



Darren Sorrels

Woker

He sat there in the passenger seat because he was the passenger. His name was Waitt. He didn't want to see what the guy looked like. He had snatched a look, just a quick look mind you, and he had been totally sure the guy had a half-eaten turkey leg crooked out of his mouth; mostly bone. The passenger was lying even to himself. Was he barefooted—he had always heard that people didn't wear shoes when they were...when they had...Oh forget it. He hadn't looked down at his feet, but had thought about the driver. He didn't think it was good to look, because maybe he had seen what the guy's head had looked like (a burnt flower reaching for the sky), something not good, and he had been trying to move that particular thing out of his immediate fractured memory. It had, he believed, almost turned his flip-flopping stomach.

The like-new van was moving at a fairly good rate and the scenes that were flying by (when you had fun, the time just flew) were trying to remind him of something. There was a skidding-road rash of thought, something about his face, maybe even the cleft of his jaw. The cars that were seeming to pass the van, taking time to stop and brake over and over when they came to a light (if they did), reminded him of all the terminal traffic jams he had been in up to

this point, here in the van, both personal and road-wise. The traffic that he had been watching had all been in his mind. Not real, maybe a lost lie. He had read that the mind holds onto strange, often morbid things, especially in strange situations where people are seeing cars that are not there and having talks with no one in particular. Like he was now. If only he had looked at the faces of those people in the cars (that his mind had put out there) or had been able to make them out he could have gotten further down the road to understanding what was going on. Maybe if he had seen his own face while seated here in the van. Waitt looked down and looked closer at the dash, making sure to not look too far left. The passenger seat felt quite comfortable all of a sudden.

There was a tightly wound spider web which hung from the steering wheel and the top part of the dash near the air vents. Coolish air silently came from the vents. He thought of the spider that had made the web and shivered. Hard. That thing must've worked hard. That thing must have been from someone's garage or someone's hole in the ground. Why would he think that? All through the night even, all through the weeks we are given. What place in his brain did this new thought come from? What a durable web we weave when first we learn and so on. Even when the driver turned the wheel (it wasn't often; they had been going straight for the longest of times), the web still hung in there. Like a circus tightrope. That arachnid had been the world's strongest web-maker. Guinness book at least. The dash had been all he had been looking at for the past hour. And his mind questioned that calculation. Before that, he had been looking at the cars that were like moving fossils, laid down in his mind. The ability to focus had been like the cars. Coming and going. Constantly moving while changing lanes, some turning off to certain septic destinations. Blaring their horns when things were not right or if someone had cut someone off. He had been cut off, huh. He was sure that it had been longer than just one hour, just like he was sure that the driver had said some things, but he couldn't. What was he driving at? He looked past the low bend of the large passenger window. There was a side mirror out there. His face had not come into recognition in that side mirror, because right off, he didn't have the strength to take a glance. His will was as thin as his legs. Besides his face was his face.

It would be an hour (his mind questioned if such a thing existed here in this tight space, this van's cabin, it seemed so vacuous, he had times when he was sure he wasn't breathing at all), until he would find the freewheeling courage to adjust his head downward, until he could take a look at his thin beanpole legs that had once walked underneath him as he went along with the everyday traffic of life. He had turned into such a dog walker. The van hit a jolt and it shuddered like a person having a small stroke. Whether it be walking the dog or walking to his car, on those frozen days before going to work, where he would find the used gift card propped in the floorboard next to the middle gearshift console; he would use it to scrape the scrim of ice off the windshield. These were everyday things for him. Sometimes he would try to park his car further out just so he would have to walk the extra. That would help his heart, he was sure of it.

Keep the strokes at bay. He didn't need those babies. He had had times when he had fought the flow of traffic, times when he thought better of what the world didn't and the mere impression of that thought made him smile suddenly.

Besides just sitting here, knowing that he had lost weight in his once dependable legs, he was finally getting the chance to sit for a while and this somehow made him feel better. Too many questions could hurt his head, so he bucked them off as long as he could so that the traffic going on upstairs in his own head would not become unbearable up there. Maybe that was why he was here. Maybe he had had a brain aneurism. This was becoming a long list to say the least.

He looked to the left and at the driver without much fanfare. The man sitting there quickly adjusted his mirror by sticking his own thin hand into the slight drizzle of the morning and continued to stare at his own side of the windshield. His face was set, but his thin face had shied away from the breeze coming into the open window and the wind almost made the passenger feel alive again as it moved around him, almost through him. He had time to see that the driver had a nose that made him look like a vulture, one that had not had a spare bite in decades.

This guy with the hooked nose was driving him somewhere. Had the guy with the hooked bill been the one to put him, with help from some delusionary drugs to soften the blow, into this van? Was it a medical van? Somehow the idea of the van being a storage van came to him and he tried to put that one off to the side: he actually put his best shoulder to that and shoved. Hard. He already had the hoggish vulture driving him to some place. That still remained an arcanum that was about as tough as having some untold sickness that had put him in such a stich. It bothered him somehow and had the aftertaste of unease. He couldn't pin it down, because he found that his eyes had moved back to the cracked window. The window itself wasn't cracked (he was always self-correcting himself when other people, and they usually did, would try to correct first), it was just a bit and there was even the slightest breeze coming over the top of the clear glass. The feeling almost made it visible. Another idea came. This was an unused van. A never-before-used van. His bursts of thought must have been coming from the drugs that had been put in him forcibly, he had come to consider, because there had to be drugs and this would have been done forcibly, because Wyatt had always felt in control of himself and of most things around him. He couldn't remember the hospital. He couldn't put it together. This list of possible scenarios was beginning to get to him. He was almost sure that he hadn't even been sick. This had all been made up in his mind. Stop. Wait. Another, his tired mind whispered and the voice sounded like the one people hear after a long night of agitated non-sleep. A voice you hear in the night when there's been an inert sound in the other room. The one you're not in. A voice so close. Maybe an accident had happened. Something sudden and horrible. In his core, this seemed the one closest to the truth. The slight breeze was bringing him around, but was that even

possible? Would he come to in a car that was smashed and torn apart or off the side of an empty road, hanging on some steep grade? The vulture's low voice brought him back to whatever this here and now was.

“Lonesome road out there, mile after mile. Except when there's another with me. You don't talk very much, even though you were talking when we first started out and then you've had your silent spots since then. I guess you were waiting on me to talk. I have that same problem myself.” The driver looked over at Wyatt and Waitt got another look at that beak, so focused on the man's honker that the man's eyes seemed smaller than a man's eyes. This was only a surmise, he hadn't actually seen the eyes. That nose and his old school. How they had hung out around that old electrical tower that had been in the back field at his old elementary school: picking devil darts near the base of that old tower, throwing them, feigning hurt. My God, where was the man's mouth? Maybe the driver who wasn't a driver had talked all in telepathy. Wyatt tried without success to fill his own mouth with spit or some kind of wetness, because his own mouth wouldn't work unless he got some water in there. God! No mouth on that guy and he had given me drugs! Ideas of the shameful pranks hospital staff must play on some unknowing folks who had surgery played out slowly in his tired mind. Wyatt had a bland moment to whisper to himself that he hadn't remembered any talk before this, from him or the driver. None at all. The wind outside had begun to dance and do some talking itself. “Does get lonesome, almost like there's no one in here if there is another person to be carried. Least that's what they say in Mississippi. Carried. That word carried to them means to drive someone someplace. Carried. When you carry someone, you are taking them somewhere, like on a trip or simply to the grocery store.” Wyatt had some time to think one thing and only one. This wasn't a trip to the grocery store. He was a surviving guy who had died and he was on this guy's gurney just for laughs. No, that's just not true. The driver returned his gaze back to the road as Wyatt looked down and saw that the driver was wearing tennis shoes. Not professional, but when you take the gurney for a joyride, you can dress how you want. The driver looked at his feet; looking down towards Wyatt's feet and noticed him looking as if there had been a mirror between the two. There was a low whistle at the driver's side door. That wind was no joke. It could almost be felt through the door. Every so often the van would give and there would be a slight shift and the driver would straighten the course and take it back in the lane. “When you do these overnight carryalls, it takes a while and the talk can help out so that no one goes to sleep, although I don't see how that can happen anyway,” the driver finished, a giggle bubbling up out of the deep waters and Wyatt supposed it was his turn to continue an already forgotten line of jibjab.

He said, “Sooo, uh how long you been at this carryall business? I guess I mean what does it have to do with me? I don't honestly remember any bad thing that had happened to me and I don't remember any kind of light that is usually there when something terrible happens, like in an accident or...or maybe that's too rational or too much like a late-night movie gone wrong.

Even that sounds funny. Especially coming from me. I've always been so open-minded, but rational. Don't forget that." He noticed his dry mouth getting worse; more than before. His hands had begun to work in his lap. They moved and writhed over his stick legs. The vulture called things to order. "What makes you think that? You think that's what happened to you? Not sure about any of that, about the accident and all or if there was one at all. That part I can't put together either. Not sure if I was there, although I might have been. Almost like, if you think about it, the both of us got into some drugs." The driver considered, then another giggle escaped his gullet. Wyatt came out of his see-the-light thought (quite dumb, actually any rational person could tell you) and said, matter of factly, "Besides, you are the one driving and usually if one is driving, that one driver knows where they came from and usually has some recollection of where he is 'carrying someone' to." With the dryness in his voice, he couldn't finish with any kind of relish or strength. His tongue wasn't working. He didn't even think it was in his mouth anymore. The Beak said casually, "Maybe we should stall on the talking, because you're scaring me, especially out here on this long stretch with the sun go'n down and me tired from all this driving. This carrying stuff ain't easy as you can probably figure. I'm not a big man and these things can begin to get to me"—Wyatt's neck popped and a good dose of pain zapped down his chin as he looked down at the guy's legs, there under the van's wheel, and had time to think they had changed—"kinda like you did when you were talking earlier in the trip. All that stuff about trying to understand what happened to you. You even got to what you thought was happening in the world. I mean you were letting it go. About seeing things change. About the caravans. Well I guess all that stuff took care of itself. Those people in cages. Kids with no mattresses to sleep on or to even rest on. That stupid Obama. But you don't remember any of what you said, do you? I can get the wheelies if I don't watch it. And after all, you know you are wrong about that stuff. You're just not thinking, not at least on your own. You are grabbing onto anything you can get, just to get by and you know it. That was put on those poor, downtrodden Venezuelan people, who are trying to make their lives better, so they don't live in no stinkin' cages. That way they would have to buy some Cage Life stickers for the backs of the cars that they don't have." Wyatt could get the wheelies at that, but with him, it was just the opposite of what this guy was spouting. He had tried to see their side, but they were not supposed to be here and no amount of gospel was going to make that any different. He honestly felt like a parody of two parties and he now had a real headache, as if a head was going to spout skyward at any time.

Wyatt found himself thinking about something else. That other talk had come too close to home. All that political stuff. Any know-it-all could tell you that politics were for the weekend, that people should not concern themselves with things that will never change. It was a losing exchange, now was it? Rational.

A thought stepped through the echoey, shadowed rooms of his mind. His cool mind. He had been walking the dog around the corner of the house one night. He had taken it on as a

bargaining chip. The dog liked to go to the darkest side of the house and stay there smelling about where other dogs had been. Going even past the air conditioner and on to the corner in the back where the trees were towering over him, moving in the singsong way Wyatt didn't like very much. A dark spot when the roof blotted out most of the seen world. A dark and lonely spot to be even with a dog. Wyatt always thought that there would be something around that corner. Something worse than an aneurism, although he didn't know much about them and didn't like pain very much. Something worse than the car accident where the jaws of life would be ready to go and the guys holding the apparatus would be muscled and ready. A place where there was no going back. To normal. To where his wife put her leg over his in bed.

Wyatt could feel the brisk wind (the wind coming in and out of that window of this van was a close second, maybe a first as well, his tired mind gave its own eerie giggle) as he would walk out there, the ground wet. During this rudimentary thing that thousands of people did at least three times a day was just normal. Rational even. Even at night. Just being in the yard with the trees moving. Some of those trees looked like they were hiding or something, the dog looking sturdily toward those same swaying trees, making the thought whole in both their minds. Anybody could be there. Anybody taking out the trash late, but that wasn't the case. It could be a wetback, trying to find his place in the world, even if he couldn't rent a house for the rest of his life, just to feel he had reached the line. Or fresh over the wall. Or fresh over the broken-down wall. Something near the hill in the back, near the top of the slope. A place he didn't want to go. It looked like some tall limbs, but that didn't make sense, because during the day, that hadn't been there. He hadn't planted it. It wavered just a bit and then Wyatt could see what looked like legs and a cocked elbow near the top of those legs. At the top of the form, where the face would have been (a flower burnt reaching, his mind interjected) was a thin sheen of light. He had time and thought to look down at the dog, which hadn't made a gurgle and saw the dog, still hooked up to the leash, lying on the ground, looking dead. Wyatt couldn't react to the dog's lying there because the stick guy was walking, skulking really, shuffling forward. Toward him. The face a lighted cat's eye, devilish. The dog jumped at one curt pull and both ran in. Wyatt had played it off like they had decided to jog on the sidewalk, but under his lie, he had been cowed and crept out. What was that? His wife had looked like she knew he had been afraid when he walked in, putting the dog harness, wrapped carefully, into the shelf. He saw just under her skin, like he always did, and saw she had taken relish in the fact of his fear. It had taken many years to see her that way, but he found that he could do it. During their strained marriage, she had forgotten him and he supposed they had become professionals at taking advantage. She had forgotten him, that's what remained in his head. She had forgotten to rub him on the nape of his neck when he had been driving the Honda, instead of the Camaro that they had ridden in when they were dating. She had forgotten that he loved it when she rubbed across his nipples while they were in the cool of his upstairs teenage bedroom. Her leg finding its place over his leg. Her hand working its way downward on him ever so slowly. Her wanting to be alone with him,

wanting to find where his lips were, the way she could breathe. He had to have something nowadays. He had pushed that so far back that it didn't exist. As he sat in the van it had come to the forefront like a container of oil and water, after those years, he was shocked at how real it was, that loneliness. A real reality. He could get out, but....

He was back in the van. Wyatt looked down at his broomstick legs, but felt a shamed relief to see the driver had legs that were the ones he used to have. Sturdy and willing. The legs were back like they were before. Healthy. Something was going on here. He didn't feel right, even though he was. Yeah, right was a good name for it.

“Have you always had a thing for that young Beiber boy and his tattoos, the one that really isn't that young anymore? I mean that turns your crank? Can't you see he's not all that and a bag of chips? I always thought that sounded so cringy, I figured the ol' bag of chips statement was so last year,” the vulture said out of the complete nowhere and did give a slight tilt to his head so as to make the question stand out. Another giggle. Wyatt thought of the cat's eye, the way he thought it had had a conscious aspect to it and shivered. The shadow of his head seemed voluminous on the steering wheel. Wyatt moved his head back to the windshield stance, his neck tired. Nothing could be heard but the slow pat of the dying rain on that new universe of Wyatt's better known as the windshield. It had held slow fading thoughts and had sheared them off as easily as it was shearing off the rain right now. Clear, but somehow viable, that windshield. “Yeah I know, that's just like saying is it ‘What goes around comes around’ or ‘What comes around goes around’? I know it's all about the same when...” The thought a broken signal. “Does that make sense to you?” It was the second round of what Wyatt came to know as the great American conversation starter from the old fart that was driving. Suddenly, he felt old. It had happened to him several times. Wyatt's throat had tightened and was getting feverishly drier as the minutes rolled on after the question was out of the bag and started to claw away. It had been a question Wyatt had guessed would be asked. He had asked himself more than once and the ability of the old-fart driver to see through several things at once was unnerving. Wyatt had also very privately thought about the validity of the Ancient Aliens stories all with great interest, but the question of his sexual hesitancy had been the one to stand itself up on sleepless nights. The question made Wyatt think of barns and of that show *Downton Abbey* and how the people and men in general had once dressed and the escapades that they had once endeavored in. Beiber didn't fit into that scene, but... All in a period dressed in unmatched grace and civility. But this one question had opened him up as if it had been asked by his own lips. It had been like the courage had whaled up inside of his lowest parts and been asked out loud. The vulture had found him as they always do and he didn't know whether to try and answer or crawl under the dash that he had spent untold hours staring at. Wyatt wasn't sure, but the guy in the driver's seat had reminded him of those vultures that had congregated on an extremely tall and high wire tower

near his old elementary school and found the way in. He had stepped on a buried root that had grown privately and nightly. The root that had indeed ended up sprouting in the wrong season.

It had been a long time ago when Wyatt had been in school and you know how kids are. Wyatt had been one of the lucky ones, not to have the plague of ridicule, that biting remark that haunts you almost to death. Especially in those days, way before phones that were carried around and the malignant, cancerous force of social media. The elementary school had been laid out with no metal fences barring the uncouth, no tiny spotlights to record vandalism or the occasional kid who loves to show himself, pants down, and what he's got to unsuspecting teachers as they look on numbly, not really caring one way or the other. The school itself looked like it had fallen out of the sky and had landed on some unsuspecting farmer's field and Wyatt had never been able to forget just what the elementary school had looked like or felt like. School life had taken this country boy, who would rather throw a rock at you rather than look at you too hard, showed him some books, showed him how to make extremely big, wide spitballs that could only be thrown with the help of the wide part of the broom where they would land on the ceiling of the boy's bathroom and stick. That place had made that boy love school and what it could do for you. All the thoughts. All this after the accident and all this thinking. Just over a simple question about a con artist with tattoos all over his chest who sang forgettable songs while hoping girls still sighed in his general direction. OK—car accident—GONE. Hospital after accident—GONE. Given the wrong medicine, maybe, but no, GONE. Those two struck off the record. Progress at last.

A red truck flew low beside them and the new van was shook on its like-new tires. Old hook nose steadied the wheel, said some old worn-out cuss words and gripped the wheel again. Wyatt didn't check his face for the portended look that might be there. Wyatt barely had time to see that the truck was red. The thing that really caught his eye was that the windows were meshed over with twisted wire squares painted white. The mesh even ran along the truckbed. He had seen these kind before. These trucks were contractor trucks and this one was hellbent on flying down the road. The van they were riding in was like a Volkswagen going against an Indy 500 first car. The contractor truck blew past the new van, but not until Wyatt had seen the mesh wire cage work on the truck and what was inside there. Human fingers were sticking through. Most were bloody, but were still wriggling with life. The whip of the wind was harsh, but the screams that Wyatt heard were worse. The screams stayed in his (fractured) head after the contractor truck had flown on down the underpass. He couldn't make out the words, but the harsh urgency was there and it ran over and over in the core of his (fractured) head. And those fingers. Some were broken off. He tried to push back the last thing he had seen through the mesh screens, but it came anyway. He could actually see through the mesh from here and could see the people's faces (where there were fingers, there were faces to go with them) and he was sure that some of the mouths were bloodied, because they had tried to eat through the (social media mesh,

meshy mesh) mesh screens. He couldn't bury the thought. He couldn't and that's when the vulture started to talk again.

“We almost there. Any last words? That sounds so numb-nuts when you actually say that stuff. Although I think the talk has went back and forth so many times, it's like the water wearing away the rock that everybody said would last forever. I guess we both know that sounds dumb and uninspiring and we both know that it doesn't, but the way things are nowadays, it doesn't matter a diddle.” An idea came to ol' Wyatt there in the eleventh hour. A shaking hand (as if a hand had some sort of knowledge itself) reached up to Wyatt's tiptop and before it even got there, the heat coming off his head pressed itself against each of his hot fingertips. It felt like a crown, but it was burning. Still burning. He had time to see the driver's jaws as they clickety-clacked. The words didn't go with what he was saying. Wyatt, through all of the talk, didn't have to check his face because he knew that his beak of a nose was sticking out. Even the folks down at the old Sears store had commented on it when he had left the papery smelling store with that see-through plastic bag in his hand. They had talked about him in private. And they must have given his wife lessons, because she had to learn somewhere. About him being special. When the bullet on that night in the woods went through the place where his tongue was, the whole top of his head had turned into a burning flower. Everything made sense. A burning flower was nice but it hurt a hurtless hurt. Wyatt looked over, because some part of his dead mind had told him to. There was no one in the driver's seat. The driver that had been there once looked over and there was no passenger. Wyatt tried to look at the dash, but it was all dust, flying back, special dust that couldn't be seen. It couldn't get in your eyes. Then he barely had time to look out at the road that wasn't there. His wife had asked him, when he had tried to talk to her last, if he had thought about coloring his hair. At last, he didn't have to figure out why his wife didn't love him.

With several years of teaching experience in the elementary classroom, Darren Sorrels is ready to write short stories, mostly spooky.