

We Stole a Van

Alex Miller

The van shook like a beast. Marshall drove as fast as he could handle it, which was only about 80 miles per hour. Even at this speed the engine roared. The panels rattled as if the wind would tear them off and sling them down the highway. He'd traveled west all night, and the faster he drove, the slower morning seemed to come. The yellow light of dawn arrived in earnest as he crossed the state line, leaving Pennsylvania for West Virginia. In the passenger seat, Trig yawned and stretched his arms. He craned his neck to look out the back windows.

"I'd bet anything we're in the clear," Trig said. "I don't bet they'll come looking for us."

"Don't kid yourself," Marshall said. He hit the blinker, merged into the fast lane and accelerated past an older-model sedan. "Don't matter how far we go. They can always find us. Just one cop runs our tag—it's over. We gotta be careful not to get pulled over for something stupid." He hit the turn signal again and returned to the right lane.

"Sure, but it helps to get some distance, right?" Trig said. "Improves the odds?"

"Ain't nowhere safe. No place you can go where they won't come for you."

"I'll never go back," Trig said.

"Fuck going back," Marshall said, pressing his foot down hard on the gas pedal. The engine growled, threatening to rip itself apart and spit out the pistons. The speedometer edged toward 85 before he let up.

Trig stared out his window. Utility poles rushed past in a blur, one after another. He started counting but quickly got bored. But when he tried to stop he found he couldn't. His mind kept track automatically—75, 76, 77. He tried to trick himself into losing count. He tried to think about the Grand Canyon. It didn't work—112, 113, 114. This wasn't the first time it had happened. Sometimes he'd start counting—or just imagining something—and would not be able to stop. It made him feel queasy in his stomach. Trig took his eyes off the road. He fiddled with the radio. He skipped past country music and static before settling on a station playing Kendrick Lamar.

"Whelp," Trig said. "This is better than being back at the home."

"Fuck that place," Marshall said.

"Glad we left. For real this time," Trig said. "I mean, it wasn't even all that bad. Not really. It's just that now that we're gone—I don't know. Feels good to be on the road."

Marshall took a hand off the wheel and motioned to the highway and green landscape of trees rushing by. "This is freedom. Once you get a taste, you never go back."

Trig nodded. "It's funny to think about, but if we hadn't left, we'd be at school by now."

"School's out," Marshall said, grinning big and showing his teeth. "No homework. None of that cafeteria food. No more bus rides back to the home. No more dormitories and sleeping in bunk beds. No more listening to goddamn Oliver masturbate."

"Every night," Trig said, shaking his head.

"Every goddamn night. Boy's a big-league pervert," Marshall said.

"Oliver has a problem," Trig said. "A sex problem."

"Fucking maniac hornball. We're lucky to be out of there."

Over the radio, Jay Z sang about the Holy Grail. He sang about getting lost in a maze. Trig sang along quietly. He didn't much like his own voice. He preferred listening to Marshall, who sang deeply and soulfully. Trig thought Marshall was the best singer he'd ever heard.

Trig looked down at the seat between his legs. The vinyl felt sticky, and the creases were full of crumbs. The van smelled like B.O. and fake leather. He rolled down his window for air.

"When they catch us, do you think they'll take us to jail or back to the home?" Trig said.

"Ain't nobody catching us," Marshall said.

"Car theft is a felony," Trig said. "When they catch us, I bet they stick us in jail. Bet we end up in juvie."

Marshall shrugged. "Either way, fuckers gotta let us out when we turn eighteen. Right?"

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A few hours after crossing into Ohio, Marshall pulled off the interstate and into a gas station near the exit ramp. It was a big station set up for travelers and truckers. Marshall chose a pump as far away as possible from the building, and as he refueled he kept his eyes on the highway, scanning it up and down.

"This place is amazing," Trig said. "It's got a McDonald's and everything. I've never been to a gas station this big. Is it lunchtime?"

"Sure thing," Marshall said, his eyes lingering on the road. "Only let's keep it cheap. This beast drinks up gas. Chugs it. Cost me sikty bucks to fill up the tank."

"Well, it's two thousand miles, give or take, to the Grand Canyon, right? So what's that? About \$250?"

"If you say so."

"How much money do you have? Can we make it all the way?"

"Don't worry," Marshall said, removing the nozzle from the tank. The odor of gasoline haunted the pumps. "I'll get us there. Don't even worry."

They entered the gas station, where Marshall stood in line to pay with cash, and then they stood in line again at McDonald's. Trig read the big menu hanging on the wall behind the register. Marshall recognized the look on his face. Trig was doing math in his head. Marshall smiled. His friend's gift for numbers amazed him. Marshall was several years older, but in school they'd been placed in the same math class. Trig cleared his throat and told Marshall that the combo meals were a ripoff—they could save money by buying a bunch of cheeseburgers and small drinks.

"Free refills," Trig said. "We can drink as much as we want!"

Marshall chose a table by a window so they could keep an eye on the van and the highway. Then they got down to the business of eating. They didn't say a word until they'd each chewed through three cheeseburgers.

"Guess how wide the Grand Canyon is," Trig said, leaning back in a plastic chair and patting his belly.

"Wide as fuck, I'll bet," Marshall said through a mouthful of burger.

"Ten miles, on average," Trig said.

"Wide as fuck," Marshall said.

“Can you imagine?” Trig said. “I’m gonna stand at the rim and toss down a rock. Do you know how deep the canyon is?” Before Marshall could muster an answer, Trig blurted out, “One mile! One whole mile up and down. Can you believe it?”

“Lots of cool stuff to see on the way, too,” Marshall said. He picked up his drink, sucked through the straw and swallowed. “We’ll head west today till we hit the Mississippi. Biggest river in the whole country, and we’re gonna drive right over it. Today. Think about it. Tomorrow we’ll see the Great Plains. Blow right through them. Then on to the Southwest—all that desert and cactus and shit.”

“I can’t wait,” Trig said. “And free refills all the way.” Trig and Marshall toasted with their paper cups.

“I’ve been thinking about something,” Trig said, staring out the window at the van. “Do you think we have time for a detour? Not right now, but once we’ve gone a little further?”

“I don’t want to get busted over something stupid.”

“It’s just that my sister lives in Nebraska. I’ve been thinking about it, and I’d bet she’d really like to see the Grand Canyon.”

“Nebraska’s out of the way.”

“It’s just a few more hours,” Trig said. “Maybe a day. Anyway she would love it. And I’m sure she’s got money. She can chip in. I wouldn’t even bring it up if I thought she’d be a burden.”

“I forgot you had a sister.”

“Half-sister, I guess. Except when I was younger I didn’t know, didn’t even know what a half-sister was. No one ever explained. She was just my sister, you know?”

“She about your age?”

“Couple years older,” Trig said. “Just turned 16.”

“Oh, well then, that changes things,” Marshall said, grinning wide and winking. “I’ll make time for your 16-year-old sister. Tell me, is she hot? I bet she’s real hot.”

“I don’t know about that,” Trig said cautiously. “She’s my sister. I don’t think about her like that.”

“But, you know, I mean—objectively—would you say she’s hot?”

“No idea.”

“OK, OK,” Marshall said, running a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry I asked. It was wrong of me. But—I mean—just tell me one thing. Does she have big tits?”

“Shut up, Marshall.”

“Because here’s the thing,” Marshall said, trying to keep from laughing, “if she has big tits, I’ll pick her up, no doubt about it. That’s my whole criteria. Like, for instance, if her tits were only *this* big,” Marshall raised his arms and formed small cups over his chest with his hands, “then it’s not even worth the time to go get her. You see? However,” he moved his hands a considerable distance outward from his chest and spread his fingers wide, as if to palm a pair of basketballs, “if your sister’s tits are *this* big, I’ll drive to Nebraska for sure. Hell, I’ll buy an engagement ring on the way. Not a problem, sir. Picking up your big-titted sister would be my goddamn pleasure.”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up,” Trig said, frowning, arms crossed stiffly across his chest.

Marshall laughed and pounded the table.

“I’m just fucking with you, man,” he said, tears trickling out the corners of his eyes. “Of course we can pick up your sister. Tits or no tits. I don’t care if she looks like a damn moose. Any sister of yours is a sister of mine. We’ll swing by her place, and the three of us’ll take off from there to the canyon. You, me and the moose.”

“Hilarious,” Trig said, struggling to hold his face in a mask of disapproval.

Marshall kept laughing. He raised his cup again. “Here’s to the moose.”

Just then, a police cruiser pulled into the parking lot. Marshall abruptly stopped laughing. He and Trig watched through the gas station window as the car rolled up slowly behind the van and stopped.

“Fuck,” Marshall said. His skin tingled with pinpricks of electricity.

The officer looked in the direction of the van and scratched his jaw.

“Fuck. I should have parked around back,” Marshall said. “Fuck I’m stupid.”

The officer had a black mustache and aviator sunglasses. He rotated his head to look all around the gas station. He typed something into a laptop computer. He looked back at the van.

“If he comes in the front door, we go out the back,” Marshall said. “Just act casual. Like any normal person who stopped for gas. You know? Don’t act like this is your first time at McDonald’s.”

The officer shifted his cruiser into drive. It crawled toward an exit, pulled onto the road and turned immediately down an interstate on-ramp. The boys watched as it accelerated along the ramp, then merged onto the highway, heading east.

“Pack all this up,” Marshall said, gesturing to the food on the table. “We gotta roll.”

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Marshall pointed the van west. The gas pedal vibrated as he stepped on it. The three-ton box of steel and glass rattled furiously down the highway while the engine rumbled like a summer storm. Every few seconds, Trig turned around to look out the rear windows.

“I think we’re in the clear,” he said after a half hour with no sign of pursuit.

“Ain’t no such thing,” Marshall said, eyes glued to the road.

“I’m not even worried. If that cop wanted us, he’d have us by now.”

“Easy for you to say,” Marshall said. “Not like they’d send some 14-year-old to jail. Especially one just along for the ride.”

“They’ll go easy on us. We ain’t hurting nobody.”

Marshall kept both hands on the wheel and drove for more miles than he could count. Trig turned on the radio. He searched through the stations. He listened to “Wagon Wheel” and sang along. Back at the home, he and Marshall would stay up late listening to the radio, and “Wagon Wheel” was one of their favorite songs. It always cracked up Trig to listen to Marshall belt out the chorus. But as Marshall drove down the highway, he didn’t sing along.

“Why do you want to see the canyon so bad?” Trig said.

“I seen it a lot in pictures,” Marshall said. He’d relaxed a little from before. He sat low in the seat, steering with one hand draped across the wheel. “I guess I’d like to see it for real. My dad always wanted to. He talked about it sometimes. Talked about buying an RV and taking the

whole family on a trip out west, seeing the canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite. He never did it. My dad, I mean. Never got the chance.”

“We can visit all those places. Go wherever we want. As long as we make a little money for food and gas. That’s no trouble. We can go anywhere,” Trig said.

“I heard about a mountain they call El Capitan,” Marshall said. “I’d like to see that one.”

“And the Painted Hills. That’s on my list,” Trig said.

“Death Valley.”

“Hollywood and Las Vegas.”

“The whole goddamn Pacific Ocean. You ever seen an ocean?”

“Only on TV,” Trig said.

“Fuck TV,” Marshall said. “You and me gonna see the ocean. Stand in the water. Watch them waves roll in.”

Trig looked out the passenger window. Marshall hit the gas and changed lanes to pass a minivan. Trig took note of the family inside it. A man with salt-and-pepper hair drove while a woman sat up front beside him. She looked tired and held a magazine in her lap. Three kids sat in the back. The oldest couldn’t have been more than eight. A Disney movie played on screens built into the seatbacks. Trig hadn’t watched it, but he’d heard about it from kids at school. It was about a fish who swims all over the ocean in search of his son. Trig suddenly longed to be just a kid again, sitting in the back of that minivan, watching some dumb cartoon movie and eating Goldfish crackers with his sister. The more he thought about it, the sadder he felt. He looked away. He tried to think about something else. But he was stuck. He could not stop thinking about the family in the minivan. He felt a familiar queasy sensation down in his gut.

Trig fidgeted in his seat. He glanced into the rearview mirror. What he saw made his whole body stiffen. He felt as if a glass of ice cold water had been poured directly into his bloodstream.

“Oh no,” he said.

From a distance, a chorus of sirens wailed.

Marshall cursed. He stomped the gas.

Trig looked out the back windows. A line of cop cars crested the hill with their dome lights flashing red and blue. Still far off but closing fast.

“They found us,” Trig said.

Marshall patted Trig’s leg. Then he returned his hand to the wheel to steady the van.

“I was just thinking about something,” Marshall said. “Do you remember how dark it would get at the home? How at night if you wanted to read, it didn’t matter how many lamps you turned on, the rooms would just stay dark?”

“Like the walls just drank up the light,” Trig said.

The sirens grew louder, and Trig recognized them as the sound of finality. He looked back again. The cruisers charged down the highway like a fleet of battleships.

“Maybe if you pull over they’ll go easy on us,” he said.

Marshall laughed weakly. He hit the gas, pushing the speedometer needle to 90. The force of the acceleration rocked the van from side to side.

“Good,” Trig said, squeezing the armrest so hard his knuckles went white. “Don’t stop.”

Marshall kept the pedal locked against the floor. The engine bellowed like thunder. And still the police pulled closer. Marshall saw the cop lights reflect dimly off the windshield. Red and blue. Blue and red. They could have been beautiful. He gripped the wheel through sweat slicked hands. He looked at the wide-open road. Marshall had always heard that in the seconds before you die, your life flashes before your eyes. And as the accelerating van shook wildly, he did see a vision, but instead of the life he'd lived, it was a life he could have lived. He saw himself and Trig and a girl who must have been Trig's sister standing at sunset on the rim of the Grand Canyon. He saw them hiking on a trail through a forest of mountain pines, with the snowcaps of the High Sierras visible in the distance. They stood in a blue ocean, laughing in the sunlight and seaspray. Theirs was a good life, and the police lights made it shine like rainbows.

Marshall lifted his foot off the gas. The speedometer crept back toward single digits. Gradually the van rolled to a stop in the center of the road. He shifted into park. Switched off the ignition. He looked at Trig, whose eyes opened wide like he would cry. Marshall reached for his friend's hand and held it. Police sirens screamed. Marshall looked at the highway, which cut through the hills like a river. He imagined the interstate as a great channel of water slicing through the continent, dividing into tributaries of city streets, tree-lined boulevards and country roads. He imagined people in cars and trucks floating in the river, swept along by the current to faroff places. He imagined himself swimming the river, cutting a straight course toward a green and distant shore. He rose from the water to look upon a new land. A new freedom.

"We did good," Marshall said. He squeezed Trig's hand, curled the boy's fingers into a fist. "Next time we'll do better. Won't stop for nothing."

Marshall closed his eyes.

He thought about the Grand Canyon.

Alex Miller is a writer and graphic designer who lives in Denver. His fiction has appeared in *Pidgeonholes*, *Back Patio Press* and *Rabbit Catastrophe Review*. He is the author of the short story collection "How to Write an Emotionally Resonant Werewolf Novel" (2019, Unsolicited Press).