

The Ride
Psalm 23
John 10:22-30
May 2, 2004

The Rev. Scott Thomas

It was late afternoon before Leo got the last of the boxes unloaded at the frozen-food terminal in Dubuque and gunned the tractor-trailer onto Iowa Route 151, headed toward Cedar Rapids. He had had enough of the interstate for today, he decided. Seventy-five miles and he'd have the big rig back in its bay; five miles more and he'd be at home with a Rolling Rock in one hand and the remote in the other. The first of several Rolling Rocks, he admitted as much. Well, he drove hard all day; drinking hard seemed like poetic justice.

Had to watch for deer, though. You never knew when one would come leaping out of the scrubby brush ten feet from the road's edge. Or two - they seemed to travel in pairs. One panicky twist of the wheel and he could be in the ditch, or worse.

He was scanning the roadside, watching for movement, when a tiny figure appeared on the shoulder up ahead. Couldn't be a person, he thought. Not in this heat. But as he rumbled closer, he saw the figure more clearly - a boy maybe ten years old, in faded blue jeans and basketball sneakers and a ludicrous muscle shirt, not hitchhiking but looking balefully into the eyes of the drivers. Leo's eyes.

Why did he stop? Thinking it over that night, he tried to explain it to himself. Maybe the kid needed help. Maybe he was lost. He looked hot, and the A/C in the cab was cranked full blast. Or maybe, Leo conceded to himself, both of them were a little lost on that desolate stretch of highway. It wouldn't hurt to have someone to talk to.

The boy slung a little backpack into the cab, climbed in and shut the door. He smelled of parched earth, and his dirty hair was the color of cornstalks.

"Got any Co-Cola?"

Leo was taken aback. "Where are you heading?"

"Cedar Rapids, but I'm not picky about it. I'll go where you're going. I'm only going home."

Leo got the truck back up to cruising speed. "Put that seat belt on, huh? And yeah, there are some Cokes in that little cooler there. Help yourself."

The boy drained the can in three great gulps, then settled against the window and surrendered himself to the hypnotism of the passing farmland. The drone of the engine washed over him like an anesthetic. It was a feeling that Leo knew all too well - roadweariness, friend of the passenger but enemy of the driver. The boy's utter ease unsettled him. He was afraid of falling into that trap.

“Why are you out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“You sound like my mom,” the boy answered promptly.

“It just seemed like not much fun.”

“Uh-huh. But it’s quiet out here. It’s not quiet in Cedar Rapids. I got a ride from these people in a big black car, but they were turning off, so I got out back there. I been looking for rocks. I collect them - heart-shaped rocks.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why collect heart-shaped rocks?”

“They make me happy,” the boy said. “Like, there’s a million billion rocks in the world, right? But there’s only a few that *mean* something. Those are the ones I’m looking for.”

“What do they mean?” Leo asked. He wanted to know.

The boy paused. Leo could see a moment of indecision, a question of whether to trust. Behind his eyes, something shifted.

“Didn’t you ever get a valentine, mister? Heart means love. Lots of people throw rocks; I line ‘em up on my shelf. They make me happy.”

Leo was silent. Happiness was a concept he had pushed to the back of his mind for a long time now, since Carol died. They had been happy together, but it was something Leo never thought about while she was alive. Never once. But when he walked into that empty house after the funeral service, a house where the smell of her cologne still lingered in the closets and the kitchen bore the marks of her paintbrush, he felt the bottom of his stomach fall into oblivion. A cruel trick, he thought - he knew he had been happy only when the whole deal disappeared.

The blacktop shimmered dreamily with the rising heat. Snap out of it, he told himself. Push it back. You’re doing fine.

The boy was down on the floor of the passenger side, fooling around with his backpack, taking something out of it. He climbed back into the seat, his hands making a sphere around some secret.

“What’s that?”

“Promise you won’t throw me out?”

Leo grunted noncommittally, and the boy took it as a yes.

“It’s a chameleon. Look. I found him under a rock next to a falling-down barn. It was damp down there. They like it kind of wet, and there hasn’t been much rain. But he liked it down there.”

Leo looked at the little lizard peeking out between the boy's interlaced fingers. Its tail stuck out below, curled up like a cinnamon bun. The chameleon looked at him glassily.

"What does it eat?"

"Bugs, mostly. I read about them in this book I have about lizards. I saw him eat a fly."

"Well, I don't think I have any bugs in here." Leo thought for a moment. "There's a cheese sandwich in that cooler. Does he like cheese?"

"I dunno. Let me try." The boy got the sandwich, pinched off a speck of cheese the size of a thumbtack, and put it in front of the chameleon's nose. The chameleon gobbled it down.

"Cool." The boy got himself another Coke and ate the sandwich. He put the chameleon on the driver's log on the dashboard, and while the boy ate, the animal faded from bright green to the pale beige of a manila folder.

"He does that a lot," the boy said. "Changes color, I mean. It's so birds won't eat him. It's like he's part of whatever he's sitting on. It's like he disappears."

Despite himself, Leo was intrigued. "Why doesn't he just run away from the birds?" "He's so small," the boy said, "and the birds are so big, and they watch from the sky. He needs to hide. He's afraid."

"But what if the bird eats plants?"

The boy frowned. "Birds don't eat plants," he said pointedly. "He's safe. He disappears."

Leo let it drop. There was a sullen edge to the boy's voice. They traveled in silence toward the sinking sun, already turning orange across the Great Plains. The odometer rolled up the miles, a trucker's time clock ticking away.

"Where's the farthest you ever drove?" the boy said out of a dead silence. Leo had thought he was asleep.

"I've driven out west some. California. Nevada. I went through Death Valley once."

"What's that?"

"This big canyon, like nothing here in Iowa. It's all desert, big rock formations, mountains all around. You get down in there and it's like being in a closet with your furnace. A hundred and thirty degrees sometimes."

“Why’s it called Death Valley?”

“Well, you were out there walking around in ninety degrees. How long do you figure you could do that for?”

“I dunno.”

“Not forever. You need water; you need an idea of where you’re going. If you’re all alone, you’re not going to make it. In Death Valley, that’s it times a hundred. People get lost there and never come back. When they find them, it’s just nice white bones.”
Immediately he regretted saying it.

“Jeez.” A pause. “Did you get lost?”

“I had a map and a compass and water and a cell phone. I needed to get back home. I called my wife right in the middle of it.”

“Were you afraid?”

Leo considered. “It’s an evil place, but I wasn’t afraid. I knew I could count on myself, count on this truck, to get me out of there.”

The boy thought about that. The landscape kept passing by. On the dashboard, the chameleon was lying in the sun. You could hardly see it against the manila folder.

“I have to pee.”

Leo sighed. That was always the way it was with kids. Or so he had heard; never had any of his own.

“Can’t you wait? We’re not that far from Cedar Rapids.”

“I have to pee *now*.”

Leo negotiated the big rig onto the shoulder but left it running. The sun was low, and he hated driving in the dark. The boy opened the door, climbed down, trotted toward a little rise and disappeared behind it.

“Hurry it up,” Leo said, only half out loud.

A minute passed. Two. Three. Five. “C’mon,” Leo thought. “Let’s go, kid.”

Still no boy.

Leo turned off the ignition and stepped out. It felt good to stretch his legs, his back. Driving takes a toll.

He climbed up over the rise and saw the boy a hundred yards farther on, crouched, not moving. Leo walked briskly toward him, half in exasperation and half in worry.

When they were in whispering distance, the boy looked back. “Shhhhhhhhhh!” he said.

Leo slowed down, stepped gingerly. He got to the boy’s side and the boy pointed. Not ten feet away, in magnificent profile, was a ring-necked pheasant the size of a basketball. Leo looked at it. The bird was kind of strutting, bobbing its head the way birds do. A shock of white made a circle around its throat. There was a splash of red on its face. Heart-shaped red.

“I saw him come out of those trees there,” the boy whispered. “I followed him.”

There was an old stump; Leo sat. The boy knelt on the matted grass beside him. They watched the pheasant for a while, framed in the hot oranges and reds of the setting sun. Leo couldn’t take his eyes off the bird. In the parched earth tones of this godforsaken field, here was a creature with colors as bright as a construction cone. He went back to the truck and got them some Cokes, and they sat and drank them and watched some more.

When they got to where the boy needed to go, the daylight was just starting to give way to starlight. The boy lived at the far end of a long dirt driveway. Leo stopped the truck on the road.

“Thanks for those Co-Colas.” The boy gathered up his backpack.

“You got that lizard?” He did. “You going to be OK?”

The boy had his feet on the ground. “I was gonna ask you the same thing.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Leo. “Fine.”

The boy started down the driveway.

Leo wrestled the double-clutch into gear, and the rig edged into motion. He was three houses down when he looked in the rearview in spite of himself. The boy had come back to the road and was watching the truck pull away. His hands were cupped in front of him, holding the chameleon with the gentleness of a father. His face was a question. His eyes seemed far away.

Amen.