

## Waiting to Know

Some miles out of town our car follows a curve in the blacktop, and an invisible force presses my left knee and left elbow into the car door. It's a familiar, expected sensation – but it is still a mystery. My father powers our car through the curve, and as the road straightens, the invisible force releases me from the car door. It is gone as quickly as it had come. Along a road that is mostly straight and mostly level, we drive through wheat fields and cotton fields. The world outside the car window next to me streams by like a movie. The old tires hum along the two-lane. When a car approaches, my brothers and I compete to name it by make and model. My father is the world champion of this game, but he gives my brothers and me a few guesses before he tells us no, that's a '63 Chevy Impala, or some such. My mother, although she's some class of a girl, is pretty good at the game, but she just tries to be funny. When a cattle truck approaches, she will point toward it and yell out there's a Ford Mustang. My brothers and I will go haha and heehee and ackack, like it's the funniest thing we've ever heard.

We drive past farmhouses and barns, past grazing cattle and pump jacks, and through scattered stands of mesquite and scraggly oak trees. About every ten miles a small town straddles the road at a flashing traffic light, usually anchored by the looming, whitewashed towers of a grain elevator or the gray, tin-sided buildings of a cotton gin. These small towns spread across the flat land in rough, irregular circles until they reach the margins of what the environment and the economy can provide. Then they go dry and wrinkled around the edges, and will never be anything other than small towns, dusty islands in a sea of plowed ground. Most of them are slowly shrinking as more and more of their young people move away.

Some of the towns have a farm implement store, surrounded by grain drills and plows, tractors and combines. On corners near the flashing lights, Gulf and Texaco stations sell Regular and Ethyl. They keep used tires and old radiator hoses and fan belts on racks near ten-cent Coke machines. On other corners there are feed stores and hardware stores and mechanics' garages. Along the little Main Streets there are drug stores and five-and-dime stores and plain places with plain food people call the café or the diner.

Life here is welded to the land and to the seasons. From Thanksgiving until the New Year, cotton trailers, filled to overflowing, crowd the gin yards. During cotton planting time in June, tattered remnants of the previous year's crop still flutter from fence wires in places, and catch in the grass and weeds next to the road. By August, the excess wheat that had been piled into low mountains on the ground next to the grain elevators has been stored away, and people begin hoping for the heat to break and the rain to come.

It's mostly the women who talk about the heat, and it's mostly the men who talk about the rain. A woman pouring coffee at a café tells my grandfather it's been so hot lately if someone tells her to go to hell she's going to take a sweater. An old man with a limp at a gas station says sure, he got some moisture out at his place – he checked the rain gauge and it looked like a bug might have walked by and spit in it. Everyone knows the heat will break, it always does. Everyone knows the rain will come, it always has. But still, people complain. My grandfather says they complain mostly out of modesty. People don't want anyone knowing that they are really pretty happy, as that would seem like showing

off. So they complain. My grandfather tells me that having the same complaints is the key to friendships, and that I should remember that.

My father slows our car as we approach the flashing lights, and if he sees a farm implement store he slows down even more. The sight of a shiny new John Deere tractor or a giant gleaming Gleaner combine is worth a closer look. My father says there is talk of the new tractors and combines coming with air conditioning. I can hear in his voice that he is both impressed and skeptical. We know from the television that big changes are taking place all over the world. Almost everyone believes changes will find their way here, too. Most of the grown-ups are forward-looking people, but they want a future they can understand, and no one is certain that's the kind they are going to get. For now, though, what counts for big changes down here are things like air conditioning and power steering coming to tractors and combines.

Farther north, the road crosses the Clear Fork of the Brazos on a big metal bridge that seems out of place and out of scale in this empty land. A sign near the bridge announces the Clear Fork of the Brazos as if it were the Mississippi, but the Clear Fork of the Brazos is always nearly dry. As we approach the river in our car, we catch sight of the bridge in the distance, and my father launches into a retelling of a time when the bridge iced over during a winter night. He tells us he was running down this very road in his old pickup truck, and he was going about a hundred. He says he drove up onto that bridge and hit that ice, and then he slid way over this way, then he slid way over that way, then he slid way over this way again. Then, he says, he slid right on across the bridge and drove on home as pretty as you please. And no, he wasn't scared or anything. Many of my father's stories feature him escaping unharmed and unconcerned from grave danger, and my brothers and I love hearing them. Each of us wants more than anything else in life to be exactly like our father, though I know I could never be like him.

My mother has a more balanced view of her husband. From her side of the front seat she tells him the only way his old pickup would go a hundred miles per hour is if someone pushed it – off the Empire State Building. The Empire State Building is the tallest thing any of us has ever heard of, so it gets mentioned quite a bit.

I lean back against the car seat, imagining my father's pickup falling from the Empire State Building. What is it that makes things fall? And how could you possibly know the speed of a free-falling Chevrolet? Years from now I will learn that these questions are easily answered – by one of Newton's Laws. I will again imagine my father's old pickup, see it rolling slowly across the roof of the Empire State Building. I will watch it tip over the side and plummet the 381 meters to the ground. I will see it explode onto Fifth Avenue, sending a collection of empty oil containers, spare tires, rusty chains, old car parts, and my father's favorite thing in the whole world, cans of WD-40, whizzing like so much shrapnel through the streets of Midtown. I will calculate its speed at impact at over 193 miles per hour, so my mother was right.

Remembering my father's old pickup and his story about the icy bridge will make me wish I could travel back in time, through all the intervening years between then and now, to this very moment. Where I could see my parents young again and be with my brothers in a time and place before everything changed for us. There will be many times in my life when I wish I could just start all over, when I look back with a strange blend of fascination and regret – the nostalgia that is impossible to comprehend here in 1965. Right now my past seems like only moments long, and

hardly worth considering, while the rest of my life seems to spread endlessly before me, full of everything I am waiting to do and waiting to know. I hope it's a future I can understand.

Sometimes my father stops our car at the plum thicket near the bridge over the Clear Fork of the Brazos. He knows how much my brothers and I like to pick the plums. He turns and looks into the backseat, trying to sound annoyed for having stopped. He tells us go on, pick as many as we can. He tells us if we aren't back here in ten minutes he will drive off and leave us, but we know he never would. My brothers and I are soon out of the car and running across the road and down the embankment into the plum thicket. It doesn't matter how many plums you eat or push down into your pockets or hold inside your shirt next to your skin. There are always more – hundreds, maybe even thousands more plums. The natural abundance here amazes us. It makes us happy.