

## **Everything Comes Together at Infinity**

Cecilia bought the Buick cheap. Two hundred bucks, she could afford it. Two hundred bucks, she couldn't afford not to buy it. Clean, long, white Buick. '70. When they were still boats. Big and smooth riding on the highway, once Tom fixed the suspension, cost her another \$178.49. And Tom. It cost her Tom.

Tom might be right. The Buick might bleed her to death. Miles per gallon. Repairs. Big tires cost a bunch. So far, though, she was making it. Barely. But she barely made it before she bought the Buick. A small car would have cost her more, and the Buick was comfortable. Matched her. Big. The big white Buick floated down the highway like a boat on calm water. She would have given up the Buick without hesitation to keep Tom, only he didn't stop or listen. He just kept walking.

Off the pedal, slow down. A hitchhiker stands out on the freeway, where the law says he can't be. He could get busted. She never picks up hitchhikers. A single woman would be stupid to pick up a hitchhiker, but she always wants to look at them. They are the movies, the fantasies for the rest of us, what won't happen to us, but interesting to observe, where we might have gone instead, like a novel written inside our heads as we drive by and leave them, thumb hopelessly penetrating the air above hot, sun-soaked concrete, the first hot day of spring.

She didn't drive on by. Cecilia hit the brakes and brought the big white Buick down fast without understanding why. "Stupid woman. You know better. You could regret this forever, and forever might come up fast because of a dumb move like this," but she didn't tromp the gas pedal and speed away. When she slowed down, she built his expectations, and she wouldn't snatch expectations from under his hard-working thumb. She stopped.

He walked along the shoulder of the road to the car. Looked in the rear view mirror like he tried to run, but he just couldn't muster the balance and the energy. He opened the back door, struggled his pack from his back into the Buick, shut the back door, opened the front door, said, "Thank you," climbed in, fastened his seat belt.

Maybe because he made her think of Tom. She had said,

“Tom, Thomas, you wild tom cat fool, I don’t want you to walk away from me. I will get rid of this car if you want me to, if you’ll stay. Stop. I’m telling you, stop and listen to me.”

But he kept walking, said, “We already talked. I already listened. You just keep getting bigger, and now you bought this mammoth old death trap of a money-eating car. Fixing that suspension is the last thing I do for you, make it a little bit safer, maybe you can survive. Take the tools back to Dan. I got things to do, won’t fit what you’re doing.”

“Damn fool,” she yelled after him, “I’d change anything for you. I’ll change what I’m doing, push the damn Buick over a cliff. I thought you’d like it, transportation for both of us and everything we own for two hundred dollars.”

Tom kept walking. Cecilia cried most of two days and nights. She woke up the third morning knowing he said it right. Again and again, she promised to change, but she didn’t change. She wanted to change. My God in heaven, she would give anything to change but she had no control, the way things came at her, she just ate and drank them as they came, and she couldn’t stop, whatever was there in front of her, gone. She didn’t even know she was going to do it until she’d done it. He said more than a dozen times, she didn’t lose a little weight, he was leaving, and she didn’t, and he did.

Hitch-hiking man doesn’t even look like Tom, Thomas, wild tom cat Thomas, the total love of my life, much, once you get past the hair and beard.

Hitchhiking man said, “Thank you,” climbed in, sat on the luxurious black and white tuck and roll leather, found the seat belt, fastened the ends together, shut the door, all slow motion, as if he acted a hard to understand script and had to decide what it meant and how to act it out before he began each motion.

She tromped the gas pedal. That big V8 engine rocketed them to 70 miles an hour like standing still, gulped a gallon of gas. That was what Tom said, “420 cubic inches. We do not need a big white Buick super big V8 gobbling our money,” and he packed, didn’t take him long, and he walked away not carrying much. A big white, V8 Buick was only part of why he packed, even a 1970, when they made them like luxury liners. He walked away into the setting sun like some kind of a hero fading over the horizon at the end of the movie.

Hitchhiking man said, “Hot out there. Getting really hot right on the concrete. Jeez. The air conditioning in this old Buick still works. Cool in here as a mountain spring morning.”

Cecilia said, “First hot day this spring. Didn’t want you to

get busted. They got a law says don't be on the freeway on foot."

He said, "These freeways were made for wheels. I tried for a ride all morning, had to do something, so I built a story. A little bit in the future. Not much. Everybody drives freeways, but all along the freeways, they got high fences, solid board, you know what I mean? Or even tunnels. Freeways are in tunnels built up out of concrete so they can confine the pollution from cars, suck it down into the earth and deal with it, try, probably too late, to save the earth. So, concrete tunnels, what do you see? Pavement. You see the sides steep above you. You see the traffic. You usually can't see live people inside cars, reflections from the glass, tinted windows. You see the roof of the tunnel. The top squeezes down ahead of you; you know how things come together at infinity?"

"Everybody travels like that, on freeways. Some places, you can pull over, and they got windows in the walls, in the tunnels, you can look out. You see landscape, a few trees, maybe a creek running, a bird flying free, but you got to pay to park, and you got to pay to look out the windows. You're shorter than most, you got to pay for a step, get you up high enough to look. If you're heavier than most folks," she looked at him to see if that was a significant remark, if he was starting out already, known her 90 seconds and going to start, but he talked, didn't look at her, "you got to pay extra for a reinforced stool. Lot of times, you want to pull over, look out through the wall, break up your trip a little bit, you know how I mean, have some variety a little bit on your way, all the parking is used up, even if you got the money to pay to look out at the landscape, even if you got you a car to ride along the freeway cuts through whatever landscape is left, not much."

They rode together like that, her a mammoth manifestation of living flesh behind the black steering wheel of the white Buick and him a tall, hairy, skinny guy, not too clean but not too dirty, like he was trying but didn't have everything he needed to work with. He looked straight ahead out the green-shaded Buick windshield, toward where the freeway left the floor of the valley and climbed the mountain, converged to nothing this side of infinity.

Seven point six miles, neither of them said anything. The air conditioner fan blew cold air into the black, maroon, and white interior of the big Buick, moving-air sounds where the air emerged. 420 cubic inches of V8 motor rumbled in front of them and under them through metal exhaust pipes, bounced up

from the concrete roadway, a steady rumble in hot spring air that opened for their 70 miles-an-hour progress and recoiled from the stink of internal combustion engine exhaust behind them.

He said, "That's the way we're headed, ain't that a fact? Travel this nation, no place you can pull off the highway. Want to camp, you got to pay money, not like it used to be, pull off, camp where you want. No trespassing signs now. Somebody owns everything, wants to make money you even look at it, ain't that the way it is?"

She adjusted her harness that pulled too hard on her shoulder, across one breast, supposed to go under the other but pulling up, a sharp edge to that nylon webbing. Ever get in a wreck, that belt'll cut straight up, involuntary mastectomy. She said, "Yeah, that's true. Everybody says move on, don't stop here unless you got ten bucks to spend with us. Use the bathroom? Not unless you buy something. Pee your pants. Customers only. That's us, customers only. That's the whole damn world now, customers only. You got you a vision. Standin on the freeway hopin for a ride in hot sunshine, you had you a true vision, the way it's going to be. You hungry?"

"I ate a sandwich yesterday noon, a guy give me a chicken sandwich he had in a sack. I ain't doin too bad."

"Oh sure. Great. So a meal every day or two ain't doin too bad. I should go that way a while. I need to go that way a while, plain for anybody to see. This town comin up, I live right by this town. I know a place, we can get a big sandwich and fries, pretty good price. We can split it. Bout broke, but I can't send a traveler on his way hungry. Sit in there and be customers, we can use the restrooms, too."

"Naw. I been longer without eating. I don't want you to spend your money on me."

She let off the gas pedal. Dual exhaust pipes rumbled and popped, slowed the big car rolling toward town and the sandwich place.

She said, "What you're doing, you're doing me a favor, and maybe the world too, cause I got to lose some weight, I really do. Sadness and hard times coming to me from being so big. If I was driving into town alone, I'd stop at this place up here, and I'd eat the whole sandwich myself and two orders of fries and the biggest coke they got. This way, you eat half the sandwich, and we only do one order of fries, and I think I better buy you a milkshake and you drink the whole thing yourself, put some hitchhiking calories in you."

She looked over at him.

He sat there laughing, not loud, but jiggling in his seat belt, like laughs running up from deep in him and out into the car and out into the air layin' hot today on the asphalt highway.

She said, "What's funny?"

"You. Save my life and act like I'm doin' you a favor. Tell you what, I'm taking you up on that. Might try to be brave about it, look good, admit nothin', just the same, I'm fading, almost gone from needing something to eat, and here comes this rich lady drives a big white Buick, saves my life, takes me off to heaven called the sandwich shop and gives me life everlasting, which is at least til tomorrow, cause I surely would have died from neglect and starvation somewhere on down this lonesome highway about midnight tonight."

She laughed and slowed the big white Buick to a rumbly 35 miles per hour, just coming into town, gravel shoulders and gravel parking lots in front of business buildings.

He said, "My name's Nedja. What's your name?"

She said, "Sheila." She got that from thinking about what she was doing. She thought, "She laughs," and the beginning of that sounds like Sheila, so she said, "Sheila," because she figured he doesn't give his right name, she shouldn't either, thought about dumping him and leaving him hungry. No grown man ever got named Ninja, no child either, unless his folks don't care about him, just have kids so they can make jokes out of them. Then she said, "Spell that," and he did, and she said, "I thought you said Ninja, like Ninja turtles."

"People hear that, sometimes, but that's not what I say. Always say Nedja. That's a good name, nobody's joke, been a good name my whole life."

She said, "Sorry. Didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"I don't feel bad. No need to apologize. Just looking forward to that half a sandwich. Thinking about food starting to feed my life."

She said, "Actually, my name is Cecilia."

He walked across the parking lot and into the restaurant. She's no speedball, but she had to wait for him. When the food came, he bit, chewed a long time, swallowed, took a deep breath, and thought about it before he bit again.

She said, "I'm not stupid after all, you know. That's why I stopped. That's what I seen when I didn't know what I seen. What I think, you're right up against starvation. More than a day since you ate, and not much then. You killing yourself on purpose, starving yourself to death?"

“Didn’t plan it. Just started happening, and didn’t seem to be anything I could do. Kept comin’ at me like it did. I jumped around, danced, skipped, stepped, jived, anything I could think of trying to outrun poverty and starvation. It went okay for a little while, then right back into it again. All this talk about a prosperous nation, that’s some, but nowhere near all, not me. That’s if you fit in exactly according to their rules.”

She said, “Don’t I know that? Customers only. The right kind of customers. Even big people trying to fit, they don’t fit.”

He sipped his milkshake and said, “Customers only, the sign says. Most places, I got to wait outside.”

She breathed air in deep and let it out slowly. “Well, no doubt about that. I can’t turn you loose on the highway, shape you’re in. You got to work with me, cause I don’t have much of a place, but that’s where we go next, my place.”

“Can’t do that.”

“You got an appointment? Someone expecting you Tuesday mornin’?”

“Nothin’ like that.”

They walked out to the car, and she started the motor, backed out of her parking space, headed south again.

“Never forgive myself if I turn you loose on the highway and you walk off into fatal starvation. I’d probably never hear about it, but it’s just about a sure thing. Three or four days, then I start feelin’ guilty, cause by then you’re dead. So I go the rest of my life feeling bad, cause I know I coulda helped and didn’t.”

Big white Buick rumbled slowly down a side street, past street lamp posts, then mercury vapor lamp posts for folks’s yards. From asphalt onto gravel road, threw dust up on ponderosa pine trees and fir trees, aspen and willow. Gravel tapered off, and they drove over red decomposed granite soil to her trailer with a shed roof built over it, faded blue and white trailer. Big cottonwood trees backed up the trailer, kept it from slipping farther out of town and into the river, anchored it solid to the ground with their deep roots, massive roots spread out acres and acres underground, holding the earth together.

She opened the trailer door and waited. He walked up the steps slowly, grabbed the door frame, and pulled himself into the trailer. She followed him and pointed to the couch, and he sat down.

He looked up at her and tried to laugh but made a weak show of it. “Now, if I’d kept on, I’d still be going strong, cause I knew I had to. Nobody but me to carry my load. Now I got help, I’m falling apart.”

“Only so far you can go on will power. Eventually, you run out of calories and digest your own body. Some of us, we can do that for a while, but you ain’t got much to digest.” She opened the cupboard, got a bottle of apple juice, opened it, and poured him a glass. “Place to get a couple days’ rest and plenty of food, you can make it again. I got plenty of food.”

“I can’t pay you back.”

“Pay me back what? We help somebody, and it’s got a price tag. Your life is worth so many dollars. I feed you and you owe me, not just for the food, but for your life. I read the book. Is that the way it says in the book? Good Samaritan helps a man beaten by bandits, and he tells the old guy, ‘When you’re up and around, you get in touch, because you owe me, not only the money I leave with the innkeeper, and we know the innkeeper will say I left less than I did so you’ll owe him too, but you owe me your life.’”

She opened a can of soup, poured it into a pan, turned on a propane burner, heated the soup, poured it into a bowl, handed it to him. “Soak this up.”

She said, “If I believed the world’s like that, I’d cut my throat now and get it done with.”

He soaked up soup.

She asked him, “You ever ask anybody, could you give a hungry man a bite to eat?”

“Never did.”

“Shame on you.”

“Shame for not begging?”

She put cheese and crackers on a plate, peeled and separated an orange and added the segments to the plate and put the plate of food on the table in front of him. “Yeah, if that’s the way you see it. They tell you don’t beg, don’t raise a fuss, never holler out, ‘Help,’ and they got you so shut out, bout to die, so dumb, you take what they say for truth. That turnout where you park a while and look out through the window, where you see outside the tunnel, you’re at the end of the line sayin’, ‘Anybody need to kick anybody? I’ll volunteer.’ No damn wonder. You got to speak out for yourself. What you learn here, you get a little weight on you, you learn to speak up. You learn about survival. You learn how to survive, how to say ‘Help,’ how to have a chance to live.”

Cecilia, she got a man to feed, fixed a bed for him on the couch. She left the windows open, night come on them but the night was still warm. She heard him leave the trailer after they settled down. She heard him vomit into the low brush across the

driveway. She waited until he came back in and lay down on the couch. She walked forward, knelt by his side, touched his face, sweaty, fevered. "You been having this trouble right along, throwing up?"

He shook his head, tried to sit up, and she pushed him down. He said, "No. Not right along. Sometimes. Sometimes, I go too long; then I eat, and it won't stay down. I did pretty good for a while." He worked his mouth, didn't like the lingering taste of vomit.

She rocked back, stood up, walked into the kitchen and ran him a glass of water, walked back in. "Here. Water. Stay down. I got this straw. See if you can manage that."

He drank water. She said, "Okay. We start over. I think we mixed up too many different kinds of food too soon. I think could be you've tore up your insides with hunger, already started digesting yourself, and we got to be careful what we put down there until you get healed up. You like yogurt?"

He nodded, said, "Yeah, I do."

"I got some good yogurt. We'll start with a little bit of yogurt, a little bit of mild fruit, out of a can, where they cooked it."

Yogurt, canned apricots. It stayed down an hour, then one soft-boiled egg. Couple hours later, sprouted whole wheat toast. Small glass of juice, water. He set the empty glass down on the table, asked her, "Where'd you learn this how to feed a starving man so he can keep the food down?"

"Never did learn it. Making it up as I go along, but any old medicine man says, start slow after fasting for a vision. I'm trying to think like food, feel what food's going to be soft and easy going down and resting easy while it waits to see what you intend. I got to go to work about sunrise. I'll be back about 4:30. I'll show you what to eat. You just go at it slow and easy and rest a lot. Go around behind the trailer. There's shade under the cottonwoods, probably a breeze. Table and chairs out there. Good place to be if it gets hot again."

The fifth day, Cecilia put a lunch and drinking water in the big white Buick. They drove down beside the river to her favorite swimming hole. She was shy about stripping down to her swimming suit, laughed and said, "Tom always said I swim easy as a whale and just about as big. Big white whale Ceece."

Nedja moved pretty well, but he didn't go over chest deep, still didn't feel completely there. He watched Cecilia float into the current, turn and face him, stroking river water, still a little muddy with spring runoff, to stay a few feet from him in the

current. Cottonwood trees stood tall on the bank across the river, new green leaves against the summer sky.

Nedja said, "I don't like this Tom guy you talk about. Where I come from, people don't say things like that about my sister. You're beautiful the way you are. And holy. Cecilia, you are a wise, holy woman, even if you aren't old enough to start getting grey hair."

"No, but I got the experience."

"The wisdom. You got the wisdom."

Second time Nedja called her "sister," Cecilia sat back and thought. She'd looked at him a couple of times and thought, if he kept staying, she might have to decide, would he fit in her bed with her? That's all the movies ever say, girl meets boy, they start fucking right away, because that's all anybody can imagine doing anymore, if you think about it. Now Nedja talks about sister and brother. She keeps thinking about it, could bring her a new way of looking at everything. She eases into that a little at a time, like easing into the cold river, first time of swimming in early spring, when snow melt from the mountains mixes in fast-moving currents. Time went by, and she eased in deeper. That water felt good. Time went by, the river warmed up, all the snow gone from the mountains. Currents flowed lazy in hot sunshine.

Two weeks, Nedja swam across the river, sat in shallow water a while, rested, then swam back across the current.

Cecilia said, "Strong man."

"Getting stronger. Strong enough, I'm going into town, go to that labor place, see if I can earn a few bucks."

Days blended into each other. Summer settled hot on the land. Nedja couldn't work full time. He said, "I got the strength now, thanks to you, but I can't do somebody else's work that long in a row. A while, but not the whole day, day after day. I been crazy a long time, but it never worried me before."

Cecilia walked over and hugged him. Good thing he was stronger now, or she would have broken him, hugged him so hard. She said, "You're paying your way and then some. This place never looked this good. You got the touch for plants. Never saw so many beautiful flowers. Never had so many fresh vegetables on the table. If you're crazy, I hope it's contagious, because we need more like you."

They walked around back and sat at the table in the shade of the biggest cottonwood. Flowers grew around them. Carrots grew by Cecilia's feet. Nedja had worked everything into the ground without disturbing the cottonwood roots. He said, "We

can all share this soil.”

Nedja said, “I’m thinking about trying to build a house right here. Start small, hook it to the trailer, build every time I earn enough money to buy materials, add on a little at a time, maybe a few years down the road, get rid of the trailer.”

They both drank apple juice. Cecilia said, “Sounds good to me. We got to get you on the title of this place.”

“Don’t need that.”

Cecilia emptied her glass and put it down on the table. “You want to build, you get on the title with me. Brother and sister own this place together and try for a real house, build it themselves. I’ll get the papers, and you sign. Otherwise, I’d love a real house, but we ain’t even gonna start. Just stick with the old trailer, shakes and rattle every time you walk through it.”

Nedja’s quiet laugh rose to the green cottonwood leaves shading them and the table. He said, “I’ll sign.”

They ate vegetables grown in their own soil, washed, and onto the table every day. Nights turned chilly, and the days shortened. Nedja poured the foundation for the first two rooms of the house and started building walls. Sometimes Cecilia looked at Nedja and thought maybe they wouldn’t always be brother and sister.

She lived at ease. Their lives stretched from where they sat under the cottonwoods, leaves going from green to yellow above them, clear to eternity, and they had time for careful development of anything they could dream about.

Nedja said, “I got to harvest everything a frost could kill, cause it’s coming.”

Frost hit. Cecilia stepped out of the trailer and walked toward the white Buick. A blue jeep rumbled toward her, raised a cloud of dust, too fast down the driveway, stopped in front. Tom opened the driver’s-side door, climbed down, stood looking at Cecilia, cold autumn morning, yellow leaves drifting toward the ground on small wind. Tom said, “Ceece, you’re looking really good.”

Cecilia’s words froze and wouldn’t come. Her heart went wham, wham, wham and tried to climb out her throat. She worked to breathe steady. She didn’t care, but the words came from somewhere, and she asked Tom, “That your jeep?”

Tom turned and patted the fender. “It’s mine. I’m coming up in the world, Ceece. And you must be doing something right. You’re down at least thirty pounds. You’re looking really good.”

Right then, Nedja walked around from behind the trailer,

dirty hands, where he'd been pulling weeds, a tight handful of kale in his left hand, dark green, shading to purple around the ruffled edges of the leaves, wet where he'd washed all the leaves.

Cecilia thought, "Help, help, Nedja. Don't say nothing about brother and sister at all. Just help me out of this place I can't for the life of me or my sacred future any way handle."

Like he read her mind, Nedja walked up to her, hugged her, dirty hands and all, said, "This kale is really sweet after the frost. I picked some for your lunch. You don't roll, you're gonna be late for class."

Tom said, "Class? Hey, you taking a class, Ceece?"

Then the words came easier, with Cecilia getting used to cold water again, fall of the year, "Nobody calls me Ceece anymore, Tom. My name is Cecilia." She got into the white Buick, started the motor, ran the window down, and looked up at Nedja. Champion that he is, Nedja leaned down, kissed her lightly on her cheek, could be brother kissing sister good day ahead, could be comfortable lover touching his lips lightly to her face in morning autumn sun, maybe a promise, where you go when the tom cat walks out of your life. She ran the window up and rumbled out the driveway past the blue jeep, Tom standing there with more to say but not getting it said.

Up the hill, on the front steps of Jefferson Hall, four minutes till class, Cecilia turned and looked down at the long black highway. She watched a blue jeep speed east, rolling forever away from this small town, rumble, rumble, rumble, traveling toward the edge of the world. She turned and walked into her future. She felt light on her feet, like a healing presence growing in this sacred green world.