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The Biggest Slide In The World

I'm in the front passenger seat, screaming and giggling and flailing my arms. Sammy's sitting behind me, stabbing my neck with a straw. We're wilting. We're hot and bored. We're drunk from days of junk food, and we are mesmerized by the endless sea of browned grains waving by the highway.

Aunt Mona- who's grown unbearably quiet since we crossed the Mississippi some time back- explodes. "You're killing me!" she screams, pounding the heels of her hands on the steering wheel. Her little yellow Datsun swerves up on two wheels, then rights itself in the wake of a blasting truck. "You killed your parents and now you're trying to kill me!"

When she gets mad, it's funny, I think-her round face puffs reddishpurple and she smells like cough drops. But I stop laughing, and Sammy stops stabbing me with the straw. And we all sit in silence, for another long stretch of road.

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Later, somewhere between Topeka and Salina, above the endless tips of the corn stalks- the stalks that are growing taller and deeper and darker this afternoon- I see a blue thing, with flags and carnival lights, sticking straight up into the sky. And then I see a billboard that reads:

"THE BIGGEST SLIDE IN THE WORLD>>>>>"

"What is it?" Sammy asks, wide-eyed, from the back seat. "Can we check it out? Please?"

"What a wonderful idea," Aunt Mona says, jerking the car onto an exit ramp. She pulls into an empty parking lot. Above us, a huge triangular scaffolding rises high into the sky. A yellow booth has a sign that simply says: \$5. Aunt Mona hands me a fiver. "I'll wait here," she says, and closes her eyes.

I return, a minute later, and rap on Aunt Mona's window.

"It's five dollars each," I say.

She opens her eyes. "It's never enough, is it." She reaches into her bag. "You know what? Fine. Here's five more fucking dollars."

Now, at the slide's gate, Sammy stands, eagerly holding the ticket in his sweaty little hand. We look up at the huge triangular structure rising up above us, above the corn fields, into the sky. I buy the second ticket, and we climb up a winding staircase that takes us to the top of the longest slide in the world. There must be 500 steps. "Don't look down," Sammy whispers. On the top there's a platform with side rails. The long blue slide dips and turns in rippled waves down into the corn field below. A slim guy in a Kiss t-shirt with blotchy red face sits smoking a cigarette in a lawn chair.

"Where's you feedbag?" Slim asks.

"What feedbag?"

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"The feedbag you're supposed to slide down your ass on, dip. It's for your ass. It's for the slide. You're supposed to get one when you get your ticket."

"They didn't give us one. Do we need to get one?"

"I don't give a fuck what you do," Slim says, flicking a cigarette butt down into the cornfields.

"Look!" Sammy yelps.

The view is incredible. The sun is setting beneath a bloody cloud. Thousands of acres of corn stalks spread out below us for miles, shimmering gold in all directions. The cut of I-70 is like a river; silver trucks slip up and downstream. For a second, I think: "I'm going to like Oregon."

But Sammy is pointing to the roadway between the highway exit and the parking lot. And that's when I see it- Aunt Mona's little yellow Datsun, driving away from us, back toward the highway.

Sammy starts crying. "She's leaving us. Come on!"

We jump on the slide, but it's pointless. Without the feedbags, we have to shimmy down the entire length of the blue plastic slide. Sammy starts screaming at me. "Come on! Faster!" We can still see her car; she's stopped at the west bound ramp, at a lone payphone by the side of the road. As we shimmy further down, her car, the highway, the road all disappear, sliding, like we are doing, slowly into the tall corn stalks. At the bottom of the slide we run for the parking lot. It is totally empty now. The lights have come on. Moths circle the lamps and crickets scream in the dense fields around us. Sammy crumples cross-legged on the pavement. Then we see headlights. "It's Aunt Mona," Sammy yells. He runs to the car. "I knew you'd come back! I knew you wouldn't leave us here!"

At the highway ramp, Aunt Mona stops for a moment; then turns onto the east bound lane. This is awfully melodramatic, I think to myself. She's not actually going to drive all the way back to Baltimore, is she?

Instead she turns off the highway in Topeka, and drives us to an airport. Without speaking, she pulls our suitcases out of her trunk, walks to a ticket counter and buys us two airplane tickets to Baltimore. I'm relieved, but Sammy starts crying again.

"But what about our new home?" he whines. I stifle another laugh, and cringe, awaiting a new blast of hysterics.

"Who's going to take care of us? Where are we going to live?"

"You will return to the Institute," she sighs flatly, as she turns away from us. "It's the best place for you. I understand that now."

We board our flight. I let Sammy take the window seat, where he watches little red car lights slide off west into the fields, then falls asleep on my shoulder.

FRANK HABERLE'S (raiseplow@aol.com) stories have appeared in So New Media's Necessary Fiction, Adirondack Review, L Magazine, Birmingham Arts Journal, Cantaraville, Broken Bridge Review, Taj Mahal

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Review, 34th Parallel, Hot Metal Press, Melic Review, Smokelong Quarterly, Johnny America, the Starry Night Review, the East Hampton Star and the City Writers Review. Frank is a Board member of the NY Writers Coalition, a nonprofit group committed to providing creative writing opportunities for disenfranchised New Yorkers.