

2-4-97

Dear Joyce,

When I got your card I was so glad you ~~asked suggested~~ were interested in "In a Car Going Nowhere." And thrilled to that you'd taken ~~any~~ ^{such} ~~so much~~ attention to revision. I was right now ~~in between~~ waiting for my editor to decide whether I should re-work one of my "older" novels or start a new one for 1999 (doesn't that sound strange?) and needed a project that was pending.

I sat down immediately and started re-imagining ~~the~~ Beebe's story. I just hope ~~it's~~ ~~not~~ that what I've done doesn't come off too sentimental & didactic -- TV made the poor kid do it. ~~2 whole~~ ^{2 1/2} pages worth!

~~Let me know if~~

Of course, if this doesn't work I'll look at it again. My best to Ray.

James

In a Car Going Nowhere

He bumps open the screened door to the carport and the spotted puppy stands and waggles around his boots, and it's a curious thing to the boy why the puppy just sat there when the pistol went off inside.

In one hand Beebee is holding the keys to his mama's blue Buick, and in the other the pistol that made the little popping sound that created a big blood spurt between her eyes.

On his way to the car, parked hood-in trunk-out of the carport, he looks next door and sees Miss Frankie with her bleached hair in pink rollers and the children she keeps swarming round the picnic table where she is carving a jack-o-lantern from a huge grooved pumpkin. Bunch of nonsense! She stands straight and stares at Beebee, tugging her silky orange blouse down over her ballooned breasts and stomach. Her hag face poses a question. He pokes the pistol into the waist of his blue jeans and goes on walking till he gets to the car. Gets in, places the pistol on the seat, switches the car on, and backs down the dirt drive to the highway. The hard part, backing.

Of course, now that he has the car to drive to school, he can't go to school, and he doesn't know where he can go or when he can come back. And he feels sad driving past the old portwine-brick school with a train of yellow buses parked along the west fence, but glad that he doesn't have to go.

He tries to turn the long car on the narrow highway and has to back up and pull forward and straighten up with the power steering screaming right under the SLOW WHEN FLASHING sign between the sheriff's white frame house and the front of the school. Then scooching low and stretching his right leg so that the pointed toe of his cream ostrich boot just touches the gas pedal, he is off, up the highway, leaving behind the SLOW WHEN FLASHING sign that isn't flashing which means he is late for school, that everybody knows he isn't coming now but probably doesn't know why yet.

He hopes nobody has seen him but wishes his whole eighth-grade class could see him driving. And not crying.

Cry, baby, cry. Stick your finger in your eye... That hot feeling of humiliation forms behind his eyes, remembering his classmates' chant when he used to choke up singing the National Anthem, or when a friend was moving away, or when his mama and daddy first fought over who would get to keep him, then fought over who would have to keep him. It's a sorry man can't cry, Miss Frankie would say and hold him in her arms till his cheeks crusted over with dried salt.

At the Cornerville city limits sign, he speeds up, shooting past his own long green house, past Miss Frankie's square gray playhouse, driving into the sun shimmering through pine needles. He adjusts the rounded-off rectangular mirror to fit the rounded-off rectangular

* rear glass and watches the little town slip behind the liveoaks and the liveoaks slip behind the pines, and then his pretty-boy face, white as a Stephen King spook's.

He flicks on the radio and tunes it to WAAC, his favorite country station. Garth Brooks singing "Friends in Low Places." He sings along to get the chant out of his head and gazes at the sheeny blue car hood, the green flatwoods and the sudden burst of sun in his eyes.

The song sounds new in his own voice, but gets old before it is over.

✓ With his ~~right~~ leg stretched, the tin of Skoal in his hip pocket ✓ soon brands a hot circle on his ^{right} buttock. He brakes the car in the middle of the road, shifts the gear stick to P, and squints up the sun-shot gravel to check for on-coming traffic, then swivels his head out the window to look behind because he doesn't quite trust the mirror or the hollow dark eyes that will show there. Foot still on the brake pedal, he fishes the can of Skoal from his pocket and takes a pinch of the gummy tobacco and dopes his bottom lip, and the chicory smell and bitter taste combined makes him feel grounded in the going-nowhere car.

She had it coming to her. "Pop!" he says and laughs and swallows the build-up of snuff juice. He hangs his head out the window and vomits Sugar Pops and milk and gall.

He has to hand it to her though: lately, she'd been trying. Yesterday, when he found the stray puppy outside while she was cleaning out the car, she said, Son, why don't you take the puppy in the house and give him a bath? You can keep him if nobody claims him;

you're practically a teenager now. He had gone inside and set the spotted puppy free from his locked fingers. While Beebee paced and ate an apple, listening to the TV without hearing, the puppy tipped about the living room and sniffed at the green and maroon plaid sofa, the matching club chair and ottoman, the beige drapes with frayed hems from dragging morning and night over the no-color carpet. Then in the kitchen, scratching at the white plastic garbage can with dried juice runs along the sides, the puppy whined and switched Beebee's boots with his scuttled tail. Practically a teenager? Had his mama forgotten his thirteenth birthday? Why was she turning things around? Puppy? He used to beg for a puppy. Now what he needed was a car.

A green log truck wobbles out from a woodsroad, left side of the highway, up ahead. Thundering west toward the car. Growing from the size of a Matchbox toy to the biggest, loudest truck Beebee has ever come close to. He shifts the gear stick to D and sets out to meet it, giving up his song to the suck of the truck roar. The driver with a tarry shocked face shunts the loaded truck onto the right shoulder, goes on, log tips wagging like limber switches. A red flag flies from the longest log.

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Thirty minutes on the flat lonesome highway to Nowhere, and suddenly the Suwanoochee Creek bridge over grass-choked black water, and then Somewhere. Fargo city limits sign and facing frame houses with scaly white paint, lines of drenty wash and trash in run-together yards. Sycamore trees, with trunks white-scaly as the houses, rain down leaves like scraps of brown paper sacks, revealing too much sky, stark blue light. There's a woodyard on the right,

ck
* piles of skinned poles on sterile gray dirt, and up ahead a deadend sign with arrows pointing north and south to either or neither road.

Beebee slows at a railroad track and coasts into the next yard: white sand littered with riscing sycamore leaves. Bony tree. A faded black pickup perching like a buzzard on concrete blocks. A white bulldog with a nickel-pied body struts from beneath the screened-in porch of the white house and stares at the car with wide-set eyes. A ✓ toothy sneer ^{holds} smooths its fleshy jowls, and when Beebee puts the car in P and buzzes the window down, he can hear it growling.

✓ A young woman in a filmy pink gown opens the wooden door a slit, then eases out on the porch with her thin arms ^{crossed.} folded. She steps around a leached-blue plastic tricycle and gazes sleepy-eyed through ✓ the screened door. Her ^{blondish} hair hangs limp as wet string. F7 hang

"What you want?" she calls.

✓ The dog starts barking in its bass voice and steps solid around the front of the car. Hair roached the length of its backbone. Smells of creosote, axle grease and dog drift on the green air from the Okefenokee Swamp, ~~where the rain comes and nobody hears.~~

Beebee tips his head out the window, looking into the tin eyes of the bulldog. "Daddy home?" he yells.

"At work," his stepmother says and rubs the top of one foot with the sole of the other.

✓ She used to call Beebee cute before she started calling him spoiled rotten and caused his daddy to drop his end of the joint-custody thing. Too much trouble, you know, specially and her on the rag and bitching evertime you come about me not ^{getting} that half-grown girl of hers ^{move} in with us and us just barely getting by on

what I sweat out in the pulpwoods and your mama hellbent on getting fifty-cent of ever dollar of that and Uncle Sam with his hand out for the other fifty. Between the niggers and the women and the wops this country's about had it. I seen on television where...

Pink skin shows through the wrinkled white fur of the dog, a phlemy growl gathers from its stocky body to its old-man face, and before Beebee can raise the window, the dog lunges at the car door and hangs by its claws to the window ledge, filling the car with its sour heat and throaty growl. Beebee leans away with a finger on the window button, slowly glassing over the framed scowling face.

He starts the car, shifts to R, barely missing the jacked-up black truck as he backs, then circles the sycamore with the bulldog snapping at the Buick's tires and pulls level with the screened door and the sleepy woman in pink and lets down the window and picks up the pistol from the seat and fires first at the rosebud above her folded arms, and then at the dog face framed in the window again. The dog's broad white forehead stains red, it yelps and drops. The woman is crouching behind the fly-wing gray screen with a neat round hole about the size of a pea.

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Halfway between Fargo and Cornerville, Beebee turns down one of the logging roads, augering north into the pinewoods, sharp tar smells batting with the warm air through the open windows and banishing the smoky cordite inside the car. Ditches of water like melted copper run with the Buick along the rutted road. Bog holes and muddy ramps and cleared plaits of woods with spikes of saplings and raw stumps, then the same old pines--bushy tops on towering trunks with brown scales. Ruches of reddening maples and yellowing foxgrape

FN vines on a field of brown and green. No sound, save for the clicking of grasshoppers in the toasted weeds scraping beneath the car, and the spotty ringing of a locust left over from summer. According to a PBS Nature special that Beebee watched a couple of years ago, locusts stay buried underground for seven years; then they surface, crawling up the tree trunks to shed, mate and die. Next summer, another crop--surfacing, shedding, mating, dying. Seven-year cycles. That simple.

When he told his mama, she said "Really?" and was out the door. Late for work again.

He used to hate that, used to hate staying by himself while she was at work as much as he hated weekends with the man he called Daddy before he remarried. As much as he hated his mama's last husband Ike ragging him about wearing Reeboks and prissy clothes and writing poems and going to Sunday School with Miss Frankie. Now he likes his mama going to work and prowling for a new husband in her off-time; he likes being by himself and not having to answer to anybody. Mostly now he watches R-rated videos rented from from the Holiday Market--on hold till the next daddy who might like poetry, prissy clothes and Sunday school.

"Pop!" he says, this time coddling the bitter snuff juice, then spits hard out the window to keep from messing up his wash job.

You bathe that dog? You didn't bathe that dog. She was hosing down the car in cut-off blue jeans and her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. She turned the water on the puppy and began squirting it with her thumb over the end of the hose. Okay, so I'll wash the dog and you wash the car. Damned if I know what to do with you, Beebee.

The blue vinyl seats and dash seem too bright, the day too bright, seems to accent the toy-like pistol and a white box of Kleenex, center seat, and his mama's soft brown leather pocketbook by the other door.

He brakes, trying to switch off the car before putting it in P, and the whole sun-blared blue Buick shudders and stutters and makes Beebee's teeth grind. What if he has tore up the car? Testing, he switches the ignition on again and leaves the car in D where it apparently works best and slides the pocketbook to the middle of the seat and feels inside. He's done it before--lots of times. Looking for money. He smells her cherry lipstick that leaves red lip prints on tissues in the bathroom at home. He feels the familiar long stiff wallet-thing, bulging with pictures and cards, takes it out and takes his time flipping through the filmy plastic sleeves: a picture of himself as a baby in blue overalls--same picture of himself as on top of the TV at home. Same pretty-boy face and smile that kept him in trouble with Ike before he left.

He flips to another picture--his mama and two of her friends with old-timey teased hairdos who worked with her at the telephone office in Valdosta. Red lipstick, white teeth, heads pulled together. They look so much alike that he has to look close to find which is Mama. He's never looked at the pictures before and can't imagine why he is looking now, but he keeps flipping. Maybe he's searching for a picture of the man who would have been his next daddy. No man. Not even his real daddy, who divorced Beebee and his mama so long ago it's like never. To hear her tell it she holds no grudges against him now; to hear him tell it he holds no grudges against her now. But, they always add, listing a string of reasons why they couldn't stay

married that don't include the real reason: Beebee. A big mistake-- that's what Howard and Leighann call their first marriage--which makes Beebee offspring of the mistake. A little mistake. He used to think about stuff like that a lot when he was younger, when his mama and daddy treated his childhood like a disease he would outgrow.

Beebee no longer signs his school homework with a last name; he's just Beebee, not even a real name but a nickname they gave him because he used to hunt all the time with the B.B. gun his real daddy gave him. He was named after a gun--son of a gun.

Try explaining that to the real reason
for the wind
of a teacher's. They & crazy keepy on after school, pleading up to the face
He drives. With one hand. Arm out the window in the blue October air. On the next curve, he is stunned motionless to meet a sudden red pickup loaded with deerhunters in camouflage. He scoots low and rams both feet on the brake pedal and his whole stiff body shoots forward like a dummy's. His head hits the windshield hard enough to crack. He screams, clasps his face with both hands, then wraps his arms around the steering wheel, sobbing like a girl. Watery light behind closed eyes. When he opens them, the red pickup is on his left, edging along the ditch, and the two men on back with deer rifles are watching him. A dead buck lies sideslung on the tailgate with one oval eye up to the sun--solid turquoise. The man on the far side looks like Ike, has a bristly black beard and a huge belly and a mad stare.

You a queer, boy? What ails you, crying like that? Beat the shit out of them old boys next time they go to picking on you. And if I catch you running to that old biddy next door everytime you stump your toe, I'm gone take my belt to you...I'm gone put a knot on your head...I'm gone tie a knot in your ass... Sensitive, shit! Pages from Beebee's construction-paper-bound, self-illustrated poetry book went sailing around his bedroom, silly words limned with snake squiggles

*why you're
acting smart,
why your
grades
all A's
in seventh
grade have
dropped to
all D's in
the eighth*

and hearts and stars exposing the secret satisfaction of his sorry life.

Face pressed into his pillow and corners pulled jam-up around his ears, smelling the oil from his own hair that makes him Beebee and special and somebody that nobody else can know, he ^{had} listened to ✓ Ike and his mama quarreling in the kitchen, growls with ^{sharp} ~~spiked~~ edges ✓ that generated stars before his eyes, as if seeing and hearing were the same and yet somehow separate and something he would know when he got to that age of knowing, when he got around to being what everybody wanted him to be if he could hold on that long.

Now, he listens to the truck engine hum out in the humming of his eardrums but doesn't look till he has to spit out the window. Mud is spinning from the rear wheels of the red pickup to the myrtle and tyty bushes each side of the sumpy road.

"Hey, Ike!" he yells. "I wadn't really crying. I didn't even cry when I shot my own mama this morning."

"When I shot my own mama this morning" echoes out over the woods and goes flat before Beebee can add, "and my daddy's wife too," which he wouldn't have said if he really believed that was Ike in the truck, if he really believed he had for sure killed his mother and his stepmother too. Half the time he feels there is a camera out there filming what he does, just as his echo is recording what he says.

He drives on, white-knuckling the steering wheel and this time keeping to the right and slow around curves, just in case, though he doesn't meet another truck and can't even find a ramp that doesn't look boggy which he can pull deep enough into to back out without dropping the rear wheels into one of the carved ditches.

He wants to go home.

Paul Harvey is preaching on the radio, which means it's 12 o'clock now, and Beebee is sick of the lump of snuff in his lip and would like something salty, something fizzy to cut the taste. His head aches. He wants to see somebody, though he has no idea who. Not the tough boys at school he's been trying to get in with; not the sniggering girls he used to hang out with in middle school ~~grade~~. Not even Linda Sellers, who he has picked to prove his manhood. She's like a diamondback rattler, pretty only at a distance. He does kind of wish she could see him driving though. But what he'd really like is to go home and watch TV, on a school day, eating barbecue potato chips and drinking Coke.

He knows who he wants to see: Geraldo, Jenny Jones, Oprah Winfrey. The usual. The usual nerved-up audiences whose blank faces and braying voices *spike* out to a thin line that keeps Beebee's mind in motion without thinking. Maybe even Bob Barker, on "The Price is Right," though recalling the hokey music and shouts, Beebee feels that to watch that show would be taking a step back to the old days when he'd be out of school with a stomachache or earache--too old for Miss Frankie's daycare then--and watch TV till his mama got home from work.

keep
the same
Daugharty 11

Stuffed but starving, he would listen for his mama's car. The later it got the harder he listened, till if he hadn't died or gone deaf from listening around the ghosting voices on the TV, he would have had to hear sooner or later her car slowing on the highway, motoring up the drive, its socketed roar under the carport. The car door would snick open and clap shut and the kitchen door would squeak and whoosh causing the blank beige drapes to suck to the living room windows, then billow as if the TV had started breathing.

High heels clicking across the kitchen tiles and going soft on the carpet in the living room. "You eat yet?"

He would shake an empty potato chip sack at her.

"Honey, why didn't you make you some soup or something?" Navy pumps kick from her stockinged feet and sprawl on the dingy carpet. "Mama's bushed."

She would turn back into the kitchen, feet padding on the floor, mumbling as she rattled dirty dishes and slammed drawers. "Beebee, this kitchen's a mess." More mumbling. Spoiled milk, webby crackers. "If you had a broke leg, I could understand it."

Too weary from sitting for too long, he would draw up small in the club chair and wait for her to get louder, then taper off.

The phone would ring in the hall, in the kitchen, and she would answer in that voice seldom switched on at home--over being tired, over being mad--her otherplace, otherpeople tone and ^{the next day} ~~tomorrow~~ he would go back to school unchanged.

Driving, looking for a place to turn around, Beebee reaches into her pocketbook again, fingering lipstick and wadded Kleenex he knows have her lip prints on them, and change on the bottom where the seams of leather meet, but no long stiff wallet-thing.

He looks at the floor on the other side and doesn't see it, at the floor beneath his cream ostrich boots and doesn't see it, then up at the dash and sees a red light flashing on the letter E.

"Shit!" he says.

Next ramp, he angles the car in, scrubbing bushes, yanks the gear shift in P, then R, hits the gas, and is surprised when the dainty tires spin out to the road without bogging, so surprised that he forgets to let up on the gas and backs into the ditch with the rear of the car dropping on his side and the front popping up on the other side, leaving him gawking up at the blown-glass sky of October through the treetops. Through the windshield collecting brown worms of pine mast.

He shoves the door open and has to hold it open to keep it from slamming on his body--ding, ding, ding--climbs out and surveys the long blue body of the car with its centerpoint resting on the banked gray dirt.

He reaches through the window, picks up the pistol and tucks it in the waist of his jeans, then buttons his blue denim overshirt to cover it. He starts walking. He has to get home. He has lost his mama's wallet, he has wrecked the car, school will be letting out soon.

Behind him he can hear Garth Brooks singing "Friends in Low Places" again. He feels all right, though his kneecaps feel twitchy and his feet in the pointy-toed ostrich boots feel numb. Those bribe-the-kid boots that cost his mama a week's pay when she went away with her friends to Fernandina Beach ~~on a weekend~~ ^{for a} forget-men ~~to~~ ^{weekend,}

By the time he gets to highway, the sun is streaking down the valley of gravel between pines. He walks toward home, along the right shoulder of the road, hearing his boot heels clicking smartly on the gravel and smelling the sun-heated asphalt cooling down and the sagey cured grass and weeds of the broad, shallow ditches. Hungry tired and thinking he will hitch a ride with the first automobile comes by. But when he hears an engine like waves on a seashore, he lopes down the ditch, through a trench of black water, and squats in a cluster of palmettoes till the car shishes by and turns to a wave sloshing out to sea.

All that saves him, all that makes him stand again and walk out and continue walking, is thinking about what Ike the Stepfather or Hannibal the Cannibal would do under the circumstances. But even thinking about them doesn't work to keep him brave and sure when two yellow school buses pass, like cocoons with metamorphosing moths, and he is left with only the nothingness ringing of the lone locust.

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It is cold and fusing dusk when he gets to the strand of woods behind the row houses where he lives, where he used to shoot squirrels with his B.B. gun on fair fall evenings like this one-- before Miss Frankie took the gun away from him. Kill it and you'll eat it, Mister, I don't care if it's crow. Big laugh.

The sky is just losing its blue hue, and there's a topaz glow where the sun is guttering out on the rim of the world. He can hear the squirrels slisking air through their teeth, their claws on the viney gum trunks as they spiral up; he can smell smoke--leaves burning--and the rooty scent of chilling dirt, and he can see the fake-moon glow of the halogen lights blooming in yards, and hear the voices of people on TV and live. Pots and pans clanging, dogs barking, somebody laughing, somebody crying. He wipes his eyes on the sleeves of his denim shirt and starts down a deer path toward home. Toward the off-and-on laughter of a TV.

In the grassed clearing of the yard, smoke unravels from a pile of burning leaves between a tilled garden patch and a scraggly tree with a couple of withered brown pears still hanging on after the leaves have started to shed. A breeze stirs the white curtains in the windows of the plain gray house. A sparrow flies down from the eaves to a green shrub. *Light as* ~~Leaves~~ like a leaf falling.

The spotted puppy comes and licks his boots and wambles with him among the toys--a sandbox, a seesaw, a rocking horse, the faded green, pleated-plastic Inchworm he rode to the mother-of-pearl moon one day. A moon by day! Beebee walks past the redwood picnic table cobbled in drying pumpkin seeds and pulp to the back wall of the house, steps up on top of the air-conditioning unit and lifts the screen from the window and steps inside. Removing the pistol from his waistband, he creeps through the dim airy room with a white chenille spread on the bed where he has read books, and on to the chute of light from the hall, smelling toasted bread and hearing voices from the TV that sound too familiar to be real.

He has done this before; she won't mind. This is home. She understands. She knows he is a dreamer and a dreamer needs a place to dream. A place to hide what's precious from the dream thieves.

He is halfway down the brief hall papered with children's crayon drawings--all A's, all starred--and even some of his own drawings and poems, when he sees her standing with her pudgy painted fingers tugging down on her silky orange blouse. It has repeating patterns of black witches on brooms and halfmoons hung over kettles.

"I ain't gone hurt you, Miss Frankie," he says and stops, holding out the hand with the pistol. "I'm hungry."

Her brittle platinum hair is puffed high on top and curled on the ends, and he knows the children helped unpin the pink rollers and brush her hair before they left for the day. Maybe helped paint the black eyebrows and dab on the red rouge and lipstick and the morning-glory blue eyeshadow that makes her eyes look open when they are shut. A sad clown face.

She moves toward him.

He backs toward the bedroom.

She stops. He stops.

"She ain't dead, is she?" he says. "Don't tell me she's dead."

Her padded shoulders quake, her hiked breasts rise and fall.

They look hard but feel soft when she hugs him and calls him honey, feeling for the pulse of his pain. She looks strange standing still: she is never not moving, she is never not talking and smiling--her mouth and body are like an electric machine. She looks as if she's come unplugged. She looks old, ridiculous in her youthful get-up, yet as beautiful ^{as she hopes to be} through Beebee's eyes, ~~as she hopes to be.~~

"Don't call the sheriff on me," he says, again offering her the pistol.

"I have to, honey," she says, easing toward him and taking the pistol from his hand. "But I'll hold you in my arms till he gets here."