

In Which Bobby Allison, Buicks, And A Childhood Sweetheart May Or May Not Appear

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Take this: I'm riding stoker in a rickety old van chasing a white Prius up interstate 35 north of Minneapolis on a beautiful June morning, and we haven't got a beetle's chance in a chicken yard of catching it. In the driver seat is my twenty-seven-year-old son, Russ, and sitting shotgun is an old Buddhist black guy, Oscar. I haven't got anything against Buddhists or blacks or my twenty-seven-year-old son for that matter, but they're chasing this car, this white Prius, because they think the woman driving was my son's childhood sweetheart.

I know it ain't her.

My son. I don't know what to say to him. For years, while I was in prison, I pretended not to know he had totaled my Buick, which I bought the day after Bobby Allison, won the Daytona 500 in a Buick Regal. Russ pretended the car was in good shape, stored under a tarp in the garage, that he changed the oil, put it up on blocks, blah, blah, blah. I knew he'd totaled it on a fool's trip through West Virginia to see a girl, the woman he now imagines in that white Prius. He knew I knew the truth, but we carried on the charade, each pretending for reasons I don't know that my Buick was alive and well. And now we're racing up the highway, another accident waiting to happen, on our way to Camp Second Chance—whatever, wherever, that is—chasing the Prius. Her name is, was, Cass. Both Russ and I know she's not in the car. It's like we're playing a game of chicken with the truth, neither of us wanting to be the first to admit that it can't be her.

One second, Russ was saying he might run into her here in Minnesota and the very next second Oscar, the former Green Beret, former ace Triple A pitcher, and presently bald Buddhist, claimed he saw Cass when the Prius zipped by us. Maybe he's been brainwashed. Maybe he's a delusional Buddhist. I don't know. "There she is," he said, pointing at the Prius passing us on the right. But the craziness didn't stop there. No. Russ started talking looney science, how a tiny atomic particle can be everywhere at once and how that may have been the case with Cass, her being everywhere until Oscar saw her. If that makes sense, I've got a big football stadium for sale in Columbus. I swear if Russ starts talking about fairy dust, I'm bailing out of this piece of crap van and walking back to Ohio.

"Oscar," I say. "You really think she's in that car?" It's a test question. I'm curious if Oscar is as whacked-out as my son.

The crummy van shakes and rattles like a 60's song by the Stones. I think it'll fall apart before we catch the damn Prius, so maybe there's no problem. We can all pretend it was her.

"Harley?" Oscar says, Harley being my name although inside they called me Rails because of my years on the railroad.

I repeat the question louder, almost shouting over the rumbling of the engine and the wind blowing through the mostly closed windows.

"No mistake," Oscar says. "It was her."

I have another test question for Oscar. "Russ ever tell you about my Buick? It's a sweet ride." I sound like a stupid kid, sweet ride. "We should have taken it instead of this piece of crap van."

"Next time," Oscar says.

I don't know any next time, and we won't be going anywhere in a car that doesn't exist. I rub my head, try to rub all the nonsense I'm hearing out of it. I've got to go to the bathroom, a prostate thing. An emergency thing. A two cups too many coffee thing.

"Was she alone?" Russ asks.

“Think so,” says Oscar. “I didn’t get a good look.”

Damn right he didn’t get a good look. If he had, he’d’ve known it wasn’t this Cass who they claim keeps magically appearing in their lives. I don’t know how a Buddhist got roped into seeing her, this imaginary woman. It worries me and I wonder if my son has finally gone headfirst off the deep end. He seems normal in most ways other than his obsession for saving dandelions from weed killers, his premonitions, and his ideas about time jumping back and forth. Okay, maybe he’s messed up in the head. Maybe my going to prison when he was young fucked him up. So, what am I to do about it now?

The two of them are so preoccupied with the Prius that they don’t see the bald eagle swoop across the road. They don’t notice the pretty lakes surrounded by tall pine off to our right.

“I need a restroom,” I say. “It’s an emergency and unless you want me to take a whiz out this window. . .”

“Okay, okay,” Russ says. “Hold your horses.”

“It ain’t my horse I’m gonna hav’ta hold,” I say.

Oscar gets out his smart phone, taps some buttons. “Five miles,” he says. “Can you make it?”

Five miles equals five minutes. “As long as we don’t slow down,” I say.

Russ shakes his head, which I ignore. Russ doesn’t have a smart phone. He only has a landline. He doesn’t have a television either, says the radio waves may act as interference and then he mumbles, doesn’t explain what he’s talking about, interference with what. This is another thing I forgot to mention as an example that he’s messed up. No smart phone. I’ve been out three weeks, and I have one although I don’t know how to do much with it other than turn on the flashlight and send and check messages. I can make calls.

I love my son, but he’s off in La La Land much of the time.

I’m sitting in the seat behind Russ and Oscar. Yogi, the bear-sized dog, licks my ear. Yogi, I think, is normal in the head.

There's confusion in the front seat as Oscar and Russ debate whether they are going to get off at the next exit. Russ wants to press on, but Oscar, an old man who may have prostate issues of his own, is more sympathetic.

I hear the conversation and roll down my window.

"Okay, okay," Russ says.

I look at Russ, then Oscar, then at Russ, then the white Prius disappearing up the road while my desperation for a restroom grows more intense.

"Well," Oscar says. "Maybe she'll reappear up the road or maybe she'll take this next exit, too."

Russ takes his eyes off the road, gives Oscar the look. "So, you're voting to stop?"

Oscar turns in his seat and gives me a look, checking out how I'm doing. I give him a look back that says my eyes are about to turn yellow, and if we don't stop soon my bladder is going to burst. "Yogi has to go, too," I say, which may or may not be the case.

"Yeah," Oscar says. "I could use a restroom."

So that's it. The vote is two and a half to one and my son leans over the steering wheel, eases off the gas just enough to back off the shaking and rattling from the van. Oscar and Russ, the two of them are good with their imaginations. I give them that. Not good in the way Russ wants to keep going until I piss my pants and not good in the way Oscar goes along with it. Good in the way they almost had me believing this Cass woman existed. *Oh what a great laugh she has, they said. A deep laugh that just bubbles up. And kind! Took a homeless man out for pizza!* On and on they went until I was looking out my window for her. Russ says he and Cass are entangled and then explains it with more looney science. Yeah, right. It takes some kind of sickness for a grown man to get you almost believing in ghosts.

After we find a restroom, I want to stop at a bakery. I have a sweet tooth. "If we find a bakery, I'll buy," I say.

I have money. Not a lot but I did some yard work for Larry, Russ's brother, and he paid me. I'll have more money when I start my new job, which is something I haven't told

Russ or Oscar despite our long trip from Ohio giving me time. I've been hired to work grounds maintenance at the university, the university that fired Oscar and Russ for their refusal to kill off the dandelions. First thing I was asked in the interview was how I felt about dandelions. I said, "Kill those weeds!" Bingo. Hired on the spot. Start July first.

Truth is I've done much worse than killing yellow blooming weeds.

Russ turns on the blinker and we head up the exit ramp.

If the bathroom door is locked at the gas station, it's all over, and I mean all over.

Oh, the relief! I walk back to the van feeling almost buoyant, even my toes are happy, and Oscar says he's a bit hungry, too, and he found a coffee shop around the corner and an I game.

"Hell, yes," I say, and he and Russ act surprised despite the fact I've spent the last hundred miles saying how I sure could go for a slice of chocolate cake.

So, we walk Yogi around the block and then drive around the corner and park in front of Wake Cup, a retro coffee shop in an old brick building with the smell of coffee and bread leaking out the front door. The woman behind the counter says Yogi is welcome, so we file in, and after checking out the cookies, muffins, and slices of pie and cake in the display case, take our seats at a table next to the window that looks out at the old van and a couple kids across the street on skateboards who are going to kill themselves if they don't stop trying to pull off the fancy stuff.

"I'm paying," I say, and Russ touches my arm, says he's got it, and Oscar says, "No," this is on him. I let the two of them fight it out and Russ wins, or loses, depending on your point of view. There's only one slice of chocolate cake in the display case, and I pray that no one takes it before I order. I don't know what Oscar might be praying for or if a Buddhist even prays.

The waitress comes to our table. She's young, pretty, smells of vanilla, and has no ring on her finger. She's the

right age for a flirt from Russ, but he doesn't because he's caught up with the imaginary entangled woman who he thinks was in the Prius.

Emily – her name is on the tag hanging from her blue blouse – takes my order for cake, says, “I think we have one slice left,” and I feel good that I have put my stamp on it. She nods and I smile back. It's not a flirt. Russ orders but spends more time looking at a list of coffees than he spends looking at her. Russ! I want to say. Wake up! Look at that smile, that curly brown hair, those dark eyes. But I don't, and Russ continues studying the coffee menu. Then, she takes Oscar's order. He wants the strawberry pie, and he gets the smile, the wink, and she asks, “Would you like that pie warmed? Want some vanilla ice cream with it?” A seventy-year-old bald, black Buddhist gets the flirt.

A bell rings and this old guy comes in and the waitress, Emily, says, “Hi, Bobby.”

I give the guy a second glance, and I think it's Bobby Allison. Sweet Jesus. Here in Minnesota. And only a few miles back I was thinking about my dead Buick, the one I bought because of Bobby Allison winning Daytona. He looks a lot older than when he won Daytona but it has to be him. Maybe he came north for the fishing. I look out the window, check out what he was driving and sure enough, sitting next to the wreck of a van is a spotless black Buick Regal. I don't know what to say.

He stands at the counter chatting with the cute waitress and then points at something in the display case.

“Sorry,” she says. “That gentleman has already ordered it and that's our last slice.”

“I'll split it with you,” I say.

“You sure?” he asks.

“Positive.”

He looks around the café and although there are plenty of empty seats, I slide out the chair next to me and wave him over “You can join us,” I say.

This white-haired guy with the piercing eyes, who I'm sure is Bobby Allison, the famous race car driver who won

Daytona three times, nods as if we know each other, lifts his cup of coffee from the counter, and comes over and takes the seat next to me. "Howdy, I'm Bobby," he says, just like you would expect Bobby Allison who is from Alabama to say.

"I'm Harley," I say although I almost said my name was Rails. Russ and Oscar introduce themselves, and I point at Yogi who is sleeping at Russ's feet. "That's Yogi."

Yogi gives one thump of his tail.

Bobby doesn't say his last name, but it's him, and I'll bet he could still do laps around Daytona. He sure as hell would've been able to catch that white Prius.

Emily brings the pie, muffin, and two halves of the slice of chocolate cake. Bobby thanks me again, a real southern gentleman, and we sip coffee, shoot the shit, tell Bobby we're heading to Camp Second Chance where Russ will be teaching astronomy to juvenile delinquents while Oscar and I fish. Oscar and Bobby carry on a conversation about the Boundary Waters, the fishing, the bears, the bugs. We don't get around to asking Bobby what he's doing in Minnesota, and I don't let on that I know who he is. We keep it man to man, real casual like. Just buds. The waitress, Emily, comes to our table, rests her hand on Bobby's shoulder like they're old pals, and asks if we need any refills on the coffee. I hold my hand over my cup to signal I'm fine. Russ and Oscar do the same.

The chocolate cake is delish. Bobby is making short work of his half slice, smashing the crumbs with the back of his fork, and slipping them in his mouth.

We chat, innocent topics like the weather, and sports, and I try to turn the conversation to NASCAR, but that topic keeps slipping away as Russ and Oscar get stuck talking about fish. I look out the window at his car. "Nice car," I say.

Bobby nods. "My baby," he says.

And then I tell him I have one, too. "It's been stored in a garage for a few years while I've been away. Can't wait to get it out and take it for a spin."

Bobby gets a twinkle in his eyes, and I think he knows I know who he is. "They take curves real nice," he says.

“Well,” Russ says, interrupting Bobby and me as we bond over Buicks. “We’d better get back on the road, see if we can catch that Prius.”

I see Bobby’s ears perk up when he hears that, hears the *catch that Prius*. The old desire to step on the gas still with him. I want to stay, work the conversation around to Daytona and if he would have let his son Davey pass on that last lap the year they came in first and second. It’s a connection thing. Me and Bobby.

“Nice meeting you fellas,” Bobby says as we stand. I leave a five on the table, tell Bobby his coffee and half slice are on me.

He nods a thanks. “Good luck catching that Prius,” he says, laughing like he knows there’s no chance in hell that’s going to happen.