**El Dorado**

Tommy Vollman

My grandpa never drove anything but Cadillacs. He owned a few, but his favorite was a midnight blue, two-door, 1978 El Dorado with a red interior.

Grandpa fought in the war and marched into Paris behind Patton. He thought and worked in ways most people didn't understand. I wish he was still here so I could tell him that I think I’m beginning to understand why he thought and worked the way he did. I’d like to tell him that even though it might not be true.

He gave my grandma the one thing she asked to be buried with: an awkwardly sewn, ivory-colored silk neckerchief. He’d sewn it himself, at night, as he marched through western Germany and eastern France. Grandma never wore it around her neck; it stayed tucked in her pocket unless it was wrapped around her hand. But that only happened when she was really anxious. They buried her that way—with the neckerchief wrapped around her hand. It bothered me then and still does.

When I was little, I loved the backseat of grandpa’s El Dorado. It seemed to stretch for miles. I’d lay there with my seatbelt off and pretend to sleep while gramps ran into the grocery or the VFW or the bank. Sometimes I did sleep, but on the really long runs when grandpa would go to all three, I’d crack my eyes just a little—not a lot so that he’d let me stay in there alone—to stare at the slender, prism-shaped lights that came on every time the door opened. I used to pretend that those lights were magic crystals that gave off protective charms whenever they lit up, protective charms that would keep me safe from the things I ran across when I wasn’t lying in the back of grandpa’s Cadillac.

When grandpa went into the store or the VFW or wherever and I was in there alone, it was so goddamned quiet that sometimes I’d talk to myself just to be sure I’d not suddenly, inexplicably gone deaf. Few things really frightened me, but deafness was one of them—the sound of my voice was important. But within that silence, I found something: possibility. Alone, in that backseat, anything was possible. I could think about anything, wish on anything, and if I closed my eyes really, really tight and concentrated really hard, I could be almost anything. At the very least, I could be safe, protected by those magic-crystal backseat charms.

The memories I have of grandpa’s El Dorado are among my most treasured. My other memories—the ones of birthdays and holidays or whatever—seem contrived and foreign, collected but not owned. It’s as if the little boy in them couldn’t possibly be me. I wonder, sometimes, if they're not mine, after all. Maybe they're just one of any number of possible stories that I assemble and attempt to not only make sense of but also take as mine. Perhaps that’s why

they seem so foreign. Maybe it’s on account of the fact that they’ve been systematically recalculated, reassessed, and reconfigured to match the scope and shape of who I think I once was or, at the very least, who I should’ve been.

Perhaps, then, I’m simply reconstructing my past possibilities, and if so, I wonder if who I think I am is actually who I really am.

Sometimes, though, I do recall something that seems real, something that isn’t foreign at all. Sometimes something breaks through, something like that time, about eight years ago, when I played a show at The Rainbow on Sunset in West Hollywood. After my set, I drove down to Will Rogers Beach to meet some friends. They’d invited me down for a bit of late-night surfing, but I couldn't surf because I had a show in Denver the following night. The night after that, I was in St. Louis, followed by Columbus, Ohio, and finally, Harlem. Standing there, at the base of Sunset Boulevard, I could almost feel America yawn and stretch out in front of me. For a moment, everything seemed possible. Maybe it was, and if it was, I hope it still is.

But I can’t shake the feeling that with all this possibility, I might be foolish not to worry a little bit. There's the possibility that all my hopes and dreams could come true, but there's also the possibility that something really, really bad could happen, which scares the shit out of me. Now that I have kids, that notion is even more terrifying. There’s so much more at stake, so much more to lose, so many possibilities for really bad, wicked, awful shit to happen.

I wish I could filter out the negative possibilities, get rid of them for good. Quantum physics and existentialism make it pretty clear that I can’t, so the thought of all these negative possibilities keeps me up too late and beats on me when I’m awake. My mind has become a snare drum.

But if I can’t filter the negative possibilities then maybe I need some protection. Maybe I need some protection for me and my family, for everyone I know and love and care about. I wish I could protect everyone. Nobody really deserves to suffer.

And so I think about grandpa’s Cadillac and that magic crystal light that went on every time the door opened, the one I used to pretend gave me protection and helped keep me safe. If only I could find that car and put the key in the ignition and open and close the door over and over and over and over again until everyone and everything was protected and safe.

If only.

But I’m sure that car is long gone by now.