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THAT AGNOSTIC BOY

by Chandler White

Stagnant, bored, unsatisfied, Amy Granville lies on the carpet, staring at the beige ceiling.

Near the west end of town, her house is the first to hear him as he roars near, just slow enough to attract attention and for an observer to frown and assert that he should not, really, be driving that fast. Someone could get hurt.

Amy, at the first hint of the roar from his black 1990 Saab Turbo, pops her head up from the floor, seized by sudden and avaricious glee. The roar escalates, tinged faintly with heavy, boom-bap hip hop. She bolts upright, flurrying one foot over the other, down stair after stair, sweeping through the living room and slamming into the front door almost before her papa Ed can object, yet he does anyway:

"Dad gummit, Amy, you better not be doin' what I think yer doin'!"

"I'm just getting the mail, Daddy!" She is already halfway through the door, and then all the way through, before she can hear Ed shout:

"Dammit, Amy, I better not catch y' out there lookin' at that agnostic boy!"

A sudden rush of black, then, as her eyes become slits and her cheeks flush red as the dirt, she can swear to her heart that for a fleeting, suspended moment, they made eye contact.

Amy is not the only girl to do this. He flicks his final cigarette out the window and scrutinizes the overgrown roadsides. He watches the girls flee their houses and established realms just to get a peek, summoned by the first sound of the rumbling bass and rattling hi-hats. The sound vibrates the car door and the hand that rests upon it, over the rolled-down window that showcases his face. And this mobile exposé reaches them all, those young and fair-cheeked faces beaming out at him like worshippers, those indignant parents hollering at their mutinous children and flashing hardened glares at his Saab, a pestilent bat. He looks back every time, with no

semblance of familiarity.

The boy squints in the blinding summer sunlight, furrowing his brow rather than scrunching his cheeks, never feigning a smile. Traveling east, his car plunges into the light. His every facial muscle is taut in resistance to it, yet he travels still. Coming in from his job in the city, he makes a regular delivery to Okemah, speeding on US-62 through a distant hometown, at the heart of miles of emptiness, a city that, by now, has come to know his approach.

As the Granville house and its neighboring admirers disappear, a brief interlude of land passes before the boy penetrates the city limits. The road becomes Carl Hubbell Boulevard, and what meager traffic Whiterock can propagate puts an end to the boy's zeal. His presence is still felt among them, though, as none of the street-side shops or businesses—neither the Tag Agency nor Video Connections a whole block down the road—are free from the behemoth profanity lacing every drum and synth of his music. The sheer volume wins him innumerable glares and confused looks from drivers packed closely in beside him. These looks are only increased as the boy sadistically pushes traffic forward, relentlessly urging every hesitant driver with honks and obnoxious proximity. The citizens of Whiterock aim disappointed frowns at him. He aims back his middle finger, one end of his mouth curved sharply upward.

As the veins of the city loosen and free up the lines of automobile sheep, the boy realizes that his is nearly spent of gas. With almost equal priority, there are no more cigarettes left in the Saab, giving him nothing to show through the open window other than his uninteresting, indistinguishable face. Keeping his speed at a solid fifty, the boy waits until Carl Hubbell crosses Dawson Street, and, with a hasty, tumbling right that turns into an equally boisterous left, he pulls up beside a pump at the lonesome Conoco.

The bell absently rings of his presence as the glass door swings, and a lone clerk is the boy's only company. As the boy approaches, the clerk's features become crisper, seeming to grow even cleaner and more composed at closer observation. His brown hair is within close trim to his scalp, topping a whitewashed face uninterrupted by any beard, acne, or dirt. His bright red uniform is tucked tightly into his Sunday khakis, and a golden cross pendant adorns his porcelain neck.

As the boy draws nearer, the clerk's spotless features contract into an acute kind of focus. As though to further inflame this

nameless impression, the boy runs a dirt-encrusted hand through his scruffy goatee, straightens his backward-facing ball cap, and speaks with a voice as rough as his stubble:

"Twenty on pump three. And a pack of Camels."

Without waiting for the pleasantries he knows will come anyway, the boy thrusts forward twenty-seven dollars and turns to glare elsewhere at something else, someone else.

"Alrighty, sir, that'll be twenty-six seventy-eight." He collects the bills. "Awful hot out there, in't it?"

The boy exhales. "Yeah. It is."

"What're you doin' this fine Sunday?"

"Headed to Okemah, gotta make a deliv'ry there. What's it to you?"

"Nothin' sir, just curious."

"Why else would I be puttin' my path through a town like this?"

"Well, there ain't anythin' too bad about Whiterock, I reckon."

The boy scoffs. "Ain't nothin' to do here but sit around and pray, thassit."

"Right."

The boy watches with the same toxic fascination as to the ignition of a cigarette. Within a number of seconds, the clerk's face, rife with anticipation, shines with the last flare of a dying star, then, as the realization comes clammy in his eyes, instantly loses the excitement, rapidly as though to evade some threat in the boy's taut, fixated glare. He retrieves the cigarettes from behind him without actually turning around, his face still resting on the boy's with the apologetic immobility of a corpse. At some indistinct point in which neither of the two are present, the pack of Camels hits the counter.

"Your cigarettes, sir."

Before he pulls out of the Conoco parking lot, the boy retrieves a pipe he bought in the city and packs half a bowl, leaving the cigarettes for later. Inhaling the smoke, lighter and tastier—yet twice as likely of censure—the boy is careful not to spill the grounds of green as he pulls back onto Carl Hubbell, continuing east.

However, before the smoke can even begin to levitate him like a smoke-filled balloon, his eyes are caught in a leftward glimpse onto a house, across from the mouth of Curtis Street.

His focus wisps out from the walls of his skull, out from the present moment, and lands in the interior of that house. There, in the image of that home left still and tainted on his eyes, the boy makes his regular observations, somehow no more vivid in its actual presence. Its front door—the gate of a daily Hell, a hub of unrestrained chaos that he reentered every day from the controlled chaos of a school bus. Its windows—smashed in now, but previously the crystal eyes of imprisonment, wet with tears from a young face pressed against the glass, prisoner. Its porch—the precipice of an invisible cliff inside that was visible only to him, a concrete ridge populated now by only broken rocking chairs. It is the same porch that, years ago, on some decadent day that the boy always fails to forget, was sat on by a disconsolate child watching the coroner bring out his mother's body, covered by a plastic white veil, concealing the underlying horror of an overdose, masking an unholy reality, but unable to stop him from reaching out for the pale hand still dangling from the stretcher, seeking her touch, her stability, her power to make it all go away and erase the stains of this bad, bad day from his mind.

It was a privilege given to the rest of Whiterock—but never to him. He can still hear the wails resonating in that street.

Why? Why, God, why?

He can still hear the host of voices swooning to him with all too much misled and unwelcome certainty.

It is what it is. God works in mysterious ways, we know this.

He has a plan for you, son, He's always had a plan for you. And that ain't gonna change anytime soon.

Your mother's with Him now, don't you worry, boy. If she could see you, she'd tell you how beautiful it all is.

Remember, son, above all things, remember that He loves you.

Hours transform back into seconds, and the boy tears away, back on the road. He sees it suddenly from inside the opposite lane, where a black truck speeds all too quickly towards him. He swings the steering wheel in the other direction, overcompensating

and nearly mounting the curb of the right lane. In a panic induced by adrenaline from the road, a reminder of the THC in his body, and memories all too unexpectedly close, the boy spins the car rightward into the parking lot of the Whiterock Church of Christ.

He stops the car. His lungs hyperactively fill and empty, and he steps outside to breathe air less thick. Forcing himself to control his breaths, he steps around the car and sits on the trunk, focusing his eyes on the earth...then back to the house still nearby...then up to the steeple.

The pristine cross stands obstinate in the sky, too thin and frail to hold the boy's somehow heavier body. He isn't sure if it's lethargy from the weed or perhaps a weakness in some other part of him, but his mind is suddenly disarmed of something, some mechanism usually kept close at hand but now revoked, and a surge of unsung misery rises in his fighting lungs. All at once, he shrinks back into a forgotten child, sitting and sobbing on his little car, a bereaved ecclesiast, grieving a love immense enough to be nameless, and the words fall like a psalm from his lips.

"Why...why, God, why..."