

# THE WAY OF HIS

By Justin Mezzapelli

It's not until he pulls over and gets out to empty his bladder that he notices the view for the first time. A grassy quilt stitching shades of green rolls out onto the horizon in every direction, glowing as though dipped in honey. Distant trees scatter in pockets like verdant clouds pulled from the empty sky. They offer little refuges of shade. Everything out here has occurred naturally and without a single sign of human intervention, except for the road which slices through it all, a pale grey line he traces on his way to where he needs to be. This paved route, no less familiar than his own reflection, runs long, single-laned, never cracked. And yet the young man begins to wonder distractedly why he hadn't paid much attention before. He now consumes the landscape with wandering eyes, his body warm under a midday sun, while his stream, lasting longer than expected, soaks the dusty gravel fringe.

When a gentle breeze rustles the thick green blades, curving them toward the field, strands of dark hair fall across his brow. They are tucked behind an ear. *Stop touching your hair. Don't look at his neck like that. You just slid up your sleeves and now you're pulling them back down again? Enough.* He will say these things to himself later. But thoughts such as these are no match for his well-trained exterior, no match at all, because it's his mouth and tongue that run them down. They will obliterate an uneasy interiority, spinning like thread, a very different story. Together, the tongue tapping and pressing convincingly against all the right places inside the mouth, together they tell without fail the story everyone expects to hear. It's one of control, of an unshakable sense of knowing, of poise, magnificence delivered continually by a fixture of the community who comes along for those others, whose hungry eyes he stares into so longingly, if briefly, secretly wanting more but giving less. Here he is: a young man in his prime; beautiful, and with all the right parts. How grand it is to see him. How glorious it is to be near him. Yes, listen to the spectacular young man, and watch him, for his mind is tamed and his body is an offering and that is all you could ever need. So lap it up and drink it down before he leaves again. He will always leave

again, grinning, grinning because clutched behind those curled lips hides that slippery deceiver. The tongue, he thinks to himself now, what a gorgeous little liar.

The acrid odour of urine reaches him. He looks at the darkened ground, where the last of it shines, pooled and dirty, until absorbed into a damp blot. For a moment he is struck by a disappointingly unrelieved feeling. As though far less had come out, a certain pressure lingers at his pelvis, a balloon not quite deflated. He waits a few unchanging moments, then zips.

But he does not return to his car.

Wandering barefoot in the field many minutes later, he puts distance between himself and the car, the road, the world. It's quiet. He trods lighter on his feet. Since stepping in here among the valley of reeds, not a single defiant thought has interrupted a steady flow of calmness that courses through his nerves. There is, for once, no dialogue running inside him to be eradicated. Like the shedding of skin, the clearing of clutter, a void has unfurled and he does not fill it with dangerous rumination. Genuine composure suddenly doesn't seem so elusive. This is peculiar, even somewhat unsettling, but the sensation cannot be overcome, only yielded to. So the young man presses forward, face to the horizon, and does not see his car behind him become a shrinking dot in the distance. The pair of rejected shoes next to it wait neatly side by side on the gravel as they might inside a front doorway.

Soon he has stopped at a solitary oak tree, its lush canopy stretching wide overhead. Beneath the shade he welcomes the soothing coolness. A newly shaven chest, visible where three ivory buttons on a linen shirt are left undone, rises and falls without haste or tension as he circles the coiling trunk, head bent upward. The warmth of the earth seeps into his exposed soles, while soft grass passing at mid-calf tugs gently on leg hair. He pauses beneath a low branch that bends down like an elbow. Gingerly, his hand rises over the curve, slides up the arm, a bicep of bark. His fingertips tickle sensitively, crawling like a silent insect over rugged skin, filling grooves, tracing folds. He's glad to be alone.

Had he not been nearly motionless, he would have missed the vibration underfoot. He wouldn't have lowered his arm and twisted around to catch the dark, hulking figure thudding its way toward him. A pair of eyes squint with suspicion at this stain on the horizon which grows steadily, rapidly, ablaze in sunlight.

He has grabbed the branch and yanked himself up into the oak when it shudders to its core under the blow. As if endowed with the claws of a cat, white-knuckled hands have brought him high up into its limbs. He's wrapped himself around the trunk, gripped between two thick branches. Feet, bare and tender, wedge into gnawing crevices. The now dampened shirt sticks to a quivering back. A heart knocks against a rib cage. Knots of hair fall loosely around both ears. If his eyes were open he might witness the horns, the muscles bulging enormously below him. He might see the leaves plunge in spinning showers toward the grass, then lay trampled by a set of unflinching hooves. If all his senses were active he'd likely notice the symphony of deranged bovine snorts and exhales. He just might catch the sweet air turning sour. Instead, he perceives nothing but the relentless pounding against the tree. No, against his body, the one that's not accustomed to violence on the outside. Perhaps there should be bursts of screams, but strained behind a clenched jaw, his vocal chords utter no sound, not a whimper. He stays completely rigid as the oak suffers collisions with a bowed head that hits, recedes for several moments, and then returns in thunderous fury, endlessly. Stuck above the barbarity, trying and failing to comprehend how this could be happening, he cannot bring himself to separate his eyelids. He surrenders to it all.

Two, three, maybe four hours pass while he expands beyond the limits of his body, beyond the very laws of nature, as the thing below remains intent on something brutal. It urges patience, demands compliance. And somewhere in the slick darkness of his mind, the young man begins, relieved at last, to reach a state of boredom.

But his eyes open in time to watch the skull crack, the neck snap, the body nearly flatten against the trunk until recoiled backwards, spilling onto wasted grass in a lifeless heap of flesh, fur, and bone. All is still. He stares at it, immobile. Except for his own panting, nothing makes a sound. He eventually descends the limbs no longer thinking about arms or skin or bodies. Both feet return unsteadily to the earth. After pausing only a moment with the defeated mass detained in his periphery, he dashes away.

He runs on sore joints through the grass, never seeing the butchered trunk, split and bleeding. He does not see the chipped white horn sticking out of the wreckage like a flag. At the noxious odour of gore, his nose will not crease, his mouth will not twist. Flies have arrived and they land on all different places across the bristly body, crawling, twitching, buzzing. This too goes unobserved. Distance swells easily between

him and the fatal scene as he tells himself there's nothing left, it's over. He reaches his shoes and with one final look as he slips them on sees the grey clouds working their way across the sky.

Thrust into his seat, he jams in the key. On the passenger seat his phone blinks with a new message. Two hours and fourteen minutes ago:

*Have to cancel tonight - sorry!*

The car spins around and departs through dust clouds in the direction it came. He lets a long thread of air depart his nostrils and, although trying to stop it from coming, the contents of his stomach begin their protest within the bath of acids. They tasted different, the words. They're still with him of course, every one of them, as if the muscles inside his mouth provoke each syllable despite having escaped them, their bitterness. Despite the new absence of one vital part. He now swallows, ashamed, a gulp of nothing. It continues to rise like a snake from the gut. As he clung blindly to the trunk, something limp and strange sliding down his throat, the most persistent thought to scramble through his head and scratch at his insides told him, with alarm: *you'll tell it wrong you'll tell it wrong you'll tell it wrong...*

He once again yanks the car over, steps out, sinks to both knees, and wetly coughs up onto the gravel his mangled little liar, not at all deceitful nor gorgeous where it lay exposed among his breakfast already reducing to compost.



