

Myra's Mother

by Doug Woodhouse

Myra's at the wheel and I'm strapped to the passenger seat, watching the towns pass by us and letting my mind wander. Every once in a while one of us will open the window a crack, and that's the signal for both of us to smoke a cigarette. I blame the boredom and monotony of traveling, but it's a pretty flimsy excuse for me to be smoking again. Smoking is like hooking up with a girlfriend you broke up with: you know she's bad for you and that it won't work out, but it feels so familiar and comfortable and so easy to slide back into. I glance at Myra as she blows the smoke out her nose and recognize the metaphor immediately. Maybe she's why I'm smoking again.

We pass a little memorial along the side of the Interstate. As the car speeds by we get close enough to see the details for a brief moment, and I notice the name on the cross right before it disappears behind us. Ben Hoffman. I was in high school with a kid name Ben Hoffman. We were both in the bass section in chorus and we did some musicals together. And here on I-70 in Ohio Ben Hoffman crashed into a tree and died.

I've always appreciated those crosses along the side of the road. Someone gets in their car with a destination and a plan for the weekend and instead gets killed along the way. When he woke up that morning he was immortal, but by the end of the day he's in a pine box. I like that. I have a destination, I have plans and things I want to do and places I want to go and things I want to say, but for all I know Myra will spill that coffee in her lap and we'll end up wrapped around a tree in the next town. I like to be reminded that I'm going to die and that I don't know when. I liked to be reminded that I can't waste this life.

I turn to tell Myra, but then change my mind. She won't get it, and she'll just tell me I'm being morbid. Maybe I am. Maybe we're supposed to ignore the fact that we're going to die. Maybe it's just because I'm young and immortal myself, and I'm still marveling at

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the fact that really, I'm not. But I'm not convinced that's true. My grandmother is in a nursing home with Alzheimer's, and spends her entire day lying in a bed looking at the ceiling. She isn't responsive to anyone or anything, yet when her health took a sharp decline last winter my mother was worried she was going to die. Of course she's going to die, mom. We're all going to die. But I never said anything. And now grandma's on life support, being babysat by a television she never looks at, and we're all going on with the rest of our lives, making plans and smoking cigarettes.

I don't really feel like talking about death with Myra anyway. When Myra was fifteen she got into a huge fight with her mother and locked herself in her room. Her mother was banging on the door, shouting at her to open up, and Myra told her to drop dead. She thought she had gone away, but when she opened the door an hour later, her mother was in a heap on the floor. All the heat had gone out of her. Later the doctors found that the lining of her heart had weakened until finally it burst a hole clean through. It was one of those disorders that you don't know you have until it's too late. For years and years and years your heart continually and thanklessly pumps bloods through your body, day in and day out, and slowly erodes the lining of your heart until one day the dam breaks. I sit still for a second and try to feel my heart beating. Even now it still amazes me to think about it: Myra's mother died of a broken heart.

Most people would have gotten into therapy, but instead Myra got into heavy psychedelics and firearms. On weekends she would get twisted on some unholy cocktail of Wild Turkey and amphetamines and drive around the warehouse district of her town, shooting out the windows of the abandoned factories. Nights she'd lie in a field and shoot straight up into the stars. She wore those round sunglasses constantly and carried a small handgun to school with her. The summer before her eighteenth birthday she was arrested for possession of narcotics and attempting to bribe an officer. The summer before my eighteenth birthday I completed my Eagle Scout Project and volunteered at the SPCA. I think Myra was sorry she ever told me about her mother, because for weeks I constantly asked

her questions about it. How did that affect you? How did that shape you? How did your Dad react? Did he blame you? Did you blame yourself? I would practically gawk at her. For Myra, the whole incident was embarrassing, because the whole incident was so cheesy.

Myra cracks her window and I crack mine. We have one lighter between us, and I light my cigarette and pass the lighter to her. I wonder if my Ben Hoffman is still alive. I'd try to track him down, but really I don't care enough to go through the effort. I glance at my cigarette and I glance at Myra and suddenly get depressed. I don't want to die today. I don't want to die in a car with Myra, smoking a cigarette.

