

BLUE WINNETKA SKIES

An excerpt from the novel
By Ron MacLean

They drove through the night, following Interstate 10 across the border into California. The Winnebago moved gracefully and they kept the speed down, stopping only occasionally to add some food item to their stockpile – something one or the other of them decided, as soon as they thought of it, that they couldn't live without.

“Tapioca pudding,” he'd say. “Those little plastic cups.” And they'd visit supermarkets, combing aisles of as many stores as it took until they'd find it. This was their job. To take care of each other. To keep darkness from closing in.

Cole stretched. He watched the highway slide by through his own pale reflection in the windshield. Deep-set green eyes. Soft mouth.

“Let's sing cowboy songs,” Joanna said. She sat behind the huge steering wheel with a kind of glee.

A canopy of stars stretched above them. The road to Blythe spread straight to the horizon. It hadn't rained in days, felt like it would never rain again.

“I don't know any cowboy songs,” he said. “Do you know any cowboy songs?”

He couldn't remember when he'd slept last. It seemed important that they keep moving. That they stay awake as long as they could. Fortify against the crash they both knew would come.

Joanna scooped forward on the seat. Sipped from a bottle of Coke. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure.”

They’d bought those flexible straws that bend at the top. She had one with a red stripe.

“The only one I know I know is ‘Don’t Fence Me In.’” She hummed three or four notes. “At least I think it’s a cowboy song. The only version I know is by Frank Sinatra.” She had small, strong hands.

Cole made his lips into a thin line. He couldn’t decide if he looked rugged now, or if the dimness of his image in the glass simply allowed that illusion.

Joanna sang.

“It’s got this great horn arrangement. He recorded it during the war.”

Cole was happy to listen. To drift. Open his eyes occasionally on desert night. Wide open country.

Through the enormous windshield Joanna could see stars, make out the tops of foothills. She felt herself, the two of them, soaring above the desert. She felt twenty, though she knew she no longer looked it. Neither of them did. Traces of gray in hair. Faces faintly lined.

“World War Two, I think,” she said. “Does Sinatra go back that far?”

No wind. No clouds.

She sang.

She rubbed the back of her neck. Black hair, traces of faded magenta along with the gray. “But maybe it wasn’t Sinatra at all. You know how that happens sometimes? You make it a certain way in your head?”

Cole swiveled in his seat.

He wished the radio worked, although there was something nice about the quiet, the fact that it wasn't a choice, just something you had to accept, like a flat tire, or a flat Coke, or eight miles to the gallon. It gave their conversation room to float in and out, to surprise each other, to be pleased at the simple sound of a human voice.

She sang.

Cole raised and lowered the armrest. Delighting in the glorious convergence of movement and their cocoon-like world.

Refuge and protection, wherever they may go.

INTERLUDE

*“Oh give me land
lots of land
under starry skies above.
Don’t fence me in.”*

*“Let me roam
through the wide
open country that I love.
Don’t fence me in.”*

Postcard, Lordsburg, New Mexico.

Cole at the wheel. Two-lane highway. Dusty shoulder. Eyes darting from road to rearview mirror.

“What are you doing?” Joanna said.

Cole’s eyes riveted. “Panicking.”

She looked behind them. A police car framed in the rear windshield.

Cole turned right, past a Union 76 gas station. A quick left. Seeking the shelter of narrow streets. Tall buildings. Not in Lordsburg.

The police car paused at the gas station, turned down the road they were on.

“Shit,” he said.

“What do you expect,” she said. “You’re driving a Winnebago in erratic circles in a small New Mexico town.”

He looked at her. In the mirror. Back to the road. He began to feel dizzy.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Take a deep breath. Pretend you’re normal.”

He nodded his head.

Blue light flashed around them. Reflected off the windshield, the roof of the cab.

The police car closed on them.

Cole began to sweat. “Fuck. What now?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Joanna said. “Pull over.”

Cole hesitated. Even with dark glasses on, he squinted from the glare of sunlight. Two narrow lanes. A warehouse set back from the road. He eased the wheel to the right. Tapped the brake. The police car stopped behind them.

Joanna heard a door shut. She watched Cole's face. His shallow breathing. "You told me you'd done nothing illegal," she said.

He shot her a quick glance. "I never used the word illegal. I said I'd done nothing *wrong*."

"Good morning." The officer stood at the driver's side window. Sand-colored uniform. Silver nameplate. "License and registration, please." Thin mustache. Thick arms.

Joanna fished the registration from the glove box. Cole pulled out his wallet. Concentrated on not shaking.

"Is there a problem, officer?" Cole tried to keep hostility from his voice. The way police always make you feel like a child.

The officer took the documents. Blue light bounced around them.

"Wait here, please," he said. Walked back to the patrol car.

Cole leaned his head back against the seat.

"Is there something I should know about?" Joanna asked.

"The law isn't entirely clear," Cole said.

She rubbed her hair, greasy from days without washing. Rested one foot on the dash. Untied, then retied her shoelace. "You took it with you, didn't you?"

The road empty and quiet. Two blocks ahead, it ended in a T at a busier street where traffic flowed contentedly. They could see a ramp reaching up to the Interstate.

Cole didn't say a word.

Behind them, the car door shut.

"Boys and their penises," Joanna spat. "How fucked are we?"

Cole watched the mirror. “It’s hard to say.”

“Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle, Mr. Newton?” A squared-off stance. A refusal to look up at Cole.

Cole opened the door, stepped onto the road. The heat dizzying.

Joanna began to climb out.

“Wait there please, ma’am.”

Here we go, Cole thought. He had no idea how to behave in a showdown. He didn’t feel properly dressed. He faced the officer. Squinting. A ringing in his ears. Holding his breath without wanting to. He saw himself, twin reflections in the officer’s sunglasses. He lifted his chin.

“New registration,” the officer said. “You just buy this rig?” A man who liked his beer. A body still strong from high school football. Cole could feel the man’s eyes searching his face.

“Yeah.” Cole concentrated on not lowering his eyes. Not looking away. “We like to travel.”

“You know you have a brake light out?”

Was this breathing room, or a taunt? He’d never had much luck reading the intentions of law enforcement personnel. “No,” Cole said. “I didn’t.”

The officer nodded.

Cole impatient. A growing feeling of *if we’re going to have a crisis, let’s get on with it*. He imagined himself – the new Cole – lunging for the officer’s gun. Grab his nightstick and knock him cold.

“You’ll need to have that taken care of.”

“Thanks. I will.” He heard his voice waver. His knees felt weak. This was not the new Cole. He needed rehearsal.

In the cab of the Winnebago, Joanna started to hum a tune.

The officer stared at Cole. For a long moment, neither of them moved or spoke.

“You were a little wild back there. Everything okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

Slowly, the officer handed the documents to Cole. A moving violation on top.

“Alright. You take care now.”

A long exhale. Cole waited until the officer reached his patrol car, then melted slowly into the driver’s seat. “Fucker.”

“Nice and easy,” Joanna said. Cole handed her the registration. “All is well,” she said.

Cole eased the motor home back onto the road. The miles slipped behind them.

Interstate 10. The Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway.

Joanna did curls with a dumbbell they kept on the floor on the passenger side.

“So,” she said. “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Lack of sleep,” he said. “An inflated sense of my own importance in the world.”

“Yo,” she said. “This is me, remember?”

He shrugged. “Legally, it’s a gray area.” His eyes followed the broken white line that marked the lane. “It’ll be fine.”

“Look at me when you say that.”

He looked over at her and smiled.

“I did what I had to do. Remember?”

“No,” she said. “You had to leave. You didn’t have to steal the code.”

They moved west at sixty miles an hour.

“I didn’t steal it,” he said. “I created it. It’s mine.”

Let me be by myself in the evening breeze

Listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees

Send me off forever but I ask you please

Don't fence me in

They stopped at places they'd read about and wanted to see. The Natchez Trace, the Badlands, the Black Hills of South Dakota. They etched an erratic line across the country, gleaning edible treasures from small-town markets, choosing destinations based on the sound of a name – Hoxie Arkansas, Alamogordo New Mexico. They moved west not by design but by implicit consent, thinking of foods they wanted to gather, putting miles, vast sections of the country, between themselves and what lurked behind them. The midwest as a buffer zone.

“You haven't gotten any smarter with age.”

Joanna behind the wheel. East of Indio. The Mojave around them, all expanse and shadows.

Cole wore his sunglasses, despite the darkness. California made sense to him.

“What did you expect?” he said.

“Never mind.” Her right foot tingled, half asleep. She tapped it on the floor. Wiggled her toes. The Winnebago slowed noticeably. “I expected you might be smarter is all.”

She pressed the accelerator again. She had no use for automatic pilot.

“I thought it would be different out here,” Cole said.

“It is. Look around you.” Headlights cut a swath of road and dust. She could feel the hills in the distance. “Think like you're seeing it for the first time. Like it's only just been discovered.”

Cole pushed the sunglasses on top of his head. He craned his neck to see the broadest possible stretch of night sky. “I mean, I thought I'd *feel* different out here.”

“You will,” she said. “You’re tired is all.”

Their faces dim reflections on the windshield, imposed on the night desert.

“How about you,” he said. “Do you feel different?”

She fumbled in the tray between the seats. “I’ll tell you how I feel,” she said. “I feel like having a Mallo Cup.” Her fingers found one. She rearranged herself in the seat. Leaned forward. Shook away sleepiness.

He wondered if she hurt any less. She had a runaway teenage son. She had broken a heart in Pennsylvania. But Joanna was the queen of bob and weave. Joanna always knew the location of the nearest exit.

They passed a green highway sign. *Indio 46. Los Angeles 183.*

“Almost the end of the road,” he said.

She turned to scowl at him. Red-rimmed eyes. The sweet taste of chocolate and coconut. “Don’t be unpleasant,” she said. “I thought you were going to be different out here.”

He smiled. Spoke to her reflection. “I’m trying.”

Interstate 10 stretched straight west, as if it would never end.

“Try harder.” She pressed her foot on the accelerator. The Winnebago surged forward. “Have a Mallo Cup.”

*“I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences
gaze at the moon until I lose my senses
I don't like hobbles and I can't stand fences.
Don't fence me in.”*

They drove to the edge of the country and looked off.

Sunset Boulevard runs into Pacific Coast Highway just north of Santa Monica, and if you go straight across PCH you find yourself in a municipal parking lot, six rows of white lines painted on faded blacktop, and if you pull to the west edge of the parking lot you encounter a steel cable which, along with a narrow stretch of beach, is then all that stands between you and the Pacific Ocean.

Joanna nudged the Winnebago forward until its nose rested against the cable. Turned off the engine.

She stared out at the water. Breakers. White foam. The tang of salt in the air.

A man, white shorts, shirt open to the breeze, strolled the beach, sandals dangling from his fingers. The digital clock on the dashboard read 4:49 am.

“Here we are,” Cole grinned. “Panavision. The west. Where it all begins.”

Waves on the shore. Joanna felt cramped in the cab. “I need to stretch my legs,” she said. “Let’s walk.”

He opened his door. “I’ll catch up. I need to see a man about a horse.”

She walked on wet sand, just beyond the waterline. Smooth shore. No rocks. A weight in her forearms. An ache in the knees. The miles had taken a toll. She wanted Anthony to be two again, riding on her chest in a Snuggli while she combed Wells Beach for starfish, sea shells, called out the names as she lifted them from the sand – mussel, scallop. Placed his tiny fingers on the ridged surfaces so he could feel and remember. She wanted to be forgiven, then have the moment obliterated, so she didn’t have to live grateful.

Cole's footsteps behind her. "I just want you to know I've marked my territory."

She laughed, eyes on the horizon. "I'm happy for you."

He fell into step beside her.

"We're free, Jo. We're brand new." His tired eyes big as moons. "We have no history, no limitations. Who have you always wanted to be?" In the distance, a pier. The silhouette of hills. "I'm going to wear a black hat. A badass grin." His smile was a child's – exuberant, infectious. He didn't seem to notice she wasn't playing. "I'm going to saddle up and ride hard. Let the sun bake my skin, sleep under the stars. I will cotton no boundaries." He was all teeth and grin. "I'm going to ride to the ridge where the west commences. Gaze at the moon until I lose my senses. I'm going to learn what hobbles are and then I'm going to hate them."

"You believe we can do this?" she said. "Start over?"

"I do," he said. "You're living proof."

She stopped. Looked out at the ocean.

"What's wrong?"

Fading stars. A warm breeze. "He's out there somewhere." She stared, intent, as if she might see Anthony among the waves, floating.

Cole was not prepared for gravity. Not interested. He was all but on horseback. "Fuck," he said. "Not now." He hadn't meant to speak the thought, but there it was. He tried to think of something kind. He put his hand on her shoulder. "He's sixteen, Jo."

She pulled away. "He's my son."

Cole watched with her, the foam of waves, the incoming tide. A shape. He made it an arm. Anthony's arm. He tried to give the image flesh. So they could effect a rescue. So he could show her that she wouldn't. "You're here, Jo. No looking back."

A wet wind. Joanna felt salt against her face. "I carried him inside me," she said. "Still do. Always will."

Dawn edged the horizon. "That's other people, Jo. Not you. You can walk away from anything."

Water swirled at her feet. Seeped into her running shoes.

He hovered behind her, near enough that his shirt brushed against her back.

She could feel his breath on her neck, his words in her belly. She wrapped her arms around herself. Goose-pimpled.

They stood there. They did not move.

The sky slowly brightened. California coast stretched before them like possibility.