

Take Your Time

When Mosca first handed over the keys to the Buick, he'd warned John to temper his expectations. And he had. Like Ma always said, beggars and choosers and all that jazz. But he was free. Fucking free, and even Mosca couldn't squelch how good it felt to get out of Boston, away from the smog, the traffic, and his father, but most of all, far the fuck away from Walpole.

Every mile improved his mood, and he was fairly floating above the bench seat by the time he crossed Memorial Bridge. Dizzy with disbelief. An almost-high sort of feeling, though he'd been clean for months, as below him, the Piscataqua River, steel gray and choked with boats, wound away toward the Gulf of Maine and the Atlantic Ocean. Free free free.

When WZLX (Boston's ONLY classic ROCK) dissolved into static, he spun the dial past the Old Time Gospel Hour and several country stations before landing on Skynyrd. Three hours later, he was still belting out the classics when he fell off the Maine Turnpike outside of Augusta. Car dealers and gas stations gave way to lakes and pine trees. Lumber yards.

The Allman Brothers bled into Little Feat, and he turned that shit up. Free-free-free and every window down. A song he couldn't quite place caught his ear. Regional, maybe, with a hook about farmers and birds and living in the country. By the end, he was wailing with the chorus even though he couldn't remember ever having heard it before.

Beside a smoking paper mill, he stopped for a freight train. Then, free-free-free, free-free-free, gaining speed, he continued north until he came upon a herd of cows crossing the road, the smell of them an intense and heady cocktail of earth and manure, souring silage and grass.

The cows swayed from side to side as they shuffled forward into a muddy yard. Their destination, a barn so old, the wood siding had faded to a silvery patina. The farmer followed behind them in a flannel shirt and muck boots, waving flies away with his hat. A slow-moving parade, the cows and their keeper marched as if nothing in the world waited on them. After six months in the clink, regimented, every action a slave to the clock, John was gobsmacked by the beauty of it.

The farm straddled the crest of a steep hill, and when the road cleared, John kept his foot on the brake a moment before coasting downward between fields of tilled earth fading into meadows so green they looked as if they might glow in the dark. Chimneys smoked in the distance. Starling. He continued on.

A herd of deer grazed underneath a power line, and he pulled over to watch them, but they picked up their heads as he slowed, flicked their tall white tails, then bounded away. Free-free-free. Houses popped up on either side of the road. A trailer with a three-car garage. A slope-roofed shack with a dog tied to a tree out front. One farmhouse so close to the road he could see inside the kitchen as he passed: a woman at the table, feet up on a chair, a phone pressed to her ear, wound the spiraling cord around one finger.

A gaunt, shaggy pony stood guard beside a tar paper shack. Across the street, engines and car parts littered the yard in front of a garage with an open bay door and a car up on a lift. Next to the

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garage, a sprawling, low dwelling looked as though it had been constructed one room at a time, each addition smaller in width and height, culminating in a woodshed where a towhead kid had just stepped out from under the eaves, a great armload of firewood stacked to his chin.

John passed an elementary school, crossed a bridge, and turned right at a four-way stop. According to Mosca's printed directions, there was a general store at the center of town located in the warehouse of a defunct corn processing plant. Based on the signs in a corner window (Winston tastes GOOD like a cigarette SHOULD), he guessed that the building in front of him, a mammoth two-story structure with blue peeling paint, was it. A gaggle of men stood elbow to elbow on the front porch. Their faces lacked definition in the dying daylight, but every head turned to follow him.

His new abode was easy enough to find. Not directly behind the store, but close enough to hit with a rock. A starburst crack in the center of a window indicated someone had already tested this theory. Who could blame them? Beige with brown trim. Plywood soffits. Moldy particle board skirting around the bottom. It was an ugly stray dog of a place. The deck looked new, or at least recently painted, and whistling, John unlocked the front door. Glad to be out of the car. Thinking, *how bad could it be?*

But when he walked in and saw the chipped ersatz-wood paneling, the matted shag carpet, the kitchen linoleum worn to the subfloor around the sink, the tilted broken shades on the windows, the slumped ghost of a couch in the living room, he thought, *maybe I should have stayed in jail*. The trailer was a sweaty tin can that smelled like burning hair every time the furnace kicked on, which was often.

But the bed was comfy once he flipped the mattress, the location was mint, and anyway, he was determined to make a go of it. He couldn't go back to where he came from.