

## Car Crash While Hitchhiking

By Denis Johnson

A salesman who shared his liquor and steered while sleeping... A Cherokee filled with bourbon... A VW no more than a bubble of hashish fumes, captained by a college student...

And a family from Marshalltown who head-onned and killed forever a man driving west out of Bethany, Missouri...

...I rose up sopping wet from sleeping under the pouring rain, and something less than conscious, thanks to the first three of the people I've already named—the salesman and the Indian and the student—all of whom had given me drugs. At the head of the entrance ramp I waited without hope of a ride. What was the point, even, of rolling up my sleeping bag when I was too wet to be let into anybody's car? I draped it around me like a cape. The downpour raked the asphalt and gurgled in the ruts. My thoughts zoomed pitifully. The travelling salesman had fed me pills that made the linings of my veins feel scraped out. My jaw ached. I knew every raindrop by its name. I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it glowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we'd have an accident in the storm.

I didn't care. They said they'd take me all the way.

The man and the wife put the little girl up front with them and left the baby in back with me and my dripping bedroll. "I'm not taking you anywhere very fast," the man said. "I've got my wife and babies here, that's why."

You are the ones, I thought. And I piled my sleeping bag against the left-hand door and slept across it, not caring whether I lived or died. The baby slept free on the seat beside me. He was about nine months old.

...But before any of this, that afternoon, the salesman and I had swept down into Kansas City in his luxury car. We'd developed a dangerous cynical camaraderie beginning in Texas, where he'd taken me on. We ate up his bottle of amphetamines, and every so often we pulled off the Interstate and bought another pint of Canadian Club and a sack of ice. His car had cylindrical glass holders attached to either door and a white, leathery interior. He said he'd take me home to stay overnight with his family, but first he wanted to stop and see a woman he knew.

Under Midwestern clouds like great grey brains we left the superhighway with a drifting sensation and entered Kansas City's rush hour with a sensation of running aground. As soon as we slowed down, all the magic of travelling together burned away. He went on and on about his girlfriend. "I like this girl, I think I love this girl—but I've got two kids and a wife, and there's certain obligations there. And on top of everything else, I love my wife. I'm gifted with love. I love my kids. I love all my relatives." As he kept on, I felt jilted and sad: "I have a boat, a little sixteen-footer. I have two cars. There's room in the back yard for a swimming pool." He found his girlfriend at work. She ran a furniture store, and I lost him there.

The clouds stayed the same until night. Then, in the dark, I didn't see the storm gathering. The driver of the Volkswagen, a college man, the one who stoked my head with all the hashish, let me out beyond the city limits just as it began to rain. Never mind the speed I'd been taking, I was too overcome to stand up. I lay out in the grass off the exit ramp and woke in the middle of a puddle that had filled up around me.

And later, as I've said, I slept in the back seat while the Oldsmobile—the family from Marshalltown—splashed along through the rain. And yet I dreamed I was looking right through my eyelids, and my pulse marked off the seconds of time. The Interstate through western Missouri was, in that era, nothing more than a two-way road, most of it. When a semi truck came toward us and passed going the other way, we were lost in a blinding spray and a warfare of noises such as you get being towed through an automatic car wash. The wipers stood up and lay down across the windshield without much effect. I was exhausted, and after an hour I slept more deeply.

I'd known all along exactly what was going to happen. But the man and his wife woke me up later, denying it viciously.

"Oh—no!"

"NO!"

I was thrown against the back of their seat so hard that it broke. I commenced bouncing back and forth. A liquid which I knew right away was human blood flew around the car and rained down on my head. When it was over I was in the back seat again, just as I had been. I rose up and looked around. Our headlights had gone out. The radiator was hissing steadily. Beyond that, I didn't hear a thing. As far as I could tell, I was the only one conscious. As my eyes adjusted I saw that the baby was lying on its back beside me as if nothing had happened. Its eyes were open and it was feeling its cheeks with its little hands.

In a minute the driver, who'd been slumped over the wheel, sat up and peered at us. His face was smashed and dark with blood. It made my teeth hurt to look at him—but when he spoke, it didn't sound as if any of his teeth were broken.

"What happened?"

"We had a wreck," he said.

"The baby's okay," I said, although I had no idea how the baby was.

He turned to his wife.

"Janice," he said. "Janice, Janice!"

"Is she okay?"

"She's dead!" he said, shaking her angrily.

"No, she's not." I was ready to deny everything myself now.

Their little girl was alive, but knocked out. She whimpered in her sleep. But the man went on shaking his wife.

"Janice!" he hollered.

His wife moaned.

"She's not dead," I said, clambering from the car and running away.

"She won't wake up," I heard him say.

I was standing out here in the night, with the baby, for some reason, in my arms. It must have still been raining, but I remember nothing about the weather. We'd collided with another car on what I now perceived was a two-lane bridge. The water beneath us was invisible in the dark.

Moving toward the other car I began to hear rasping, metallic snores. Somebody was flung halfway out the passenger door, which was open, in the posture of one hanging from a trapeze by his ankles. The car had been broadsided, smashed so flat that no room was left inside it even for this person's legs, to say nothing of a driver or any other passengers. I just walked right on past.

Headlights were coming from far off. I made for the head of the bridge, waving them to a stop with one arm and clutching the baby to my shoulder with the other.

It was a big semi, grinding its gears as it decelerated. The driver rolled down his window and I shouted up at him, "There's a wreck. Go for help."

"I can't turn around here," he said.

He let me and the baby up on the passenger side, and we just sat there in the cab, looking at the wreckage in his headlights.

"Is everybody dead?" he asked.

"I can't tell who is and who isn't," I admitted.

He poured himself a cup of coffee from a thermos and switched off all but his parking lights.

"What time is it?"

"Oh, it's around quarter after three," he said.

By his manner he seemed to endorse the idea of not doing anything about this. I was relieved and tearful. I'd thought something was required of me, but I hadn't wanted to find out what it was.

When another car showed coming in the opposite direction, I thought I should talk to them. "Can you keep the baby?" I asked the truck driver.

"You'd better hang on to him," the driver said. "It's a boy, isn't it?"

"Well, I think so," I said.

The man hanging out of the wrecked car was still alive as I passed, and I stopped, grown a little more used to the idea now of how really badly broken he was, and made sure there was nothing I could do. He was snoring loudly and rudely. His blood bubbled out of his mouth with every breath. He wouldn't be taking many more. I knew that, but he didn't, and therefore I looked down into the great pity of a person's life on this earth. I don't mean that we all end up dead, that's not the great pity. I mean that he couldn't tell me what he was dreaming, and I couldn't tell him what was real.

Before too long there were cars backed up for a ways at either end of the bridge, and headlights giving a night-game atmosphere to the steaming rubble, and ambulances and cop cars nudging through so that the air pulsed with color. I didn't talk to anyone. My secret was that in this short while I had gone from being the president of this tragedy to being a faceless onlooker at a gory wreck. At some point an officer learned that I was one of the passengers, and took my statement. I don't remember any of this, except that he told me, "Put out your cigarette." We paused in our conversation to watch the dying man being loaded into the ambulance. He was still alive, still dreaming obscenely. The blood ran off him in strings. His knees jerked and his head rattled.

There was nothing wrong with me, and I hadn't seen anything, but the policeman had to question me and take me to the hospital anyway. The word came over his car radio that the man was now dead, just as we came under the awning of the emergency-room entrance.

I stood in a tiled corridor with my wet sleeping bag bunched against the wall beside me, talking to a man from the local funeral home.

The doctor stopped to tell me I'd better have an X-ray.

"No."

"Now would be the time. If something turns up later ..."

"There's nothing wrong with me."

Down the hall came the wife. She was glorious, burning. She didn't know yet that her husband was dead. We knew. That's what gave her such power over us. The doctor took her into a room with a desk at the end of the hall, and from under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated in there. What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere.

"There's nothing wrong with me"—I'm surprised I let those words out. But it's always been my tendency to lie to doctors, as if good health consisted only of the ability to fool them.

Some years later, one time when I was admitted to the Detox at Seattle General Hospital, I took the same tack.

"Are you hearing unusual sounds or voices?" the doctor asked.

"Help us, oh God, it hurts," the boxes of cotton screamed.

"Not exactly," I said.

"Not exactly," he said. "Now, what does that mean."

"I'm not ready to go into all that," I said. A yellow bird fluttered close to my face, and my muscles grabbed. Now I was flopping like a fish. When I squeezed shut my eyes, hot tears exploded from the sockets. When I opened them, I was on my stomach.

"How did the room get so white?" I asked.

A beautiful nurse was touching my skin. "These are vitamins," she said, and drove the needle in.

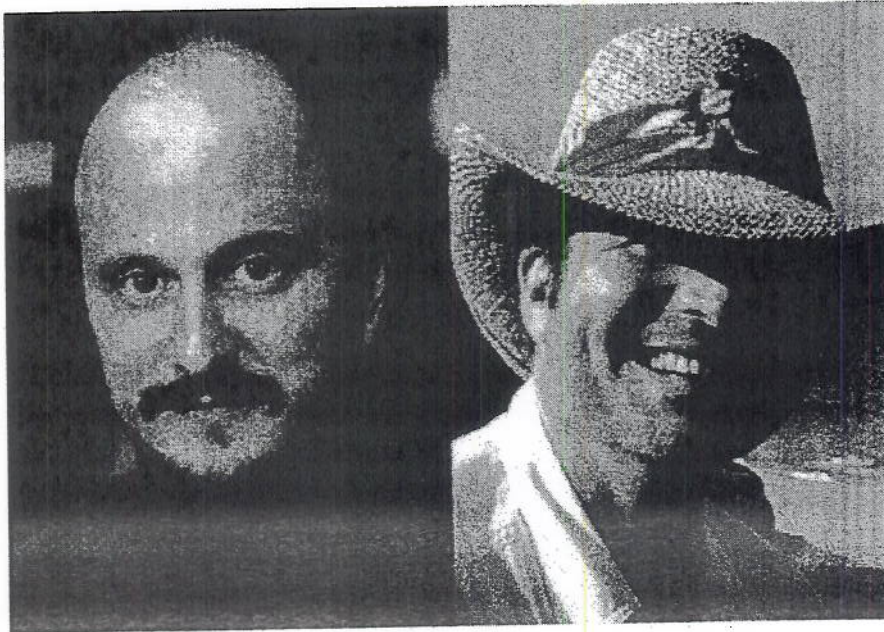
It was raining. Gigantic ferns leaned over us. The forest drifted down a hill. I could hear a creek rushing down among rocks. And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you.

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# Eugenides on Denis Johnson: "Blistering, brilliant"

**The Pulitzer Prize winner says the author of "Jesus' Son" is a master of short stories with maximum plot and energy**

BY JEFFREY EUGENIDES



Jeffrey Eugenides and Denis Johnson

*Excerpted from "Object Lessons: The Paris Review Presents the Art of the Short Story," edited by the Paris Review.*

A short story must be, by definition, short. That's the trouble with short stories. That's why they're so difficult to write.

How do you keep a narrative brief and still have it function as a story? Compared to writing novels, writing short fiction is mainly a question of knowing what to leave out. What you leave in must imply everything that's missing.

If you'd like to learn how to do this, you'd be well advised to study Denis Johnson's blisteringly acute "Car

Crash While Hitchhiking." In this story — and indeed, in all of the stories in Johnson's brilliant collection, "Jesus' Son" — Johnson found a way to leave out the maximum in terms of plot, setting, characterization, and authorial explanation while finding a voice that suggested all these things, a voice whose brokenness is the reason behind the narrative deprivation, and therefore a kind of explanation itself.

The first two paragraphs of the story divulge the entirety of its action: "A salesman who shared his liquor and steered while sleeping ... A Cherokee filled with bourbon ... A VW no more than a bubble of hashish fumes, captained by a college student ... And a family from Marshalltown who headonned and killed forever a man driving west out of Bethany, Missouri ..." This appears to be a straightforward recounting of events except for that one word: forever. What "killed forever" means isn't entirely clear. It's a strange thing to say, as if it were possible for a person to be killed temporarily. Soon, other unusual statements appear. "The travelling salesman had fed me pills that made the linings of my veins feel scraped out. My jaw ached. I knew every raindrop by its name. I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside of it I knew we'd have an accident in the storm."

And then comes the kicker: "I didn't care."

We are, at this point, about 20 lines into the story, and the ground has fallen away beneath us. Who is this guy (identified, elsewhere in the collection, only as "Fuckhead")? What has happened to get him in this altered state? Why is he capable of making vatic utterances about the weather and of registering the sweetness of human voices while not caring about their impending demise? No explanation is given. The story rolls on, rubber-necking its way through the car crash, the individual sentences veering from poetic reverie ("Under Midwestern clouds like great gray brains") to detached commentary ("The interstate through western Missouri was, in that era, nothing more than a two-way road.") The description of the accident is frightening in the extreme, and leads to a scene in a hospital, when the wife of the injured man learns of his death: "The doctor took her into a room with a desk at the end of the hall, and from under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated there. What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere."

It's impossible for the reader to know how to interpret this. Customary narrative procedure has disappeared and you realize that you've entered, or better, been sucked into, Fuckhead's world. By removing any rational linkage from the story, by refusing to provide any form of accepted behavior on the part of the narrator, Johnson brings the reader to a place where these things are no longer operative, as they are, after all, in an addict's twisted mind. The story hasn't told you about an experience so much as made that experience your own. Which is as good a definition of fiction writing as I can think of.

Up to this point, however, as chilling as "Car Crash While Hitchhiking" is, it still isn't a story. It doesn't become a story until the last paragraph, where Johnson makes an amazing move. Mirroring the chronological liberties of the opening paragraph, he leaps forward: "Some years later, one time when I was admitted to the Detox at Seattle General Hospital, I took the same tack." Fuckhead goes on to describe the voices that are speaking to him in the room, and the lush hallucinations that appear before his eyes, as a "beautiful nurse" gives him an injection.

By the end of the story, then, we glimpse the narrator's eventual descent into drug-fueled insanity, and we get a clue to the reason he's been able to write about these events with such clarity. The story is a description of "the pity of a person's life on this earth" as well as a testimonial of redemption, without any sentimentality or even the prospect of permanence. (That "one time when I was admitted to the Detox" suggests that it happened more than once.) The narrator's recovery, which allows him to relate these events, doesn't absolve him of his heartlessness during them or bring the dead people back to life. That's the meaning of "killed forever." Sobriety and sanity, precious as they are, do not compensate for the tragic senselessness of life. Redemption is glorious, and it isn't nearly enough. It saves only one person at a time, and the world is full of people.

As if to emphasize this hard truth, the story concludes with a furious last line: "And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you." Fuckhead isn't Jesus. He's Jesus' Son, which is a different thing entirely. He's a person graced with an intuition of heaven who still lives in hell on earth.

All this Denis Johnson does in a little over a thousand words. By conflating registers of time and tone, he delivers a narrative where the personal brushes up against the eternal, all from a single incident, or accident, on a rainy night.

*Excerpted from "Object Lessons: The Paris Review Presents the Art of the Short Story" edited by The Paris Review.*  
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