

Unscathed

By Gil Somers

IT WASN'T LIKE I heard it would be. There was no flash, no bright lights, no memories of my mother stirring hot lentil soup while my brother and I knelt around the woodstove racing matchboxes to the smell of ash and smoke and dust and the tinny sound of Bob Dylan on our father's guitar. It was silent. And slow. Like what I always imagined being lost in space would feel like: unending and relentless, just me watching the world go by.

It was early March and I had set out to drive cross country, solo. I acquired a forest green 1994 Jeep Grand Cherokee for five-hundred dollars, threw what little possessions I had into the trunk, and drove westward. Aside from a flat tire two hours later and a blizzard near Laramie, Wyoming some days later, the trip was pretty uneventful and I was pretty lucky, considering I didn't necessarily know what I was doing. Looking back, of course, no one gets into a beat-up farm Jeep with less than four-hundred dollars to their name planning to drive across the country in the middle of March when most places north of the Mason-Dixon line are still experiencing winter unless they absolutely believe that they know what they're doing. Or they're an idiot. Or both.

I felt the earth let go of my tires, windows cleared of hot and humid breath and fog. I felt my foot on the brake pedal (when did it get there?), and I felt the cold foam steering wheel in my grip, nails digging into my palms. One, then two, then three and four thick flakes of snow clumped heavily on my windshield. Wipers lurched and arced, beginning their unperturbed sweep of the stragglers in their path. Breath, hot and humid, fogged my windows, and the headlights ahead shone through like dull stars. I hadn't even begun to spin. Outside my windows, evergreens stood like ever-watching sentinels in their ice-bound world, like two walls with which to collide. Behind me my tire tracks crisscrossed and laced together, in and then out, dancing in the snow on the road like planetary trajectories moving through time.

I was alive. I threw open the heavy door to the frigid air outside and unfurled myself onto the snow, relishing its cool embrace on my red and flushed face. The air reeked of engine oil and transmission fluid, of cold nights and snot. My body was still Jello from the adrenaline, and when I stood up I fell again to my knees and then to my palms. I wasn't sure if anything hurt, but I still saw stars on the horizon. I heard her, my Jeep, rumbling softly, like some celestial beast half-hidden in snow, waiting to rise. "Are you OK?"

"Uhm, yes." I replied. "Yeah.."

"You sure?"

I started laughing! "Yes! Yes! I'm ALIVE!". I was exuberant! Ecstatic! Elated! Invigorated! Maybe a touch delirious, but I was alive! "I'm fine, I'm fine!" I called back, my teeth bright in manic smile. I whooped and hollered, howled and cheered! I danced into my lovely, life-saving, forest green Jeep, put her in four-wheel drive, and drove off into the setting sun, westward, in search of more incidents to barely survive!