

Temptation behind the Trucker's T

Mom always knew how to pick us up, no matter what the problem was, no matter how far down we had managed to slip. Mom just had the knack for it. See, it was a regular summer day filled with the regular things: stagnant pool, blazin' sun, flies buzzing at the back screen door. Mike and I had forgotten that outside world beyond the door and now lay heavy on the couch and carpet. I, constantly trying to situate on a summer's couch that never feels comforting, wrestled once more with the bolsters and cushions to keep them beneath and behind me, praying for enlightenment by the radiation before me. Mike, on the rug, was inevitably ignoring the pains of a strained neck, a common symptom to those who keep falling for the idea that the floor is more comfortable. His pillow, now arched in a C, was, at best, a momentary relief, but would by commercial break hit the epitome of discomfort. Our Levi cutoffs and oversized tees were clinging to the skin it grabbed for and added nothing to the ease we sought. In short, we were caught by the sun's tractor beam and were lethargic and bored. It was the time between the morning cartoons and the evening sitcoms that we had fallen into and there was nothing to make us move, no matter how pointless it seemed to watch. In about an hour and a half, the Who's The Boss?-All in the Family-Three's Company scheduling would begin and bring us to mental nausea as it always does to children of innocent minds. What parents don't seem to understand is that the television is never a substitute for outdoor growth, it's just an object to make us feel a momentary relief from the thought of doing nothing in the times where nothing is a temptation, in the times where nothing seems the only something. In addition to that, what eleven-year-old isn't turned on by anything with cars, boats, or spaceships, whether it is a cartoon or a documentary? Spaceships, specifically, were a specialty for Mike and I and we would constantly remark to each other how we'd be leading a mission to Saturn, our unanimous favorite planet, one of these days. All you had to do is mention the word spaceship and our minds would start soaring.

As abrupt as she always is, she was there. In her hand flashed an item that holds all possibilities to a kid my age, the most sacred article, before the age of women, the age of driving, or even the age of fire: money. It's what the older kids deal with. It's what Mom and Dad assure me will make happiness when I'm big like them. It's age in a tangible form. Money.

"Your mission is simple," she stated, using her age's form of entertainment. "One gallon of two percent white--I repeat, white, not chocolate--milk from Cumberland's. Do you accept?" Well, how could we refuse? She held before us what we were told to cherish from everyone of respect in our lives, something that we greedily agreed to. She held us by the eyes, the far-less-vulgar precursor to what teens constantly complain about being held by in times of futility. Yes, Mom had us soaring and before I could nod my head or notice how far open my jaw crept, the five dollar bill was jerked from her hand, gawked at momentarily, and slammed into Mike's newly-comfortable cutoffs. The sticky shackle of a remote in my hand terminated the Thunder Cats and aided my positioning towards the back screen door. There it paused on the black plastic handle. "You guys be careful. Remember that kid, Randy, from down the street that everyone thought ran

away. People are talking about him maybe being hurt. Remember, there's crazy drivers and bad--"

"Bye Ma!" I shouted and was echoed by Mike's voice; his caught in the closing of the door behind us. Yeah, we knew *Randy Hoginstern*. He had no friends. At least, now he had no friends since the big kids started picking on him calling him baby and stuff. Since then, we all just kind of went on without him. You know how kids can be. Who wants to be friends with a baby? Especially a baby that the big kids didn't like. We left.

I'm sure as soon as the fly, who had been groveling for freedom since GI-Joe, drifted upward in the humid mass of summer we all entered into, it knew it was much better off on the other side of the screen door. The air coagulated in our pores and greased our sloppy coifs back. It seeped into our shorts and made them cling tighter to our legs. It dappled our faces with perspiration and glistened in the blazing sun. Mike raced ahead with the urge of leadership that always comes when a kid is "carrying the money." I trailed close behind, off the porch, through the trees, over the mulch pile to the Broaches' lawn. We were cutting through to Kuser Road, which would bring us to Cumberland Farms Convenience about a mile down the way.

It's kind of peculiar how on a windless humid summer day one can feel the globs of vapor in the air as they're passed in a hurry. And for children, who grew up in the eighties, there's a certain audio track that seems to silently play in the background of everyday life. Whether it be a muffled action theme orchestrated care of the birds or lawnmowers or a full-blown Star Search overture strung by the racing cars off the nearby expressway, there's always that track of music that is subconsciously accepted as normal.

Besides the fire of the sun above and the searing of its refractions on windows and puddles, a new fire burned in our throats as we gasped for air. We had run through the Broaches' back and front yards, passed the elementary school on the starboard side of Kuser and the farmer's stand on the port. Now, we entered a thick of trees, which grew hastily around Kuser and stood as a threshold to the small bridge that stretched Kuser over a creek below. This was the spot that Mike and I would go when we had avoided the fated solar tractor beam and managed to conjure enough energy to skip a stone or two. Today, though, we had a mission to fulfill and felt overwhelmingly mature for such child's play. Passing the bridge we entered the half-mile stretch which would lead to Cumberland's. This is when the abdominal cramp, searing throat and heavy breathing beckoned for a low impact pace and the sun above saw chance to prey once again. Of course, the sun succeeded in making our hyperactivity decline to a walker's pace, but today, the money in our cutoffs symbolized strength and allowed us to continue on. The dust, which flew around us, left a trail diffusing back to the trees, which were about four hundred-some yards back. Mike had dropped back to me or I inched up to him and now we both kicked adjacent soil with our Reebok high tops, their laces suffering gravel in an untied state. On both our minds were most likely the pool we were too tired to attempt at home since the oversized tees were constricting and the elastic on our briefs felt three sizes too small. The claustrophobia of my toes in their heated traveling case sent shivers up the front of my feet, oozing discomfort everywhere.

Kuser, as you may not know, is a lonely flat of asphalt. Since Hamilton Square isn't a booming megalopolis, or at least wasn't when I left it in 1988, it's connected to larger areas, such as Trenton, by roads like Kuser. And normally the only people who

drive these stretches are the truckers, the vacationers, and the members of the working class that have the fortunate jobs of carpooling to and from cities like Trenton on a daily basis. Since “rush hour,” however tamed that word can be for Kuser, wasn’t due for a while, the road was basically bare. Hamilton Square, past the thick of trees, doesn’t have what some towns consider prairies. It doesn’t have meadows filled with heather or pussy willows. No, on either side of Kuser Road, we passed the plain ol’ fields of grass and Queen Anne’s Lace; the, to an eleven year old, towering weeds with what looks like spit deposited on them. And inclusion to that, they also have a lot of one more thing: Japanese beetles. On this humid, bugger-of-a-day, and I say that for two reasons, the beetles were swarming. And as native motorists know too well, the bastards never steer clear of on-coming traffic. Needless to say, the bugs had found us and when one of those fellas gets stuck in your hair, you know. Why? Because it holds on with everything it has and makes a sickening buzzing sound in the act of doing it. And after ten minutes of wrestling and rolling, screaming and beating, when you think the insect is gone, demolished, for good, that’s when the buzzing resumes.

On this day, after avoiding some of their kamikaze attacks, Mike and I mustered some sense to quicken our pace. The sun had thrown everything it had at us and was now detracting a bit to let way for a cool night. In addition to darkness, Mom worried about us walking Kuser when rush hour was going and warned us of the “crazy drivers” who lurked after the sun had went to bed. Up by the watermark mirages and clouded mixtures of dust and Japanese beetles, down by the horizon of Kuser ahead, there was an unsettling. It seemed that the rustle in the grass and the tumble in the weeds had awakened when the black and gold first appeared. With the still-beating sun above, the animal seemed ablaze with dancing light, consumed in flames. Its stealthlike purr as it controlled the sky seemed to insinuate motions of a panther or a lynx, one that we had never seen on a National Geographic on summer’s couch day, but that we knew existed. Mike scootched me to the grass beyond the dirt beyond the asphalt beyond the white line notioning a shoulder. I felt like I was escaping from something as I saw the beast tear up the grit from the roadside up ahead. Without the telltale roar of a diesel combustible engine, I wasn’t sure if this, this thing approaching was to attack by hit-and-run or mutilate and devour as beasts of the wild are more accustomed to. As the golden curtain slipped up past the shimmering eyes of the animal, it gave a wide-eyed stare as if it knew what it wanted. As the sheen slipped past its lips, I could see a lubricated chrome grin and aluminum teeth gritting. Mike and I pushed deeper into the field to avoid the massive creature and crouched down under the tall blind of foliage, touching some of the spit-weeds.

Then there it was, with the distinctive purr we heard on the horizon, before us. The air brakes sounded and the full body of the creature was stationary before our gaze. It’s black skin glistening, its hubcaps glowing with a silvery anticipation. The animal gave one last puff and release, then stopped its purr. Silence. Mike and I watched as its cab door opened and the driver jumped down from the black seat with catlike jerks.

He was a curious fellow, standing about six feet tall in front of the ferocious machine. It was like a master-blaster from the Mad Max flick that I had once seen, the master being the driver, and the blaster that he rode was the beast. Though for some unknown reason, I was more scared by far of the one that resided behind the wheel.

“Betcha think I don’t see you, eh?” his words cut into the silence, and caused us to cling closer to the ground beneath, reeds poking, Japanese beetles claiming hair for their cause. “Betcha think I don’t know who you are!” He reached around the back of his light grey jumpsuit and grabbed a red handkerchief from his back pocket, then mopped the sweat from his forehead and returned the flag to its home. We clutched even tighter, Mike staring dead at the driver, the driver seemingly leering back. “That’s it, Chief, there ya go,” he called as Mike simultaneously let loose his grip on the weeds and rose to his feet.

“What are you doing,” I whispered with a hot breath, a beetle before me launched from the steam. He began walking closer towards the master-blaster. Scared, I jumped up myself.

“Y-ya can’t just park that thing in the middle of the road! It’s against the law.”

“Easy, now, Chief, calm down,” the man smiled back. He now reached back into the cab and produced a map of the Garden State. “See, I’m just a bit lost, here, Chief, and was wondering if you could set me back on track.” Mike had about hit the roadside now and I began to cautiously catch up to affirm a strong stance behind him.

“We have to get going before it gets dark,” was the only thing I could muster as a response. It suited my needs though, and I grabbed at Mike’s wrist and pulled him along towards where the creature came from. Mike had all the while regained his sense of orientation.

“Did you see his eyes? Man, he’s got freaky eyes,” he tried to whisper. I dared not look back for fear that I would, like Mike, be caught in his--

--Say, I betcha you’re wondering what kind of stuff I’ve got in my...well, in the back, here,” the driver said. “I betcha you’d be awfully surprised at the toys I’m carrying with me.” he sang making the word “awfully” appear to have over six syllables.

“Mister, we’ve got to get going,” Mike threw at him.

“Relax, Chief! The milk will be there for another twenty minutes, ya’ve got some time.” At this, we froze dead in our tracks and felt the prying wonder that boys everywhere know all too well. It’s the wonder that causes them to stare a bit longer at roadkill or to climb a bit further up the unstable oak. It’s the fascination that provokes high-speed bike chases and careless, full-throttle sprints over an iced-over creek. That wonder was strong in us now and we both turned around. “Don’t tell me, fellas, that you don’t feel the slightest bit of...of *wonder* for what’s in my big buddy here. Come on! I mean, what kind of stupid, idiotic, moron could pass up the chance to see the latest in child entertainment.” The names were on the right target and the man had us lured when he said *entertainment*, but when he mentioned the word *child*, we were off like a switch.

“No thanks, Mister, we’ve got to get going,” Mike yelled back again as he pulled me back. I hesitated a bit to glance towards his eyes which were hidden beneath a Hybrid Seeding Company’s emblem emblazoned on a baseball cap, complete with the rim folded in an upside down U, or trucker’s T. The shadow that was cast blocked any real color that resided there, but in that instant, I looked and swear I saw *something*.

“Aw, that’s really too bad, Chief. All the big kids would kill for an opportunity like this,” he responded, making us produce an “about face.” He had us by the eyes. “Yep, it sure is a shame letting all these unused toys go to waste. Guess I’m just going to have to just trash ‘em now!” He turned towards the door and squeezed its handle tight. I stared at the markless exterior of the creature itself. Aside from various bits of chrome

and aluminum in the essential places, the creature was completely black, no scuffs, no dust, no mud even on the retreads.

“Whadda you mean `trash them?’” Mike asked. He once again stared at the driver’s face; I was caught by the trailer.

“What? Pardon? Oh, yeah. See, Chief, the company that made these state-of-the-art game systems made too many of them. And he said that if I couldn’t find anything else to do with it, to just throw it away, get it? Kaput! Anyway, nice talking to ya. I guess I can find my own way out of here.” He stepped back into the cab and slammed the door making Mike jog up past the sixteen or so wheels towards the front. I slowly ran the fingers of my right hand across the alabaster belly of the animal. It felt strangely cool, possibly air-conditioned. The driver started the purr once again allowing the air brakes and other internal mechanisms to give a puff and pop.

“Can I see what you’ve got, Mister? I mean, since you’re gonna throw them away anyway?” Mike asked. I could see from where I was the driver’s elbow and forearm on the windowsill. Mike stared up into the jam.

“I know. It’s getting pretty late and rush hour is gonna start soon. Plus you’re partner there is in a hurry to pick up some milk.” Did I tell him we were going to the store for milk, I wondered. I approached the cab and noticed Mike was locked into a stare with the driver. I put my arm around his shoulder and tried to direct him away, but he didn’t budge. “I guess I’ve got a minute if you do, Chief!” the driver chuckled and cut the purring once again. He stepped out of the vehicle and closed the door behind him. Then he walked by us and around the back of the beast. It’s cool skin sent a chill as the creature was passed. Mike urged us closer.

“I just want to see what he’s got. Don’t worry.” He had forgotten all judgment the money-leadership in his pocket had brought him, even the money himself. Now, he followed in the path that the swaying red handkerchief recently moved. With the clunk of metal and the drop of a lock, the back doors of the creature were thrust open right in front of us and as we walked around them, we could see the master stepping up into the creature. A gush of cool air blew in our faces and comforted our swollen temples.

“You boys ready?” With that the driver threw a switch and fluorescent lighting illuminated the insides. At the far other end there were two spaceship simulator-type pods which were covered with red and blue LED lights, blinking and shining, an obvious enticement to anyone the age of eleven. I glanced down at my camouflage watch/compass and noted that rush hour was close to beginning, though surprisingly, there wasn’t a car or truck in sight, I mean besides this, this--

--“What you’re looking at is the latest, greatest in interactive video gaming, it combines twenty-four surround sound speakers pumping authentic, realistic sounds with a global-vision 3D imaging screen. The entire modulator shifts and moves as the experience inside would, be it a roller coaster, a whitewater rapids ride, or...or a *spaceship*. You like spaceships, Chief?” The master asked Mike as he proceeded towards the far end and notioned for us to follow. Mike grabbed the bumper and hoisted himself up onto the sheet metal entrails. It, too, was painted obsidian.

“Mike, we’ve gotta run,” I whispered, but he kept inching closer to the pods.

“See, you boys want real. This is real. You want adventure; I’ve got your adventure. I’ve got your excitement, your enthusiasm, your thrill, and it’s all right here. And here’s the best part, boys: it’s absolutely free! Now I can tell that you boys probably

have folks that think you're little kids that think you can't do anything. I bet you know boys who treat ya like you're little babies, well let me tell you this. After you play this game, you will be respected by all those guys whether they're in your grade or seventh or eighth. Hell, even you're parents will treat you like you're older. After you play this game, you'll feel smarter and stronger and richer. Yeah, you like money, don't ya? Well, this game is sure to give you a lot of that as soon as you step out of it. Just think about it, boys, people will be throwing money right at you because you will be smarter and stronger and richer, just like I said. And you can tell those kids that *they're* the ones acting immature and you can spend money like that five that you've got in your pocket there on whatever you want, be it candy, cars, whatever. Let's face it, boys, with just one game here, you'll get respect. And we all know how hard that stuff is to get around here, don't we?" his grin oozed.

"Let's go, Mike. It's getting dark."

Mike blurted out, "How do we play? I mean, if we wanted to?"

"Now that's an interesting question," the master answered. He again took the red handkerchief from his pocket and dragged it along his forehead, which appeared to be sweating now more than when we were outside. "Ya see, since you guys are the first to play this game, I'm not quite sure with its operations. What I'm guessing is that you sit here and put your feet on the levers here. Then you press this big button to start and the rest is up to you. Jump in!" Mike approached, staring at the master. He nodded and smiled, then nudged Mike into the pod seat. There, the door closed from above.

All of a sudden, I felt urgency inside of me. It was terror. It was panic and fear and I knew Mike was in danger. I ran up beside the driver and started pounding on the glass-tinted door, screaming that we had to get home and that it was getting late. The next thing I knew, the driver had grabbed me by the shoulder and thrown me into the other pod reassuring me with his sinister voice and cold eyes that it would be a lot of fun and that all big boys do what they're told.

"Come on, Chief, can't you act like a big boy like Mike here?" The last thing I saw before the hatch door sealed locking me in was a clear view of the driver's eyes. It was like one of those messed up photographs where the eyes are all funny and red, I'm sure of it. Except where the white normally is, I mean, around the red part, it was jet-black. And the rim around his eye was surrounded by red veins protruding from the skin. Mike was right, his eyes were freaky! In fact, they were horrible. I felt, after one look almost nauseated. I banged on the tinted door, but could see nothing outside. Suddenly the lights inside shut off and the 3D screen turned on.

"Hello, Don. Welcome to the Host-Activated Demo Experience System," a woman's voice stated. "It is the first fully-interactive game which constantly recreates itself real-time based on the user's emotions as it goes on. In order to play, read the screen and press the button below. Thank you."

Before me was a gigantic dashboard with levers and buttons of all different colors. Forget the customary red, blue, yellow and green. This array of button colors even put Crayola to shame. There was a steering wheel, an authentic aviator mask, and vents for regulating environment temperature. I was astounded! This was the coolest thing I had ever seen. Say, maybe this guy wasn't so bad after all, I thought as the screen lit up with about a page of words. I mean, he let us ride it for free.

At the bottom of the list was in red blinking letters “**PRESS BUTTON TO BEGIN**” and it notioned to a dead-set button in the center. Behind me was a screen with examples of the games: rides, racing, even a spaceship ride to Saturn, just like he said. On the right was a list of the top scorers. I was determined and reached for the red button. It symbolized, as the man said, respect. Suddenly, the glowing button before me recalled an image in my mind: the bloodshot red eyes of the driver outside, which now, in my head, revealed only one thing: emptiness. Behind the reverberations of the woman’s voice prompting me to press the button, I felt a purring outside. Now I began to worry once again.

“Relax, Don. The sound you hear outside is just the generator for these Experience Systems to work. Read the paragraph and press the button,” the woman calmed me. Yes, read the paragraph, press the button. Then I can play. Then I can fly a spaceship to Saturn like Mike is probably doing right now. Then I can be respected and...

The thoughts whirred in my mind. I began to read the paragraph.

The Host-Activated Demo Experience System is based on emotions...blah blah blah blah blah Please make sure that you’re belted in and have no neck or back injuries blah blah blah blah blah to ensure safety as well as precaution this pod is equipped with a yellow emergency exit switch on the floor by your right foot blah blah blah blah blah to avoid life liability on our company of injury or damage to your health, you’re depressing of the button below will signify your releasing of your mind, body, and soul.

PRESS BUTTON!

As I reached for the button before me, my mind echoed the words I had just skimmed past. Something felt peculiar about the final phrase. Then suddenly, the fear in me arose again as I recalled the last word: soul. I screamed aloud and jerked the yellow lever by my feet. As I bolted out of the seat of the pod, I rushed past the driver, daring not to look at his eyes again, and jumped off the back into the dust below, once again feeling the heat, the humidity and the bugs. I fell to the ground.

“Fine, ya stupid brat! You baby! Yeah, that’s right. You’ll always be a baby! You’ll have no friends. Fine! Leave.” He jumped out of the back and slammed the doors shut, bolting them. I hoped Mike had left the pod too, but couldn’t remember if his door had opened or was still closed. I hoped, now, that Mike had read the paragraph and didn’t sign away his soul to the master who now stepped up in the cab and jerked the door closed. The purr was fierce as the creature peeled off down towards the horizon facing home. Just as it appeared, it was gone in the dust, with a now black and copper glint from the setting sun. I coughed at the grit in the air and found my way to my feet.

There I was, alone, standing in the middle of Kuser halfway into a vacant rush-hour twilight. I stared where the black had vanished and said a silent prayer.

“What was it that got you?” entered my ears from behind. I must’ve jumped about six feet in the air. It was Mike. When I came to my senses, I grabbed him and hugged him hard. He, unhesitantly, hugged me back and smiled.

“Mike, I thought you, I mean, I--”

“Guess I’m a pretty good hider when it comes to fields, huh?”

“Yeah,” I beamed.

“So, what was it that got you? The list too?” he asked. The list? Wait, oh, yeah! The list.

“Right. How could there be a list of the top scorers if we were the first ones to play the game? I also read the fine print in that paragraph,” Something big guys do. “It said something about my soul. It was creepy. Real Creepy. God, you were right about that guy’s eyes, though. They were freaky as--”

“--No, I mean, didn’t you read the list?” he interrupted.

“Yeah. Scorers, so?”

“Did you read number eleven?” I guess I hadn’t actually read it, just skimmed it. He got me there. I realized I still had some learning to do if I wanted to be a real big guy.

“No,” I answered, “why?”

“Never mind,” he said. “Come on. It’s getting late!” We both continued on towards Cumberland’s to pick up the gallon of white, not chocolate, milk, retorting to each other about how that ‘stupid, idiotic, moron’ thought he found a couple of babies and didn’t expect us to be as big, as smart, as we were.

To finish off, Mom picked us up at the store and we told her why we were late, but didn’t believe us as all parents seem to do. She was kind of upset, but relieved that nothing had happened to us with all those ‘crazy drivers’ and ‘bad people’ in this world. To be perfectly honest, she was downright happy that we didn’t come across one of those fellas only to be dumped in a *field* somewhere in Hamilton Square.

As for number eleven on the list of top scorers that the Host-Activated Demo Experience System proudly displayed, Mike never told me who it was and until this day, I’m still not sure. But, truthfully, I have a pretty good idea as to who it might have been: a victim of those ‘crazy people’ out there who we had previously thought ran away.

Remember, they come in all shapes and sizes and may appear as gentle as a lamb, but could be someone or something far worse than you could ever imagine, just like the driver that Mike and I encountered. Watch their eyes, because even though a person can change his hairstyle, his clothes, his accent, his looks, the eyes will forever be a window to the *soul*. They can’t hide that, no matter how full or empty it is. And that’s assuming you’ve got one in the first place. My mom taught me that.