

Roleplaying

by Matt Gillick

The man got in the truck after the driver made the point that he shouldn't be out in the open when the fog rolled in. They were driving now. The passenger's name used to be Larry, but with no one to call him that as he walked along the highway outside what might have, at some point, been Dubuque, he'd forgotten himself. His last memory: a woman in a raincoat, boarding a cargo ship, him standing in the wave trough. Not her touch, not even a farewell. Only her yellow coat, that last blur of color. He presumed at some point he found the highway and continued, immersed in flatness. He had plenty of time to think on that moment with no one else to talk to, until he got in the vehicle. The passenger assumed his situation regarding lapsed memory was similar to that of the driver's.

With fading high beams, the rattling frame of the pickup truck ambled through the grey night. The vehicle had a burning paint smell and sounded like if it idled for a while, it would never move again. The driver had a clean-shaven face carrying high cheekbones and a ponytail of curly maroon hair, contrasting the passenger's torn, dirty jacket and unkempt beard streaked with grey knots, like bits of the fog had attached itself to the man's whiskers.

The driver's tone addressing the passenger was familiar like he'd picked him up before, Gonna say it again, man. If you only knew how much you remind me of him.

Can't say I ever will. This bucket sure looks like it can't take you much further.

The driver ignored the comment, Boy you sure do look familiar. Got a name?

Forgotten it. You?

Wouldn't really matter at this point, right? The driver did another double-take at his passenger. He went on, I'm sorry...wow...I mean, you really do remind me of him. My brother.

Well, pretty sure I'm not him.

Hate to harp on it, sir. Don't get much—any opportunity to say this, but he was one hell of a trailblazer. Always had to do it his way. Half-expected to pick him up one day, looking something like you. Maybe I have.

Voice raspy with underuse, the passenger answered, Yeah I can't remember shit either. Been walking for a spell, I suppose. You're the first...person I've seen as far back as I can gather. He looked out his cracked window to see that wall of white cresting toward the vehicle. Before the grey murk came upon them, the passenger could have sworn he saw a yellow blemish in the disappearing horizon. The fog covered the pickup and the road and beyond. Headlights were useless now. On the passenger side, the vehicle tilted over, rough dips and potholes, collapsed median strips. No indication they were driving on a road at all.

After what felt like minutes, the passenger noticed the driver still had not taken his eyes off him. An apprehensive stare discarding a shaggy beard, an unpleasant aroma, and seeing what it wanted to see. A look that wanted to come out and say it already.

The car halted. The driver's tone changed, like someone trying to hold back bubbling anger while simultaneously making a point, I need to ask you something. Why get in now when you had a chance before?

The fog grew thicker. The passenger replied, Got me confused with someone else. I'm not who you think—

The driver smacked his hands on the steering wheel like he was boxing a child's ears, dust floated across the flickering dashboard, Don't! he screamed. Stop dancing around the issue like you always do. Tell me! Was it because I'm the older brother? You think you knew better than me? You could have gotten in. At the parking lot in Davenport. Remember Davenport? You

just ran. I would've gotten out and chased after you. We could've talked it out. But they were coming. You left me alone. I've been driving all alone!

The passenger turned to find the clean face wet with tears, angry, and tried to gather just how long this man had been driving. How long he himself had been walking. He couldn't say for sure but it must have been long enough for the driver to think picking up a stranger and calling him brother was a good idea. The passenger envisioned the woman standing at the stern, going into the fog, the cold water at his feet. He understood that he would want an answer from her too if given the chance.

So, the passenger said, I was afraid you were going to get us killed. I didn't want to die so I left. Do you hate me for that?

Of course not, just dumb of you to turn down a free ride is all.

The driver relaxed his shoulders and faced forward. Fog was creeping into the car. The passenger stared at the first person he'd spoken to for as long as he could remember and asked, Why'd you get on the boat?

Because I thought it was the right thing to do.

But to leave me out here alone? Why wouldn't you take me?

There wasn't any more room. You blame me for going?

I blame you for leaving me.

You judge me for one moment?

It's the only one I have.

The vehicle inched forward, more bumps along the road that might not have been the road anymore. Both were quiet as the vehicle blindly sought a level terrain.