

NOBODY LIVES IN YOUNGSTOWN

By

D. G. Voda

CHAPTER 1

THE PRODUCT

The supplier in Newark was late with the coke and MJ Shea had been awake over 30 hours by the time he got to northeastern Pennsylvania. He didn't like to stop when carrying product and seldom used coke himself, but when he started falling asleep at the wheel in mid-afternoon, he pulled over at a Super 8 in Bloomsburg for a few hours of rest.

He paid cash for the room using the same fake I.D. he had used to rent the car, a 1986 Chevrolet Celebrity with no flash and little power. He parked the car outside the motel window and dropped his overnight bag, with its three keys of coke and a 9 mm Browning, on the mattress. Then he flopped on the bed himself and clicked on the boob tube.

On the TV, President Reagan was meeting Gorbachev and Jimmy Cagney had died. MJ cared nothing for politics but liked Cagney's cool toughness, which reminded him of his old man.

Soon sleepy, he put the overnight bag under the covers with him and the gun under his pillow while he slept. Having covered all the angles, he slept soundly and woke at 7 p.m., feeling groggy but better. After loading his stuff in the small Chevy, he headed for the Interstate entrance.

Bloomsburg was an old farm town injected with a bit of life by the construction of Interstate 80. The sun was setting, lighting orange fire under the clouds to the west. On this Monday night at the end of March, there was little traffic along the motel-and-restaurant strip leading to the nearby Interstate.

250 more miles to Youngstown. He should have the coke to Waylay by 1 a.m. His take for the run would be the usual three grand.

As he passed a flood-lit Howard Johnson's, a local cop car pulled out from the parking lot and followed along behind him. MJ felt a moment of anxiety, but then relaxed. He always checked his vehicles carefully for little stuff that might attract a cop's attention--shit like broken tail lights--and he always drove the speed limit. The overnight bag with the coke was in the trunk and his gun in his waistband, hidden under his untucked shirt.

He rode along nonchalantly with both hands on the wheel, observing the cop in his rear view. The officer, in a grey hat, appeared to be sipping coffee and didn't seem too interested in MJ.

A green sign indicated the entrance to I-80 a block ahead, and MJ pulled into the right lane in anticipation of turning.

Even as he did so, he realized that he had failed to signal his turn. The cop car's flashers and siren came alive as it swerved into MJ's lane and came right up on his tail.

Fucking shit, thought MJ, jolting upright. How could I do that? The Interstate entrance was just ahead and MJ had a split second to decide whether to make a run for it or play innocent. But what were the chances of outrunning the police in this piece-of-shit car? Besides, he knew from past experiences that if he just played polite and stupid, he could easily talk his way out of a simple moving violation.

He pulled over.

"Good evening, officer," MJ said as the cop came up to the window, wielding a huge black flashlight which he shone in MJ's face. MJ wanted to rip the light out of the guy's hands and shove it up his stupid ass, but merely said, "Did I do something wrong?"

"Don't you know you're supposed to signal before changing lanes?" the cop said, finally shining the light away. He was a meaty, balding guy with a big brown hickey someone had planted above his collar on the left side of his neck.

"Oh, I'm real sorry officer, I thought I signaled," said MJ.

"You could have caused an accident," the officer said.

Accident my ass, thought MJ, who figured this was the cop's scam for writing up tickets on out-of-towners.

The patrolman continued: "Let me see your license and registration."

Reluctantly, hoping the cop was as dumb as he looked, MJ passed the documents over. The Avis registration was legit, but his driver's license was a fake in the name of "Melvyn Purdue" that his brother-in-law Lee had ordered up from some mob friends. While the cop examined it, MJ tried to distract him by saying, "I'm real sorry to disturb your nice town. I know you police have a hard time, what with catching all the criminals and stuff."

The cop, who had apparently been expecting an argument, looked up from the license. "We keep busy," he said.

MJ kept talking: "My uncle was a police officer and I know he sure worked hard. He taught me always to respect the law."

"Where was that?" said the cop, glancing at the city on the license. "Cleveland?"

"Yeah, Cleveland. My Uncle Jack. He was on the vice squad. Say, officer, do you think you could let me off with a warning?"

"I don't know," the cop said. "Changing lanes without signaling, that's a serious offense."

Yeah, right. "Please, sir. I've got a wife and three kids and can't afford no ticket."

"Three kids, huh?" said the cop. He looked at MJ and grinned. "Boy, you must have started early, and kept on going."

MJ forced himself to laugh. "Yeah, three kids is a lot for 25. You a dad?"

"Yeah, I've got two. But they live with my ex."

"So what do you say?" pressed MJ. "A warning?"

The cop thought a moment, then handed back the license and registration. "All right, I guess we can let this one go. But drive careful, Mr. Purdue."

"Melvyn. You can call me Melvyn," MJ said with a little wave, thinking what a sucker the cop was.

It was this smart-ass gesture that got MJ into trouble, for when he gave the wave, he accidentally dropped the paperwork in his lap.

The cop leaned in (friendly now, the not-from-his-ex-wife hickey huge on his neck) to shine his flashlight into MJ's lap to help light the papers--and jumped back, startled, when he caught sight of the Browning poking out of MJ's pants where the shirt had pulled back.

"Whoa!" the cop yelled, drawing his weapon. "Put your hands on the steering wheel where I can see them! Now!"

Shit, thought MJ, his mind racing, thinking that the three bricks in the trunk meant 40 years in prison if he were caught.

He was going to have to make a run for it.

He made a big show of raising his hands to the wheel, then quickly turned the ignition key and floored the accelerator.

The underpowered Chevy didn't exactly peel out, but it did lurch forward fast enough to startle the officer, whose cop hat flipped to the ground as his head snapped back.

MJ kept his foot mashed on the pedal as he sped toward the turn-off for the Interstate.

A ragged hole magically appeared in the windshield to MJ's right and a glance in his rear view confirmed that the cop was in a wide-legged stance--actually shooting at him. What a yokel, shooting at him for nothing, wasn't that illegal?

MJ barreled through the red light and swerved in front of a slow-moving dump truck onto the Interstate

ramp, continuing to accelerate up the ramp. In the mirror, he saw the cop frantically running to his cruiser and grabbing the hand mike through the open window--probably to call in even more cops.

The Celebrity was doing 80 now, but that seemed to be its top speed on the long highway upgrade MJ found himself on. The cop, in his more powerful vehicle, would be on him in a minute.

MJ knew he would never make it to the next exit. He wove in and out of the night time traffic, looking for an escape route. A sign flashed past, something about low-clearance, and then he found himself approaching an overpass spanning the road ahead--big steel beams solidly set on angled buttresses of concrete.

As he neared the pass, MJ realized the buttresses would make a perfect screen to hide behind.

He flashed under the bridge and swerved onto the shoulder beyond, jamming on the brakes. The little car fishtailed as MJ struggled to keep it out of the ditch.

Then he threw the car into reverse and backed up as fast as he had ever backed up before, banging the Chevy's bumper hard into the stone-and-concrete buttress of the overpass.

He turned off the car lights and slid down into his seat. It was the kind of setup the police liked to use for speed traps. He was sure that the bridge abutment would hide his car and the pursuing cop would blow on by--assuming the guy was not checking his rear view mirror.

Just then, a huge tanker truck went rumbling past--and beyond it, in the far lane, a patrol car zoomed ahead with lights flashing and siren sounding--the hickey-necked cop from Bloomsburg.

MJ watched the car speed up the grade until it disappeared around a curve, then MJ re-joined the highway and followed along cautiously, taking care to blend with the traffic.

Here the highway was split with a grassy median down the center, and MJ moved into the left-most lane.

When he found a place where the grass strip levelled out, he slowed and pulled onto the left shoulder, then crossed the strip and joined traffic in the other direction.

Wedging himself between two slow-moving trucks, he passed the exit for Bloomsburg, then travelled several miles further to get off at the next exit, U.S. 11, heading south.

When he was absolutely sure no one was following him, he pulled over next to a farm field and lit a cigarette, pissed to find his hands were shaking. To calm down, he turned on the radio and tuned through the dial searching for some music until he found a static-y Harrisburg station playing Karen Carpenter, "Close to You."

He sat listening for a minute, keeping an eye on the rear-view mirror, then snubbed his cigarette and turned the radio off.

"Close to You." That was Cassie's favorite song. She had put it on a mix tape she made for him, right before they had broken up.

He checked the map, looking for routes to Youngstown that would keep him off major highways.