

A MANUAL FOR LIVING WITH DEFEAT

by D. W. Wilson

The moment you figure out how all of this will end, you're driving west along the Alaskan Highway. It's January, that month of old wounds and fresh scars. Wind shakes hoarfrost from the treetops and snowflakes rasp against your windshield like the inescapable tick of a clock. Six hours earlier you fled a motel room in Grand Prairie, garbed in a worn overcoat that once belonged to your ex-wife, its pockets stuffed with cigarettes and mailbox keys and a roll of antacids that taste like playground chalk. In the midnight dark you cradled your son into your car, buckled him in, and he mumbled a nonsensical thank you. Now, as you drive west with your son in the backseat, the radio slurs Ryan Adams' "Winding Wheel" on an endless dangerous loop, and your tires shush along asphalt that is lit storm-red by the rising sun. Things you notice: the car's broken blinker; the palm-bald gearshift

rubbed as smooth as bone; the empty passenger seat beside you.

You press a wrist to your eye and unwrap an energy bar. Every so often, in the rearview, you glimpse the boy's squirrel-brown hair. He sleeps like a kid that age should, and drools, and clutches a sock-puppet worm he's had for four full years. Bret, your son's name—as in “The Hitman” Hart, your idle, growing up.

Your '64 Rambler jitterbugs over potholes and packed snow, and the road turns some colour of sludge. The plan: bomb down the Alaskan Highway with no plan and nowhere to go, until something turns up, because sooner or later something has to turn up—it's the law of averages, it's the law of pure belief: you take it all for granted, your luck, your fate, your body, the life you find yourself in through no real act your own, until one day it has all vanished, and your options seem limited and predetermined. You will believe your way out of this, you who have always styled yourself an action man, a fixer-of-things.

So on and on you go—under-the-counter jobs and loveless late-night couplings, trying not to draw too many eyes. Your son, all the while, endures: he, unlike you, does not have the illusion of choice. Beneath you, the car shudders like a bewildered dog. The engine draws a wheezy breath. Your son looks as if he would give anything to play in a park, to hear a recess bell ring. That breaks your heart, that being-aloneness.

Thus, with conviction, you makes plans to settle down and straighten out, to buy a nice shirt, to take your son to a movie. You plan to fix this car—a vehicle that saw your first kiss, that ferried your ex-wife when her water broke in the parking lot of a Kentucky Fried Chicken, that, so many moons ago, somebody with more to live for than you nearly wrapped around a power pole. You plan to be a good dad, get remarried, get a job, get out of this mess. You plan to quit being so goddamned lonely.

Ahead of you, the road seethes like ocean.

The car, you realize, smells like a locker room: all that sweat and trepidation.

Probably the happiest you've ever been were the nine months you spent bareknuckling for cash, in Northern Alberta, to pay for your ex-wife's appetite through her pregnancy. In those days, you padded your hands with gauze and descended to the basement of a local dive bar to gouge your fists on dumb guys' teeth. Money changed hands. You broke a few bones, not all of them your own. Each night after the fights your wife massaged iodine into your cuts with her thumbs, wrapped your swollen knuckles in cold cloths, in bags of frozen peas. Later, you'd lay on the small bed in your apartment, her thin fingers as soothing as balm, and sleep ebbed in and out of you. She might draw your head to her ropey shoulder. You might tell her you loved her. You could see her belly by then, how she cupped it from underneath. Lockdown, they called you in the

ring, because once you got a hold of something, you never let it go.

Then Bret cracks a window, and you sniff a jolt of winter and streetsalt and morning, and for a second you go back in time to a time when you're a kid riding shotgun with your own dad. But you drag yourself out of the fantasy. It's always been like that—two parts of you vying like rivals. The dreamer, the man of action. The patriot, the father. The coward.

Everything okay, Dad? Bret says.

You squeeze your hands on the wheel and watch your knuckles drain to white, then fill, then drain. You had so many plans at the start, so many ways your lives could've gone. Unless, of course, there weren't. It is possible that, like this highway, all your life you've been moving toward the same exact moment. Above you, a band of clouds clear—a narrow canal of sunlight across the overcast sky, and you smell winter air so clean no other human has breathed it. In the backseat, for an instant, your son becomes a grown man full of his own inadequacies, his own failures, his own loved ones who—like you—have forever exited his life.

You shake your head. He is a boy again, four years old if he is two. A wiser man would pull over, right then, and hazard a nap on the roadside so that, if nothing else, father and son may share the moment. There are you, you suspect, few of them left. But you rub the heel of your palm in each eye, smack your gums, bite down on your cheek until the pain spikes you awake. In the back seat, your son wears his sock-puppet worm,

and it gnaws on his free arm and he squeals in pretend horror. You pass a trio of deer, lined up on the roadside as if to bear witness. You pass a green highway sign that says Kirkwall 25, but you don't pay attention to the name: one town is the same as another town, two like any two.

In Kirkwall, you choose the first diner, some place with a giant neon dog's head in the window aglow like the second coming. All parts of you ache. Your neck crackles when you stretch. Your shoulders and arms windlass with fatigue and when you glimpse yourself in the car's windowglass you realize you look exactly like the kind of man you are.

Inside, you order a plate of eggs and toast and your son asks for pancakes with strawberries and maple syrup, and though you must count your dwindling stack of bills you will not, at least not yet, deny him the food he loves. The waitress—a woman your age, with dishwater blonde hair and fatigue bags beneath her eyes—fills your coffee mug, unbidden, and says, On me. I know a tired soul when I see one.

Thank you, you say.

Her lips lift at the edges. Hint of a dimple.

You douse your coffee in milk and sugar and try to remember when you last sat down for a meal, and when you last sat down for a meal with your son. Half a year, at least: his mother invited you over for Thanksgiving dinner, knowing that if she didn't you would give thanks on your own, at McDonalds, or worse. She had her new man with her, an

electrician named Big Jim who had the Wizard of Oz's Tin Man tattooed on his upper arm.

Then two cops in their Mountie greys take the table nearest you, and you stare out the window at your Rambler, at the glaciers that ring this strange northern town, at your son who, with his sock-puppet on one hand, arranges the salt and pepper shakers on the table like a pair of tiny adversaries. The cops order coffees and say Thank you, ma'am when their food arrives— pre-ordered, you figure—and jaw about some kidnapping in Alberta they'd been warned about. Your son walks his sock puppet worm across the table, lets it roar at a ketchup bottle with its mouth crusted red. Beside you, the cops grin behind their wrists.

Do you want a Coke? you ask the boy.

That a southern drawl? one of the cops says. He's got a bushy moustache, looks your age, smirks with only one cheek. You a neighbour from downstairs?

Yes sir, you lie.

Up here for a vay-cay?

You got it.

He swallows a bite of egg. Whereabouts you from?

Colorado, you say. Though I'm more of a Blackhawks fan, if I'm honest.

But where are you from? he says, and bites into his toast, eyes on you the whole time.

Boulder Creek, you tell him.

He pushes a forkful of bacon into his mouth. Skier?

Thought I might try.

How about your boy, the other cop says, and levels his fork at your son, and, bewilderingly, you feel a clot of anger catch at the cauldron of your throat, same way you used to when you fought for cash, the adrenaline behind a floodgate, that urge to clench your jaw as hard as you can.

Is he a skier? the cop continues. He looks like he's a skier.

I do not believe he has ever skied.

The cop swallows. His gullet bobs like a piston. You don't believe so? he says, and lays his knife and fork on the table, one tinkling after the other. The other cop crosses his arms and tilts his head back and it could be a trick of the light, but it looks like he's slid out from the table, an inch—no more. Or you don't know so?

I believe he has never been skiing, you say.

The cop spreads his hands on his table, runs a tongue along his teeth so the lip bulges with it. It could be a smile, or something else. How long you been up here?

A week, maybe.

What're you here for?

A holiday, you say.

A holiday, or a vacation? Where's your wife?

The boy looks at you, and you wait a full breath before giving your answer. Back in the USA, you say. With somebody else.

The cop leans forward on his elbows, plucks the fork, stabs a piece of egg. The other one follows suit. Your food arrives,

pancakes heaped as high as Bret's chin and bacon on your plate you didn't order and when you look to the waitress she winks and raises a mug of coffee in salute. Above you, on the wall, a mounted stag's head lords over the room, this small slice of the human world. Someone has hung a sign from it that reads: The Mountains Shall Bring Peace to the People.

In the bathroom, you listen to the tinkle of your son's urine on an enamel bowl. Some nearby graffiti reads, Could you fuck the sadness out of me? When Bret finishes, he dutifully washes his hands, dries them. You pass him the sock puppet worm—you, its momentary keeper—and he falls against your chest and you ferry him to the Rambler. You buckle him in. There are a few conversations you'd like to have with your son, but your heart is simply not in it.

How much do you resent me? you say to the unconscious boy.

And right then, as you loom above him, you make plans to scrub yourself down and clean yourself up, to quit smoking and stop drinking, to brush your teeth every goddamned day. You make these plans with conviction. You'll sell your car—a vehicle that will become a teenager's first ride, that will see a child conceived in the parking lot of a neon-lit bar, that, many moons later, somebody far lonelier than you will wrap around a power pole. You'll stop sleeping around and find a nice girl before you're thirty-five. You'll turn into a parent other parents will tell their kids to admire—a parent your own kid will

admire.

But apart from those that do not matter, these plans will not come true. You have to know this, even as you just drive, just drive, just drive. Things you don't notice: a stray thread on your overcoat's collar that rubs against your chin, all but undetectable, but also persistent, consistent, perplexing; the headlights far behind you, getting slowly bigger, slowly closer; and your own long, low, exhausted breath that could almost be mistaken for a sigh.