Word Count: 1927

Fresh Ice

My college roommate, Mutt, yanked the shifter and blew passed a hundred. Felt like pushing it to me, but it was his ’88 Mustang. Mutt’s dirty brown hair tickled his shoulders and danced in the blow from his window that was perpetually rolled down a third of the way. An annoying distance for the passenger, especially if you didn’t like the window down, which I didn’t. But I did like Mutt.

The ’88 Mustang was easily the ugliest body style in the model’s history. Only rednecks like Mutt would still fathom driving one. Especially one a decade older than we were. I had to give it to Mutt, though, it ran great and roared like a tyrant when floored. Mutt could work on cars. Worked on his and others in the dorm parking lot at Tuscaloosa for the two years we’d been roommates. He had a beat-up truck with a camper bed he kept parked in what would have been my spot. Inside, he kept his tools and jack and all the other bullshit. He ran a little side business helping every stupid freshman who came to Alabama and ran their first car straight to shit keep running.

Mutt and I were miles from close, but we shared a space the size of a giant’s shoebox for two years and most days after class I’d wander out to talk to Mutt, and he’d roll out from under whatever car he was working on, dig in his cooler and toss me a Natty. The Natty was always ice cold because Mutt was always in fresh ice. He’d leave anything and ride until the end time to have fresh ice. He’d go to a keg party and focus on nothing but the ice. It wasn’t like he was going there to be all social. He needed something to do. A man lost without a purpose, even if that purpose was as fleeting as keeping ice fresh.

“Decide if you’re coming back yet?” I yelled over the wind.

"No," Mutt said softly, "Hadn't figured it out yet."

I doubted Mutt would return for junior year. Despite his seeming to care less, Mutt was a surprisingly exceptional student. He made the Dean's list four semesters, while also completing an associate degree at the community college in automotive mechanics. He'd mentioned a shop in Gulfport that would take him on and that he'd been considering it.

Mutt lit a Marlboro, took a couple puffs and tossed it. Mutt always had Marlboros, rolled in his sleeve, but he never took more than a couple puffs before throwing them out. I'd never met anyone Mutt knew, but it made me think he was emulating someone, because he clearly didn't like smoking.

"Well, I hope you come back."

Mutt glanced over but didn't speak so I couldn't be sure he'd heard. After several minutes he said, "We'll see."

Getting through Alabama was the worst part of the trip. The drive from Tuscaloosa to New Orleans was five hours. My folks lived outside New Orleans. Mutt hailed from Biloxi but said he didn't mind going out of his way to drop me off. He liked the drive from New Orleans down to the Mississippi gulf coast.

The only place between Tuscaloosa and Hattiesburg that had anything was Meridian and Meridian didn't have much. Then again neither did Hattiesburg. The sign said Alabama the Beautiful, but I never saw much of that either. Unless beauty was a lot of nothing because that Alabama had.

Mutt pushed the Mustang over 120 as we passed a cavalcade of eighteen wheelers, cut back into the right lane in front of the lead one, too close for comfort, then left the whole procession falling away in the rearview. I watched him as we slowed to a reasonable speed. His

white t-shirt had a tawny pit stain and with the sleeve rolled up the way he did I could see his golden underarm hair. It seemed groomed or grew perfect, one. Funny thing about Mutt was he dressed filthy but was always clean. He took multiple showers a day but rarely did laundry.

"The fuck you think people want to live out in this part of the state for?" I asked.

"Ain't a lot out here," Mutt replied.

"Mind if I drink a Natty?"

"I surely don't."

I reached in Mutt's cooler on the backseat. There was some water with the ice. I tried not to rustle it while grabbing the Natty but sure enough Mutt heard the slosh and we veered off at the next exit.

The dilapidated gas station screamed Easy Rider. Mutt fit in like a faded window beer sign. We parked by a pump and Mutt chased after ice. I got out to fill the tank for him driving.

A beat to hell Chevy pickup squealed to a stop at the next pump. Two good old boys stepped out wearing camo. A cage in the bed held two hounds. The one I couldn't see started pumping while the other stood by the tailgate with his foot on the fender staring at me like I was a zoo exhibit. He had a patchy moustache and teeth dirty from dip.

"What color is that?" he asked after things got good and uncomfortable.

"How's that?"

"Them streaks in your hair," he said. "Those pink?"

I cursed under my breath.

"No, I believe they're fuchsia."

He slapped the tailgate.

"Fuchsia!" he laughed. "Now that's a big word."

“Kind of sounds like faggot,” the other one said, hidden by the pump.

“How many piercings you got?” the first one asked. “You squeal when they did that?”

I bit my lip ring and didn’t say anything but then I couldn’t contain it and started cackling. The good old boys were confused. The laughing cut through the bullying in a peculiar way. It didn’t last. Their unease shifted to anger. The one behind the pump presented himself and turned out to be even uglier. A toothless, slack-jawed hick. He dug in his pocket like he might pull a knife and moved to step across to my side of the pump.

That’s when the bag of ice hit the asphalt with a crinkle thud. And there stood Mutt unrolling his pack of Marlboros from his sleeve, plucking one and giving it fire like he was the star of a movie scene the three of us couldn’t pry our eyes from.

“Look at this stupid son of a bitch lighting up by a gas pump,” the uglier one said.

“What are you his boyfriend?” the other one said.

Mutt took a long drag. “What if I was?”

The pump clicked and I hung the nozzle.

“We got anything else here?” Mutt asked.

They both just laughed. Mutt nodded at me and I took it to mean get in the Mustang and did. Mutt walked over and retrieved the cooler. He returned to the ice and poured out the water in the cooler making sure to hold the good ice and the Natty’s back then poured the fresh ice in.

The good old boys watched with a sort of wonder. I don’t know what it was. Mutt’s indefinable magnetism. He loaded the cooler in back and shut the door. He walked straight toward the hick by the tailgate, did a long once over of the Chevy, took a final puff of the Marlboro and tossed it in the truck bed.

“That’s the god damn most beat up truck I ever saw,” Mutt said.

Mutt climbed in the Mustang and we slowly pulled away. In the rearview, the good old boys watched with the amazement of seeing something for the first time.

Full of adrenaline, I couldn't shut up for an hour. If what I'd said to Mutt in the two years prior was two years-worth, then what I said in that hour was two lifetime's and Mutt listened without reaction and that reaction was the perfect one.

When the signs for New Orleans started to show, I said I didn't want to go, and Mutt hit the gas. The four o'clock sun burnt heavy and low in the sky behind the city. Mutt swerved from lane to lane navigating the I-10 traffic with a kind of wild bliss and we breezed right through.

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Mutt pulled the Mustang over when we reached the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We sat on the shore shielded from the road by a large drainage pipe dug into the beach. Mutt crawled over and picked up a shell we'd watch move. There was a tiny crab inside. Mutt named it Crabmandu and placed it softly back on the sand. The setting sun burnt like a cigarette cherry. It was eerie pretty. Mutt crawled back over beside me, put his hands behind his head, leaned back and closed his eyes. And that's when I reached for his belt and started to pull. He grabbed my wrist hard. His strength seemed overwhelming. I brushed the hair out my eyes with my other hand.

"Fuck you doing?" he said.

"What?" I held his gaze.

His eyes softened and he let go. I unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his jeans. His breathing rose and I could feel his heartbeat in my mouth. When I could tell he was ready I pulled off and held him while he spurt into the sand. The sun falling into the gulf left little drippy dots of light crawling across the water's surface. We both got right spooked when a lifted 4x4 truck roared onto the beach a few hundred yards down and drove straight out into the shallows.

Mutt fussed with his jeans while standing and keeping his back turned. Then we hightailed it up to the Mustang.

We rode along by the beach and the gulf as the last waning slithers of twilight slid calmly screaming into darkness causing the sky's edges to litmus test. I plucked two Nattys from the cooler and handed one to Mutt. He popped the top and downed half.

"You're pretty good at that," Mutt said.

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Mutt never returned to Tuscaloosa. I assumed he went to work at the mechanics shop in Gulfport. I finished up a gender studies degree at Alabama and went on to get my doctorate in psychology at Auburn. My husband, Cal and I got married in Maui on a cliff overlooking the Pacific a year later. It's been a decade since I stepped foot back in the south.

One afternoon on our honeymoon, I sat down to watch TV with a beer, wasting time before getting ready for dinner. Cal had gone for a run on the beach. It was a Sunday afternoon.

Lazily flipping through the channels, I stopped—for some reason unbeknownst to me—on the Fox Sports Racing channel. A Ford stock car with a giant Natural Light logo on the hood slowly parted a growing crowd on its way to the winner's circle.

The driver climbed out of the stock car, took two Nattys someone handed him, opened both and drenched himself with them. A pair of bikini models sauntered up, one holding a trophy the other carrying an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne. When the driver turned to face the camera, it was Mutt. He ignored the trophy and craned his head over the edge of the champagne ice bucket. As bottles popped, bikini models flanked him and a sportscaster stood idly by with a microphone waiting for an interview, Mutt was in his own world checking to make sure there was fresh ice.