

HERE'S TO YOU, FRIEND

With thanks to a friend on the open road.

Another load – this time from the home base outside of Dallas going to Cedar Falls – and Tony knew he was one step closer to being at home again. It wasn't clear yet whether Cedar Falls was going to take him to Chenango Forks and to Baltimore, or to Omaha and then Los Angeles, but if it did, he figured at the very least that there was more money on the line, more promise to be at home for good, and, though he tried to suppress the guilt over the feeling of giddy excitement that accompanied every trip, he knew there was a new adventure to be had.

He'd been on the road for three weeks prior and home for the weekend, only to be dispatched for a 6 A.M. departure Monday morning. He had wanted to get home sooner, maybe Wednesday if he was lucky, but a hold-up in a Carbondale rest-stop (gear problem this time) put a wrench in those plans. Still, he had spent the night at a local bar cheering with the locals for the Southern Illinois University Salukis basketball team in an unexpected win over Michigan State, and he felt like he'd just made enough good friends to last a lifetime, particularly the fellow who gave him a lift to and from the spot near campus where Tony remembered what it was like to feel young again.

6 AM meant a 5 AM wake up call. He sat on the edge of his bed, squinting at the darkness outside in disbelief, and by the time he was ready to go he thought about kissing Marie on the cheek. He knew for her that frustrations were seamlessly rolling by like the tires on his truck, and her presence tugged at him. But he couldn't say goodbye; either that, or he couldn't face the guilt of the still solemnity in her eyes that she always possessed whenever it came to talking about leaving. Instead, he tip-toed into his daughter Allie's bedroom and woke her up, placing a single finger over his lips to motion for quiet.

“Daddy's leaving.”

At the dispatcher he met up with Reggie, one of his best friends from TexHaul Driving Company. They'd been working together how many years now? Tony wasn't sure, but Reggie was probably his best black friend. Now that Tony thought of it, he didn't really have many black friends besides Reggie, but he knew that it wasn't the novelty of his skin. It was that Reggie had dispatched him countless times and they had shared so many laughs over the phone when Tony was away; it was also because Reggie reminded him of the racial harmony he'd seen in the unlikeliest of places, and because Reggie reminded him of home.

After the pre-trip inspection, Reggie told Tony that the trailer had already been loaded up, much to Tony's dismay. His friends would call Tony “The Crazy Trucker” because he would volunteer to help loading and unloading his trucks as a way to stay in shape. Trucking life was not conducive to a healthy lifestyle, so Tony tried to make up for that by being the craziest trucker out there, and one who drank lots of water to fill his stomach, even if that meant lots of bathroom breaks along the way. Still, he had a gut – but one small enough that you may not even notice, depending on the shirt he was wearing.

Even his CB radio handle was “Crazy Trucker.” “You're one crazy dude,” Reggie had said when Tony was first starting out, “you're gonna be the crazy trucker.” And it stuck. So when the crazy trucker waved goodbye to Reggie and set out for the open road – 6 AM sharp,

too – he wondered what craziness lay ahead.

But sometimes the enjoyment of the open road is looking back. As he got on the nearly vacant highway, Tony thought about how many times he had enjoyed the serenity of the rising sun, wondering where the few other cars were coming from and going to. Were they returning home to see their wife and daughter? Tony looked at the photos of Marie and Allie that he'd had affixed onto the dashboard, and instantly that pleasant feeling was lost.

35 North to Oklahoma. This was the way most trips started. For the first few moments of the trip, Tony thought about getting the details straight. Planning ahead. A furniture load to Cedar Falls. Reggie would figure out the details from there, to avoid brokering the next load. He had already glanced at the Motor Carriers map to determine the best route, but the Cedar Falls run was slightly familiar by now. Water, good. Toiletries and all for the sleeper, that too. Then he remembered: the logbook. He would have to update it at the next break. Gotta follow the laws. Can't be driving too much too soon, even if you abide by the mantra that a moving truck means money in the pockets.

Soon, Tony passed thoughtlessly through Oklahoma and entered Kansas. When he saw the first sign for Wichita, he embarked on his first travel down memory lane. Donnie. His friend from the small radio station outside of Wichita. Five years prior, in the wee hours of the morning, Tony had felt himself falling asleep. He pulled off an exit near Wichita into a small town that rendered a distinct feeling of desolation at night. Tony sighed when he saw the 24-hour convenience store and pulled in to buy a soda.

Drinking the soda in the cool, night air and trying to find some stars, Tony became absorbed by his own thoughts, the mystery of the heavens, what lay beyond. Sure, he'd seen it all in his travels. But had he really seen anything? Snippets of every culture, never the real thing. He could glean the differences between a California and Alabama resident, but he knew his own failings: all he really understood was the road, the paths that lay between these people, the obstacles that set them apart. They were all puzzle pieces, and even though Tony could grasp the rough outline, the textures, the borders – he could never completely fill them in.

That's when an odd-looking man brushed by, rushing into the store and consequently setting off a loud jingling noise. Tony took the soda from his lips; he'd never seen a robbery. But as he got to the door - his heart fluttering, his soda a potential source of artillery – the man was already at the counter, paying for a pack of cigarettes. Tony was overtly staring right inside the door, blocking any would-be customers from entering.

"Whatsa matter? Don't like my beard?" the man chirped. The cashier, a young boy, smiled furtively as he gave the man his change. Tony was embarrassed. He tiptoed backward as he replied.

"Oh, no...you just scared me, is all."

The man approached Tony quickly. At first, Tony was prepared for a fight. But then, the man fluttered by and out the door just as lithely as he had done originally.

"Gotta queue up the next song!" was all he yelled behind him. Queue up the next song? What did that mean? Tony knew what it meant, literally, but the lack of context confused him. He stood there nonplussed, searching for answers in his mind. Maybe this was the beginning of understanding what people were like in Kansas. Crazy. Like Dorothy, he thought maybe he shouldn't be in Kansas any more.

The boy at the register was opening his mouth to speak when the man returned, out of breath. He leaned into the door frame and waved to Tony, who turned his head.

"Hey, sorry...I meant, I am a radio host, and I had to run here while the song was on to

get these cigs. I really should never be leaving, but I'm all alone. You wanna see how radio works?"

Tony gave away confusion with a puzzled look, narrowed eyebrows.

"Is this one of them tricks?"

"No," the man shouted, looking down at his watch, then, looking up, and more quietly, "I just don't got a lotta time 'til the next song and I'm alone for the overnight shift."

Tony considered the facts. If the guy was a creep, he'd only have to run 60 yards to the convenience store. He was still tired, and he'd never seen a radio station. And, more importantly, the stranger reminded him of a very frequently formed version of himself; alone, late at night, in the middle of nowhere, and yearning for company.

Tony looked at the boy behind the register, who was now resting his chin on his palm looking bored as he chiseled away at a scratch ticket. His indifference was all he needed. This guy was crazy by nature. The boy had seen it countless times before.

"So?" the man pleaded, stroking his graying beard.

"Sure, why not?" Tony said, throwing his hands in the air and spilling a little soda in the process. The man chuckled. Tony did too.

"Donnie."

"Tony. Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise."

Then Tony jogged behind his new friend as he sprinted back to work.

It didn't end there. In the radio station, Tony was exposed to an array of gadgets and controls he had never seen before. Tony watched with folded arms as Donnie let AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" wind down.

"Quick," Donnie yelled, "pick a song."

"A song?"

"Yeah you big dummy. A song. Any song. For you."

Tony had never been treated like this. Moreover, he had never been on television, called into a radio show, or even been mentioned in either medium to his knowledge. He liked to remain anonymous. He registered Donnie's anxiety and panicked as the song got quieter and quieter; then, he remembered one of his favorites.

"'I Can't Go 55.' Sammy Hagar."

"A classic!" Donnie yelled. He hit a button and then started talking, all the while searching for a CD. Tony tilted his head to see exactly what he was doing. He was amazed by the multi-tasking.

"... 'Thunderstruck'" but fortunately for us out here in God's country there is no thunder at all. In fact, it's very nice. Now, I'm gonna tell you something..." – Tony noticed how much deeper Donnie's voice had become since he started talking – "...truly incredible how people meet people. Anyway, I have a truck driver here in shocker country from Dallas on his way home. I wanted to show him a little bit about our hospitality. How fitting is it that he wants to hear this tune as he goes back home to his family."

With that, Donnie hit a button, and the guitars set in. Donnie waved his hands in the air triumphantly and gave a short bow.

"Bravo," Tony said. From there, Donnie showed him how he did his job, explaining all the controls, the hours – "I do lots of overnights" – and his conditions – "There is usually someone in that other room, but when I do these shifts, I'm alone." Tony shared his own stories as they walked into the next room and examined his truck from the window. "It's funny you fall

asleep here sometimes. I sleep in my truck. There's a sleeper in the back."

A few songs later, Donnie tapped Tony on the shoulder, jerking his head toward the door.

"Hey, quick cig break."

Tony followed Donnie outside. It was chilly out. He put his hands in his pockets. Donnie took a long drag.

"Got a family?"

"Yessir," Tony replied, pulling the photographs of Marie and then-infant Allie out of his pocket.

"Adorable," Donnie said, "you're one lucky man."

"How 'bout yourself?" Tony reciprocated.

Donnie looked at Tony, displaced. Not the confident, quirky guy he thought he knew. Tony quickly realized simply by that one look that he really knew so little when it came to knowing people, even the ones who took him on random at-the-right-place-at-the-right-time adventures.

"Yes I do," Donnie said, "And I miss 'em to death all the time. A wife, two sons, a daughter. 13, 11, and 6."

"Looks like we're in the same boat, working these hours - "

"Ya know, I work like this, I come home and sleep after my kids go to school, and by the time they're back, I'm gone," Tony interrupted, "It's awful."

"I hear ya," Tony said, firmly placing his hand on Donnie's shoulder, and then, realizing how little he tended to know about people, cautiously removing it.

"One of these days, I'm just gonna bust up and leave. And just be like, the hell with this! I gotta watch my kids grow up. I'll find work, ya know? My fans, they're close to my heart but they're not my family. One of these days, I'm gonna bust up and leave."

"I hear ya," Tony re-iterated. He was unable to find the words to encapsulate the feeling of having the exact same thoughts without sounding overly sentimental.

"Well, listen buddy. I gotta get back in there to finish my night. You should get home, huh? You've been a real friend" - he stressed the *real* - "and I'll remember you. But don't be a stranger if you find yourself in these parts."

Tony had met lots of people on the road, but this pause was unprecedented. For a second, he didn't know what to say. The awkward silence made him self-conscious about hurting Donnie's feelings, so he stammered, "Likewise. Will do, buddy."

They shook on it. Ever since that time, Tony would listen to Donnie on the radio when passing through the Wichita area, or try to in vain as he discovered it was not Donnie's shift. But they never connected again in person. It was not for lack of effort; one time, Tony heard him as he was going by and rushed to catch him, only to find out that he'd just left. It was seven in the morning.

"Whoa!" Tony swerved to the right as a car cut him off, honking loudly in the process. It snapped him out of his memory. As the car sped by, Tony saw two young faces, a middle-finger, and a Harvard bumper sticker that got smaller and smaller.

"Dammit! I'm a person too!" Tony howled. The elitist pricks. Young drivers are the worst drivers, he thought, and young Ivy League drivers think they own the damn road. He knew everything about the damn road. And then, after a few breathing exercises he learned in driving school to avoid road rage, he was Tony again. And that Tony sighed when he didn't hear Donnie's voice on the dial.

By the time Tony approached the Missouri border, it was almost 1 PM. Hard to believe

time had passed so quickly, but it was time for a break. He'd have to update his logbook and start really planning the rest of the trip. He hadn't done so before; life, real life, had caught up to him. This would be a good opportunity to grab a bite while still following the law for driving hours.

He hastily reached over to the passenger seat and rummaged through his truck stop guide. He really wished he had planned ahead as he kept one hand on the steering wheel, one hand on the guide, steadily gazing back and forth between the two. He felt guilty and irresponsible for doing this; he was always diligent in his preparation. Thankfully, he found that the next truck stop was 20 miles away. He pointed upward with one hand, looked up for a moment, and said "Thank you."

Tony found himself in Ottawa, Kansas when he stepped out of his truck and headed toward the rest stop. Not a shabby place. Larger than many he'd been to, with full amenities, restaurants, a pharmacy, and even some arcade games. He just wanted some food. He quickly identified the sandwich shop by the blinking neon sandwich logo, and walked in.

Shortly thereafter, he heard the shout.

"Hey! Crazy man!"

He turned around, and much to his joyful surprise, he identified Allen, Roy, and Stevie sitting in the booth in the corner.

"Unbelievable!" Tony shouted, arms outstretched. Man, these guys looked exactly the same. It had only been two years.

What were the chances that three black men would have to pull into the same rest stop by Starkville, Mississippi due to a gear problem? Compound that with the odds of Tony finding himself in the same situation with these gentlemen. That's when you have Tony, Allen, Roy, and Stevie – a white man from Texas, two black men from North Carolina and third from Florida – alone together in a rural town in the deep, deep south.

"What are you three doing here?" Tony asked excitedly, taking a seat at their table as Stevie moved over. He knew they all worked for the same trucking company, but still, being at the same rest stop, in Ottawa, Missouri?

"We were all heading to Wichita, and once we got in a good range, we hit each other up on the CB," Allen explained, taking a bite of his turkey sub. Roy, the stoutest of the three, had his arm arched over the back of the bench behind Allen and had already finished eating. He picked up the story.

"He's got slow freight. He's not due for a couple hours, and he has to broker the next load, so he waited up for us. We kinda planned ahead. We knew when I was out west and Stevie was up in Pennsylvania that we might all collide here at the same time if we played it right."

Their confidence was a far cry from the attitude they had that night in Mississippi. It was three in the morning, and when Tony pulled into the station, he was exhausted. He was ready to call it a night, just tucker up in the sleeper, worry about the gear problem in the morning. Then he saw the three men, huddled together by a truck, looking at him anxiously. His first thought was to run for his life. He didn't know many black people, just the stereotypes about murders and robberies. But soon, he saw that the three men tiptoed cautiously backward, and as he had often heard about dangerous animals he visited in the zoo, he realized that the three men – despite outnumbering him – were more scared of him than he was of them.

"Fellas, how you doin' tonight?" Tony cracked nervously, moving slowly. They didn't respond. Just nodded their heads.

"What's the matter?"

The three men looked at each other furtively. Allen hit Stevie in the chest, Stevie hit him

back. They both looked at Roy, the biggest, the baddest, the self-acclaimed “Beast.”

Roy stepped forward and put his hands on his hips. Tony backed off.

“Easy now.”

“Who are you?” Roy demanded.

“Just a trucker with a gear problem. Who are you?” Tony asked, craning his neck around Roy to try and get a better look at Allen and Stevie.

“Same,” Roy said stoically, then correcting himself, “actually, it’s just Stevie with the problem. These two guys here haul freight for the same company and we had to divide our load into three trucks. We weren’t gonna leave him here.”

“Why not?” Tony asked.

The three black men laughed. They looked relieved by Tony’s ignorance. Tony cracked a smile while looking at each of them, trying to collect hints. He wasn’t really sure what he was laughing about.

“Crazy white man doesn’t know shit!” Roy yelled, slapping Tony on the shoulder. The contact made him jump. The three of them laughed even harder. Stevie bellied over, his trucking hat falling off his head. Tony tried to look amused, but now he was just plain-old confused. Noticing that, Roy coughed and spoke again, even as Allen and Stevie giggled in the background.

“We’re in Starkville, Mississippi. I can’t leave a black man here. Mother fucker will get lynched. And that ain’t no lie. Just this afternoon when we dropped off the load, we swore we heard the folks at the dispatch mumbling about niggers.”

The word made Tony cringe.

“Yeah, I said it,” Roy said. The two sidekicks were quiet now.

“I’m real sorry about that,” Tony said flatly. What could you really say to someone after that anyway? Roy didn’t answer. The four of them were looking at the ground. Tony tried to suggest a solution.

“Well, why don’t we all just get some sleep and we’ll figure out our gear problems in the morning?”

“We don’t have sleepers,” Allen said, stepping forward. “And we’re scared to shit. Three black men in Starkville, Mississippi? Hell I told Roy to leave his truck here and we’ll drive him the fuck out of here!”

“I’ll figure this out,” Tony mumbled. He stepped away and pulled out his cell phone. Reggie answered grumpily. It was the middle of the night, but when he heard Tony’s story, he understood. He got out of bed and found a contact to help them out. When Tony explained that a mechanic was on the way, his three new accomplices groaned and yelled about how Tony had made a mistake, but Tony tried to calm them down.

The mechanic arrived half an hour later in a compact car. The headlights beamed on the four men and they strained their eyes to try to see what was inside: a white man with a plaid, flannel shirt and jeans, wearing an ‘Ole Miss hat. He was as southern as they come.

“Oh, we’re fucked,” Allen said, clutching Stevie. He looked like he was going to break for it.

“Hello gentlemen,” the mechanic said. The three black men nodded their heads. Tony directed the bewildered mechanic to Stevie’s truck to have a look as the others lingered behind, whispering to each other about guns and the KKK. After a long look under the hood, the mechanic walked back with Tony to the three men.

“Whose truck is this?”

Stevie raised his hand slowly, refusing to look the man in the eye.

“You got an engine problem. We’ll have to take care of that in the morning. As for you,” he motioned to Tony, “we’ll take a look at yours tomorrow, too, since you’re not going anywhere ‘til then. You said only one of you has got a sleeper, right?”

The four of them nodded.

“Well, why don’t you guys come to my place for the night. I’ll put you up. For free. You won’t find a better deal in town. And then, after church tomorrow, we’ll come back here and get you goin’.”

The three black men were wide-eyed. Tony was going to remind the gentleman that he had his own sleeper, but Roy knew what was coming, and it took one glance from Roy for Tony to keep his mouth shut. They weren’t going anywhere without him.

Tony got into the front seat while Roy, Stevie, and Allen crammed into the back. They didn’t say a word. Well, not a word besides the yes and no answers they occasionally offered to the mechanic’s questions. Later, at his house, they told him they would stay in one room – to make it easier on him and his wife.

“She won’t mind a bit,” the mechanic said, “but suit yourselves, gentlemen.”

Tony was amazed with the hospitality. Even though Roy begged him to stay in the same room, Tony insisted that it would look bad and that everything would be alright.

“I promise,” Tony said.

“You’re one crazy dude,” Roy replied.

In the morning, breakfast was set on the table for everyone. The mechanic’s wife had arranged it, and she gracefully introduced herself to everyone as they sat at the table.

“You boys aren’t dressed for church...but people will understand,” she said, taking a bite, searching for clues about her cooking as she looked around the table. Tony tried to drive the conversation, although he was slowly realizing that Roy, Allen and Stevie were beginning to assert themselves, constantly offering thank you’s and ma’am these eggs are goods.

At church, the six of them, as well as the mechanic’s young daughter, sat in the back row. In spite of their appearance, the four truckers received greetings from several members of the church who had never seen them before. When told that they were truckers, just getting out of town, the townspeople replied by wishing them a happy, healthy journey, and, of course, the hope that they enjoyed their time in Starkville, Mississippi. Most of all, Roy, Allen, and Stevie sighed deeply when they saw that almost half the church was made up of black congregants.

After the service, they all thanked the mechanic’s wife, dropped her off with her daughter at their home, and then went back to the station. While the mechanic repaired both trucks, the gentlemen spoke to each other over lunch in the stop.

“I gotta thank you man,” Roy said to Tony, “you’re one crazy dude, but we owe you one.”

Tony didn’t feel like he had really done anything. It was just the mechanic. If anything, he felt like he owed these guys. He had learned something in the past twelve hours. He wasn’t quite sure what it was, but he wanted to see these guys again. He told them how his name was The Crazy Trucker, and they all laughed. And after they all shook hands with the mechanic and drove away in their trucks – the three black men all back to North Carolina, the white man to Louisiana – they assumed they’d never see each other again.

“That’s amazing you planned it like that,” Tony muttered. “I never thought I could plan something like that. I was hoping I’d see you guys again.”

The men all looked at each other and laughed. Tony got himself a sandwich and enjoyed

a meal with his long lost friends. They exchanged numbers and vowed to meet again someday soon.

On his way out of the stop, Tony called Reggie to update him on his progress. Then, he called Marie. She asked if he knew anything about his next load after Cedar Falls. No, I don't, he always said. Oh, she always sighed. She was upset he hadn't said goodbye this time. And Allie was at school, so he'd have to call back again when she was home, maybe tomorrow night. Ok, he said, and hung up the phone. He had been trying not to think about them the whole time, but now, here they were.

Tony walked briskly outside, ignoring the two lot lizards who beckoned for him over their cigarettes. They'd find some other lonely soul. Not Tony. He had greater things in life, and he was on his way home, even if he didn't know it yet.

When he got back into the truck, he updated his logbook and planned the rest of the trip. He had to be in Cedar Falls by the following day. Very attainable, he thought. It was almost 3 PM now and he only had six hours he could drive now before he'd have to pull over.

Two hours into his trip, Tony hit rush hour traffic. He looked at his watch. He was making great time. Another hour of this, he thought to himself, and he'd pull over. He ended up in Bethany, Missouri. When he got a bite to eat the rest stop, there were no old acquaintances. Just families playing with their kids, teenagers at the arcade games, travelers stopping to use the restrooms. He stopped and felt the still silence of the world going by, and suddenly, in the dark solemnity of a moment with no noise, he realized how alone he was. He no longer wanted to press onward. It was 7 PM but he was only mere hours away. If he wanted to, he could have the load in by the wee hours of the morning. But now, Tony didn't want to do anything.

He had tried to put his family out of his mind, and he had even tried to thwart the memory of the brief conversation with Marie from Ottawa. She hadn't sounded bitter or angry. She sounded genuinely sad. It wasn't as if she wanted him to change, but it was as if she wanted things to change. She wanted things to be different. This is what they had. Tony called the house.

"I thought you weren't going to call 'til tomorrow night?" Marie asked, surprised.

"Had one of those urges. Can you put Allie on the phone?"

Marie smiled. He could hear the smile through the phone, even though she hadn't responded. Soon, Allie's voice came on.

"Daddy?"

"Hey darling."

"Where are you?"

"Bethany, Missouri."

"Bethany like my friend Bethany?"

"Kinda," Tony croaked, "Yeah. I gotta go. Be good in school. Tell Mommy I love you both."

"I love you too," she answered softly, hanging up the phone. Tony tried to imagine the look of surprise on Marie's face. Maybe she'd understand. She probably would, he thought. No, it wasn't wishful thinking, he told himself. She'd know. She'd get it. And if she doesn't, I'll tell her myself when I'm home.

That night, Tony turned on the tiny television and hooked up the antennae to get some decent reception. He fell asleep to the sound of the evening news, a cool, quiet night in Missouri, and the rambling thoughts of his own mind that slowly subsumed everything else.

In the morning, he went into the stop with his bar of soap, and took a shower. He changed his clothes in the truck and then gave Reggie a call to tell him he was going to be in Cedar Falls

soon.

“I got news for you my man,” Reggie shouted after Tony gave him the status update.

“You got my next load set up?”

“I do indeed,” Reggie cried in an overly eager tone, “You’re comin’ home, bud.”

Tony’s heart skipped a beat.

“I don’t understand.”

“I spoke to management today. They said you deserve a break. They’re giving you a paid vacation. Head on home, take a week and next weekend off, and we’ll talk then. After you drop off that load, of course. They’re gonna load you up some mattresses to bring back to Dallas. I brokered it, figured we should maximize profit. Hope you don’t mind.”

Mind? Tony didn’t mind one bit. He couldn’t believe it. All he could muster was a thank you and a see ya soon. He didn’t know where to begin. Then, he looked to the front of the truck. The steering wheel. His way home.

As Tony cruised in the middle lane, the trees and the corn fields and the cars whirling by all took on new meaning. As the sun beamed down on an early March day, Tony sensed the timelessness of his surroundings. It was a similar feeling he had in the Bethany truck stop, the timeless sense of watching the world go by. Except now, Tony didn’t feel like he was sitting on the side watching it happen. He felt like he was a part of it. He felt like he was leaving his imprint on the road, and he banged the steering wheel and gave a triumphant shout as he crossed the Iowa border.

Up around Des Moines, Tony made his first turn since Texas, excluding his breaks. He got onto 80 West, hitched right onto 380 North, and soon, he sailed into Cedar Falls, Iowa. He hadn’t been there in ages, but the letters on the sign smoothed a smile across his face, and he started humming to the bumbling country tune that had come on the radio. He belted out the word “cowboy” every time it came on, and he didn’t care that people in the cars around him were watching. Every time someone made the motion, he tooted his horn. All was roses again.

At the station, a crew of men glumly welcomed Tony and began to slowly unpack the truck. Tony started helping them; they offered a quizzical look, but didn’t say anything, just shrugged their shoulders as if to reveal indifference to someone helping them out.

“What’s the matter boys? Cat got your tongue?” Tony asked, jumping down from the truck.

“UNI lost last night,” one man said unforgivingly.

“Conference championship,” the other added.

“UNI?”

“University of Northern Iowa.”

“Oh,” Tony stammered, “Well, who’d they play? Someone good, I bet.”

“Southern Illinois,” the first guy said, his arms now heavy with a large, wooden chair, “those damn Salukis.”

Tony smiled, but then quickly retracted the look from his face. He had remembered his stay in Carbondale, Illinois, when the Salukis beat Michigan State. He was a Saluki fan now, and he’d almost forgotten. But hearing that his “team” had won the conference championship was just another reason to be excited. He’d be home just in time to watch them play in the NCAA basketball tournament. Hell, maybe he’d even order a Saluki hat for Allie and they’d watch together.

He heard the second man mutter to a third about how hungover he was from getting drunk at Beck’s the night before. Tony presumed that this was the local watering hole. The crew

was so ungrateful for his help. Today was the day of celebration. God's day of rest, on a Tuesday. Tony, The Crazy Trucker, decided to let them handle the re-loading of mattresses themselves.

"You're all set," the third man said, and the three of them were about to depart when Tony extended his hand. They each shook it limply with plain, boring faces, Tony thought, and so he saluted them sarcastically, and decided immediately that Carbondale, Illinois was a much better place than Cedar Falls, Iowa, even if he had already concluded that his glimpses into different societies were just that – glimpses.

When Tony got back into the truck, he knew this was the beginning of something new. Something was changing within him, he just didn't know what. Looking back at everything with his family life, his life on the road, his current experience – he knew he was going to take it all in and give birth to a new Tony. He just didn't know what that new Tony was going to be like.

He turned on the radio real loud and waved to all the smokeys on the side of the road who had set up speed traps on 35 South in Missouri. He passed Bethany and remembered Allie. He had just been there this morning. Now, it was late in the afternoon.

As day turned into night, Tony got a phone call. He didn't recognize the number, but he was intrigued and in a risk-taking mood, so he picked up.

"Tony?" It was the voice of an elderly gentleman.

"Speaking."

"This is Robert Brown. From the antique chair store, out in Boston?"

Ah, Robert Brown, Tony thought to himself. Hadn't seen that guy in a few years now. He thought of Boston. So distant, but yet so close now. Everything seemed possible in this truck.

The trip to the antique store was unlike any other. For one thing, Tony had never traveled to New England. Most of his routes took him elsewhere. One time, he had been up to Albany, but that was the closest he got. And not only was he going to be able to see New England, he was going to see Boston, too.

When he had finally got to the shop, he had unloaded the furniture by himself, and with much care. This was to Robert Brown's chagrin; he had never seen a trucker do it himself, let alone handle his precious objects with such attention. He had insisted that he should do it, for insurance reasons.

"Now, now," Tony scolded, "You ever hear about respecting your elders? Well I'm respecting you right now, mister. By not respecting what you're saying."

The two of them chuckled. Often, in these interactions, you could just do the unloading, talk about the weather, wish each other luck, and get on with your lives. Not with these two. That simple joke led to much more.

"Where are you heading off to next?" Robert had asked.

"Back home. Outside Dallas."

"Ah, I see. Are you making another stop or just taking that thing back empty?"

"Empty, unfortunately," Tony frowned, before chirping up, "but at least I'm going home."

"Yes, I'll say!" Robert exclaimed, and then realizing that his exclamation was a bit out of place, tried to think of something else to say. Tony sensed solitude in his excitement; not a pure solitude, but the kind of solitude that forces one to be excited when meeting a stranger, not just the kind of stranger who came to your store to look at what kinds of objects you could provide for their lives of luxury.

"Say," Robert started up, squinting at Tony threw his coke-bottle glasses, patting his

white hairs down on his head, “why don’t you take a look around the store. Grab yourself an antique, so you can remember Boston.”

Tony was shocked. Who was this diminutive old man, offering him these expensive objects he would never even dream of purchasing?

“Oh, no I can’t. It’s kind of you, but it’s against protocol. And besides that...I just can’t-”

“But no one will know,” Robert begged, grabbing Tony’s arm, “Please. It’s a favor for me.”

Tony sighed. He was honored at the kind gesture, but he didn’t understand where it was coming from. But as they went around the store, he began to understand. Robert explained the historical significance behind many objects, both great and small. One chair was from the civil war era. Another was the favorite of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

“I love these antiques,” Robert hissed. “They are not objects; life has been breathed into the wood. You have to look at them differently. I love collecting for the sake of collecting. For re-living that life in the antique. To look at it and say that this thing here was tied to something. But these people who come here, they buy them from me to show their friends. To tell a story. They don’t breathe in that life.”

Robert looked at Tony pleadingly as if hoping that he might understand. Tony did understand, and Robert smiled. That’s when an elderly lady walked in. She had been watching them all along, Tony realized.

“This is my wife Susanne.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Tony said, kissing her hand. She blushed and laughed. Tony could see that she was a beauty in her day, despite her heaviness and thick graying head of hairs.

“I’ve never met a real cowboy before.”

She had fired back with her own sense of humor, and her own intelligence, detecting that Tony had a distinct Texan accent. Tony had always thought that people from the northeast were dumb and ignorant for assuming people like him were dumb and ignorant. He figured, heck I’ve got this accent, they probably think I’m just one of those people from out there in one of those places you fly over to get to the other coast. He was wrong, at least with Robert and Susanne.

“I think you’ll like this,” she said, stepping aside so Tony could see a small rocking chair. It would be perfect for Allie, and it was small enough that he could easily fit it into the truck. Also, it seemed to be of lesser value than the other antiques, so he would feel less guilty about having it.

“That’s perfect,” Tony mouthed slowly. “How’d you know I’d want that thing?”

“You look like the kind of guy who has a daughter,” she said knowingly. Tony smiled, affirming her prophecy. Robert smugly rubbed his hands together, watching the scene with joy.

Tony ended up staying the whole afternoon at the store. Robert closed the store in the middle of the day so that no one would interrupt them. It was as if they had never had a real visitor before who wanted to talk to them; just people who had meandered in and out of their lives. Maybe they assumed that Tony was like them: someone who meandered in and out of every state, meeting people he would never see again. Maybe, he was thirsty like them for companionship.

Over coffee, Tony exchanged his pictures of Marie and Allie with Robert and Susanne’s pictures of their seven grandchildren. They seemed to come from all different walks of life. Tony vigorously complimented each one, making Susanne blush, and Robert glow. He noted how overwhelmed they seem by his compliments, so he consciously persisted, trying to thank them for their arbitrary hospitality in any way possible.

“When you have grandchildren someday, you’ll realize how fun this picture-sharing activity is,” Susanne laughed.

“I think I already know,” Tony said, taking the picture back of Allie from Susanne and holding it in the air. They looked at each other, and Tony felt a bond. Not an amorous bond, not the kind of bond where an older woman lusts for the cowboy she always saw in the movies. It seemed to Tony more like a quiet understanding that the three of them were so lonely, not for lack of interaction with others, but for lack of consistency. Yes, Susanne and Robert had each other. But their grandchildren were always so far away, and the one consistent thing they had left was an antique store infested by customers who preyed upon their valuables to show off to their wealthy friends.

“It’s nice to meet a stranger like yourself. It warms the heart to think of all the people you meet, how you may never achieve something. But then it amplifies moments like this, a true act of kindness. You’ve been such a sport, giving us old folks your time, Tony. It makes you wonder about all the people out there you’ll never meet. It’s almost sad.”

Tony was embarrassed. The scene had become utterly sentimental. He had appreciated it, but it hadn’t been voiced outright. He did what he thought was best, and offered to exchange contact information. That way, if he was ever back in Boston, he would see them again. For the next few years, they used these addresses to exchange Christmas cards.

Before he left, Tony had one question.

“What’s the story behind the chair I’m getting? Allie will want to know.”

Robert swiftly answered.

“The Pilgrims brought it over in the 17th century. The children were scared of the new world, so they brought a few of these.”

Tony was impressed. Robert wasn’t going to tell him the next part of the story because he didn’t want Tony to feel guilty; Susanne told it instead, albeit without the intention to mean any harm.

“It’s the most expensive item in our store. We’re glad you’ve taken it off our hands.”

As Tony stared at the dark road ahead, he took a deep breath and answered.

“Mr. Brown. Pleasure to hear your voice again after all these years.”

But there was something else. A difference in his tone. An emotionless eagerness.

“Yes, yes, likewise. I actually have a favor to ask you.”

“A favor, for you? Of course! What’s it gonna be?”

Robert inhaled and exhaled slowly a couple of times. Tony waited.

“Susanne...she is very sick. Cancer. She has been battling with it for awhile. Hence no Christmas card this year.”

Tony’s heart dropped into his stomach. The Browns may not have been his closest friends, and indeed, he had not seen them in years. But his interaction with them was poignant; he viewed them as displaced parental figures. He had always assumed he’d see them again in Boston. He imagined Susanne, once so full of life, now laying in a hospital bed.

“I am very sorry to hear that, sir. What’s the prognosis?”

“It’s not good, I’m afraid...” Robert’s voice trailed off. Tony tried to focus on the road. He realized he couldn’t, so he checked his rearview and pulled over to the side of the road.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Brown?”

“It’s very simple. If you could just send her a get well card, well, I have this uncanny feeling that it would help her so much. She thinks the world of you. We both do. We often think

of where you are on the road. In fact, we often try to predict it! We make a game of it sometimes. And sometimes, we think we may even call you, but we never have, for we would never want to bother you..."

"Bother me?!" Tony was suddenly angry. Not at Robert, but at something. "You guys would never bother me! I'd love it if you guys called me, you hear? You guys are a dime a dozen! I only have a few stories of people like you. The rest...they're just floozies, you hear? I'm always out there, whoever I meet, they don't give a rat's fuck about me, I'm just some truck driver on the road and uh..."

Tony was trailing off now. He was crying. Loudly. Into the phone. He was angry for yelling. He was breaking down; he hadn't known how much something like this could affect him. He had never really dealt with death before, except for his parents dying. Somehow, this seemed worse. Unexpected. Unwarranted.

"I see," Robert said solemnly. Tony started to say "I'm sorry," but was immediately cut off by Robert.

"It's okay. I think I get it. And that means a lot to me...and Susanne. But can you take this address? And send her a note? I really think hearing from you will put the biggest smile on her face."

"Of course. It's the first damned thing I'll do when I get back," Tony said determinedly. "You give me a phone number, and I'll call that hospital and get her on the line, too."

Tony scrounged around his truck for a pen and paper. When he was ready, he took the address. It was the same one he already had, so Tony reminded Robert that he had kept the one he gave him years ago. He apologized again to Robert for his outburst and for Susanne's situation. Robert re-iterated that it was okay. And then Tony said something he thought he'd never say to a stranger.

"I've missed you guys. You guys were a class act, let me tell you."

He sensed that he had regained Robert's faith when he said, "We've missed you too," and they hung up the phone in unison.

Tony got back on the road with a sense of purpose. He was no longer just driving himself home to see his family. He was now in a hurry to send off a letter to Boston. He reminded himself that Boston had the best healthcare in the country. He imagined his letter arriving in Robert's mailbox; the old man would be excited to receive the letter, and he'd close his store and rush off to the hospital. He imagined Robert sitting by Susanne's bedside, reading the letter to her, a faint smile coming to her face. Tony put himself in the hospital room. He'd be holding her hand, looking at the way the sunlight filtered through the blinds and danced across the room. Slowly, he'd feel her regaining life, and he'd finally understand the feeling that opposed that timelessness he had always been feeling: the sense that we were all slowly moving forward, to get somewhere, for something.

Determined to get home, Tony promised himself to make no more stops. It was already 2 AM, but he was into Kansas now. If he kept going at his pace, he would make it back by the late morning, probably.

Everything seemed insignificant now. His return to his family even was trivial. He felt selfish for caring so much about it. He felt selfish for not making more of an effort to reach out to the Browns all these years. What had preoccupied him out on the road? Nothing. Yes, he'd had his Donnie's and his Roy's and Stevie's and Allen's, but the rest of them, for the most part, were those puzzle pieces he had always ruminated over. He had always wanted to make them fit together, those puzzle pieces; he had wanted to get to know and like everybody. But it seemed

like it was people few and far between who wanted to get to know him back.

As he neared Wichita, Tony got on the CB, hopeful to hear Roy or Stevie or Allen. They had said they were heading that way. But it was wishful thinking. They were gone by now. All he got was some random others, talking about road conditions or some such things.

As was routine, he flipped to Donnie's station. To his surprise, Donnie was on the air. He thought about trying to flag him down. After all, hadn't he just learned to try and maintain these friendships? But no; he would do it next time. There were more important things to take care of.

Tony relaxed and tried to use the voice of an old friend to soothe his fears.

"Well, it's a late night here in Shocker country, but it's never too late for change. That's right. I'm making a toast."

Tony turned up the dial, looking straight at the dotted lines ahead, one leading to the next, and to the next, and so on, all the way to Dallas.

"So, here's to you, Beth Ann at the diner down the street, for always giving me free coffee. Here's to you, Roger at the convenience store for selling me those cigarettes and telling me horror stories about being a teenager. Gotta love those. Here's to you, people who call in and tell me how much you like the show. Here's to my family, the people I love the most in the world. Here's to late nights you never remember, and here's to the friends who will always be there to talk about the story. Here's to you, Sunday, for providing me a radio-free day during the fall and winter where all I have to do is watch football. But most of all, here's to you Tony, the truck driver from Dallas- "

"That's me!!" Tony screamed, inadvertently swerving halfway into the next lane, causing a car behind him to pound on its horn and speed away in the fast lane.

"Yes, here's to you, friend. If you're listening, then listen close: this one's for you."

Tony could barely focus on the road. He was craning his neck toward the radio while trying to maintain some kind of attention to his surroundings. He noticed that, unlike in other songs you hear on the radio, he could still hear the studio noise as Sammy Hagar's "I Can't Go 55" came on.

It was a swiveling chair; a pounding noise on a desk; a rush of pattering footsteps; the opening of a door; and a muffled yell of ecstatic joy as the door slammed shut.