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Five Hundred Miles to Freedom

By Shawn Whites

Driving your father's pickup truck, your head turned to see how far we'd come, the empty road splitting the barren blue desert sand behind us, five hundred miles to freedom. You smile like I have never seen you smile before—and this time I think it's real—as the wind swirls your blonde hair and the dark shadows of the landscape move fast outside the window like a shutter-film, placing you against it in slow motion.

Do you see the fireworks in the distance as they climb above the dark limestone hills, kaleidoscopic, the remnants falling to the horizon like candy sprinkles? Do you hear their explosions echo in the vacuum of the empty night, like popcorn popping inside a microwave? Inside the truck the cassette tape plays a hollow electric guitar as a man's voice echoes and with each note, higher, higher, I watch your eyes close and you dance, your head moving sinuously in circles, your feet tap-tapping on the floor, until you become invisible.

We're driving fast at ninety miles per hour and the fireworks get closer but I don't know where they're coming from, we haven't passed through a town since we got into this desert and that was hours ago. I watch them like I used to watch them on the fourth of July back home in Indiana where you and I used to sit on that old white bed sheet in the middle of the high school football field, the stadium lights turned off. We'll never see that field again, though, never going back to that town, and as I begin to float away into a memory you grab my thigh and then point out the windshield and say, *Do you see? Is that ...* and I say, *Maybe it's a fair? I don't know, maybe it's not real. It can't be.* You ask, *Can we stop?* And I look down at the duffle bag that hides a stack of crumpled bills, \$2,695 to be exact—both of our savings combined minus the couple hundred that we'd already spent on bread, gas, and water to get this far—and you look at me and say, *Please?* But the way your eyes stare at me, I can't say no, so I tell you, *If it's more than \$10 we can't go in,* and you must think it's not because now I feel your lips pressed against my cheek.

When I pull the truck over into a parking lot of sand and gravel there are only four cars. I don't want to spend any of the money so I tell you, *They must be closed,* but you say, *All the lights are on, and the music, can't you hear the music?* So I say, *Alright,* and we walk up to a booth that reads tickets but there is no one inside. I put my hand in the pocket of my jeans and feel a few dollar bills but you grab me and say, *Wes, there is no one here, let's just go inside,* and we do.

A carnival, but not like back home, because the few people we see here are all brown, nothing like we've ever seen before, and you tug my shoulder and whisper into my ear, *Look how dark they are, I think they're Native Americans.* I've only seen them in history books, never in real life, so I say, *I think you're right,* and we continue walking as we smile at them not knowing what to do, and they smile back—I can tell this makes you happy.

Look at the neon lights of the Ferris wheel glowing like a Christmas tree set against a dark black sky; listen to the clanging sounds of the carousel turning its rustic wooden horses, the pipe organ blowing chimes like train whistles, the cymbals like tin pots dropped upon a kitchen floor. Do you smell the funnel cakes and the steam from the fried red peppers? Do you feel the thin air out here struggling to hold us down, almost like you could float away any minute? We walk straight to the Ferris wheel because I want to be romantic and take you to the top of the world, and when we ride you quickly fall asleep on my shoulder as we move like a clock hand slowly turning time.

As you're asleep I stare up at the moon, who looks much lonelier than us, and who is so luminously white like a jewel from all the stars reflecting off of each other that she looks like one big eye in the sky—the only eye to watch over us now—just like it's watching over the land below. I began talking to the moon, because, you know, when you disappear like this I need someone to talk back, and the moon talks back, and I know, as the craters seem to move to form a smile as if acknowledging what I say.

But it's getting late and the Ferris wheel bulbs are shutting of one by one so I nudge you and say, *We better go.* As we're walking almost everyone who was here has left, and I catch your eyes peering over to

the red trailer to your left that holds stuffed animals on the wall. I know that your dad never took you to the fair, never did a nice thing for you, and I wish your mother was still alive because she would've saved you from him, but that's why I'm here, that's why we left, and though I can't do much for you I want to do all that I can so I lead your hand with me towards the stand and you say, *Where are we going?* I lead you along to the little man behind the counter with a thick black moustache and thin green eyes whose white shirt still sticks to his skin from the hot desert day. He asks in slow English, *What are you two kids doing out here so late, all alone in the desert?* I turn to you and kiss your forehead and tell the man, *Just chasing a dream.* The man smiles, nods his head, and says as he waves his hands, pointing up to the sky, *Ah, you see this... this is a magical land we're on, and we believe if you close your eyes and think hard enough, your dream will find you,* and I nod, knowing that we are almost there, maybe another day, and I point up at the stuffed animals and turn to you, *Which one do you want?* And you tell me, *No, we don't have much money Wes,* but I turn to the man and say, *I'll take the brown bear,* and he looks at me real deep like he is looking through me and grabs a white buffalo from the very top instead, and it's kinda ugly, not as good looking as the bears and the horses. He hands it to me and says, *Here, this is the white buffalo, the sacred animal of my people, it will bring you closer to your dream,* and I turn to you and your cheeks are red and you've got your hand on your mouth, laughing, and I ask you, *What do you think?* And you say, *It's cute, I like it,* so I give the man \$5 and put it in your hands as we walk towards the truck. *Thank you, I love it,* you say, and I can tell you are happy.

But as we get closer to the gates you slow down and begin to walk towards the bathrooms. *What is it?* I ask and you tell me, *It's a family.* A family of four, a mother and father with two young children, a girl and a boy, tucked underneath their arms, bodies pressed against each other for warmth through the cold desert night, leaning up against the entrance to the restrooms. All of their eyes are closed in sleep, and the young girl—whose head is rested on her father's round belly—moves gracefully up and down each time her father snores. All they have is a blanket to cover up the children and I watch you bend down to look at them, no expression on your face, and I can tell that this makes you sad. *What do you think they're doing here?* You ask, and I say, *They don't have any place else to go.* I say, *Let's go, there's nothing we can do.*

Once in the truck the first thing I do is check that duffle bag and all the money is there so we get back onto the road where you ask, *Are we gonna die? Are we gonna end up like that Wes? Homeless in the cold?* And I laugh and say, *No, no, we're just being born. We're going to live forever,* and you clutch my hand and smile. *It's like being a kid all over again, isn't it? Not knowing what it all means, where we're gonna end up,* and you say, *I guess it's better than home.* Now you hold the white buffalo to your head and use it as a pillow, and after a few minutes you fall asleep, but there is something special about watching you sleep—peaceful like a child as if no one could do you any harm—so I let you disappear again, but now I want to stop the truck and drift away with you.

After a while I pull over to pee on the side of the road and as I'm standing there I hear the crunch of footsteps behind me upon gravel where they aren't supposed to be. I don't know why but I expect to turn around and see your father standing there—Mr. Rissinger in his camouflage hat and coffee stained twill shirt, a shotgun in his hands, coming after us to steal you from me and do what he's always done to you with his fist and the things he never should have made you do, blaming you for your mother's death. I start remembering the look on his face when I woke him up from his drunken slumber and told him that I was taking his daughter, that we'd never be back again, and then I told him I was taking his truck, too, and he'd never see that again either. He was too drunk and stupid to understand what I was saying though, so we packed our bags and got the hell out of that place, a one-stoplight town where there are no hopes and no dreams. It was the best feeling in the world—seeing him come out the front door screaming and stumbling as he watched us drive off forever. But when I turn around it's only you, crouched holding your jeans down to your knees with the remnants of the last green desert leaf in your hands, and you laugh and say, *I've never done this before,* and I say, *Done what before? Peed like this,* you say, *Out in the open,* and I tell you, *Don't worry, there ain't no one watching out here.*

We get back on the road and you start talking about all the things that we're going to do, how we're going to get a place, both get jobs, and watch the sunset on the ocean. *I've never been to the ocean,* you say, and I tell you, *We're going to live on the ocean,* and you put your head on my lap as I drive and stroke your

hair and turn the music up loud. Soon my headlights are drawn like a magnet to the green square sign that stands alone in the desert to reassure us that there is life out there somewhere, that we are on the right road to our dream, as it says Los Angeles, five hundred miles to freedom.