At the halfway point across the State of Washington, Interstate 90 descends into the mighty chasm known as the Columbia River Gorge. From here it crosses murky waters and climbs north against the canyon wall before eventually disappearing over the precipice. I am standing near the quiet off-ramp that rolls onto rural Highway 26. Across the river from me sits the tiny village of Vantage but I am alone, nothing but asphalt here, my thumb hanging dumbly in the air.

Once, this place was a low and swampy forest of ginkgo biloba trees. Millions of years ago the earth here opened up and massive flows of molten basalt spewed forth across the land. Later, as the eons passed, the Columbia
River carved its path, now hundreds of feet deep, through the new topography. Today, no longer swampy or low-lying, this place is an arid and desolate desert, shadowed from rain by Mt. Rainier and the Cascade Mountains.

Out here all the colors are shades of brown or gray, from the burnt siennas of the rocky cliffs above me, to the drab and dingy sage brush along the river’s bank, to the ashen pavement below me. Even the water, polluted with algae and sediment, looks like malt liquor in the afternoon sun.

To the south sits the U.S. Department of Energy’s Hanford Facility, which was created during the World War II to provide plutonium for the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan. In the post Cold War era, nuclear waste leaked into the ground water and threatened to contaminate the Columbia River as well. But I am not going to Hanford. I am heading east, hitchhiking across the desert to Pullman, where I go to school.

Traffic is scarce. It has already been many hours; soon it will be dark. I worry that I will be forced to spend the night in this ominous and unforgiving place, with nothing but a hooded sweat shirt to keep me warm. I can do nothing but wait.

“Where are you going?” asked a young, twenty-something, girl through the open passenger window of her maroon Volvo S80. Her expression suggested she knew exactly where I was going but hadn’t yet decided whether or not she would be taking me.

“Wazzu,” I said referring to Washington State University. After a slight pause of recognition she opened the door.

“This is your lucky day, then. Get in.” Before I could even buckle-up she slammed the accelerator and I was thrown back against the leather seat. She had the sloppy, unkempt look of a woman so assured of her own beauty that the need to dress up arose only on the rarest of occasions: baggy sweat pants, cheap plastic flip-flops, a tight black lint-covered track jacket unzipped to showcase the curves of her breasts and a muddle of long blond hair rubber banded into a tangled mess.

“You want a drink?” she said shoving an unopened orange and silver can of Sparks into my hand. The label read: 7.0% ALC/VOL caffeinated premium malt beverage with taurine, guaranara, ginseng, natural flavors, certified colors, and FD&C yellow number five. She pulled an open can from between her legs and took a solid pull as if to impress me with her practiced technique. I watched the orange liquid roll over her chin and down into her cleavage.
Ah, what the hell, I thought, opening my drink. The speedometer read seventy. I took a drink and clicked on my seat belt.

How I became interested in hitchhiking is a mystery even to me. Somewhere around my sophomore year of college, for really no reason at all, I developed a sudden interest in characters below the fringe of society. Bums, vagabonds, tramps, hobos, tent dwellers, anybody living outside of society by their own admittance.

I came across an out of print book entitled American Pictures by a Dane named Jacob Holdt who traveled to America with nothing but a camera and forty dollars. He lived here for five years as a vagabond, hitchhiking more than one hundred thousand miles, living mostly with the poorest of the poor, selling his blood to pay for film, and relying on those he met along his way to keep him alive. Holdt describes, and shows through his pictures, an under-class unknown to most of the nation, one that more resembles the third world than America.

What surprised me the most was that he could actually hitchhike in America for five years straight. I had always been under the impression, as most people are, that hitchhiking in this country is a dead art. For Holdt, hitchhiking was not only possible, but it presented him with a point of view completely foreign from any that I have seen through mainstream living. This is what drew me to hitchhiking: I wanted to see if I could do it; I wanted to see what it was like and I wanted to experience the world from a new perspective.

My first trip happened during spring break in 2004. I was broke, bored, antsy with wanderlust and wanted to see some old friends living in Las Vegas. The time was right. As I stood on the road waiting for my first ride I was nervous and almost turned back. But I persevered and after only two days, and seven dollars, found myself standing in front of the Lady Luck Casino on Freemont street without so much a scratch. It was love from the beginning. I liken that first experience to an all-expense paid, cross-country, guided tour of “The American West”.

Later I hitched to San Francisco and Reno with a friend, hitched through Western Montana, and made numerous trips across and around Washington. I’ve slept in fields, under bridges, dive motels, where I listened as my neighbor loudly conspired to gangland murder over the phone, and even the streets of Sacramento. Over the past couple of years I have logged more than six thousand miles by the thumb. My experience has been nothing like Holdt’s, but it has made an impression on me nonetheless.
"Why would someone like you be hitchhiking out here in this dust bowl?" she asked, paying little attention to the road.

"To get home," I said.

"And you decided to hitchhike because?"

"Because walking takes too long. This is a lot easier, you know?"

"Yeah but don’t most people, like, drive cars these days?" She asked with a playful sass. We were pulling to the end of a long grade, out of the gorge and onto the plateau. Up here was farm country. Irrigation circles lined the road but it was winter and everything was dead. Just frozen fields, scarred from the imposing tread of tractor tires. And, of course, my driver.

"Yeah," I said resting my arm against the window. "Most people do."

She took a drink. I did the same.

Contrary to popular belief, hitchhiking in the United States is not especially difficult. Rides come fairly easily, assuming there is a decent amount of traffic, you look presentable, and there is an acceptable place for drivers to pull over. In my experience, the average wait is somewhere between ten and twenty minutes—often less—but outside of major migrations, such as holiday weekends and such, Highway 26 is pretty dead. Many continue on I-90 but few people take this exit.

Catching rides on the interstates is no problem. Just find a busy on-ramp and stand out there with your thumb out. If there is a No Hitchhiking sign, stand a few feet in front of it. In most places it is illegal to hitchhike on the actual interstate but on-ramps are fair game. They’re the best places to catch rides anyway; they usually have wide shoulders and drivers are moving slow. People have time to check you out and an easy place to pull over if they decide to stop. These two things, along with looking clean and friendly, are the keys to getting rides.

Catching rides on rural highways is usually pretty easy too. In fact, they are my preferred routes. The trick is to hitch from town to town, avoiding traffic shadows. Avoid rides that aren’t going to the next town at least. Occasionally it is impossible to avoid areas with no traffic, and in this case there is nothing that can be done but wait. You are at the will of the road.

"So where you from, strange hitchhiker," she asked taking a drink.

"A little town called Orting." I said.

"You’ve probably seen us on the Discovery Channel or something."
“Discovery Channel?”

“Yeah, when Mt. Rainier blows, Orting gets wiped out. It’s the next Pompeii. Some housing developers not too long ago actually found an entire petrified old growth forest buried there. They built over it.”

“I know where Orting is,” she said.

“You do?”

“Yeah,” she said, “I’m you neighbor.”

“My neighbor?”

“That’s right. I’m your neighbor. Guess where I’m from.”

She was from the neighboring, and much larger, Puyallup. I had grown up in the flat flood plains of a once fertile valley which had become an enormous housing development for country loving commuters, horseshoed between two rivers and lined from one to the other with gray and beige track housing. It’s a paved deathtrap with only one two-lane escape from the inevitable mudflows of a vengeful Mt. Rainier. She had grown up in the affluent neighborhood of better-offs that sat on the valley’s west rim, looking down on the doomed upstart below. And now here we were, together, racing across Eastern Washington in one of the safest cars in world.

I almost felt safe.

Actually, it wasn’t even her car. It was her daddy’s. He had given it to her days earlier, after she purposefully backed her BMW into the side of her stepmom’s car during some kind of vindictive, family-tension driven rage. Instead of getting mad or punishing her, daddy, some kind of doctor, just gave her his car and asked her to “please, honey, try to show whatshername some respect from now on.” The fact that the stepmother had not been given a new car seemed sufficient enough proof of her father’s love. In fact, after twenty-something years, she had only thus far had one job: a scantily dressed Trojan Girl handing out free condoms to sweaty concert goers who may or may not have ever used them.

She seemed happy. But like my drink, she had an underlying bitterness that must have been hard to fully cover up.

“You know what, I think I did see Orting on TV,” she said. “You guys are totally fucked.”

With each minute the sun falls deeper in the late afternoon sky and the shadow from the cliffs across the river draw ever closer to me. Another car passes from the wrong direction. I remember a part of Henry David Thoreau’s Walden. He talks preferring to walk instead of take the train: because by the time a person works all day to earn his train ticket, he could have already walked there. If the railroad reached around the world, he says, I think that I should keep ahead of you; and as for seeing the country
and getting experience of that kind, I should have to cut your acquaintance altogether.

Out here I have no acquaintances at all, only my thoughts, and the road. A road that could lead me anywhere, even to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Wanapum Dam is about a mile down the river. I once slept in the visitor center for an hour to avoid the sun, watching movies about how there used to be a different bridge behind me. A great bridge that was a marvel of its day. But they took it down when they built the interstate because it wasn’t good enough anymore.

A red Geo Metro rolls off the freeway towards me. I hold my thumb up. He slows down, almost to a stop. I look at him through the window. He looks scared. I watch as he accelerates as fast as his little car will let him and he disappears down the road. I wonder where he is going. To the uttermost ends of the... who knows.

Once I was hitchhiking among the plowed remains of potato fields south of Boise, Idaho, when I was picked up by a flannel clad dog trainer in a gray pickup. His brown leather cowboy boots matched his Stetson hat. He was an easy talker and right away began telling me stories of training Fox dogs for British Royalty and of drug dogs for state law enforcement agencies. It wasn’t long before the subject of hitchhiking came up, as it usually does when one is traveling this way.

“I never pick ‘em up,” he said, “at least not when my wife’s in the car.”

“Have you ever picked up any real weirdos?” I asked excitedly, still being new to hitchhiking, I was curious about the darker side of the art. “You know, any real crazies who just made you wonder ‘maybe I should’ve left this one on the curb.’ You know what I mean? Someone who just scared the living shit of you?”

Instead of rolling into a spirited anecdote, as I had imaged, he was stiff and quiet and stared at me through his peripheral vision without turning his eyes off the road. What had merely been excitement on my part may have been misinterpreted as insanity. As the silence grew heavier, I began to realize my mistake.

Finally he said, “Yeah. Every once and a while you run into some nutcase. But I don’t worry too much because I always carry this.” And with that he whipped out a silver six-shooting revolver, gave the cylinder a spin, and pointed the ticking weapon about ten degrees off my face. “I keep it under my leg here just in case anybody decides to mess with me.”

“Hey man,” I pleaded in the calmest tone I could muster, though my voice may very well have cracked. “I’m cool. I promise...
just meant... you know, if you had...maybe... I mean... I was just curious. That’s all. I’m cool man. I promise. I’m cool.”

To both of our relief, he seemed to realize that I wasn’t some deranged runaway and he lowered the gun. Then, in what must have been some kind of redneck peace-offering, he placed the loaded gun on the center console, equidistant between us. Although my situation had improved substantially, I wasn’t exactly comfortable.

Outside, the landscape was changing. Dead fields were slowly growing into neatly aligned orchards of fruitless apple trees. Cows, lost within a maze gnarled, knotted wood, chewed on the apples which had long since fallen from the empty trees, now rotting on the ground below. I finished my second drink and started digging around for a third.

“Are we all out?” she asked. “We’ll stop at the next place. I gotta piss anyway.”

A few miles later we pulled into the Shell station at Royal City- not much of a city at all, but an isolated village home to little more than a concrete fruit packing plant and a couple of grain silos.

“You get the booze while I use the ladies room,” she said strolling awkwardly toward the gas station.

I was struck by the thought of getting out. Maybe I should just ditch this mad woman right now. This could be my only chance. What if I give her more alcohol, and we don’t make it out alive? Or worse yet, what if somebody else gets killed?

I remembered the car accident I had been in when I was seventeen, I lost control driving my Ford Bronco II around a wet corner near my house. The truck swerved hard left. I overcorrected right. Then left. Just when I thought things were under control I hit the brakes and the truck took a hard roll once... twice... I remember that my mind was clear except for “I’m airborne.”
The school bus that I almost smashed into head-on called 911 as I crawled, unharmed, from the overturned vehicle, which looked more like a crushed pop can than a truck.

"Sit down," someone yelled. "You're in shock. You need to sit down." I was in shock but I snapped out of it quickly. I had been lucky. The whole experience lasted less than a minute. It was nearly a year before the shards of broken glass were fully washed from the shoulder of the road.

To hell with this, I told myself. Walk over to the highway, put your thumb out and wait for somebody with sanity to pull over. You're lucky to be alive. This is crazy. It's only gonna get worse.

I knew what to do, but there was something else. Something telling me to stay put; to stay on the ride. Something primal, atavistic. Something beyond logic.

I went into the Shell Station's Men's Room. Above the urinal was a condom machine. 75 cents, I bought one. Then I went out into the store and bought another six pack of Sparks (I don't even like Sparks) and waited in the Volvo for my driver to return. She grinned when she saw me.

"Still here eh? Let's hit it. Wait... do you wanna drive?"

"Do I want to drive?" I hadn't expected this. That same voice that had told me to get back in the car told me get behind the wheel. I wanted to, but I couldn't. I would never be able to drive like her.

"Why would I want to drive?" I said. "You're my chauffeur. Now let's go. And easy on the gas. Last time I nearly spilled my drink. One more time and I'll have you driving a Greyhound in Texas. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," she said, smirking. "Anything you say Mr... what did you say your name was? That's right. Whatever you say Mr. Hitch, I'll have you there before you can even finish your drink, sir." She put the car in reverse and whipped us around toward the highway. It was a straight shot now, but I knew it would be anything but. I didn't care though. The alcohol was kicking in. This time, I knew what I was in for.

"Let's go driver," I said. "I haven't got all day you know."

It's easy to stereotype people on the road, or anywhere for that matter. In fact, it is almost impossible not to. It's as if human beings are pre-programmed for that kind of thinking. Before I get into a car with someone, the first thing I do is pigeon hole them in some way. Size them up. Label them as quickly as possible. This person is a liberal or a conservative; this person works in an office or on a construction site; this person is a single mother; this person carries a gun; this person is a sissy; this person is a serial killer.
If I can't define them in some way I won't feel comfortable. It's a defense mechanism. Of course, each person I encounter likely runs the same scenarios through their own head about me. A hitchhiker is a very iconic image. Nearly everyone in this country, including children, have a pretty good idea of what a hitchhiker is before they ever even see me alongside the road.

In this country, the hitchhiker has become a dark and shadowy figure. Thirty years of cheap horror movies and bad media publicity has turned society on him. Americans nowadays are generally skeptical of anyone and anything that is not the direct result of a corporate franchise.

The thing I find most amusing about this whole phenomenon is that nearly all my stereotypes are wrong. One guy that I thought was a hippie turned out to be a nanophysicist. One lady that I thought was a manic, chain smoking drunk, turned out to be a software engineer. Conservative areas, like Eastern Washington and Idaho, are full of intelligent, understanding people who respect me for wanting to experience their homeland. Super liberal, supposedly tolerant places like San Francisco are full of snobbish prudes who yell things like 'bum' and 'loser' from expensive cars as they pass.

A white Toyota Camry, new and well-kept, rolls off the interstate onto Highway 26. I stand up straight and throw my thumb in the air. The car is moving very slowly. This is it, I think. This is my man. He's gonna stop. I'm finally out of here. It is a middle aged man with gray hair. A cross pendant is dangling from his rearview mirror. He pulls up next to me and his passenger window lowers.

"Where you going?" he says.
"Pullman," I say.
"I'm going north to Wenatchee. I can take you there if you want." Disappointment creeps in.

"Thanks," I say. "But I need to go east."
"Okay, well, good luck out here," he says, "Trust in Christ and you will be fine."

With that he pulls onto the road, gives a terse wave, turns around, and pulls back onto the Interstate. I am alone again.

Evangelism, I have found, is less common while hitchhiking than one might imagine. Of probably more than a hundred rides, only twice have I had to sit through a sermon.

One was a strange old man, somewhere in his seventies, who picked me up outside a prison in Orofino, Idaho. I had been there a while since the presence of a nearby prison seems to discourage drivers from picking up
hitchhikers. He had a patchy, white beard and a giant gold rodeo belt buckle that cut into his belly as he sat tightly behind the wheel of his new Saturn coupe.

At first he was cautious about talking religion to me, but once he discovered that I wasn’t hostile and after that, it was hard to change the subject. He told me about his days transporting scores of violent offenders from Orofino to the main maximum-security facility in Boise. Never, he insisted, had he handcuffed or otherwise restrained these men in any way.

“Weren’t you afraid that they might try to harm you or escape?” I asked the old man.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “I always knew the Lord would protect me. Just like I’m not worried about you. Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?”

The old man was eager to take me as far as I would let him. He was retired and there was nothing he would rather do, he said, than help a lost young boy like me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I’m doing this because I care about you,” he said, “and because I care about your soul.”

I let him take me as far as the junction to the main thoroughfare. It was nice to get an easy ride, but I must admit I was happy to reenter the world of sin.

It was getting dusky outside. The orchards were gone, nothing but empty fields again. And flatness. It was flat here as far as I could see. We rolled into the town of Othello. There was a sign that read: “Watch For Drunk Drivers. They’re Out There.” I wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol, the guaranara, or the red number five, but things were getting blurry. It might’ve been her driving. I don’t know. I glanced at the speedometer—almost fifty. The speed limit was thirty-five. I wondered where the cops were. This was place was a trap. We should’ve been pulled over.

“I can slow down if you need me to,” she said seeing me glance. “If you’re not ready for this kind of pace.”

“Slow down?” I said. “That’s the last thing I want. Speed limits are for the feeble anyway.” I should’ve drove, I thought, gulping my Sparks.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Listen,” I said, “the faster you drive, the sooner we can get home to bed. So have another drink and let’s get on with it.” It was a trap.

“Excuuuuse me,” she said, “WE can get home to bed? I will be sleeping alone tonight thank you very much!” Half of her face was smiling slightly. I squirmed; I couldn’t help it. I don’t think she noticed. She was too drunk.

“Excuse me?” I said. “Excuse you! You’re a very pretty girl and all. Don’t think I don’t
I appreciate everything you’re doing for me. But I’m very tired. Too tired for these kinds of petty games.” I took a drink and stared straight ahead. “You’re not really my type anyway.”

I finished my drink, checked behind us to make sure there were no cops around, and tossed the can into the ditch.

“Please,” I said, “pay attention to the road... there are a lot of bad drivers out there.”

◊

The evening is upon me. It’s not dark yet, but it will be soon. The river is turning blue in the dimming light. Direct sunlight is gone now, only shade. I’m worried. The sweat is drying from my forehead as the air cools, I have to get a ride out of here before it’s too dark. When I walked across the bridge earlier today, I thought I was going to fall in. It’s not made for foot traffic. Someone will come along. The road always provides for the patient. Stay upbeat. Someone will come...

◊

Things were getting hairy now. My driver and I had each polished off two more Sparks. That put me at six. Where exactly stood, well that was hard to tell. Who knew how many she had killed before picking me up. Seven, eight, twelve, whatever the number it was more than enough. The drunker she became, the quieter she was. Her new form of expression was road rage and she made her presence known.

How was this to end? I wondered. With me crawling from the same ditch I had thrown my empty drink in earlier? My legs broken backwards at the knees? My face ripped from my skull by a heartless pavement? My body destroyed by a bitter irony? Would someone put up a white wooden cross commemorating my death along this lonely highway? Or would some other poor innocent get the wooden cross?

We were in the opposite lane now, ripping past anybody moving under eighty miles an hour, dodging oncoming vehicles however we could. The orchards of Royal City were long gone. The landscape here was brown and dead. We were in the desert. Washtucna, LaCrosse, Dusty- towns so small that they’re hard to notice at normal speeds. To us, they were barely there at all. The speedometer read just under a hundred miles per hour. We were doomed; I could feel it in my gut. There was no way we could keep this pace for long.

We came up on a semi-truck and had to slow and wait as a row of oncoming traffic moved past. I could feel her impatience. With each tiny gap she pulled half way into the opposite lane, hoping to make a mad dash, but instead was forced back behind the semi as another car whizzed past. I wanted to say
something, to calm her down, but I couldn't think of anything. She was a slave to her lusts and her demons. She was void of all restraint. Strands of golden hair clung to her face and to the sticky remains of spilled alcohol. She chugged her Sparks and jerked the car to the right, speeding past the semi on the narrow shoulder.

"Bet you didn't know I would do that," she said.

"Of course I did," I said and took a drink. I tried to act calm. My rib cage was so tight against my lungs I was having trouble breathing. As we swerved ahead of the truck and back into our lane, I felt the back tires break and begin to drift.

Interstates are full of strange people and Interstate 84 through Southern Idaho is no exception. Here, near Idaho's southern border with Nevada, I hitched a short ride on the outskirts of Twin Falls with a foul-smelling repugnance of a man named Tim.

He pulled up to me, rolled open the passenger window, and told me that he was only going about six miles but there was a truck stop and Burger King at the next exit. His fat, round body slumped deep into the grimy seat of his dirty, white Honda, which was filled to the door-stops with candy wrappers, cigarette butts and every other kind of garbage.

While I was reluctant to accept the ride, I had been waiting at this lonely rural on-ramp for a cold couple of hours and was eager to make my way to a better spot.

When I got into the car I was instantly uncomfortable. Tim was silent except for the incessant wheezing of his throat with each shallow breath he took. I didn't imagine he had bathed in quite some time. His once white T-shirt was tarnished with every snuff-colored substance imaginable- from the disseminating coppers of his arm-pit stains, to days of greasy fast-food slips-ups, to whole-cup coffee spills. He was a mess.

"So what do you do," I asked, hoping to ease the tension that only I seemed to feel.

"Me?" he said. "I don't give a shit because I'm dying."

I just stared at the empty brown cattle-land through a cracked windshield. The fracture lines seemed to scramble across the glass like cobwebs; Black Widows and Brown Recluse sulking in the cracks. Of all the awkward moments I had experienced, somehow this one was the very worst. I felt trapped. Did he mean now? Was he planning to die with me in the car?

It was all I could do to squeeze out a wimpish, "Yeah?"

Tim didn't answer. He just stared ahead in silence as the dotted white lines of the Interstate whipped by at seventy miles per hour.
Finally, with a sigh that seemed to signal to me that it was alright to breathe again, he began to explain that he was living out the final phase of a liver disease which, doctors had told him, would take his life within the next few months.

"Don't really seem like much point in working anymore," Tim said, lighting a cigarette.

It wasn't long before he pulled off the freeway and let me out into a busy Burger King parking lot. Wondering what he might have been like had I met him a year earlier, I stood outside the restaurant's sterilized glass Playland and watched as his car disappeared among the endless hoards of anonymous morning commuters.

In California, near the notorious Donner Pass of cannibal fame, a former special forces soldier picked me up. He hated the government, didn't trust them at all. He told us that during Vietnam, while the rest of the military was roaming through jungles in the name of democracy, he was in the Middle East securing oil fields for U.S. interests.

Later I was picked up by another man who was the head manager of a slot machine factory which employed only Mexicans, many of them illegal. I told him what the special forces guy had told me.

"Sure," he said matter-of-fact, "that's what the Vietnam War was really about." I had never heard that before. Maybe I'm too young.

We were on the very edge of control now, moving fast in the wrong lane. Her eyes were bloodshot and wide. Insanity of Sparks and focus and lunacy. Cars to the right, a deep ditch to the left, headlights bearing down on us like the white lights of heaven. There was nowhere to go. Here it comes, I thought. This is it. My heart was choking with terror. I slumped back in my seat and braced for impact...

The car that was hurling towards us veered right, skirting the edge of the ditch. We veered right toward the double-solid center line. The cars next to us broke hard. The Volvo's sport Pirreli squeaked as we skidded through the center gap, dodging doom by mere inches. I dropped my drink.

"Shit. Clean that up." She turned around and started digging through her purse. I picked up the half spilled can.

"Here," she said shoving a handful of napkins in my lap. "My car's going to smell like alcohol now."
We were back in our lane again. We were alive. Through the side mirror I could see that nobody had crashed. I took a drink and tried to act cool. She took a drink.

"Jesus Christ," I said.

She grinned a closed-mouth grin. "Boy am I glad I met you," she said. "This would’ve been a long ride by myself."

I took another drink, a long one this time.

An old hippie in a beat-up, white, windowless, van picked me up in Northern California. He had long hair, a tie-dye shirt, bandana, the works. His wife was riding shotgun and I was sitting on the floor behind them. The hippie passed me a joint to hit as he told me a story:

He had been hitchhiking on that very same road during the seventies when two tweakers in a mini Mazda truck stopped and told him to jump in the back. He didn’t know they were high on meth until they took off down freeway. They were speeding and weaving wildly, cackling like hyenas while they dodged traffic through any crazy holes the little truck would fit. On top of that it was raining and he was getting soaked. He pounded on the back window. It took the tweakers a while to realize he was pounding.

"Pull over!" he yelled. "Right here’s fine. This is good. Pull over. I’ve gotta throw up."

The tweakers finally pulled over and he jumped out. Along with a lot of other garbage, there was a sopping wet towel in the back. He grabbed it and walked up to the driver’s window, motioning for him to roll it down.

"I slapped that dude right in the face with it," he said. "As hard as I could. WHAAAP! Right in the fucking face. WHA PSSSH!!" he said mimicking the snap of a towel. "Just like that," he said, "WHA PSSSH! That dude didn’t know what the fuck to think. He was stunned."

The hippie said he took off running and hid in the woods along the freeway until the tweakers left.

"Fucking meth heads," he said. I handed the joint to his wife who was laughing hysterically. "Yeah, you really got to watch your ass hitchhiking. You never know who is gonna come along."

Soft purple cumulus clouds hung in the evening sky as we rolled over the horizon that finally revealed Pullman. We had crossed the desert. We were home. My relief turned to blissful delirium. The same feeling after a good roller coaster ride, except more. Way more. Survival. That was the feeling. Pure, abstract survival of the highest order. I could feel it dripping down my spine. One final downhill decent into town and this madness would be over.
“You know what we need?” she said, “Some weed. You don’t have any do you? That’s okay. I’ve got some at my house. We’ll go smoke there.”

My driver lived alone in the Aspen Village apartments at the top of a hill. For some reason I was nervous. The chemicals of logic in my body had been held at bay by the excitement of excessive chaos. But now, on the verge of something, my nerves were finally giving out. There was only so much I could suppress. The caffeine, herbal infusions, receding adrenaline, lactic acid, the alcohol, confusion, they couldn’t have been helping. I was more hopped-up, jittery and edgy, than drunk. An intense anxiety. Foreboding disquiet. Angst. Fear? I felt my pocket for the condom. It was there. I think. I checked again.

She went to her bedroom and returned with a glass pipe, black from resin, and a small bag of marijuana—about a gram. I thought the weed would help but it only made things worse. She sat on the love seat and I sat down next to her. I was too self-absorbed to pay much attention to her, too nervous to make a move. I just sat there, awkwardly. Is it her? I wondered. I wasn’t nervous before, through all that. She had been in charge then. I had been faking it. The mix of chemicals had become too much. Our flirtation had come to an end.

“Now only the bridge to cross.

It’s dark now in the Columbia Gorge. There’s no moon but a million stars are glittering in ripples atop the black water behind me. I haven’t seen a car come through in a while now. Even if one did come they wouldn’t pick me up. Not out here. Flashed across by dim headlights, only the worst can be seen. I’m barely a shadow. Vantage glimmers across the river. It is cold out here.

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