

Connor Sibley

## Men Don't Cry

“Do you have any idea how fast you were going?”

The cop is smiling, he knows exactly how cliché his opening line is. The pain is subsiding, but the anger is still omnipresent. I hand over my I.D. without a word, I don't want to hulk out on a police officer, no matter the current circumstances.

“Lachlan, Felix...” the cop said “Woah! A little early to be drinking, isn't it bud?”

The cop probably didn't see much action in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't much enjoyment to be found in the endless walls of wheat. No clouds to make shapes out of either, just the hot sun blasting boredom for the entire world's enjoyment. The policeman is almost certainly going to make sure this experience is one that can hold him over for at least a few hours. Please, can he just hurry the fuck up.

“Look Officer... Jaime,” I can barely make out the policeman's name tag through the harsh sunlight, “I swear don't drink, I've been sober my whole damn life.”

I barrowed this car from my drunk ass friend Dennis, so not only do I look like shit, but the car reeks of Newport and Budweiser. I had no choice; I have places to be and I'm way too broke to buy my own car. I should have just rented, at least then I wouldn't have to give excuses on par with “my dog ate my homework.”

“This isn't even my car, I'm just barrowing it from a friend so I can get... to a family member's funeral. Just give me the damn breathalyzer, I'm already running late as is.”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” Officer Jaime said.

Of course, this cop couldn't be the normal no-nonsense type like those in Chicago. My car is literally the only one for miles, so he must have seen this as an opportunity to quench his boredom. Officer Jaime pulls out the breathalyzer and runs me through the test.

"Just exhale into the tube please, sir," the officer said "Oh! What happened to your hand?"

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I've been driving for hours. The trip between to Nashville has been painfully long, and I already hate driving. The rest of my family wanted Mom buried in the city she grew up in, however there's a good reason she didn't die in that hell hole. She wanted to be cremated, a wish unfulfilled by my uncaring aunts and uncles. Mom wanted her ashes to be scattered in Lake Michigan, a new place, where she started her own family. Now she was being dropped six feet under, in the city where she grew up and temporarily managed to escape from. I still hardly believe she's dead, it's been only a few months since we last spoken, and she seemed fine then.

I left Dennis's apartment building at around five in the morning, seems early but I meant to get up at three, precious time I won't ever get back. I already asked to borrow his car and collected the keys the night before, since Dennis would be asleep until at least two in the afternoon.

"Yeah, yeah, just don't wreck her, alright X," Dennis said.

"No shit Dennis. If anyone's totaling your baby it's gonna be your drunk ass."

"You got me," he said. "You're going to a funeral right, man?"

"Uh, yeah."

Dennis threw me a bottle of scotch. I wrestled my hands out of my pockets just to catch the damn thing.

“I still got a few months before I turn 21, shit head. You know I don’t drink.”

“Yet. Trust me, it’ll make you feel better. Just take a swig if you ever feel down, it’s gotta be the best cure for literally everything, man. Trust me bro.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

I tossed the bottle into my backpack just to get Dennis off my back. The next day, I hastily threw on my work clothes: black suit, white undershirt, blue tie. I don’t love being a host, but it’s the easiest job I could find that pays anything over minimum wage, albeit not by much. Besides, college tuition ain’t paying for itself. I called out only a few days ahead, the suddenness of the funeral prevented me from giving the polite two weeks’ notice, but they’ll get over it. It was still pitch-black outside, and I grabbed my backpack accidentally. I guess I had school on the brain. I threw my backpack into the passenger seat and gunned it out of the lot.

Usually, when driving, I listen to my favorite radio station: 101.9, all the classic rock one can get their hands on (or dad rock according to Dennis): the passion of Freddie Mercury, the power of Steven Tyler, the presence of David Bowie. It was a good distraction from the deafening truth. However, the radio stations aren’t the same across the entire country. I suppose I was lucky Indianapolis had the same one. An hour past Louisville, however, was another story. I was nearing “Music City,” the homeland for everything country.

Inevitably, the radio sizzled, and Ozzy Osbourne was interrupted by the rough voice of Johnny Cash. I was never too big on country, but Mom loved the stuff. Probably a side effect of growing up in Tennessee. I swear country music is on par with the God damn national anthem down there. Hastily, I switched stations, searching for any distraction. I couldn’t find anything

suitable and eventually landed on Mom's favorite song. She loved Joey + Rory. She would make me listen to them with her, she'd cry and hold me close while I squirmed trying to break free. I couldn't turn the dial to swap stations, I was paralyzed. I could barely keep my foot on the gas. The soothing, sad melody poked holes in my denial.

She rushed through my head. Her warm embrace, reassuring that the monsters under the bed weren't real. Her smell of apples, a sign she was going to surprise us with apple pie for dessert. Her green eyes, that could always see the cookie in your pocket. Her long wavy brown hair, always managing to catch in the breeze. Her soft voice, promising ice cream after I fell off the playground. She is gone, I will never see her again.

My eyes boiled; a drop of moisture threatened to roll down my cheeks. I shook my head vigorously; Mom would always have the remedy for my tears, but now that job is left to me. I should have fucking been there, gone to the hospital or at least called to see if she was alright. I'm a worthless fucking son.

The music stopped abruptly; I was jolted back to the present. I looked over at the radio, it sparked and sputtered before giving one last cough and dying. I felt warmth crawl over my knuckles, and I don't need to look to know what I've done. The dashboard was partially caved in where the radio used to be. I slammed my foot down on the gas pedal, making up for the time lost when I was fumbling with the radio. 60, 80, 100, 120, I couldn't escape, Mom is gone, I failed her. I couldn't outrun the truth forever.

"At least, I didn't total this piece of junk" I grumbled

A new distraction presented itself. The still country air was punctured by blaring sirens and sweeping beams of red and blue light. The two vehicles pull over to the side of the empty road, two ants on a lonely branch extending on for miles.

“God damn it, you idiot,” I muttered.

“Self-inflicted,” I said quickly, gesturing to the radio, or lack thereof. No point hiding the truth any longer. Lying would only serve to extend this wasteful conversation.

“Uh... Do want something to prevent the bleed-”

“No, no, I’m fine”

Practically ripping the cop’s arm off, I pull the device closer and exhale sharply into it, setting the cop’s attention back to the breathalyzer. Officer Jaime checks the screen: 0.00, completely sober.

“Welp, looks like your friend does enough drinking for the both of you... Unfortunately, I’m still going to have to give you that speeding ticket,”

“Great. Whatever”

The policeman meanders back to his police car to procure my very own personal speeding ticket. I’m fucking over it; I have more important places to be. I’m more so bothered by the officer’s unwillingness to get this business done with quickly. This mess means I’m going to be even later than I already am. If I hadn’t destroyed the radio I wouldn’t have ended up in this situation.

“Are you seriously crying, bro” 9-year-old Dennis said.

I just took a baseball to the stomach. Aside from the tears, I’m gasping for air. That must be what dying feels like; at least that’s what 8-year-old me thought at the time.

“That was going to be a homerun for sure. If anything, you should apologize for getting in the way.” Dennis said.

I was coughing, oxygen finally refilled my lungs. I couldn't even fathom a snappy retort. All this pain just from a stupid game of two-man baseball; I was nothing more than a glorified pitching machine. The tears refused to stop, snot dribbling out of my nose. I tried to wipe off my face, but the assault kept coming. I sat up, ragged breathes keeping my shaking body from collapsing.

“I gotta go home” I said.

“Naw, come on man. We just started playing. You got at least give me a few more tries at a home run for messing up that one”

“No. I can't.”

“Grow up, bro. You think the pros just quit after they take a hit. You gotta get back up”

Officer Jaime is walking back to the car. The prick is waving the ticket and the license around like he's conducting a fucking orchestra.

“Here is your ticket sir, and your I.D,” Officer Jaime said, “You sure you don't want anything for the bleeding?”

“I'm fine”

“Alrighty then, sorry about your loss, have a good one,” the officer said, running through the formalities.

How can anyone wish someone a good day and acknowledge that you lost someone in the same sentence? I wait just until the officer hops back into his cruiser and immediately slam the gas, making certain to stop accelerating just below the speed limit. No need to get pulled over twice.

“You’re such an idiot” I mutter to myself.

Dennis isn’t going to be happy about the smashed radio. He doesn’t use it much himself, but his baby wasn’t going to be as pretty with a hole in the dash board. I’m going to have to pay him back, but the money would more than likely just be spent on alcohol; Dennis doesn’t care enough about anything to fix even his most prized possessions. The only love he knows is the damn bottle.

Dennis was always able to get me to do almost anything for him, but my one victory was that I never drank. My Mom, however, was not as averse to drinking as I am. My last call with her didn’t go very well; that’s why I hadn’t spoken to her in a while. She’s always had a bit of a drinking problem. She was good at hiding it when I was younger, but after I left for college, she stopped trying.

During our last call, she was drunk. This time it was the worst I can ever remember. We both said shit we shouldn’t have. I told her she needs to stop drinking, go to rehab, do something, anything. She screamed at me, told me to focus on my own shit. My grades have been slipping a bit and I literally can’t afford to fail another class. I told her, “Fine drink yourself to death, see if I care.” And know here we are, I didn’t mean a word of it. I did this. She probably didn’t even realize that the light was still red, or that the truck was barreling towards her as she drove across that damned intersection.

I unzip my backpack and the bottle stares at me. Daring me. I reach for it, but I hesitate. Do I really want to go down this path? Is losing myself worth avoiding the pain I've caused? Before I can even grab the scotch, a honk snaps my attention back to my surroundings. I'm slowly drifting closer to the first car I've seen in ages. I quickly swerve back into my lane and the driver flips me off and speeds ahead. I don't even have it in me to return the favor. That was too damn close. I zip the backpack up and return my attention to the road.

I'm getting close now, about an hour left to this misadventure. I check the rear-view mirror and I'm met with Mom's eyes. I blink and she blinks back. I shake my head, adjusting the mirror back onto the road. Mom refuses to leave me, creeping back into my mind and this time I can barely stop her getting in. I can hear her: *everything is all right, I forgive you. You just gotta remember to get up and dust yourself off, kiddo. You should never feel ashamed about crying, it's okay to cry. You just got to get it out of your system, and you'll feel much better.* My knuckles whiten on the steering wheel as if rooting myself down to the moving car. Mini earthquakes vibrate through my body, I'm losing control. Grief's meeting is coming up and I'm running late to that too.

I'm strong. I once more shake my head, as though my thoughts are a liquid that can be shaken out like a dog. I'm desperate for any distraction. Instead, I focus on my still bleeding hand, I should have let the officer grab me a bandage or something, but too late now I suppose. I rummage through Dennis's car looking for something I can wrap around my hand. Not wanting to trust any of the alcohol-stained t-shirts. I remove my tie and wrap it tight across my knuckles. I spend the rest of the drive in silence, my head as empty as I can keep it, and eyes focused on the road, avoiding Mom's gaze. Luckily, my exit is finally coming up.



I pull into the cemetery, just a few miles outside the great “Music City”; I was supposed to have arrived hours ago. My family, a murder of silent crows, crowded around an upright stone, with words, too far for me to make out, scratched deep, as though they were enough to capture an entire person’s existence. I’m too late. The coffin is already sealed, and they’re carefully lowering Mom into her grave. I can’t take it any longer; the floodgates finally opened.