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Ithaca

Written by Alan McMonagle

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Alan McMonagle

ITHACA

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for my parents

And they all pretend they're orphans
And their memory's like a train
You can see it getting smaller as it pulls away
And the things you can't remember
Tell the things you can't forget that
History puts a saint in every dream
Well she said she'd stick around
Until the bandages came off
But these mamas' boys just don't know when to quit
And Matilda asks the sailors are those dreams
Or are those prayers
So just close your eyes, son
And this won't hurt a bit . . .

TOM WAITS, *Time*

JOYRIDERS

I am the cancer-ridden only son of a dangerous driver who has thoughts about turning herself into a man. The cancer is in my testicle. The left one. Every day it's getting worse. Black, tarry urine is coming out of me. My goolie is the size of a tennis ball. I won't even begin to describe the smell. A couple of weeks ago – just before school finished up for the summer – I was merely hobbling my whiffy way to an early grave. Now I am a swollen, leaky infestation liable to cark it at any moment. This was the story she had for them after Mattie Conlon put cop Lawless onto us.

Ma had borrowed Mattie's car without asking him. I think it was the fourth time in less than three weeks she'd borrowed it. Maybe the fifth. Let's go, she yelled out through the rolled-down passenger window when she spotted me on Station Hill, and without fully stopping she reached over and opened the passenger door.

Where are we off to this time? I asked her, as soon as I had jumped in and buckled up.

Don't ask unnecessary questions, she said, and sped away again.

She took the fast road out of town and joined the by-pass and we were soon at top-speed, giving chase to the hi-velocity jeeps and super-cars zipping their effortless way.

ALAN MCMONAGLE

Are we off to the big city? I asked, straining for a glance at the large road signs flashing by, but received no answer. She didn't say a word as she drove, just kept her hands on the steering wheel, her eyes peeled on the way ahead, as though at any moment along the open road was suddenly going to materialize whatever it was she was searching for on these helter-skelter spins.

Mattie's car suited her driving style. And so did the two-lane road. She weaved her way in between slower-moving cars, took the shortest route around bends, a determined-to-leave-everything-behind look never leaving her face. She sped by suited men driving smooth cars. Some of them were talking into phones and during her overtaking manoeuvre Ma slowed a little and made a telephone out of her hand, caught the driver's attention by waving it as though she was having a fit while mouthing an enthusiastic *Call Me*. She sped by happy families tucked safely away inside cars large as buses, opened wide her mouth and inserted her make-me-puke finger. She sped by large lorries and waved out at the burly men driving them. One or two beeped back at her as though they were the best of friends. She sped by boy-racers, pouted her lips at them and blew kisses off the palm of her hand.

For a while we drove pretty much alongside the railway tracks. She slowed down some more and I thought she was waiting for the train to appear so that she could have something new to race against. Then she speeded up again and I thought we had missed the train and that she had decided to try and catch it. Soon the road swerved away from the

ITHACA

tracks and I wondered what her next target might be. At some point she reached over and turned on the radio, fiddled with the knob. Through the static came a song I'd never heard and I clamped my hands over my ears when she started to sing along. After a few minutes she turned the thing off and she had both hands on the steering wheel again, was peering intently.

Like the times before, we drove until the petrol light came on. This time she swung off the main road and found another road and from there she turned onto another road, one that narrowed and narrowed, and the further we drove the narrower it became and either side of us tree branches reached out and bushes rubbed and scratched against Mattie's car. Soon one long tuft of grass appeared in the middle of the road and more and more tree branches reached and out-of-control bushes crowded the way until it seemed that nature had decided that this road was an unnecessary road and that it and any vehicles on it, and any passengers in those vehicles, ought to be squeezed out of existence.

You're going to get us lost, I said, when it seemed we could go no further.

Would I let something like that happen?

I'd say so, I replied.

Do you want to drive? she said to that, and there wasn't much talking for the remainder of this particular trip.

Somehow we found the way out of there, but not before all the petrol ran out. We had to temporarily abandon the car and walk two or three miles until we came upon a little

ALAN MCMONAGLE

shop in front of which stood the loneliest-looking petrol pump I had ever seen. Remember, you're as good as dead, Ma told me as she disappeared inside the shop. A few minutes later she was back to me with an eyebrow, a nod, and a plastic container that she filled from the pump.

It was near dark by the time we got back. For some reason the town lights had not come on – maybe there was a power cut or the ESB men were not happy and had decided to pull the plug – either way it didn't matter because a big moon was hovering, like a saviour lighting up the place, and I couldn't stop looking at it. Ma drove to our part of town and when we pulled up outside our house Lawless was parked along our road, patiently waiting. Straightaway he recognized Mattie's car and he stepped out of his squad car and made his way purposefully towards us.

Uh-oh, I said, we're in for it this time.

The words were hardly out of my mouth and Lawless was knuckling the driver-side window. Hey, kid, she said, looking my way. I've got the moon in my pocket. Don't ever forget that. Then she winked at me, rolled down her window, and switching on her famous smile, turned to face the newest trouble in her life.