

Sons

"She wouldn't give me a steak for no less than four dollars," the younger told his brother.

"Did you tell her it didn't need cooked?" the older said.

"No."

"Well, get back in and tell her then. Hurry up."

The younger brother slammed the car door with both hands and ran into the restaurant, his black crewcut hustling up the steps and around the door after he swung it open.

The older would have turned around to check on his father passed out and sweating in the back seat. But as it was, it took just about all he had in him to hold in the clutch and the brake. He'd already killed the car a couple of times and the trouble getting it started was enough that he figured it best to keep the thing running all the way back to Buford.

The younger came running out with a cloth wrapped around a little brick of ice.

"It's all they had," he said. "Leastways all they'd give me."

The older brother said, "That's alright. Put it on him. Over where it's swollen."

The younger turned and reached into the back seat. His father was leaned against the window, passed out. The younger held the ice brick near his father's face, then drew it away.

"Where do I put it?" he said.

It was a good question. Their father's face, broadsided by a shovel head, was puffing up all over.

The man straightened to life, scaring the two boys.

"Give it to me on my left," he said. "S'my good side."

The younger handed the little brick, maybe more like a bar of soap now with the heat, over to his father who rubbed it up and down his left cheek.

"Can you believe it?" the father said.

The older pressed the gas and let out the clutch in little coughs. By the time the car caught a gear it was revved enough to shoot gravel across the lot and into the other cars.

"Easy," the father said. "Who the hell taught you how to drive?" He started to laugh but coughed, dropped the bar and fell asleep on the seat.

"Nobody," the older said.

They drove maybe an hour before their father stirred. A wet scab of blood and mucus bridged his mouth to the seat as he sat up.

"Mother," he said. "All her life, all she did, that's all they put."

He looked through his jacket pockets for the cigarettes his older son swiped while they were dragging him into the car. He checked his coat pockets slow and his older son watched in the rearview mirror as he relearned and forgot that the two pockets on the front of his suit coat were just for show.

"You boys. You put something better on for me. Sweet Man. Greatest Man of All Creation." He lay down, using the leftover slice of ice and the rag as a pillow.

The older brother kept driving, and except for a curve he came in a little hot on because he didn't want to downshift, everything was going okay. The brothers smoked two of the cigarettes stolen from their father. The younger had to turn around in the seat and steal matches from their father's coat pocket. When their father awoke his hands danced like he was playing a ghost piano. He slurred, "Fuck off" and the boys giggled before getting the matches and smoking together. The older watched the younger, how he only put the filter to his small pink lips a couple of times. The rest of the time he just held the cigarette with his fingers the way you might hold a pencil.

The older drove into the afternoon. Both boys were sweating through their button-up shirts. Their lips were white and peeling. They pulled off into a little gas station and the older let the car die as it coasted into place next to the pimp. It took a minute before he could uncoil his hands. He didn't know he was holding the wheel so tight.

The older said, "Get dad's wallet."

The younger twisted around and dug into their father's pants. Their father rolled over, but in his half sleep he pulled his wallet from his back pocket and held it up. He spoke into the seat. He said, "When I die, I want mine to say, He Did What He Could've."

The younger took the wallet and put on his coat before he walked into the service station.

The older pushed up on the lever and used two hands to jam the nozzle into the car. He didn't know how much to put in. He tried to remember how long it took, how long his father would stand with his thin arms crossed, scratching at the little scabs on his knuckles.

He waited until he thought there was enough, twenty-five Mississippi. He pulled the nozzle out. A few drips fell on his good shoes. He hung up the nozzle, licked his thumb and tried to rub the gas spots away in fast circles. He didn't notice the younger running across the lot until he heard the passenger door squeak open and slam shut.

The man working the gas station stepped over to the window. He watched the car jump and stall. It crept forward, then shot to life, bursting onto the empty road, fishtailing a little and revved hard. And damned if he could see any driver in there.

The older said, "Why are you still wearing your coat?"

The younger smiled. When he smiled, he kept his lips closed, but one sharp tooth crept over his bottom lip, a little fang. He opened his coat and pulled out two Cokes, drips unzipping the frost jacket on each bottle.

"Did you buy those or steal them?"

"I bought them," he said.

"With whose money?"

The younger put on his angry face. His mouth went angry, his eyes wet. "With my money," he said.

The younger always had a couple dollars. He was good about sacking away his money in small hiding spots around his room, and the boys were sealed together when the older once ran headfirst into an unwinnable fight to try and get the younger's plastic billfold out of an older boy's hands.

The older said, "Okay."

The younger scrambled though the glove box, then under the seat until he wrapped his fingers

around a metal bottle opener shaped like a woman with a bottle-opening head. He cracked the bottle and handed it to the older. The older looked over, then turned his eyes back to the road and reached out for the bottle.

“Is it good?” the younger said.

“Real good,” the older said.

The younger cracked the second bottle and turned around in his seat. “Dad,” he said. He shook his father’s shoulder and held the bottle under his nose like smelling salts. “Dad, wake up and have a drink.”

Their father raised his eyebrows. He sat up and grabbed the bottle. He leaned back and tipped the brown drink into his throat. He started spraying the soda back out before he pulled the bottle from his lips.

“Oh, god. That’s horrible!” he said. His hand searched for the rag that held the ice brick. He opened one eye and found it on the floor. Dirt and other filth stuck to the wet rag and the father rubbed it on his face. “When I’m all finished here, I want mine to say, We Were Blessed to Have Him.”

The father slouched into the seat. The bottle slipped from his hands and bounced on the floor. The younger snatched it up. Half of it was foamed away. He used the cuff of his only button-up shirt to wipe coke from the outside of the bottle.

The older said, “Hold this for a second.” He handed the younger his bottle and then grabbed the ruined one.

“Hey,” the younger said.

“Drink it,” the older said.

The younger held the bottle with both hands and tipped it up, arching his back. The older drank from his bottle. Grit washed into his mouth and the bottle was sticky in his hands. The younger said, “Can we try and give dad some again?”

The older used the rearview mirror, tilted all the way down, to look at their father, passed out in the back seat, the filthy cloth folded under his head as a pillow.

“I think he’s had his share,” he said.

The darker the road was, the less sure the older was of where he was going. He remembered sneaking out in the summer when only the screen door kept him inside at night. The neighborhood was different. More his. He has trouble seeing too far down the road. The school tested his eyes and ears and checked for lice. No lice. His ears were fine. The nurse said he might need glasses soon. She said he could come to the office if his parents were unable to pay for them. He walked home with his test results. The younger had a paper with him too. He kept his flat, unfolded, even though it only told them what they already knew about his left ear and what a shotgun blast in the closed up garage does to it

The older squeezed his eyes into slits to read the road sign. Fifty-two. That sounded right.

The father was snoring after vomiting a little more than what was left in his stomach into the footwell.

The younger rolled down his window for the smell. He shivered himself to sleep and the older woke him to roll up his window. The younger did and then pulled his shirt up over his mouth and nose and fell back to sleep.