

Stoner

THE FIRST TIME RED GETS STONED, HE'S EIGHT. Can you know you're stoned when you're eight? Would you *want* to be stoned when you're eight? Can you even *spell* stoned when you're eight? For the Red-Headed Kid, like so much else, it happens without thought under the most beneficent of conditions, and many times, since he understood what happened, he's wondered about the disconnect adults seem to exhibit when they medicate a child. At the very least, it suggests a misunderstanding as to the addictive nature of dreams, regardless of their legitimacy.

In these wonderful times, Mom and Dad bundle up the Kid and his sister and drive off into the past—the Wild West or the Ozarks. They head east on the legendary U.S. Highway 66 in this sweet dream, as far as Flagstaff, the first leg of the “northern route” between California and Missouri. The “southern route” goes through Albuquerque, and is a bit faster, so they usually come home that way.

Driving out of the Los Angeles basin in 1948—as it does now—requires using *El Cajon Pass*, where the San Andreas Fault marks the division between the North American and Pacific tectonic plates. The Kid isn't sure what it's like in the twenty-first century, but it first flows into this moment as a thin, winding, mountainous road, a precipitous drive almost designed to make a kid carsick. It certainly makes Red carsick, which brings us to the point.

The drug of choice for carsickness in the late Forties is *Dramamine*. The Kid has no idea what *Dramamine* is, he's

only eight, but it makes him high. He doesn't know he's high. He doesn't even know what *high* is, but the state he's in during all those bright, moonlit drives across the Mojave Desert is made impossibly romantic by something, and he's a smart little boy, so it doesn't take him long to understand that this very desirable condition is somehow brought on by the pills he takes to keep from puking in the car.

Not that he's lurking about stealing pills. The concept of "high" is still a long way off. It hasn't yet occurred to him that taking the pills deliberately is an option. He takes them so he won't get carsick, and that's it. On the other hand, when he does take them . . .

. . . the Mojave Desert flows past like a ghostly river. The moon is always full, and the landscape shimmers in silver and white. There is no color, just fingers of light, reaching toward what appear to be watchtowers of tortured stone, their layers of sediment heartlessly exposed by twenty-million years of incessant wind. No wonder he likes those pills.

The Kid admits that the memory might be more romantic than the event. But, maybe not. He is so happy when he's eight. His family is everything and eternal—a concept carved in stone—so real it can never change. So, what happened? Where is it? Wasn't it just this morning that he rode home in his dad's old Ford—the one with the flowerpots in the back seat—his baby sister resting in his arms? How long did it really last before fading away?

The time we spend with our parents is so brief. Blink, and it's gone. From this end, they are apparitions, flitting in and out of the cloudy memories that fill our dreams. Some philosophers tell us that everything is illusion, so perhaps they *are*. Indeed, the older he gets, the more the Kid thinks it might be true.

At the other end, they are absolutely real. No apparitions here. When Red is eight, his parents dominate his life just

as completely as they do when he is three. How can it be otherwise? It will be a while before television advertising thoughtlessly begins to peddle the idiotic notion that it's normal for teenagers to disconnect from their parents, surely one of the single most divisive lies ever sold to a much-too-credulous public. The salesman should be shot. Too bad we can't find the son-of-a-bitch.

But, that hasn't happened yet, nor has sex yet overwhelmed him, nor has the aching loneliness that will blight so much of his life taken hold, so there's nothing to stop Red from being a happy little boy. His world is secure and an endless childhood summer is beginning. He has recently finished second-grade and been promoted to third, something not taken for granted in a day when children are expected to learn something. He is *so* relieved on the last day of school when he finds out he "passed," even though there was never any doubt. The Kid is way beyond his peers because he reads everything he can get his hands on. Whether that's good is still questionable, but right now it doesn't matter. Dad is loading the family car—a black, 1948 Buick Roadmaster—the classy one with white-wall tires and ornament-holes in the hood, and the Kid's so excited he's afraid he's going to pee in his pants.

This time, the entire family is driving to Colorado. Red's baby teeth are history, so that won't be a problem this time. His sister's are loose, which should be fun, but that injustice is beyond him, and he's certainly not going to let it ruin his second trip to Colorado, at the time blessedly free of the politically-correct overkill that will drain it of its vitality by the end of the century.

Shortly, they'll be leaving on vacation, and their departure has to be timed so that they reach the Mojave Desert as the sun sets. Except for one less-than-successful attempt by *Packard* in 1939, air conditioners in cars are not introduced until 1954.

In 1948, the only way to keep “cool” while driving across the desert is by using a device actually called a *car cooler*, a tin-can-like thing that diverts air into the passenger-side window. It holds about a gallon of water, the evaporation of which is supposed to cool the air blowing into the car. It sort of works for 150 miles or so, depending on how hot and dry the air is.

The air in the Mojave Desert is *very* hot and dry. On summer days, the temperature hovers between 105- and 120-degrees Fahrenheit, and Death Valley has actually reached 134-degrees, the highest temperature ever recorded in the United States. It would take a hell-of-a-lot of optimism to even pretend that a tin can with a gallon of water can have any effect on all that heat, so it isn't any wonder that they never cross the desert during the day.

Back then, there is practically nothing between Barstow and Las Vegas. That needs to be repeated. Back then, there is practically NOTHING between Barstow and Las Vegas—no food, no water, no gas—and nobody will have a cellphone for at least thirty-five years. Being stuck out there during the day is not in anyone's interest, nor is being stuck out there at night, for that matter, so it's always a good idea to make the crossing in company with another car.

It seems to take all day to pack. There's a lot of luggage, far more than the Kid thinks they need. He'd wear the same jeans all summer if his mother would let him . . . and, it *is* summer, for God's sake. Nobody actually *needs* shoes. Eight-year-old-boys certainly don't. But, his mother and sister need all sorts of girly things, as Dad explains when Red complains about the weight of his mother's vanity case, and somehow that still seems plausible. Even after half-a-century, most everything his dad ever tells him still seems plausible. Isn't that wonderful?

Strictly speaking, the Kid should be called Red Junior. As long as he can remember, his dad has been “Red,” a nickname

our hero won't earn until he leaves home. Everyone in his immediate family is a redhead; bright, golden, shining with light. Our boy hates it at first, probably because some dull child makes a joke and most kids don't want to be different, but I'm not sure whether that, in itself, is a problem for Red.

When he's in first grade, Mom senses that something is bothering him, and it takes her about two seconds to discover that he's worried because his hair is "different." She runs her fingers through his curls and asks . . .

"When somebody comes into your classroom, who do you think they see first?"

. . . and, surprise, surprise, that cheers him right up. He never worries about his hair again—not until it begins to fall out, anyway—but right now is not the time for that. Right now, he has to help his dad load the car.

Like his mom, Red's father comes of age during the Thirties. All of the Kid's cohort are grandchildren of the Great Depression, of course, so that isn't unusual. Born in 1915, Dad is fourteen-years-old in 1929. He is the oldest boy in a family of five. His own father, said to have been an alcoholic and a mean, violent man, is long gone. When the economy collapses, and his mother, sisters and brothers are almost starving, he has no choice. He quits school and looks for work.

Something not generally appreciated about the young people whose childhoods come to such an abrupt end during the Depression is that, whether they're in school or not, they can't find anything to do. Work doesn't exist. Untold thousands of children hit the streets and roads, chasing a *chimera*. When Dad's family is literally down to its last turnip—the sort of story that many of us, who have never had to worry about our next meal, too often dismiss—he has to leave home.

With no resources at all, as far as Red knows, Dad hitchhikes to his grandmother's farm in rural Missouri—where

food still grows—and is welcomed and given work, not only there, but also, occasionally, as a hired hand on neighboring farms, which enables him to send money to his mother.

One thing, at least, this farm has been in the family for generations, and Dad's grandmother owns it outright, so there is no danger of them being dispossessed. Nor is Missouri part of the huge area that becomes the Dust Bowl, so they are able to keep growing those turnips. As a side note, our boy has been told in no uncertain terms that turnips are as good as chocolate cake when there isn't any other food. Thank God—and heroes like his father—that he never has to find that out for himself.

The next few years are so hard for Red's dad that it's difficult to understand what he actually does. After he leaves his grandmother's farm he works as a field hand, a truck driver, a mechanic, a welder, a roustabout and a golf-course caddy. For a while he works in an abattoir, but he doesn't talk about that except to say he's done it. What *is* clear is that practically all of Dad's teenage years are spent moving from one place to another, from job to job to job. It isn't until he's twenty-one years old and marries Mom that he finally finds a home.

What a tragic loss. Who knows how much genius and ability died on those jobless roads? But, that's a different story. Red's father is a good man in spite of these things, and his experience, while almost inconceivable to his children, is not unlike that of millions of his contemporaries. In some ways, he's luckier than most. Very few young people in that time are fortunate enough to find even temporary safety where the door is always open and the turnips grow like weeds.

The Kid and his dad fight a lot during their brief time together. The warmth of this moment might suggest that their relationship is a sugary fantasy, which it isn't. They have the same problems as everyone else. Red can be arrogant, and his father can, at times, be a hard-ass. But, that's made insignificant

by two things; not once during their life together does Dad ever raise his hand in unjustified anger, and there is not a single moment during his childhood when the Kid does not absolutely know that his father will come charging through the walls if he's in trouble.

None of which is going to get them onto Route 66 any sooner. Even when Red jumps up and down and whines his dad still says it's too soon to leave. Centuries pass. The Kid frets. It's a good ten minutes before Dad says "OK, pardner. Let's hit the trail." But, surely that was John Wayne in some forgotten black-and-white movie. Whoever it was, it is definitely Mom who says the magic words "here's your pill," and the door opens to bliss.

One of the characteristics of *Dramamine*, which is good when kids are noisy, is that it puts you to sleep. The "stoned" part happens when you wake up too soon or purposely stay awake. There are several sleep-aids in the twenty-first century that act in the same way, and some of them have been co-opted for sex. No recommendation here, just a short explanation as to why Red might have reacted the way he did.

We also have to observe, either to praise the Kid's developing intelligence, or to question his burgeoning lack of conventional morality, that he takes advantage of this aspect of the carsickness drug almost as soon as he realizes how much fun it can be. This is typical of practically everything Red does during the many years ahead. He is capable of extraordinary finesse, and anything that interests him, he masters. In this case, he quickly learns that resisting sleep after taking the pill makes him feel very fine, indeed, and the same thing happens every time he does it.

Red swallows the little pill and they climb into the car. Immediately, he claims his turf, in this case the left side of the back seat. Dad has cleverly turned the entire rear of the

car—bigger in a '48 Buick than most of you can imagine—into a comfortable, window-level bed. The Kid is still short enough to fit lengthwise between the front and back seats. He gets the left side, his sister the right, and woe to any interloper who might stray. It's amazing how territorial siblings can get.

They hit the road and the Kid settles back. It's just like traveling in a bedroom. He has a soft pillow. Everything is comfortable, and he feels absolutely secure and safe—the only person in the world he will ever trust to drive while he sleeps is his father. He turns his head and looks out the window, lazily watches the Route 66 icons near his hometown speed by at 65-miles-an-hour. The wheels thump, thump, thump as he gets drowsy, the icons transform into unfamiliar shapes, and he finally drops off. When he wakes up, everyone is playing the *Burma Shave* game and he's as high as a kite.

*The wolf is shaved
So neat and trim,
Red Riding Hood
Is chasing him.
Burma Shave*

In those days, these great adverts begin appearing almost immediately. Route 66 runs through Red's hometown—he learns to drive on that famous road—so they're on it right away, and before they get as far as Victorville, his mom spots the first *Burma Shave* signs.

These are part of a famous advertising campaign, created in 1925 to market the first, brushless shaving cream. Groups of four-to-six small T-shaped wooden signs are set at eye-level, close beside roads and highways throughout the United States. Each white-on-red sign features one line of a pithy little poem or advertising jingle, and the last sign always reads *Burma Shave*. In their heyday, there are more than 7,000 of these set

up across the country, imparting bits of wisdom and advice. The last new ones are erected in 1963. By then, American highways have morphed into acres of concrete and there is no longer any space suitable for a sign smaller than a football field. One of the last signs, found abandoned at the side of an old highway in 1986, provides a fitting epitaph.

*Farewell, O verse
Along the road.
How sad to see
You're out of mode.
Burma Shave*

In 1948, the game consists of nothing more than spotting the next group of signs, a bit simplistic when viewed from a day when pre-packaged entertainment has replaced meaningful interaction between children and their parents. How sad that so many people have lost the joy of doing simple things with the people they love.

Mom always wins this game. Of course, she's sitting in the front seat and has the best view of the road, so it's no surprise that her sweet voice still echoes so often in the Kid's heart after all these years. He hears her laughter, he hears her speak as she says "Burma Shave," and every time, it lifts him out of deep sleep into a drowsy, romantic fantasy.

Does he know he's stoned? No. He's eight. The endless Drug War—which will cost trillions of dollars and accomplish absolutely nothing for most of the rest of his life—hasn't yet developed the constituency that will perpetuate its wasteful stupidity for so long. It's still not in the news every day, nor is it discussed in second-grade show-and-tell, so drug consumption is still a mystery to the Kid, including what it is about mind-altering substances that make them so attractive. It won't be for many years, until he finally gets high on purpose and a strangely

familiar sensation takes him over, that he understands their appeal. Until then, he has no idea *why* people take drugs, which is why he doesn't connect that with the state he's in. I mean, right now he's having such a good time. How can there be anything wrong with that?

*The Kid is eight,
He's really stoned.
He doesn't know
He's Twilight Zoned.
Burma Shave*

When his mother's lilting "Burma Shave" breaks through his sleep, it excites at least a dozen different fantasies. Almost all of the family road trips start out the same way—Route 66, *Dramamine*, the Mojave Desert, Colorado—sometimes Missouri, when they have enough extra time and are willing to risk driving through Kansas. Every time, they play the *Burma Shave* game and the *P.I.E* game—which is basically the same except they look for and count *Pacific Intermountain Express* trucks instead of signs—and, sometime at the beginning of every trip, his mother wakes him up crying "Burma Shave."

She certainly does that when he's eight. It's the first road trip he actually remembers, although there must have been others because he met his paternal aunts and uncles in Missouri when he was very small, and except for that wonderful trip to Colorado on the *Santa Fe Super Chief*, all the trips in those days are road trips. It's certainly the first time he realizes that he's feeling extra good and understands why.

How incredible that time of innocence, when your parents are gods, when there is still no guilt and the time you spend together is more important than you can possibly know. Every drive to the midwest adds another such moment, frozen in the same reality and preserved forever in the Kid's dreams.

*How short the time,
How sweet the bliss,
When boys can know
Their mother's kiss.
Burma Shave*

The Kid drinks his first cup of coffee on one of these trips. It's dusk. The sun is just setting behind the mountains. The sky is a deep, incandescent blue, and every star is a bright, sharp point. They are at the western edge of the Mojave, where they've stopped for a moment to freshen up, eat a sandwich and hydrate. With no warning, Dad fills a coffee cup from his thermos and hands it to Red.

"Here. You're old enough to drink coffee now."

He's around eleven this time, just verging on adolescence. It might seem odd to a child brought up more recently to accept that our boy needs permission to drink coffee. In those days, however, coffee definitely stunts one's growth, so there is no question that you'll drink it too soon. The Kid has tried coffee a number of times, of course, a sip here, a sip there. He doesn't like it all that much. But *those* sips did not come with the incredible honor of being acknowledged by the most important man in the world as an equal. That is something else altogether. Red raises the bitter liquid to his lips and gulps it down without even noticing how awful it tastes. He never loves his father more than he does at that moment.

*Whatever comes
Dad does his best.
In this, the Kid
Is doubly blessed.
Burma Shave*

The car is filled with music. Our boy is eight—or thirteen or twelve or nine or seventeen or fourteen, somewhere in

there—and his drug-heightened awareness adds a poignancy he won't even recognize until his life is almost gone. Over the rushing, white noise of the car cooler, the songs ring out, and they are not the prepackaged product of some commercial interest designed to keep children quiet.

The *Harvest Moon* shines down on *K-K-K-Katy*, who's waiting by the k-k-k-kitchen door, or maybe *She's Comin' 'Round the Mountain* or falling in love *Down By the Old Mill Stream*—old songs, every one—older than the Kid's parents, some even older than his granny. But, reliving these glorious four-part harmonies is a tribute to those sweet times, when people sang together and bonded in ways that seem to have been lost.

Red's family is a perfect quartet—soprano, alto, tenor, bass—and everything he ever learns about singing in concert he learns in whichever car they're using as it speeds through the ghostly, desert moonlight.

*Sixteen is hard
Just like his cock.
His hand is stuck
Inside his jock.
Burma Shave*

Once, in the desert outside Albuquerque, they almost drown. Red is deliciously drowsy. He's older now, and his drug-laced dreams are blatantly erotic. His lack of sexual experience limits his fantasies, but his dick is always right up there and that makes up for a lot. The pill he took in Santa Fe is beginning to kick in. The sun is sinking behind distant, flat-topped buttes, tracing them like Byzantine halos framing the mosaics of long-forgotten saints. The terrain on each side of the road is absolutely flat. Except for the buttes popping up here and there, they might have been driving on a glass plate.

They're on their way home and anxious to get to Albuquerque because it's been a long day and they need some rest. The Kid is day-dreaming, drinking in the desert colors as he imagines naked cowboys in its dark, demonic shadows, when his sister says "look at the lightning." Red looks, and off in the distance, behind one of those tall buttes, he sees a brilliant flash of light. Then another . . . then another . . . and all of a sudden, it's raining.

They're about five miles from some small, lost town. The rain is a joy at first; refreshing and cool. They roll down the windows and breathe the fresh air . . . and it rains . . . and it rains . . . and then, abruptly, just as they pull into that little town, the water is up to their hubcaps. It's been less than ten minutes. The entire desert is under at least eighteen-inches of water, and rain is coming down in sheets.

Red thinks it's great. It's years before he understands how much danger they're in. His sister is clapping her hands and laughing. She's oblivious, too. But, Mom isn't. Mom is terrified, and Dad is too busy finding the edges of the road to react.

Around them, the houses and businesses on this short thoroughfare look like ships floating in liquid gold. The setting sun is clearly visible beneath a remarkably level cloud cover, and its long bright rays slash through the rain-stippled surface of the water in ways that cause the desert to glow with its own light—and it rains and it rains and it rains.

The water is over the hubcaps now and lapping at the lower edges of the doors. The only reason the car doesn't stall, as the Kid learns later, is that the undercarriage is sealed. Thank God for that—for the fact that they're in a very heavy car—and for Dad's skill in keeping them centered on that submerged, two-lane highway. All around, other travelers, and more than one local, are slipping off the road into the swift, shallow rivers that were once the little town's gutters.

A beautiful, young cop wades out of the rain, forever locked into the Kid's memory as a mythic hero come to save the day. Not that he does anything more heroic than shout "the river is high and the bridge isn't safe" before turning toward the next car. It has to be mentioned that by this time the water is six inches deeper.

All this happens in less than twelve minutes, in the desert, for God's sake—where it's supposed to be dry—a flash of light followed by an aquatic cataclysm. What a stunner. It's only a coincidence that the family car, by this time a 1954 Oldsmobile Super 88, comes to rest in the center of the *only* high point to be found in all that vast wilderness—the tiny ribbon of dirt that was piled up to build the old highway.

And, then, as abruptly as it begins, the rain stops. Just like that, everything calms down and the water stops rising. If they hadn't been sitting in the middle of a lake, it would have been fun. But, by this time, both Red and his sister are becoming aware that their usually unflappable father is not having a good time. Almost simultaneously, they shut up and sit back to listen to their parents discuss what to do next, and the urgency of their tone is inescapable.

There are only two options, keep going or stay where they are. If they keep going, they have to cross a river on a dangerous bridge. If they stay where they are . . . well, they can hardly stay where they are. "Where they are" barely exists. The little town boasts a population of about ninety—who knows where they got that cute cop—and there are famously no accommodations of any sort this side of Albuquerque.

So, it's option one, keep going, also known as *cross the river on a dangerous bridge*, which, in retrospect, is so reckless that it's hard to believe they do it. But, they're all complicit. It's getting dark and no one wants to stay in the middle of the lake. Water is seeping under the door frames, beds are

waiting in Albuquerque, and that Super 88 with the sealed undercarriage is humming softly, like a living thing. I can't remember, after all this time, what rationalizations they use, but barely fifteen minutes later, Red and his family are approaching that bridge.

In 2015, with death waiting in the next room, the Kid realizes how dangerous this is. In 1954, with death something that happens in books, the Kid thinks it's amazing. Immediately outside town is a narrow chasm, a deep "crack" in the desert floor that extends for miles, east to west. At the bottom is a river. Normally, it's a trickle, now it's a torrent—flowing at a spectacular rate—barely five-feet below the level of the road. It appears that the entire lake that formed during that short storm is pouring into this chasm, over which runs the dangerous bridge.

It's dangerous because it's supposed to lift Route 66 across that chasm, not hold back biblical floods. The tall, awkward structure, supporting *only* the narrow, two-lane highway, is noticeably swaying from side to side. Even though it has stopped raining, waves are pounding against the struts and rising up to obliterate the road.

This bridge was crossed an eternity ago and the sheer majesty of that moment is frozen in his mind forever. The Kid won't think about dying for years, and he's having such a grand time. Why ruin it? He doesn't know what danger they're in, and is still absolutely certain that everything will work out.

On the other hand, he wonders how Dad can take such a risk? He's a smart, practical man, but it happens so fast. It rains for less than fifteen-minutes—a desert lifetime. Maybe he just doesn't have enough time to think it out. Or, perhaps he doesn't know what danger is and is still absolutely certain that everything will work out. Who knows? He's still young enough, then. When *does* innocence leave us?

They never discuss it. Typical of his father's generation, everything of importance remains unsaid. It doesn't matter, anyway. This ends now, an anticlimax, the way all dangerous experiences should end. They cross the bridge. It's dry on the other side, and the next morning, in Albuquerque, they all sleep late.

*And, then it's gone.
How could he know
How much he'd lose
So long ago?
Burma Shave*

It seems to take all day to pack. There's a lot of luggage, but not as much as the Kid thinks he'll need. This time, the car has to hold everything he's taking with him when he leaves home—not a lot, really, just everything he can legitimately claim as his own.

How to speak of the last trip? At the time, any sense of loss is overwhelmed by an almost sensual joy at the prospect of being on his own. The Kid is eager to go, to quit the mind-numbing after-school job that has plagued his adolescence, to leave his hometown, where everyone is knee deep in everyone else's business, and to find a place where the things he values are important. Right now, he's downright giddy because he's going to start over, and any other consideration, such as what he's going to lose when he goes—what he's going to lose forever—is a long way off.

Red is seventeen and has been accepted as a pianist at an "eastern" music school. It's in Ohio, which isn't exactly east. But, it's east of California, so it makes sense at the time. As always, Dad is packing the car. Somehow he's found room for the Kid's hand-built "stereo," *all* his clothes—including a new tuxedo and white dinner jacket—lots of 12-inch long-playing

records, and all the other bulky trinkets that college boys think they need in 1958. They'll be leaving in less than an hour, and for more than a week, no one has been able to acknowledge the fact that they're driving to Ohio to drop him off. This time, the Red-Headed Kid won't be coming home.

Is he aware of this? Doesn't he care at all that he's leaving? It's hard to remember how he feels. In theory, he knows a lot will change, but he's never even considered a world without his parents—he's not quite ready to understand that such a place exists—and they're paying for his education, up to and including study in Europe, so he's not exactly severing all ties.

When he thinks about it now, he can't believe he was so heartless. Mom can barely function. She's trying to smile, but she's been crying for weeks. Dad is dad. There's lots of back-slapping and laughing and little bits of common sense whispered in passing. But, he's working very hard to maintain his *gravitas*. Not wanting to deal with his son leaving home, and still letting him go, is taking its toll. And, what does our hero do while the hearts of the people who love him are breaking? He's a thoughtless fool, oblivious to everything outside himself. But, in his defense, it must be observed that it's all he can do not to scream with joy, and that makes him virtually powerless to prevent the reality of getting away from influencing every movement he makes.

As for his sister, she's delighted. The Kid has always been a pain as far as she's concerned. She's still a little girl, of course, and has a problem similar to her brother's—she can't believe a world in which he doesn't exist—so she won't really understand he's leaving until it happens . . . which is also, basically, what's wrong with Red. He doesn't know he's losing anything. He's so hyped up that he won't

even know it when it happens—when they're in Ohio, and his family drives away, and his entire world turns upside down.

*My God, what joy
To hit the road,
When life is new
And nothing's owed.
Burma Shave*