

## NIGHT DRIVING

by John Coy

Narr: My dad and I are driving west.

Boy: We started this afternoon, and I'm excited because it's my trip to the mountains and we're going to sleep in a tent.

Narr: Ahead, the sun sets in a mix of orange and pink.

Boy: Are we almost there?

Dad: Oh no, it's a long way. We'll do some night driving.

Boy: Why are we going to drive at night?

Dad: It's cooler when the sun is down and we have the road to ourselves. We should see mountains by morning. *(He turns on radio.)*

Narr: Dad turns on the radio and finds a game.

Dad: Listening to baseball helps eat up the miles.

Boy: I imagine the car as a giant mouth gobbling up the road.

Dad: Look, there in the ditch.

Narr: Dad hits the brakes, and pairs of eyes shine.

Dad: Those are mule deer.

Boy: I watch the deer leap a fence and bound into a field.

Dad: Many animals come out at night,

Narr: Dad says.

Dad: Keep your eyes open.

Narr: As we drive Dad unscrews the cap of his thermos.

Dad: Can you take the wheel?

Boy: Sure.

Narr: I watch the lines and steer straight while Dad pours coffee.

Narr: Steam rises from the cup. I like the smell of coffee,  
Boy: but the taste is too strong. As he looks ahead, my dad tells stories about when he was a boy.  
Narr: I look at his face and imagine what he was like. Behind him, the sky is black.  
Boy: In front of us, it's purple.  
Dad: These summer sunsets on the prairie seem to last forever.  
Boy: How late can I stay up?  
Dad: As late as you want.  
Narr: Behind us,  
like a giant's night light,  
the full moon has risen.  
Dad: That moon is so bright,  
Boy: (to Narrator) Dad says,  
Dad: We could drive without headlights.  
Boy: Really?  
Dad: Sure. No cars on a straight road. This is a good spot.  
Narr: He slows down, then clicks off the lights.  
Boy: Wow!  
Narr: The road glows in the moonlight. Dad turns the lights back on.  
Boy: I could still see.  
Dad: Yes,  
Narr: he says.  
Dad: Same moon, but out here, it's so much brighter.  
Narr: Kaflump, kaflump . . . .  
Boy: What's that?

Dad: Sounds like a flat.

Narr: Dad tightens his hands on the wheel as the car bumps to a stop.

Boy: Will we still make it to the mountains?

Dad: Oh yeah. You can help me change it.

Narr: I hold the flashlight as my dad gets tools the trunk. He presses the jack and the car lifts off the ground.

I hand him wheel nuts, and when the spare tire is on, he lets the car down. After he puts the tools away, Dad stretches and rolls his head.

Dad: There's the Big Dipper.

Narr: He shows me how to draw a line from two stars in the Dipper to Polaris, the North Star.

Boy: The sky here is huge,

Narr: and a chorus of crickets chirps.

Boy: I pick up a smooth rock. Watch my fastball. I throw as hard as I can, and the rock sails into the dark.

Narr: Back in the car, the game on the radio has faded,

Boy: so I switch to Western music.

Narr: Dad teaches me cowboy songs, and we sing together.

Boy: A semi passes us with its lights glowing.

Boy: Dad flashes the headlights so the trucker knows it's safe to pull back in. (*to the narrator*) The trucker flashes back to say thanks.

Narr: We stop at a gas station in a small town.

Boy: While my dad gets the tire fixed, I help the attendant. He lets me pump gas while he washes the windows.

Narr: My dad comes over holding a sharp piece of metal.

Dad: This was in the tire.

Narr: He fills his thermos at the café next door,

Boy: and we each get a doughnut.

Narr: (stuffing doughnut into his mouth) As we leave town,

Boy: two juicy bugs splat against the clean windshield. Let's play the letter game.

Dad: A is ashtray,

Boy: my dad starts.

Narr: I watch until we cross a dry creek gulch.

Boy: B is bridge.

Narr: At Y, Dad points to his mouth and yawns.

Boy: I look over at the green glow of the speedometer. And Z is zero.

Narr: It's cooler now. I reach in back for my blue jacket and put it on.

Dad: Do you want to rest a while?

Narr: Dad asks.

Boy: Oh no, I'm not tired one bit.

Narr: No stations come in clearly, so Dad turns off the radio. He sips coffee and tells me more stories about growing up.

Boy: He tells me about his dad, who died when I was little.

Dad: Your grandpa was left-handed and a fine pitcher. He might have played in the big leagues, but he hurt his arm one summer when he threw too much. He always loved baseball.

Boy: I love baseball.

Dad: He would have liked knowing you.

Boy: (to Narrator) My dad stops talking and I know he's thinking about his dad.  
(to Dad) I wish my grandpa was still here. We drive awhile in silence, and I listen to the hum of the engine.

Narr: We stop at a wayside rest where the outhouse smells bad. Inside, it's dark and flies buzz. I hold my breath, hurry to finish, then rush outside.

(Dad laughs.)

Narr: My dad laughs.

Dad: Let's go down to the water.

Narr: As we walk, a cloud crosses the moon.

Dad: Use your night vision, and let your eyes adjust to the dark.

Boy: At the river, I put my hands in. *(to Dad)* That water's cold.

Dad: It's from snow in the mountains.

Boy: My dad bends down, cups water and splashes his face.

Narr: I do too. The cool air on my wet face feels good. We squat together and listen to the gurgling water.

Boy: As we walk to the car, I look up at a million stars *(to Dad)* and still find Polaris.

Narr: Now we play an alphabet game of people.

Dad: A is Abraham Lincoln. *(begins a story about Lincoln -Boy listens patiently)*

Boy: B is Babe Ruth. *(Dad begins another long story about Ruth.)*  
My dad tells stories about each person, so this game lasts a long time.

Narr: There are no other cars out now, and we've been driving for hours.

Boy: I hear the thp, thp, thp of tires rolling over the cracks in the road and wonder if I'll stay awake. I look over at my dad's heavy eyes.  
*(to Dad)* Are you getting tired?

Dad: Yes,

Narr: he says.

Dad: We need a break.

Narr: Ahead, orange letters flash

Boy: E-A-T

Dad: EAT!

Dad: Stopping for breakfast,

Narr: Dad says,  
Dad: is my favorite part of at night.  
Boy: Inside people are talking and eating. A cowboy is singing to the jukebox.  
Wait: You sing as bad as you tip,  
Narr: says the waitress.  
Cook: Worse!  
Narr: says the cook, and everyone laughs.  
Boy: The waitress is surprised when she comes to our booth.  
Wait: You're up early.  
Boy: Late,  
Narr: I say,  
Boy: We've been night driving and I stayed up the whole time.  
Narr: When the food comes, I'm glad the pancakes are so big they cover the plate.  
Boy: Night driving makes me really hungry,  
Narr: I tell my dad.  
Dad: Me too,  
Narr: he says, and we both smile.  
Boy: After we eat, dad reads the paper and drinks more coffee.  
Narr: Behind him, the sky is lighter.  
Boy: When Dad finishes, we walk outside. Suddenly, I see giant peaks, sharp as bear's teeth, that push into the sky. (to Dad) Look, Dad, the mountains.  
Boy: I feel his hand on my shoulder, and way up high, I see snow sparkling in the light. We made it,  
Boy: Let's go set up the tent.