

## All the Way Down

Highway 78 dropped into a much larger town at the base of the mountain on this side. According to highway signs dotting the descent, it was called Evanston, and I could see that the state route skirted the north side of it. We'd come to a scenic over-look about half-way down, and had taken a few minutes to eat, as I described to Brin what I saw below. We were standing next to each other at a hip-height rock wall, backed by a side-walk and the parking lot. The valley was spread out before us.

It was almost a city, spreading far south of the highway. The business district paralleled the route, giving way to neighborhoods and light industrial parks farther beyond. A tall ridge loomed along the north side of the roadway. There were a few large homes sprinkled atop the ridge-line fed by circuitous access roads, but not much else to the north due to rising terrain beyond.

After finishing my description, I asked her what she thought. She replied,

"Can you tell how far? From this side to the other, if we stay on the road?"

"It's at least a couple of miles, maybe farther. It's a straight shot, but if there's a toll to pay, which you *know* there is, it's along there."

"And how far around?"

I sighed, and scratched my scalp. What I wouldn't give for a shower. Or even a pond, at this point.

"Fifteen? More? It's a long way, and who knows if it's any safer. I can see smoke rising in a few places, so there *are* people living here."

Her response was delayed, and when it came, I could hear a hint of frustration in it.

"Look, if you want me to take over, just let me know. It must be hard making all these decisions."

I debated, and decided to push back.

"Yeah, that would be great. Can I ride in the wheel-barrow?"

She didn't hesitate.

"Of course. You'll wait for me at the bottom of the mountain when you get there, right?"

The idea hit me like a freight-train, and my irritation was lost to it instantly.

"Holy shit. You are brilliant."

I leaned over and kissed her cheek before she had a chance to react. She put a hand to it, brow furrowing.

"Wait, what?"

"We need to go back up a bit. Let's go."

On our descent from the pass, we'd come across a few abandoned vehicles. A few hundred yards before the over-view exit ramp, there'd been a small pickup parked on the shoulder, doors open and covered with dust like the rest. I'd barely paid attention at the time, but enough to notice that it had a shell covering the bed, and was old enough to likely be a stick-shift. The biggest question now was the state of the tires and brakes. Brin protested as we returned to the wheel-barrow.

"Are you going to share, or what?"

I told her my idea.

"Will that even work?"

"I have no idea. No power steering, no brake assist. You can veto if you want, but once again, it's all I have. It's this, or we try to walk all the way through there. I don't see around as an option. Damn, Brin, *everything* we're doing out here is a hail Mary."

She didn't say anything for a bit, as we pulled the wheel-barrow out of the parking lot, and back up along the over-look ramp. It was my turn to impatient.

"Well? Yes or no?"

All the snark was gone when she answered, and I could hear in her voice that she wasn't so much mad as really, really tired, despite the fact that it was only late afternoon. It made sense. She'd pulled our stuff up the other side by herself.

"Forget what I said. Fine, if you want to do it, but do we have to right now?"

"No. We can pull the pin tomorrow. Bed-time for Brin, I think."

We made it back up to the pickup. The back window of the shell was unlocked, and the bed was empty, so I laid out my bed-roll inside, and hers on top of it, after securing the wheel-barrow inside as well. There was just enough room for her.

"Time to crash."

She didn't comment, just crawled in, and was asleep in seconds. I closed the tail-gate and the shell window as quietly as I could, and then inspected the rest of the truck.

Over-all, it was exactly as I had hoped it would be. Four inflated tires, a manual transmission, and a key in the ignition. The brake discs looked rusty but ok on the outside faces, but I couldn't tell for sure without pulling the wheels off one by one to check the back sides. No way was that going to happen. I was also too tired.

The sun was setting, and I got in behind the wheel, pulling the driver door closed after having shut the passenger side. The hinges squealed, but Brin didn't stir that I could see through the back window. I knew this was a risk, but everything we did was. We both needed sleep, and so I let myself go as well.

I woke a number of times in the night, but not for long. I finally came fully awake before dawn, as the darkness began to pale beyond the mountains above. Brin was still asleep in the pickup bed. I realized that neither of us had slept this long for quite a while.

Besides being stiff from sleeping upright, I felt pretty good. I popped the hood release, and then got out and took care of some necessities, returning afterward to raise the hood and prop it. The scream of the hood being raised must have awakened Brin, as the truck rocked slightly, and the rear shell window popped up. I could hear the tail-gate thump down, and she appeared moments later.

"Jake?"

"Yeah."

"What time is it?"

"I don't know. Early. Sun's not up yet, but working on it."

"I can't believe I slept that long."

"I can. You were beat."

"Are you hungry? I'm starving. I'll grab some food."

She disappeared, and the truck tilted a bit again.

I unscrewed the cap on the brake fluid reservoir. Fluid gleamed within. Satisfied, I replaced it and then closed the hood. I had confirmed what I knew to.

Brin reappeared, carrying some food and a couple of water bottles. As she made her way along the truck toward me, I wondered at the sight of her. She was a mess, with tangled hair, and vestiges of blood still visible on her face. Her clothes were filthy, yet her expression was earnest, and unwary. She was entirely focused on me. How far we had come.

My heart broke, and was re-made in almost the same instant. I had thought I was capable of doing anything before, but now I knew it in a way that was no longer negotiable.

She came to a halt before me in that spooky “I know where you are” way, and offered up one of the water bottles.

“Drink this.”

I did.

“Done?”

“Yes.”

“Kiss me, then.”

I did.

In a long string of recent reorientations, this was the apex. The idea that I would ever make this particular connection had seemed like a pleasant version of a lie since that first day in Dave’s living room, but as she withdrew, I knew I had.

“Hmm. Not bad, but I should have made you brush your teeth.”

“I’m happy to do that right now, and we can try again.”

That got me a small laugh, but she shook her head

“Nope. The moment has passed.”

It was hard to let go of it. Talk about a rush. She came back to the business at hand.

“How do you feel about your idea today?”

“About the same. It’s a great idea, or the end of the road. Lots of ‘I don’t know’ in between.”

“Jake, you are no version of a salesman.”

We ended up beside each other on the bench seat in the pickup as the sun crested the highest peak, and light streamed out over the valley below. I’d already belted in, and asked Brin to do the same.

“Here we go.”

I pressed down on the brake pedal, and depressed the clutch, shifting into neutral. I let up on both.

Nothing happened.

It took me a few seconds, but then,

“Oh, for crying out loud.”

I tromped the brake pedal again, reached down, and disengaged the parking brake. Letting up on the brake pedal, the truck began to roll downhill immediately.

The brakes screamed at first deployment, as the ceramic pads scoured the rust from the steel face of the rotors, but muted quickly after the first few turns. The truck picked up speed, and the wrestling match began in earnest.

We could have never done this on the other side of the mountain. The curves here, though wider, were only navigable because I didn’t have to observe the center line. Even then, I was soon soaked in sweat and steeped in adrenalin as each successive bend in the road became its own exercise in physics and geometry. Nearly four seasons worth of detritus blanketed the road surface, and the rear

end drifted alarmingly at every corner. At least I had the steering wheel to hang onto. Brin had the “oh, shit” handle above the passenger door in a death grip, and was doing her best to brace herself with her legs and other hand.

I was tempted to ride the brake even more, and take it slower, but I had no idea when we’d hit the base of the mountain. This was all going to be about how fast we would be going when we did.

Then that option evaporated, as the smell of burnt metal made its way into the cab, and the brake pedal began to pulse under my foot. It was slight at first, but became more evident within minutes.

Then the pulse became a shudder, and I seriously began to doubt our chances of surviving this.

I cut the next corner so close to the edge of the asphalt that the passenger-side front wheel dropped into the dirt alongside it, and then bounced back up, even as the tail slewed toward the center line. I had to crank the wheel the other way, into the spin to correct.

We wouldn’t have made it, had there been another corner coming up, but the road straightened out before us. As the tires caught on a relatively clear patch of roadway and the truck evened out, I could see a beautifully long, straight slope ahead of us that leveled out just at the outskirts of town. The decline had to be a six or seven percent grade. I took my foot off the brake, and watched the speedometer climb rapidly.

“Come on, gravity.”

Brin reached over and smacked my shoulder with the back of her hand.

“Update, please.”

“Sorry. Curve level completed, and it’s a straight shot now. A long downhill, the best we could’ve hoped for. Now we’re just looking for escape velocity.”

“I might have said you were easy to understand, and that’s true, except when you are talking. Stop trying to be clever.”

“Fine. Alive. Going straight. Going fast. Hoping to go far.”

“Thank you. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

When we hit the bottom of the grade, we were doing just under ninety. The town began to flash past on our left, even as the speedometer needle began to drop. Most vehicles were on the shoulder, but some were further out into the roadway, and each time I had to navigate around them, it bled off more speed.

I undid my seat-belt, and when Brin heard the click, she did the same.

We dropped down through sixty, and then fifty when something caromed off of the hood faster than I could see. Then something else smacked into the front fender.

“What was that?”

“Assholes are shooting at us.”

Now forty, then thirty. No new impacts.

“Get ready to bail. Meet me at the back.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake.”

“You are so easy.”

Twenty-five, twenty.

We'd gone a long way. I could see the other edge of town, maybe a half-mile in the distance. But we wouldn't make it. That was clear.

Fifteen, ten.

I called it, pulling over to the right shoulder, slotting in between the right side of a box van and left of the high retaining wall running along this section of the roadway. It was as much shelter as I'd seen from the buildings lining the other side of the road.

We both exited the truck as it came to a halt, moving fast to the rear. I opened the shell window and dropped the tail-gate, and went to work freeing the wheel-barrow from its restraints. As soon as it was free, I pulled it out, and used the inclined nose of it in a controlled fall to the ground off the back of the tail-gate. I flipped the tarp back, liberated my bow and quiver, and slung them. I turned to Brin. She looked concerned, but ready, and calm.

"Ready to run for it?"

She just nodded.

We pulled it behind us across the short grass at the base of the retaining wall, leaving the little truck behind as we rushed back to the blacktop, and then legged it as fast as we could toward the open road ahead.