

“Driven”

WILMA digs eelskin wallet from her art portfolio and disseminates its items down her trim thighs and on the bus seat armrests: three tarot cards, a driver’s license, two student IDs (one fake), two dorm keys, a butane lighter, a prophylactic, lint fluffs, various coins, seventy-five dollars, five pins (two safety, three traditional), three gel pens, four Carry A. Nation postage stamps, a stack of complimentary tickets to Danceteria, folded tissues, and two Greyhound ticket carbons. Her piles sway with the jouncing of the Greyhound.

“It must be on my dresser,” she finally says. Blood drains from her face. “What if my mom finds it?”

“Would she know what it was?” asks the large-featured Greta. Her oval eyes blink like elegies.

“My mom? I don’t know.”

“Mine wouldn’t. She’s oblivious. But yours might at that.”

“I left it sitting out in plain sight.”

“Look again,” prods Greta.

“I need some smoke,” Wilma sniffs, as petite as her bones. She holds the limp pocketbook and stares at its worn-out form, touches where the satin lining has torn, snagged and stained, where constant pressure from various items has puckered and distorted its shape. “Why didn’t you tell me this wallet’s dead?”

The Greyhound ambles onto an offramp. Because of the steep angle of the road, each grouping begins to topple, and Wilma panics while restocking her wallet. Greta covers with her manicured hands lighters, IDs and dollar bills.

“Who’s this lady?” the larger asks, singling out the strip of postage stamps while scooping the piles into the yawn of Wilma’s portfolio.

“Carrie Hatchet? She’s from another century. She went around busting up taverns with an ax, to protest against how men always get jerky when they get drunk. I’m going to send them on hate-mail postcards, to every jerk, on frat house row.”

“Was Carry A. Nation her real name?”

“I don’t know. I think so. She was a Jesus freak, but I love her anyway.”

Greta's cheeks bloom and swallow her eyes as she chides, "Everything's always got layers with you art majors."

The Greyhound reaches a gas station that's located, thinks Wilma, about a stone's throw from Sticksville. She zips closed her portfolio. The bus driver brakes, expels mechanical hisses. Her sleek, carefully parted dirty blond hair swings, reactionary.

Greta's swept-back curls swing too as she rises, sets her purse on the seat, tugs on her pea coat.

Passengers in front ape them, with variation; their exodus is ordered, nearly silent as they step out under a feckless gray sky.

Meanwhile Wilma lugs her portfolio down the bus aisle. She wonders if she maybe she stashed the cellophane-wrapped acid doses in it instead. Nervous with the driver she misjudges the drop of the steep linoleum staircase, stops to twist her ankle back into its Birkenstock bed.

Wind sends a draft into the bus, somehow reminding Wilma to look up; she does so and notices her friend throw a conspiratorial look before darting behind the far side of the station. But the zipper has caused a pucker and she fears the imperfection will damage a semester's worth of fabric swatches and prototype garment sketches. Dawdling, fooling with her portfolio, the design major wonders what Greta is up to. Her heel comes loose again and she thinks smoking some pot might be nice.

Behind the gas station, she does admire the aluminum foil pipe quickly fashioned by Greta's calculator-sized fingers. A dust-speckled breeze prompts her to shield the flame as it chars the crude bowl; she wishes she had fastened her hair beneath her coat like Greta's is. Unsecured, it floats and attracts micro-stones, brazenly seeks the spark of the lighter. Perhaps because of the wind and the clouds, Wilma hardly feels the THC.

"This'll make the ride more bearable," Greta shouts six hits later, crumpling foil as they scurry round the station's brick wall. "Only four more hours of dull from the bus windows."

Stopping together, with identical slouches of different scale, the girls observe the Greyhound, gaining speed as it reaches the freeway onramp. Wilma lets go her portfolio, and it also slouches. They stand this way for several minutes. Mesmerized by enormity of predicament, paralyzed with shock over getting abandoned, they watch the steel bus disappear onto the bleak horizon.

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"TOLD you to rent a car," Greta eventually says. Specifically, one of the new gas-electric hybrids, the girl thinks. The percentage of dollars saved on fuel, plus the help it does for the environment, outweighs the risk of receiving snotty glances from jock boys in

Normal Vehicles.

“I won’t believe this,” Wilma shrugs, sloppy in her sandals as they crunch toward the station door. “This isn’t happening.”

“Believe it, Wil,” replies Greta. “At least you have your portfolio.”

Once inside, the girls stifle nervous giggles at the arthritic store-keep who ogles them with slick-looking eyeballs. Though Greta believes most octogenarians to be blights, corrupt at their cores because, honestly, how can they not be, she also tries hard to remain empathetic. With smile expansive, she greets, “Hello, old friend.”

“Ha-ha!” the man sputters. “Sweet-tarts is all on sale, two f'r eighty-six.”

Cognizant of her diet—always, always, always—Greta also possesses a keen head for numbers. Figuring in modest musculature, average skeleton, boob and hip fat, and road-trip energy expenditure, she could use a snack. The station stocks nothing much recommended by the RDA; Greta comes to believe Sweet-tarts to be as healthy as anything else at hand. While rereading its chemically-laden label she hears Wilma buying sweet cigars.

“Your sign says three-forty-eight,” her friend argues. “Why are you charging me three-ninety-seven?”

“Ta-ta-tax.”

“That sounds a little crooked to me.”

“Ha!”

Greta intervenes with, “Actually, with six-percent sales tax, your total should come to three-sixty-nine. And would you add on this candy roll? I seem to have lost my purse.”

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STANDING as tall as she can in her sandals outside the station, Wilma puffs her sweet little skinny cigar, thinking about Greta’s fat purse sitting on the faded bus seat. She thanks God that their Greyhound stubs are in her portfolio, and thanks God again that Greta has the weed stashed on her person.

Just inside the doorway, door propped with the portfolio, Greta keeps warm via a duct in the ceiling. She yammers, “I was just remembering how, over Thanksgiving break, we went cruising with those scummy guys, and you hid the last of our stash in your bra—”

“—that’s where,” the aspiring designer shouts. Then, at Greta’s vacuous stare, she clarifies, “I stashed the acid in my bra, this morning.”

“Yippie. Let’s eat!”

Wilma stubs out the cigar on colorless brick. “Don’t you have to call your mom again, about the missing Greyhound and all that?”

Greta says, admiring Wilma’s ash mark, “Do you think I explained it well enough? Was it too much, telling her the bus driver kept laughing at us in the rearview mirror?”

“He was, I saw!” Wilma fibs, fastening loose hair strands beneath her collar, like Greta’s is.

“Still, I don’t want to dose, you know, without some idea of how we’re getting back on campus.”

Nodding, Greta dials her mother again from the payphone. She presses her left palm against her exposed ear when a lemon-orange van with noisy muffler pulls up almost at her feet, listens to the receiver with a pained, wind-whipped expression.

Wilma looks on as a scruffy, twenty-something guy dressed in blah coveralls climbs out of the lemon-(limon-?)orange van’s cab, throws some surreptitious glances then, hobbling stiffly by with barely a glance, disappears behind the wall.

Stifling a grin—she’s a bit stoned, after all—the college freshman imagines their station to be dripping with drugs, and decides it’s the hippest spot in Sticksville.

“We’re sitting pretty,” Greta announces, suddenly at Wilma’s side.

“Sitting pretty?”

“We’re perfect. Let’s dose.”

“Do you mean we’ve got a ride?”

“In six-hours-fifty-five-minutes we catch another bus, and we’re back in Iowa City by midnight,” she boasts with glee. “But if we miss this next one, we’re screwed.”

Wilma crumples the pack of cigs in her pocket, drops it off in the trash. “Your mom’s the best.”

Using Greta as a privacy shield she fishes for the blotter paper doses stamped with a cute blue unicorn. When her fingers find the crinkly fold of cellophane against her tit, a rush originating below her stomach rises into her throat and she’s feeling like a vandal.

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AFTER swapping watches, necklaces, earrings and lipstick Greta can only stare at the green laminate table in suspicion. To her, she and Wilma keep sitting in the bar-

restaurant, discussing the same point forever.

“Huxley likes to give A’s, because it helps your GPA,” the tiny Wilma fizzes, pausing for a sip of melting ice water. “Anyway what’s the difference? if you got an A-minus?”

She wonders what’s happening to Wilma’s voice, turning effervescent and green like the table, but tries anyway to treat Wilma regular.

“The minus is an insult,” says Greta coolly. “It’s a mark of negativity—er, a symbol of it.”

“In salt.”

“Huxley once told our class that trying to teach to us was like peeing into a vagina.”

“What?”

A carnation-pink light blushing down on her, shining up in her, Greta thinks Prof Huxley is a kind of disgusting in this light. Except there is no blush light! She knows this; she sees Huxley naked, trying to piss; the idea of sex with him excites her; she wants to experience any other thing besides him. “He has a big one I think.”

“I don’t think I want to think, about it. Your brain thinks up the weirdest s.,” says Wilma in her green way.

Greta sees the wide grin smears itself onto Wilma’s petite face, and her sleek hair begins to fan, or no , , , wait.

Nacho amigos!

The words descend upon the math-whiz like ethereal detritus.

Nacho amigos, nacho amigos, nacho amigos! Trying absurdly to count the number of A’s, Greta gets goofed up. A moment later, she sees the phrase coming out Wilma’s mouth.

“Nacho amigos,” her friend again intones. “God, that’s hilarious. Notch your amigos. Not your amigos. Na’cho a’m(e) goes. Nacho amigos.”

“Wil, why do you keep saying it?”

A beat. Then, “It’s where we are.”

“Cheese, chips and friends.”

Greta finds herself chuckling in hiccuppy bursts. Right, she thinks; we’re tripping, inside of a bar-restaurant named after itself.

Her friend's snaky tint intensifies, drawing upon the laminate. Everything turns green.

A peek at the bar confirms an elderly audience who like to drink but refuse to have fun. This audience looks blue. Study of her palms tells Greta a lot about arteries, veins and bones.

Bent over in nearly uncontrollable fits of hysterics, the girl marvels at how her skin can contain her insides.

"We're very far away!" boasts Greta. She suddenly wants to see Wilma vomit, spew multicolored bile, and this stifles any giddiness. Eighteen years of partially digested meals rush to feed her head.

Across the table Wilma keeps erupting in bark-like giggles.

"Shhh, listen, Wil," she says. "Just think if we had geodes for organs? Like crystal, those geode things people are always busting open? Do you think we'd all be nicer to each other one if we knew how sloppy our organs are; how fragile?"

Wilma gets lost in their untouched water glasses, turning her head slightly as if objects in there rotate in suspended animation.

"You're right, girly; we're all disgusting tubes and pumps and sacks," the smaller spurts. "I would like to be a tall glass of nothing, like Ms. H-two-oh here. She's so pristine, so unspoiled. You and I are rotting piles of stinky garbage."

"Piles of s.," Greta agrees, nodding. She imagines her fat tits as translucent and stares at the bones beneath. Then she opens the pepper shaker and, with maniacal glee, dumps the dark cubist grains into her tall glass prism.

Fascinated, the girls watch the silt swirl and settle. The room rotates like light in a prism for awhile as the glitter disperses. Wilma says, "Now we're even."

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PERIPHERALLY aware of the other patrons in the restaurant glancing, coughing, clearing their throats, Wilma and Greta sprinkle liberally their laughs on the establishment. Elders at the bar stare, order more drinks.

The girls eventually draw a ghostly pair of coveralls toting a bottle of ale toward them.

"The limon-orange van!" Wilma hears herself screaming, mind reeling from the recollection of bright fruits/wheels/noisy-on-gravel; the cold-looking phone, the cupping over of Greta's ear.

The coveralls grow a face, replete with eyes, a mouth, and ears, and hovers closer to their booth, a wholly helium specter, clothed 'neath the head in blah.

Except the blah now teems with pointillist pastel coils, tightening then unfurling, disappearing behind massive shoulders, reappearing on both necks—the thick pale corded one and this extra brown one of ale.

“When did you guys order?” face above the coveralls bellows, resonating with an energy that Wilma can’t right away place.

She recalls, slowly—while enthralled by the rainbow trail its elbow brushes—that yes, this creature that crawled out of a van is a Man—the Something Familiar about him.

In a whorl she sees how solid, somehow, his craft is; his orange one, his flesh one; she wonders why her own craft feels so soft, so expansive and unstable. To sharpen her mind she tells it to refashion the ornately covered coveralls into black tie with tails. A beetle, then; a black roach.

“We’re not guys,” Greta admonishes. She blusters her way toward a menu, appears momentarily baffled by its tricky plastic folds. “And, we haven’t ordered a thing.”

“Good,” the man says, “then we can all three of us take a walk.”

Wilma wants to stay, and says as much. She likes it at Nacho Amigos. She’s enjoying the ambiance, the geodes especially, and the foreign necklace against her breast, and the nothing wash of her water in the mouth, the one without the crud in it.

The man says, “You’re putting on a show for the yokels.”

The girls explode with laughs, echo the word yokels. But they allow themselves to be shuffled, still twittering, toward the door—walking the long way round the restaurant so as to avoid the bar. A windy vacuum helps expel them through the doorway into the screamingly barren universe of the town’s main street, which extinguishes their fun.

“Where are we?” Greta asks, spooky in her exaggerated, chunky step.

The sidewalk roils ahead, promises more horrid pith than anything Wilma’s ever experienced. Her panic barometer rises and she feels she’s about to go apes. Vainly, while experiencing apes. as the most frightening word she—or anyone, for that matter—could ever aspire to think of, Wilma clutches the air for her portfolio.

“My art!” she cries, breaking the threesome, “My art!”

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GRETA shifts her bulk, once deciding to abandon the strange man in coveralls who keeps telling her to stay put. Then she is charging beneath the enormous blinking Nacho Amigos sign dangling ominously above the door, an electric moment.

Inside, an organic warmth stuns her, encapsulates her in cloying peuse tones, a bizarrely uncomfortable comfort; she thinks for a moment that she's entered her own vagina, strolled into her own geode.

Their booth, dotted with pepper, looks different now, the crunchy psychedelic now a sterile, matte finish awash with x-bar formulas and binary repetition. She remembers some of this from her high school calculus course, the one she took to prepare her brain for the rigors of college, though of courses her youth and yes, her campus, seems distant now—an unreachable and abstract entity—as distant as any amigos.

Greta thinks the people at the bar might know the whereabouts of Wilma.

Amoeba-like she floats toward them, slowing to focus on an object sitting in the middle of the peuse carpet, among the sticks of table and chair legs. A familiar-looking shoe, a Birkenstock shoe, toe-jam-yucky and about used up. She doesn't want it, and ambles on.

"I'm looking for my friend," Greta says, at last placing bare elbows on the ring-stained bar to speak at a waxy-looking woman behind the counter. "She's short. And stringy—sounds like I'm describing an alien—oh, why , , , ? Her name's Wilma. Like the cartoon. Only no, she:s real. I'm not , , , on, 'nything." Greta thinks her organs seem more solid against the cracked leather rail and she begins to feel more substantial, less amoeba-like. "Have you seen her?"

"That who's in the jane, Doe?" the woman says, eyeing her suspiciously. "Goll, you kids come in here, all strung-out like this, I'm itching to call the cops, I swears to Christ."

"Thank you," is all Greta can think to respond. She takes a few steps back while turning the waxwork's phraseology. Jane/itching/doe/time/strung-out/cops/swears/christ/two , , , ?

One sweep of the bar with what could only be dilated pupils confirms to Greta that it's littered with alienated corpses. Hunched-over men and a few red-wigged women. The evil dead, clutching empty pitchers and steins and highball glasses; they wear dark rags, have flappy skin and hollow eyes that beam telepathic messages at her, tell her she's disrupting their macabre happy hour, confirm she's slipped into their true dimension. One of them orders a greyhound, to which the waxwork bartender responds, "Leave the driving to us."

Greta remembers her Sweet-tarts and regrets eating all of them already. She pushes into the jane in search of Wilma.

In There, lit by dingy antique sconces, her stringy sleek-haired friend stands agape at a mirror. A row of Carrie Hatchet stamps connects her tweezed eyebrows and she pumps Kleenex fragments in both fused-fists. Scattered about her feet lay the portfolio's contents: three tarot cards, a driver's license, two student IDs (one fake), one dorm key, various coins, seventy-one dollars, two leaky gel pens, a smattering of comp tickets to Danceteria, two Greyhound ticket carbons, an empty salt and pepper shaker, sixteen

swatches of fabric and fourteen pieces of design-heavy posterboard, arbitrarily poked with pins (two safety, three traditional) and smudgy with ink.

“You remember Roni?” Wilma says, scarcely moving her bluish lips. Greta worries that the lips look discolored because of chewing on a pen, or if their blotter was cut with too much strychnine. She thinks on Black Spine. Spinal tapping, hair follicles. “She’s the type to have glue. The glasses, the fluffy hair, she’s gotta have some Tacky Glue at least.”

Feeling her self slide recklessly into glazed floor and wall tiles, her insides now liquefying into the grout, her smarts sinking into the imperfect grid she always congratulated herself for being atop of, Greta steps toward the mirror. With both their faces reflected in the glass, she sees her own mouth colored maroon, not blue.

“Have we peaked? Has it been six-hours-and-fifty-five-minutes? Wil, has it yet?” the math-whiz pleads, feeling somehow uninhabitable.

"Black spine," mumbles Wilma.

Frightened, Greta reaches out to shake her friend’s arm in the mirror and catches no real thing but air.