

Central Washington State On Five Dollars A Day

by Ray Nessly

The tailfins of our '57 Plymouth Fury dip and rock from the stress: Three boys—say no more?—jumping into the car. And Dad, loading suitcases into the trunk, working them around the steel cooler heavy with Cokes, root beers, ice. He slams the trunk lid down like a TV wrestler, Dad in funny mask pinning a bad guy to the mat. Make the trunk scream “uncle,” Dad!

Uncle Dad? That didn't turn out right.

Meanwhile, we three jockey—okay, fight—for position in the back seat. Smirkin' Rolf and I get window seats. Little Dirk's stuck with the middle seat, big surprise.

“Sucker.”

“Who sez?”

“Me. I'm big.”

He doesn't dare try a comeback. Silence. *Five seconds, four . . .* Mom, in the front seat, lets out a sigh. Silence is golden they say. (It's temporary too. They always forget to say that.) *Two, one, lift-off* and now we're fighting over the comic books she's handing out. I grab Superman, Rolf hogs Batman, and loser Dirk's stuck with Richie Rich. (Richie Rich!? Wow, sometimes Mom has lousy taste in comics.) Now we're arguing about who looks the goofiest in the new shirts she made us wear so we look good when we see Gramma. Lickety-split we shift gears to argue about who's ugliest. Who smells worse. Whose favorite TV show is the lamest. Faster and faster we argue. Meet the Magnificent Three. Fastest tongues in the west. We argue about any thing or dad-gum notion we can get our trigger fingers and ruined-forever-by-TV minds on. We fight, therefore we are.

Mom yells at us. Silent timeout again. *Five, four . . .* Mom looks tired of refereeing a trio of Looney Tunes Tasmanian devils whirling

in the backseat in Technicolor with the volume turned up. She's looking for a diversion . . . anything will do.

She rolls down her window, says, "Need any help, honey?"

Dad, looking at the fishing poles and crap he's about to tie to the roof rack, mutters something. ("Nope," sounds like. Maybe a different four letter word, don't know, can't say.) Dad's King Kong atop the roof now, his arm lashing out at a tiny plane or maybe it's just a mosquito. The hood ornament teeters and the tail fins totter. The car creaks. Hanging from the rearview mirror, the pine tree air freshener sways drunkenly. Swish, swish. Creak, creak. Teeter, totter. Dirk's carsick and we're still in the driveway. What a pansy.

At last Dad turns the key, the Fury roars (of course it roars—it's a Fury!) and we're off. To the hallowed land of our ancestors or bust. To where Dad's side of the family lives anyway. Where half our cousins live, where laughing Buddha-belly Grampa lives. And Gramma too, all gums and wrinkles and looking eight thousand years old, a shriveled hobbit who loves to read us stories and feed us cinnamon bread and the reddest watermelon anywhere and sometimes speak ill of beatniks and colored people. Grampa? He loves to take us bowling, pays for everything, knows all the good jokes. Heaven, on the other side of the mountains. But first we gotta get there.

Up, up, up, and over Snoqualmie Pass, and down, speeding past apple orchards, the fruit too small and green to filch. For hours (days? years?) the Yakima River runs alongside us, snowmelt washing over boulders, whitecaps good as ocean surf. And now the hop fields of central Washington state, the road endlessly flat and aimed dead-on south, to the Horse Heaven Hills, those Hostess Snowball-shaped mounds of dirt and summer-frazzled grass. Grasshoppers, rattlesnakes. The ghosts of long-dead horses, their heads down, feeding. Mount Hood eats up one-quarter of the southern sky, snow and rock against blue. Remember this for art class, get it down on paper, easy A.

The car bumps over something. Road kill? It was already dead, I'm hoping. I turn around. "That a black cat? What's that yucky smell?" I ask, pinching my nose.

"Mint," says Dad. His goofy grin fills the rearview mirror.

Lots of obstacles between here and there. Geography. And death. The quick death of little things. Snakes, flatter than highway stripes. Moths, splattered on the windshield. And the slow, slow death of big things. Miles, and time. Boredom takes you down for the count. Boredom kills. Store signs tempt us, wizards of temptation offering snake oil cures for boredom. Ice cream cones, homemade fudge, deer jerky, you name it they got it. But Dad's immune to the signage, deaf to kids' demands. One potty stop's all we get. And here it is—at last!

Mom escorts us to the restrooms. Bladder-of-steel Dad stays behind. We're headed back to the car and Dad's got the trunk open. "Root beer or Cokes?—c'mon boys make up yer mind don't have all day let's go."

We grab our sodas and a church key and jump into the car. Dad's not into temptations. He's into making good time. Yep, good time, good mileage. Maybe spot a deer.

For us kids though, it's all about the comics. The comics that Mom, in her almost boundless wisdom, buys us before each trip. A gift? No, a bribe. Mordida in the land and time of Eisenhower. Mom's hoping—dreaming—the comics'll shut us up. And they do. For a while. Cover to cover, forwards, backwards. There's a limit.

"Oh all right, I was trying to save 'em for later but here's two more," Mom says.

Two comic books divided by three boys. Mom never was any good at math.

