

Joe Farley
Middling

The headliner is moody and growing impatient—the opener is the only one of us who still thinks we have a real chance to make it. We were supposed to be in Casper, Wyoming an hour ago, but instead we are stuck in a snow berm somewhere south of Douglas on I-25. Snow is coming down at a rate of several inches per hour—my Accord is fast turning into a tomb. There’s also the issue of the *thing* I hit.

“Let’s just go, man,” the opener says. “Whatever it was...it isn’t.”

“We can’t just...*leave*,” I say.

“Why not?” The headliner borrows my key and stuffs some powder up his nose. “I’m not hanging around here, if I don’t work, I don’t get paid—*neither* do you.”

Right. I’m doing fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes I’ve been working on for four years. I’m being paid fifty bucks and free drinks for the weekend. “We have to check,” I say.

“I’m not getting out of this car. Almost show time, we can call it in from the club—you got a death wish?”

“It was nothing man, *nothing*!” The opener is bouncing around in the backseat. I think he’s on something but maybe it’s just how he is—the only other time I met him he told me his favorite comic was Dane Cook. Unfazed, he starts throwing bits at me. “You think maybe I got something there?”

“Jesus, I can’t think of that shit right now,” I say.

“But if we weren’t, you know, stuck in the situation, do you think it would be funny?”

“What’s with this guy?” I ask the headliner.

The headliner shakes his head, removes a flask from his coat. “He’s just trying to bring a little levity, kid.”

“Levity? I might have just killed someone!”

“Relax,” the opener says. “Now, and be completely honest, what do you think of this one?”



Nobody who ever met me would describe me as funny. Thoughtful, quiet, at best clever. I wasn’t sure what I was after when I first started going on stage—maybe I wanted to prove my own existence. At one of my first open mics, this haggard looking guy about ten years older than me wisely told me that if I could do *literally* anything else than this with my life then I should do it. He then went up and killed, even though he seemed like he didn’t even want to be there. I bombed, ate shit harder than any other time I remember. Still, I had no other marketable skills, so I kept coming back. Now, I know even less about why I still get up there wherever and whenever I can, expect that I’ve got the bug, a brain worm that

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

craves the approval and adulation of complete strangers. I've paid for the ticket with the last half-decade of my life, so I figure might as well ride the ride.



The opener tells me to stop being so negative. "This is part of the life, man. Feel it, love it, *be* it." I think he saw some documentary recently dealing with something spiritual—maybe it was a podcast. The headliner tells me to floor it, maybe we can shake loose from the snows icy grip.

"I've been flooring it," I say. The opener is drumming on the back of my seat. Finally, I lose patience. "Would you give it a rest? Shit—are you a little slight?"

"Huh?" The opener says, changing the beat.

"Enough!"

"Oh, sorry, man. I'm just trying to stay positive here." The opener looks offended.

I floor the pedal again and the tires spin helplessly. "My tires are beyond bald."

"Well, one of you two clowns get out and start pushing," the headliner says.

"You got a shovel?" The opener says.

"Why would I have a shovel?"

"I don't know, man. Don't get all sensitive," the opener says.

The sound of snow and wind makes it so we all have to half-scream. It beats the roof of the car, clouds the windows with thick gobs. My mind is still on this thing we hit, *I* hit.

"Make a decision here boys," the headliner says.

"Listen," the opener says, "if it'll give you peace of mind, I'll help you look for what we hit."

"What *I* hit," I say.

"You know, you really need to stop being so hard on yourself—*we* are in this together, man!"

The headliner taps out more powder on the dash, says, "make it fast."



The headliner spent some time in LA in the early aughts. He was a regular on that show. If you're of a certain age, you've probably seen it—he used to say the thing. He moved back to Denver to try and reconcile with his ex-wife and kid, and is now a fixture at Comedy Works. But at this point in his career, all the heat is off him. He's really more like a plumber than comedian, traversing the Midwest telling jokes that are no more than snaking toilets. It's a service he provides—the headliner hasn't written a new joke in years.

For instance, he stole my best joke. I couldn't get up often at Comedy

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

Works, but one time I did he was in back sitting at the bar. When I told it I saw him nod his head. A few weeks later someone big blows through town and the headliner does a guest spot. He tells my joke. Next time I see him he invites me to middle for him in Casper, Wyoming, out of guilt or self-interest I'm still not sure.



Even opening the car doors is a challenge. The wind fights us every step of the way, it pins us back, burning our eyes and stinging our faces. It seems to come from every direction at once, ghosting snow across the highway. The landscape slides by like a damaged filmstrip. The front end of my car is dinged; the bumper is badly bent and matted with some sort of hair—fur? Off the highway I think I see a dark figure, maybe twenty yards from the car. I grab the opener by the shoulders and point him in the general direction. He squints through the snow that seems to be coming down sideways. Then he smiles, says, “jackpot.”



Leaving Denver the weather report looked okay, but out on the Front Range, most forecasts are more or less meaningless. As we crossed the Colorado border into Wyoming, I felt a jolt, a little burst of excitement—this would be my first real road gig. Even though the pay was shit and the headliner was a joke thieving asshole, it was something, a right of passage. We were doing four shows in Casper, Wyoming, two Friday and two on Saturday.

I had this great notion that maybe the three of us would even become friends. I knew the headliner was older and had no interest, but maybe the opener and I could form a bond over slave wages and free drinks. That all came to an end when I started hearing his jokes. He insisted on testing out material on me before we even left the city limits.

“Hey,” the opener said. “What’s the difference between a madman with a gun and a woman?”

I looked at him through the rearview mirror and said nothing.

“Either way your dead!”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“You know, man, like how women are...like if she says do I look fat in this whatever,” the opener said.

“Oh, sure,” I said.

“Still working on it, I guess, just wanted some feedback, a little positivity. C’mon, man, we’re really doing this shit! Tonight is going to be lit.”

The headliner told him to shut up for a bit, he wanted to get some sleep. I didn’t know how these two knew each other, but it didn’t seem like they were any kind of friends.

“Keep thinking on it,” I said, turning the radio up, drowning him out. “We’ve got like four more hours.”



"What do you think it is?" The opener yells into the storm.

I think about the matted hair, clumps of crimson fur. "Hopefully not a drifter," I say.

"Drifter? Way the hell out here?" The opener barrels ahead of me, shoulders lowered against the wind.

"Maybe an elk or something...a moose? I only clipped the thing." I struggle to match the opener's pace, slipping and dropping to my knees in the soft snow. He doesn't notice, continues to plow ahead, seemingly excited by what we might find. I run to catch up, the wind jacking me up with every step I take. Getting to whatever it is I, *we* hit takes longer than I expected it to. Suddenly I don't remember how long we've been out here. I look back and my car is gone. I know it's there but I cannot *see* it. I feel a sense of panic, and when I finally get to the opener, he's leaning down, huddled over a large figure.

"This is totally fucked, man," the opener says.



I sometimes get the feeling I always start things too late, not just stand-up—I'm almost thirty, didn't graduate college until I was twenty-six. My older brother died more than four years ago. He was the funniest person I ever met. He never got on stage during his life—he worked at a rental car company. It didn't matter, he was the life of every party, every interpersonal interaction, he could've ran for mayor and won in a landslide—everybody wanted to be around him.

After the funeral, that very night, I got up on stage for the first time. My younger sister encouraged it, almost begged me. She was a senior up at CU Boulder, already worlds wiser than I'd ever be. It was open mic night at this small bar on Colfax, there wasn't even a stage and nobody who was in the place wanted to listen to me talk—they wanted to drink and ignore their lives. I bombed, ate complete shit for five minutes as I forgot my jokes and mumbled the lines, but even as a sea of blank faces stared at me in disbelief, I felt a pull.

Without Wyatt I never would've went back after that first week. He bought me a drink and told me to keep coming back. The next week I came back. I bombed again but this time I got to see Wyatt perform. He reminded me of my brother in uncanny ways, mostly because he was kind and a completely original thinker. Wyatt never talked about himself unless he was on stage, and he commanded the little bar with the quiet confidence of a cult leader. I went back every week till the bar closed down, hoping some of his magic would rub off on me.



"Fuck if you don't think I'm opening with this tonight," the opener says. It's a mountain goat with its head caved in, its legs splayed and kicking at unnatural angles. Its white coat is stained scarlet. It's making this high pitched mewling sound, a sound so awful I plug my ears even though it's faint as it competes with the howling wind.

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

"Jesus, what do we do?" I say.

"It's speaking to us!"

"Huh?"

"Listen! She's telling us something," the opener says.

"The fuck are you talking about?" I'm cupping my hands and shouting through them.

The opener takes out a pocketknife and plunges it into the mountain goats soft parts. I blink through snow that has turned to sleet, not saying anything. The animals' entire body begins to shiver. Its yellow eyes open wide and its lips tremble over protruded teeth. Finally, the lights seem to dim before going out. I'm crying. I don't realize I'm hunched over crying these big, sobbing cries until the wetness begins to freeze on my face. The opener is standing over me. "It's part of nature, man."

I shake my head, then stand up and wipe my face with my sleeve. "Could have warned me," I say.

"I had to send her on her way!" The opener wipes his knife on the snow, pockets it.

"Shit," I say.

"It's bad karma to leave her like that, man. We don't need any of that, we've got a show tonight."



I was the first to know when my brother went—I was with him. I'd been staying on his couch, mom had gotten sick of me. Post graduation I wasn't doing much, I wasn't sure what to do—the whole global economy had just collapsed.

My brother and I were at this fancy bar downtown, I'd had a promising interview and he wanted to take me out to celebrate. His girlfriend Jane was going to meet us after she got off her waitressing shift. It was my smart mouth that did it. My brother didn't even know what happened, didn't see it coming. This suited ape swung wildly, caught him square—I heard something click. As soon as he hit my brother I knew instinctively it was all over. It was weird; I think I actually saw the light he always carried around with him go out. He hung on for a few more weeks, but that was the last time I really saw him, it was like something simply switched him off.



The late show goes on as planned. The sleet turned to rain and the opener and I were able to push the car from behind as the headliner gunned it, shaking free from the berm. We drove in complete silence until we reached Casper.

The opener takes the stage with a wild, almost feral energy. I don't listen to a word he says. The headliner is in the back room with the club owner, no doubt squabbling over pay after we missed the early show. After the opener finishes his set there is some sparse clapping, the clinking of glasses as the staff brings drinks.

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

Then the opener hypes me up before brining me on stage. As he passes and hands me the microphone he claps me on the back, flashes a wild grin. "They are ripe for you, man." I look out at their round, expectant faces. People are talking amongst themselves, the staff is yelling orders across the room, but I barely hear any if it, I feel like I'm watching it all through the window. The men are wearing Stetsons and dressed in western shirts. The women have their hair teased and their faces painted up. They've worked all week — *this* is their big night out. I tell them who I am.