the hula girl for luck.

I curse myself for having stopped so soon. But we know nothing about mileage in the Squire or when we’ll run into the next gas station. Since this morning, we’re 90 miles closer to Mulegé—if I subtract the 30 or so round trip to Bodie—and it’s good to be back on the road. We pass the chips and discuss food in Mexico. Erick’s lightened his mood

considerably and asks me to talk about shrimp. “Big as boomerangs,” I say, “and cheap.” “And beers?” he wants to know. “Eight dollars a case. With a return on deposit, maybe six.” He hollers and pulls two cans of Olympia from the cooler behind us. He’s less enthusiastic when I start in about the *señoritas*. “I saw Laney less than two days ago,” he complains. I ask him, Laney who? He groans as I describe us lying in hammocks while two black-eyed girls stir the breeze above our faces with palm fronds. It really shouldn’t be a tough sell, but I’m forced to make them topless. This works for a minute or two, then I have to assure him they’re of legal age and account for the whereabouts of their fathers and brothers before he settles back into the fantasy. “Do me a favour,” he says, “just don’t give them names.” It’s criminal the way he sets limits. I tell him to give us both a break. “Name yours, if you want,” he says, “just keep mine ambiguous.” I move on to tales of surfing—something neither of us has tried. But on the front seat of the Squire the waves break perfectly, tubing us every time. We go down the road like that, trading stories of what’s to come, heading south while the last rays of sun follow us on our right, occasionally dipping behind the mountains. Erick rolls over on his side in a fetal position and crosses his arms over his chest. “This is great,” he says. “Thanks.” He closes his eyes and smiles.

It gets dark after that—not all the way black. But the “ALT” light comes on and the desert fades. At first, I give it up to road weariness. I’ve been driving too long and the endless mounds of sage start to lose their definition. I squint hard, push the headlights off and on again, but I can’t see more than ten feet of road ahead of us. The old in-dash AM/FM goes from jukebox bright to sepia before disappearing completely. I immediately suspect the mechanic and imagine him appearing behind us any minute in his truck, promising to roll the price of the tow into what will surely be our considerable repair costs. I’m furious with the opportunistic fucker, then I’m furious with Ancient Walt. Then just furious. Eventually, the car loses power.

We’re scrunched down on the side of the highway, just off the shoulder when Erick wakes up. The whoosh of trucks rocks the Squire rig like a bathtub toy. *What the hell?* he says as we rattle back into position. I tell him with certainty that I have no idea. Then I tell him about the glowing red light that’s faded, and we’re into it. I get the full litany of “*Why didn’t you wake me?*”s and “*I knew this would happen*”s. I let him go off for a while, then pop the hood and stick in a flashlight. We stand there dumbly, wiggling wires. Erick probably has me beat on the mechanical front, but that’s not saying much. We both know there’s a better chance of sprouting wings and flying down to Mulegé than getting the Squire fired up between the two of us. Still, we go through the motions because it’s required, mumbling *fuel line* and *pressure hose* before settling on the obvious *alternator*, as if those words had meaning.

Back in the Squire, we help ourselves to the rest of the Olympia. It’s shitty beer, but suits our mood. Erick wants to know if I think we’ll make it and I almost believe he doesn’t realize how far a question like that goes in sealing our fate. Midway through senior year of high school we sat in his dad’s pick-up, parked outside a party some other kids were throwing by the river. It was a spot we went often—at the end of a dirt road that led to some summer cabins long since abandoned. There was an old bridge fenced off with cyclone and barbed wire. A “DANGER” sign hung crookedly and pocked with buckshot. Summers we’d go down there and watch tourists hang their rafts up on the rock-filled pilings. That night, Erick talked of its design, about beams and trusses, arches and suspension, like it was a language

he'd been secretly studying. He told me then he was leaving home in September, going to college. Mostly because I felt we were at the end of something, I told him I'd go, too—that we were in this for the long haul.

We decide to sleep in the car. It's too dark to hitch a ride and the trucks come more infrequently. Under the full weight of our bodies the foam rubber yields more than expected. The screw mounts for the backseat dig at my ribs. I suppose this is true for Erick, too, because there's considerable movement and jockeying for position. It's a silent battle of knees and elbows. Erick launches into a series of over-the-top, strategic flops, which I counter to the best of my abilities. The Squire rocks into motion. At first, I think it's my imagination—a loss of equilibrium because our heads are pointed downhill. Then it's obvious: sage scrapes at the undercarriage; the jagged outline of mountains moves across the back window like it's a drive-in screen. We flail in our mummy bags, zipped in too tight to be of any use. Erick yells, "Emergency brake," then mumbles, "Fool," repeatedly and I don't know which of us he's talking about. It's over quickly. The front end of the Squire crumples against a berm. We climb out and onto the roof. We haven't slid more than fifty feet down from the road, but the damage is substantial.

A light glows across the desert, nearly perpendicular to where the car's come to rest, maybe three quarters of a mile. We put on our packs, lock up the wagon and step unsteadily towards it. I talk about the rocks I'd seen earlier from the car, the very ones we step over now. It's a subtle beauty, I tell Erick. You've got to really look to see it. He squints and shakes his head. One thing I do remember from geology is fault slippage along the San Andreas. There's a rock formation north of San Francisco that matches exactly to another in San Diego. "You know," I say, "this desert isn't so different from the beach. I mean minus an ocean." For the trouble of making this observation, I get a sigh. We don't talk after that, and not much goes unsaid, either.

We meet the trucker in the diner where we spend the night and twenty dollars on cheeseburgers. Erick worries over the coffee can. He wants to be sure there's enough for bus tickets and whatever the hell else comes up. I order pie out of spite and watch the trucker watch us over the course of a few hours. He sits at the counter wearing jeans and a sheepskin vest over a T-shirt. We're off to the side, splayed out on both sides of a booth. It feels somehow disrespectful, like we're not quite entitled. I tell Erick we should have sat at the counter and he looks at me like I fell out of the sky and landed across the table from him, in an all-night diner somewhere in the desert.

Between trips to our table, the waitress whispers to the trucker. He sips at his mug and occasionally glances back at us while smoothing his thumb and forefinger across his moustache. When the first rays of sun begin to spread across the parking lot, he rises, kisses the waitress on the cheek, then makes his way to us. "Why don't y'all come with me?" he asks. Erick and I are bleary-eyed, but the question seems perfectly natural, like we'd agreed on it hours ago and were waiting for him to hurry up and finish his coffee. We follow him out to his rig, climb in the cab and in no time are rolling southbound on Hwy. 395.

I'm riding bitch, chatting up the trucker and being friendly for both of us while Erick rests his head against the passenger window watching the chaparral roll by. Turns out we're just outside Independence. The trucker says he'll take us as far as Victorville, then he's heading east to Kingman. He's heard about our trials from the waitress and seems genuinely sympathetic. In a way, I'm glad for our recent misfortune. Sitting high up in the

cab, I talk about Mulegé again. The trucker says that right now Mulegé sounds like a good idea. He says it in a way that mixes weariness and hope. “Ah, Mexico,” he says and I tell him, “Damn straight.” I launch into my sordid tale of the *señoritas*—I’ve dubbed mine Carmenita; Erick’s, for obvious reasons, goes by Escondida. They’ve just put down their palm fronds and generously splashed coconut oil on each other when Erick says, “Enough already.” This seems rude—given that we’re in company—and, I suspect, it’s a disappointment to the trucker. “Do you want me to go on?” I ask him. He twists the left half of his moustache, nudges me with his elbow, nods. I go on. Those girls, the beach and everything on this green planet God’s laid before us roar up into a Technicolor splendour that’s not lost on the trucker. We’re doing better than 90 MPH and the cab feels like it’s listing when Carmenita twirls her dress. I temporarily lose myself in the unsteady intoxication of the vision. Twice the trucker crosses the white shoulder line, and the cab reverberates as the wheels thump in the warming dimples. I feel Erick’s thumbs at the back of my neck; his fingernails dig into my jugular.

Sometime during the throes of Erick’s tirade—between Lone Pine and our rightful destiny—the trucker glides the rig to a stop on the straightest and most desolate stretch of road imaginable. That’s when he adjusts the seating arrangements.

The floor of the trailer is littered with rough-hewn wood, and I have to keep shifting my weight to avoid a splinter from working its way into my ass. Erick’s breath grows deeper and eventually gives way to snores. It comes as no surprise he can sleep through this, but we ought to be making plans. For one thing, there’s the Squire. Mulegé for another. But those visions are being erased behind his eyelids. Either Erick can’t dream or keeps them so tucked away I can’t shame him into thinking big. When this is sorted out, we’ll be back at the lake, begging Todd to take us on for another winter. Probably doing that every winter and summer, too, until it becomes so regular we can’t tell it from breathing or the back and forth sweep of a paintbrush. But I can’t think of that now. Instead I picture buying tickets in the next town and boarding two separate buses. His is heading north, but I’ve got other plans. I feel a kind of aching pity for him and stretch my foot out across the blackness and nudge him. “Fuck off,” he says. He kicks me in the shin. “Get some sleep and fuck the hell off.”

But I know I never will. The next town will be as far south as we get before turning around. I have my eyes shut, but it wouldn’t matter either way. I lie on my back with my hands behind my head as the big truck barrels down the interstate, listening to Erick inhale and exhale—the rhythm of contented resignation. Under us, the wheels spin round and round.