

## From *Climbing the God Tree*:

He's cruising along route 315 going nowhere, and there she is. Her thigh is what he notices about her first. Long, really long, in tight jeans, she's stuck it out then curved it in and around a utility pole like a backwards question mark. She's blond, same as his wife, only his wife's hair is short. Everything about his wife is short. This hair swirls out and about like an animal's tail, like something with a mind of its own.

As he lets up on the accelerator, braking, coaxing the Plymouth Fury to an easy stop beside the girl, she whips her arm behind her head and yanks at the hair, stretching it down in front of her neck like a shield. She leans into the window he rolls down, passenger's side, takes her sweet time about it too despite the line of cars building up behind him. "What do you want?" she asks, peering in at him like he's the one with no right to be here.

"Shit," he mutters. An ache of something neglected tugs at his groin. She's barely more than a kid. Her eyes burn with newness. "Excuse me, but do you or don't you need a ride? I thought you were hitchhiking." His voice seems strange, a sound apart from the rest of him. It's been awhile since he's spoken to anybody.

"Depends. If you're a weirdo or a creep, forget it. Are you some kind of pathetic loser?"

The driver of the car behind him leans on the horn. He flips him off in the rear-view, shaking his head, his own hair black as the road but for a slow creep of premature, just-over-thirty grey at his temples, and cut in an uneven line at his neck. He feels a surge of anger. The girl, the car behind him, it's like a conspiracy sometimes. "I didn't know hitchhikers were so bloody picky. Take a bus, why don't you?" A semi, emptied of its load, barrels by a warning. The horn-blower behind him, white car, probably a BMW or a Volvo, is writing down his license plate, he'd just bet on it. The girl shrugs, opens the door and climbs into the car.

"My stepmother has this same damn car, same color and everything. Goes to show you can't escape. Just take me anywhere," she says as he forces the Fury back into traffic, out of the right lane, shooting into the left where things flow a little freer. "Anywhere that's away from here." She tosses her hair over the seat so it's drifting into the back of the car where recently his whole life had been kept, a bag with his toothbrush and shaving stuff, his sleeping bag, a spare clean shirt and HOLLYWOOD-the book he's been reading about a guy who doesn't live his life the normal way but people love him, he makes a movie the way he wants to make it, it's a success naturally, and he lives forever with lots of money.

His eyes leave the road for a second traveling quickly over the girl. Her hair is the color of the moon and just as showy. A hank of it has blown across his arm that rests tenuously on the seat near her shoulder. She's left the window open even though the wind has teeth and it's about to rain. Not a yellowy blond, he rolls his eyes, stares straight ahead at the street again; she's hardly a real blond at all.