

Route 346

by David Plumb

Route 346 is the way Pop drove to Troy long after everybody else took Route 2. Today Charlie and I drive in the opposite direction. Back then, Pop drove us to Troy on Route 346 on Sunday afternoons with the car windows rolled up. He smoked White Owl Invincibles and Mom smoked Kools. Way before Mom and Pop separated, we sat in the back seat staring at the passing telephone poles and trees and farms where no one seemed to live. Sometimes the smoking made us sick and we'd stop and throw up on the tall grass beside the road. It took all day to visit Mom's sister in Troy.

Today we scoot up from Route 22 to look around. The steep rolling hills to our right overshadow the narrow road. A scatter of darkly battered farmhouses dot the rocky pastures to our left, where the river twists sadly east following the road, sweeps south three miles and crosses under the span bridge, where the road curves deadly right on the New York State side. More than one teenager died trying to make the curve into New York State where the drinking age was eighteen. Double the deaths driving home at ninety miles per and hitting the bridge. Now the curve is missing and a new cantilever bridge replaces the old span.

Suddenly I tell Charlie I've had enough. The nostalgia is gone. He whips the car around, despite the narrow road. We head back to North Petersburg, to Route 22 to Route 7 and Troy where Mom moved after Pop's death.

I gaze across the river to the right. I think I'm nuts, or in a dream. The tops of the trees are missing. Like somebody ran a chainsaw across the top of the valley and sheared off all the trees. I ask Charlie about it.

"Helluva storm three summers ago," he says, looking for a place to pull over. "It tore all the way northwest through South

Zoar and out here. I stood in Abe's Furniture yakking with his son Wally over in Hancock when it hit. It slammed through town for about forty minutes. I swore my car was going to fly off in the sky and never be seen again."

"Unbelievable," I say gazing out at the hills. Every single tree along Route 346, topped from one end of the valley to the other.

Charlie pulls up on the grass shoulder thirty or so yards past a square-framed farmhouse and we get out. A man in bib overalls loads manure into a spreader up the way on the other side of the fence. He doesn't look up. A small bulldozer idles next to him.

I pull my camera out thinking the photos won't develop right, because I don't have the right lens and more than likely, the brown landscape will blend the colors. I'm right, but I click through half a roll, keeping the man in the bib overalls in the corner of my right eye.

"So what really happened to Marge?" I say watching a flock of crows pass in front of the lens.

"What made you think of Marge?"

"I'm not sure." I swing the camera towards the crows. They fly swiftly out of the lens. "It's been a long time since you and I have done anything together."

Charlie steps back to my left and out of sight. "I think I used her to get away from Mom, to get away from Pop's death, to get out of that house." I hear Charlie scrape his heels on the gravel. "We were too young. Damned, if I knew what the hell we were doing. Now I'm a grandfather. Imagine that? And *my* boy thinks *I'm* some kind of coward because I didn't go to Vietnam. Imagine that?"

"You're not alone," I say. "Be glad you're not over in the Gulf."

"The whole neighborhood has yellow ribbons tied on every god damn tree for miles," he says.

"They probably have them tied around their boy too," I say. "That's what it's about."

"Probably," he says, half to himself.

"Meeting ourselves coming around the corner," I say.

Charlie says, "Listen, what *really* happened to Robin. I liked Robin."

I let the camera rest in both hands at my chest and stare across the field to the river's edge. The crows have roosted in a half tree. My stomach runs empty and damp.

"It was that damn duck," I say.

"The muscovy you had in Sonoma?"

"There were two ducks."

"That's right; you had a male and a female."

"No, this was another duck. I told Robin I was going out to buy a duck for New Years dinner. I stop at Gino and Carlos and get into the gin and tonics. The afternoon shapes up North Beach Christmas. Like Alan Dugan says, 'An unearthly rape of sorts and the arrival of a difficult child.'¹ It's somewhere between hope and despair. About three fifteen I realize I still have to get a duck. Needless to say, I'm half in the can.

"I slide off the barstool thinking, I got plenty of time. We'll have late night duck right at the stroke of midnight. I'll get home about nine, put the duck in the oven...Peas, pilaf, all that. So I whip over to Chinatown and lo and behold, no ducks. No butchered ducks anyhow. I walk back down Stockton Street toward the Beach; there must have been eighty thousand people crammed on that one sidewalk. I think maybe I should get fish, but I don't want fish, or crab. I want duck. Period the end. Maybe we'll eat out. I didn't like that idea. And then I spot the green dented truck with Chinese lettering on the side. Cages of ducks, live ducks. And wow! This duck with the powder blue head and the white tuft. What a beautiful, beautiful duck. Half Mallard, half Khaki Campbell.

"I buy the duck for four bucks; they'd get seven now, maybe twelve depending on the duck's age. The Chinese duck monger with the Greek fisherman's cap shoves the duck in a paper

bag and I head down to Vesuvio's. I sit down at the middle of bar, order a gin and tonic, drink three, maybe four. Pretty soon the duck starts rooting around in the bag, so I pull the duck out of the paper bag and sit him in my lap. Then I start telling everybody this is my pet duck. I have a couple more pops, and I stand the duck on the bar. It waddles up and down, looking real cool, which sets Theo the bartender off, because the duck knocks drinks over and flaps its wings in the customer's faces. Me, I like the idea, but I can see where this is going and it's getting late. Only now, I decide this is truly *my* pet duck.

"I race up to Figone's Hardware on Grant Avenue with the duck in the bag. Christmas Eve. Figone's is closing. I buy twelve feet of poultry fencing for the duck and hop in a cab. Up the stairs and into the living room I fly with the duck and wire.

'Look, Robin,' I say. 'Look at this beeeootiful duck.' And I let the duck out of the paper back onto the living room rug.

"Robin stares at the duck with one of her resigned, he did it again looks. I know she wants to like the duck. I know she likes the duck. She whips her Dolly smile on me. It means. Yeah. Ok. I love you. You're crazy. What now? I know what now. It means, "If you vacation with a cannibal, you're asking to be eaten out of a can."2

"Now I don't know what to do. Before long the two cats, Sadie and Tugboat slink in the room and begin circling the duck. I know they won't kill the duck. This is one smart duck, but I also know the scenario is going sour. I tell Robin to go downstairs and talk to Carla for awhile. She leaves with some comment about not wanting a zoo. She reminds me that a raccoon got in last week because I ran the plank out the window to the top landing, so I didn't have to open the door and let the cats in and out. When I hear the downstairs back door slam, I carry the duck in the kitchen, set him in the sink and get out the boning knife."

"You didn't," Charlie says.

"So I say, "Duck, I'm sorry about all this." And I slit his throat. It gets real quiet then, except for the thrashing, which I

keep at a minimum by holding the wings and neck in one hand and the feet in the other. I let the blood drip in the sink and then it gets real, real quiet. After I finish cleaning up, I put the duck in the fridge and whip downstairs for Robin, but she's left a note saying she and Carla are taking a ride, so I walk back to Vesuvio's.

"I run into Theo coming through the swinging doors and he shoots me a strange look. There's something wrong with you, he says. You got blood and feathers all over your face.

"Theo stands there a full five seconds looking at me like I'm nuts. He shakes his head and walks off into the night. Sure enough, when I go downstairs to the men's room, I see I got blood and feathers all over my face. I wash it all off and go up to the bar."

"That's why she left you?" Charlie says.

"Not quite," I say watching one of the crows flap its wings and settle back on a branch. "I didn't come home for two days."

"That'll do it." Charlie follows my line of vision out to the crows. "I did that once and I never heard the end of it."

The crows burst from the tree like a great blooming flower and scatter in the pale blue sky. The man with the shovel has gone inside.

"Anyway, Charlie. One day, a year and a half after we'd moved to Sonoma, Robin stood in the garden. A few months earlier she'd been exercising and dieting. She lost fifteen pounds. Now it's August. She bulges in her green bikini when she bends down and picks up a gigantic three-foot banana squash. The dirt spills across her wrists when she hoists it to her chest and turns around, sensing me standing on the side porch. I see her eyes then. And I suddenly remembered them the day she came into my life.

"Three months later, I'm driving home and I see a blue car crushed against an oak off to my right. They'd just repaved the road and loose gravel covered that flat stretch. Robin is in the front seat. Her face is cut up; her knee cut badly and she doesn't know where she is. She spends ten days in the hospital. One day in the hospital, she tells me she dreamed about a big man with a beard

who lives up in the sky. She smiles through the sutures in her lips and I'm so damned afraid. I loved her so much and I felt sure she'd die. The day I bring her home, I start yelling at her the minute we drive in the yard. 'What the hell's wrong with you? You smashed the car up on purpose!'

She stands in the driveway with the cast on her left arm and the bandage around her cut right knee and eleven sutures in her lower left lip. She's broken, blankly mystified by pain, life and my blindness as well as hers.

"And I saw her eyes again when she walked past me in the house one night; the familiar smell of her curly hair catching me off guard. Her eyes darted to mine, then away and she disappeared into the bedroom. Yes, I imagined I had taken it all, her heart, her hope, her love and finally, her sweet God. I turned away and looked out the window to darkness, knowing the branches of the Monterey Pine I planted the year before, rose and fell in the warm spring breeze, even if I couldn't see them. And I was already running."

Now I stare out at the topless trees where the blackbirds have perched. The day suddenly pales to tan.

"What was I thinking about?" I say.

Charlie stands by the car with the driver's door open. He laughs like he's known me all my life. "I don't know. What were you thinking about? What were any of us thinking about?"

"It was such a beautiful duck," I say. "It really was. It had a blue head and this plume that stuck out of his crown. God you should have seen that duck."

"Get in," Charlie says. "You'll start to think like Pop.

"It's incredible," I say.

"Get in," Charlie says.

1 Dugan, Alan, "Holiday," *Poems*, (1960)

2 Vose, Julia, "CAN," *Moved Out On The Ins* Edit body of your story here...

