

Passenger Story I

Three of us: sixteen, seventeen and eighteen with six fluorescent incriminating paws. We were wedged in Luke's Plymouth Laser contemplating our fate. The Plymouth had shiny gold painted steel rims. White kid hip-hop blasted on the stereo. We should have silenced the speakers and our hands before we pulled down the driveway.

Two squad cars with reflective door decals sat in front of Dave's house. He was the youngest, relishing his chance to hang with the big kids. Luke and I needed an outlet for our repressed teenaged buildups. Luke pulled the Plymouth right on through the circular driveway without deceleration. He turned right onto County D and we were headed towards toward Lake Tomahawk, cruising through the late October darkness. I guess Luke preferred to leave Dave's parents to the police.

I squinted through the autumn's half-naked trees towards the neighbor's house. They also happened to be Dave's aunt and uncle. The view was sharp the crisp, cold air. Every imaginable light was on. Even car headlights reflected from inside the open garage doors. I thought I could see a silhouette standing in the garage door, staring inside. A cylinder of light shot miles up into the atmosphere above the house.

"I can't see the truck," Dave reported from the backseat. I twisted to look back through a hole he had cleared in the fog on the back window. We had been breathing heavily and our camouflaged hunting gear was damp.

I squirmed in the passenger seat. Luke sped on in pursuit of his headlights. I couldn't decide if he was trying to catch up to the light or violate a universal constant and force us back in time. He turned off the radio and we rode in silence until Lake Tomahawk.

"Whaddya wanna do? Where should I go?" Luke was concerned about his parents. They often stayed up late until he got home to check in. He was an arbitrary adult but he acted the same as Dave and I. Why shouldn't he?

"I hope Debbie doesn't get blamed for this," Dave was selflessly talking about his mother. I never understood why children spoke of their parents without formality or honorific titles. "My aunt and uncle have a restraining order against her, but not me. I even let the dogs out on Wednesday night when Mark and Karen are at church group." His words contained shrapnel that sliced through the innocence of our prank. It was too late for that anyway. Things had turned sinister long before.

Dave crafted a family tree with conflated limbs: neighbors, adversaries, friends, real people and fictional characters interbreeding. I guessed that all families were like this. So, while I was confused by the family dynamic I decided not to press Dave. He had bounced around from place to place and school to school. He never told the same story twice. These are the marks of a brilliant conversationalist, lost boy or blatant liar. In fact, I had noticed he would concoct different stories for different social settings. As far as I could tell, his dad was in the army, his mom was a bohemian artist and his much younger siblings were mentally disabled McArthur grant candidates.

Neither Luke nor I had the slightest inkling of who this kid in the back seat was or the extent of his family's feud. Or of the puppeteer grandmother who maintained a balance of power that would have made Otto Von Bismarck's mustache curl. Dave certainly didn't know that he was a pawn child Hatfield or Capulet. Or that his family had been disintegrating into anxiety and hatred with alongside their matriarch's dementia.

They fought it out in sewing circles, bars and school board meetings. His family lore included "The Teapot Incident" which was decided in Milwaukee County Court; "Grandma Bernie's Funeral" where Dave was conceived; and "Easter, 1993" where a cousin was mysteriously poisoned and needed a stomach pump. On this sleepy fall Thursday, the three of us were unwitting soldiers who had committed just another atrocity in a history of familial conflict. We continued west on State Highway 47 away from Lake Tomahawk.

"We have to go turn ourselves in, right? I mean, they're already at Dave's house..." I was proud that Luke addressed me as the guiding voice, "They saw us drive by for God's sake. His uncle saw us in the garage. They can identify us. We can't run forever. We gotta go establish an alibi, print off some social security cards..." the silence had prompted Luke to rehash every caper movie he had ever seen and search for an out. "We left the pliers, the paint. And the wrench and

the flashlights. Oh, god..." His voice was rising in pitch and volume. His breathing was audible and quickened. "They have our fingerprints and DNA all over them." Luke was rambling scared. I had not seen this since I had met him in Boy Scouts, frightened and squinting in the dark, scrounging for his glasses outside the latrine. I turned towards his face, eerily lit by the Plymouth's instrument panel. His fear was contagious. It pulled the ends of my stomach knot tighter.

The worst part was that I had heard them coming. I thought back to the scene to a two car garage. I heard the car tires crinkle grind down the driveway. I stopped and stood still, needlessly frozen within the dark garage. I had little experience as a mercenary or saboteur. I looked toward Luke's outline for help. He was moving toward the side door and probable exit.

"Wait till the motor starts then break for it when they pull in," there was a quiver even his whisper. It sounded reasonable enough. In the dark I nodded, once again needlessly, to signal that I had heard his directions. I held my breath and heard blood pulsing in my middle ear.

The behemoth big F-150 lurked between us and the unoccupied garage stall. The truck wouldn't be running again soon. If anyone tried before re-reversing the battery cables, it never would. The upholstery festered. Three tires were flat without valve stems. If the headlights would ever shine again, they would be cross-eyed. A live trapped chipmunk bounced about the glove box. There were rolls of unused saran wrap on the garage floor. We may have only spent fifteen minutes in active vandalism but we had spent years in adolescent researcher.

In the darkness we waited. The car's radiator fan switched on and there was a faint squeal from its serpentine belt on the other side of the garage door. Three vandals were tightly packed in the corner of the garage. Luke's hand fondled and twisted on the doorknob. I thought of bobsledder rhythmically counting down before a run.

A car door slammed. I could hear the crunch, crunch of footsteps atop the driveway gravel. I strained to hear the house door shut. The faintest sound of country western electric guitar whined from the car speakers. Then calm came over me, either resignation to fate or anticipation of action. It was the bathtub moment when silent water fills your ear canals and the only intrusion is the ripple of the water surface.

It felt safe inside the garage with the growling beast at bay. The door motor exploded like a jet engine in a phone booth, destroying the stillness of our sanctuary. I was jarred back to the realization that we were the beasts, the predators, the instigators, the problem children whose idle hands had taken to the devils work.

"Go!" David's regular voice sounded odd after our careful whispers and stifled giggles. He shoved Luke towards the door. I moved to, like a caboose at the end of a train. Then, with a series of increasingly frantic bounces, thuds and kicks we three separately learned that the door was stuck, locked or otherwise immovable. I thought about the chipmunk. We shuffle paced in a tightening circle, trapped like rain barrel fish dodging shot.

"Shit, Shit, Shit, Shit." Luke took off toward the opening garage door and ducked toward the Subaru headlights. Dave and I followed in a human stampede. Into the dark we ran, blinded by the car's headlights.

I was getting whapped in the face by branches as I struggled to keep up with Luke's slender cross country body. Dave was bringing up the rear. There was something jingling in Dave's pocket. Without irony, I thought about how ignorant he was to keep something so loud on his person while we were trying to be so quiet.

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness. I saw Luke stopped ahead, pulling on a wire that was snagged on the back of his pants. I grabbed on the wire and with a rip of cloth, yanked him free and sliced my hand on unseen barbs. I couldn't see his face but I imagine his eyes were wide, forehead bunched and nostrils flared with terror.

We waited another few moments while Dave caught up and the three of us sprinted another fifty yards toward a Plymouth Laser sitting conspicuously on the shoulder of Highway D. Just as I reached the car, I could hear a man yelling over my huffing. Only the most profane words were allowed from his mouth.

We drove, now miles past Lake Tomahawk. We had spent an hour in motion and silence which Dave interrupted, "You have to admit, when we put our minds to it, we can do extraordinary things." At first I was disgusted. Then as it sunk in, I began to laugh and so did Luke. It was nervous but fresh with inside-joke camaraderie.

It was a short lived distraction and we returned to our sullen thoughts. Luke wondered what adult prison would be like. He wondered about group showers and gang fights and bunk mates. Dave was realizing the scope of his family dysfunction. He was rationalizing his actions as a heroic figure. The three of us were dreading, relishing and preparing our stories for our parents.

I folded inward, reflecting on the destruction which we had wrecked. I wondered how we ever thought it would be a suitable action. I wondered how we had gotten so out of control. I wondered where we were.

Luke had been turning onto narrower and narrower roads until we had left the pavement behind. We were hurdling through the darkness, much too fast at 40 miles per hour, on a gravel forestry road. I knew we were lost but I also knew the final destination. I leaned back and closed my eyes in the passenger seat and listened to the rocks that kicked up against the bottom of Luke's Plymouth Laser. He chased after his headlights into the guilty black night.