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Len went to college for one-and-a-half semesters until he got suspended for who-knows-what violation – the story was different every time. Instead of returning to campus when they let him back a few months later, he took $8,000 from his bank account (his savings from a brief stint as a high school pot dealer), got two Chinese tattoos, and drove his parents’ Toyota all the way across the country to Los Angeles. He didn’t know anyone and didn’t have any idea what he was going to do. He wanted to do everything.

Sleeping for free on a couch in an apartment rented by gang members, Len tried novel-writing, club promoting, modeling, and finally rapping. He found an agent, wasting his money making awful demos. It took him nine months to realize he wasn’t ever going to be the next Eminem, or even Vanilla Ice.

He spent his last week in California passing out on Venice Beach with a fifth of Wild Irish Rose under a plastic tarp in case the tide was unusually high. He contemplated moving in with a post-op transsexual named Seven until he (or she) stole his cell phone one night while he was sleeping on the sand. Shrugging his shoulders, Len spent his last $300 on a plane ride back to Connecticut, expecting the welcome of a tired soldier returning home after a long, unsuccessful campaign.

Instead, he couldn’t understand why his mother and stepfather didn’t remember their son, but only the $40,000 they had lost by sending him to college. When he got out of the taxi from the airport, a short yellow note taped to the door told him in five words that he wasn’t welcome. So Len walked a half-mile to his grandparents’ condo. The day my friends and I called home after our sophomore year at college, we found the same cryptic e-mail marked URGENT in our inboxes. The heading read: The Ninja Cowboy has returned: Be Ready. We just rolled our eyes. We knew he’d be back.

No one really remembers when Len started calling himself Ninja Cowboy. He claims he had a vision while tripping on Acid with our friend Alex at a Dave Matthews concert. It’s his rapping name, his persona behind the microphone, whatever the hell that means. Lately, it’s become the punch line of all our jokes. Hey man, don’t skip class tomorrow, you’ll be the next Ninja Cowboy! Dude, you better get that internship at Wachovia or
you might as well go to California with the Ninja Cowboy this summer.

We all went to prep school, one of the best, where getting into a good college is expected. Dropping out does not happen. Most of my friends are business majors. I'm in a five-year accounting and finance program. This summer I have an internship at my father's insurance company. The thought of spending the next 30 years in a cubicle sounds pretty crappy, but it's better than sleeping on a beach.

I always have to pick Len up because I live so close to him. It's not something I like doing. As I pull up to his grandparents' condo, I see him outside without his shirt on, cross-legged, happily slapping two large rocks like bongo drums. Jesus. When he hears my car, he jumps up, leaps over the rocks, and sprints across the front lawn. I unlock the passenger side door.

A grip-changing, fist-bumping, back-slapping handshake that looks like something from a rap video. Who does this kid think he is anyway?

"Hey Jeff! what's going on buddy?"

"Not too much. Ready to party."

"Good, good. Can I smoke a cigarette in your car?"

"Are you out of your mind? My parents would destroy me if they found out I let you smoke in here."

"Why do you always care so much about what your parents think? I mean, what's the worst that could happen if they found out?"

"Well, they could take my car away. Or stop paying for college."

"That might not be such a bad thing."

"Can we please just stop talking about this? I really don't want to get into some stupid fucking discussion. You can't smoke in here, so drop it."

"No big deal, Jeff. Shit, it's Friday night and we're going to be drinking cheap beer with our friends in half an hour. Why would I want to start the night by arguing?"

As we shoot up the onramp and drive southbound on I-91, the acres of shade tobacco farms with scattered rickety barns slowly melt into a world of concrete and billboards advertising strip clubs and sports bars. It's that time of day you can only appreciate in the summer. At about 8:00 it's not quite daytime anymore, but the sun still wants to remind you that it
exists. Blasts of deep pink, orange, and magenta ignite the clouds and drench the highway, one last convincing burst of color in the darkening sky.

Neither of us gives a shit about the sun. We’re going to a party, to get wasted with our friends, and we have to take care of some business first. We get off the highway at Exit 46, the hip-hop booming out of my speakers. As we creep to the first stoplight, I turn the music way down, to Len’s disappointment. It’s an instinct because I know where we are.

The North End of Hartford is one of the worst neighborhoods in New England. Our suburban parents can spout out newspaper statistics about the appalling teen pregnancy and murder rates and about the segregated school system, but we see this place with our own eyes every weekend. Len and I drive past buildings with more boards than windows, past the shopping carts and useless fences; past the dealers standing in front of the Flamingo Inn, past Scott’s Jamaican Bakery and the West Indian Social Club. Everywhere, black faces stare at us. Len smiles back, but I only see anger, indifference, and surprise.

Finally, Vanessa’s Grocery and Package Store. There are only two reasons for preppy white kids driving a new Volvo SUV to pull into this parking lot. It’s either to buy drugs at the nearby housing projects or to get booze without a fake ID. We’re in a Puerto Rican neighborhood, so the posters that crowd the front of the store advertise Goya beans, food stamps, and empanadillas—all in brightly painted Spanish.

I give Len twenty dollars for a 30-pack of Bud Light. He promises to pay me back but I know he won’t. Len gets out because I never get out. We’ve been going to this place to buy beer for four years and I still don’t get out. Instead, I wait until Len goes inside, lock the car doors, and pretend not to stare at the three Puerto Rican men outside the store drinking out of paper bags and laughing.

It always takes him forever. What the hell is he doing? It’s been at least fifteen minutes. No, only five. I turn on the radio but make sure the volume is low. I watch a fat little kid speed by on a bike. On the front steps of an apartment, an ancient man who looks exactly like Uncle Remus uses his beer bottle to serenade anyone unlucky enough to walk by his stoop. He belts out the chorus to an old Temptations song while two girls curse him out loudly in Spanish.
Finally, Len strolls out of the store, jabbering away with Pedro. We think Pedro is the storeowner’s son, but we’re not sure. He doesn’t speak any English. You would never know it by the way Len is laughing with him, slapping his back, helping him with the case of beer hidden in a brown paper bag. Len only pauses to salute a grinning prostitute on the other side of the street. I unlock the car when they get close and give Pedro my best fake smile.

“¡Cerveza buena! Usted se emborracha esta noche. ¡Encuentre a muchas chicas!”

“Um, thanks, Pedro. Get in the car, Len.”

I’m not here to make small talk with someone who I can’t even understand. As soon as Len gets in, I put my foot on the gas and start backing out of the parking lot. The Puerto Rican men put down their beers and stare at us.

Back on the highway, the dim urban sprawl slowly turns greener as we speed out of Hartford and return to a land of golf courses, Mobil stations, and Hummers that will never feel anything but smooth asphalt hugging their tires. We’re passing through Wethersfield, Ryan’s town. It’s just another cluster of trees and boxes that adds to the quaint monotony of suburban Connecticut.

Len turns up the radio until the rearview mirror shakes each time the bass erupts from the speakers. It’s the new G-Unit single, so he raps along with 50 Cent, not caring about anything else. He doesn’t have to think about the case of beer in the backseat, the parents who will disown me if anything happens to their car, the price of gas, the internships and jobs those same parents bother me about every night at dinner. He’s just rapping.

I’m horrible with directions and I think we’re coming close to Ryan’s exit. It’s Len’s turn to contribute something to this trip. I turn off the radio.

“Hey, shut up. You know how to get to Ryan’s, right?”

“Yeah, it’s easy. You get off at this exit, take a right after the ramp. Then you take your first right, then your second left, and that should be Ryan’s street. I’m sure we’ll see Chuck and Dan’s cars in front of his house.”
"Thanks."
"Now turn the music back up!"

I follow his directions perfectly, but when I take the last turn a few minutes later, we don't see a stream of cars and drunk college kids. Instead, three vacant bulldozers sit next to some huge oak trees and a sign telling everyone that this is the future site of Deer's Run, a premier outlet shopping center. As we start arguing, a deer suddenly jumps out from behind the trees, sprints across the road, and disappears between two houses on the other side. Probably the last real deer to enjoy Deer's Run.

Being guys, we don't want to call Ryan for directions so we drive around for another half an hour before giving up.

"Just call Ryan, Jeff."
"All right, fine, give me your phone."

Ring...Ring...Ring...Ring...

Hey, what's up, you've reached the cell phone of Ryan O'Halloran. I'm not around right now, but leave me a message and I'll get right back to you.

"Shit."

We're lost again. It's almost midnight. I know, because I check the clock on the dashboard about every 30 seconds. We should have taken a left at the last golf course we passed, but I was worried that a man on the sidewalk had seen Len take a huge final swig of his beer and toss the empty can onto the road.

"Why do you always have to litter so much?"
"It's not littering, Jeff and I'll tell you why."
"OK, Ninja Cowboy, enlighten me with some great fucking wisdom."
"Well, it's simple if you think about it. What is this road we're driving over right now?"
"I don't know the name of the street. That's why we're lost, you idiot!"
"No, I mean what is the road itself?"
"Mostly concrete, I guess."
"Exactly. So are sidewalks and parking lots. Probably the foundation of
your house, too."

"So what?"

"Think about what was there before they built this road, or any highway."

"I don't know, trees, fields, ponds, Indians..."

"...Animals, birds, a healthy ecosystem. See Jeff, it's all pollution, it's all litter. Everything humans create pollutes the natural environment. When I throw this beer can out of the car, I'm not throwing it into the woods or into a river, I'm tossing it onto a piece of concrete that sits on land that's already been ruined. Another small piece of metal can't make this road any worse."

"Where the hell did you learn some logic like that?"

"Not in college, that's for sure."

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"HOLY SHIT! Watch out for that guardrail, man. You almost made me spill my beer."

I can clearly see that he's spilled half his beer all over the passenger side.
and I can smell the Budweiser as it seeps into the beige leather stitching of his seat. I'm too wrapped up in my own thoughts to even care.

"Sorry, Len. I, uh... I was just checking out my hair in the rearview mirror. Gotta look slick if there's going to be a bunch of girls at this party."

"Are you kidding me? Do you really think that matters? No girl at the party gives a shit about your hair or even what you're wearing."

"I know, but I just wanted..."

"Dude, they're going to check you out for like a second. You're a good-looking guy so maybe you'll get two, maybe three seconds, but that's it. After that, it's all up to you. Jeff, you know you've got game, you can talk to girls."

"First of all, I know I can talk to girls! I don't need you to tell me that. This isn't even about girls, it's a personal thing. I just don't feel comfortable unless I know I look my best."

"Well, if that's how you want to live your life, go for it. I just think that's pretty ridiculous. I mean, who cares what your..."

"I don't give a fuck about what you think!"

"Oh, believe me, I know that, Jeff."

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It's over. Ryan's not picking up his phone and it's close to 1:30 in the morning. We drive back past more houses, fields and construction sites, most of them unlit. We can't see the street signs, but at this point it doesn't even matter.

Len's actually quiet now. He's realized that he was supposed to call his grandmother if he was going to be out later than 10:00. For the first time, he's not smiling. That's when I realize that he cares. He cares more about his grandparents than I care about school, about getting a job, about my parents, about anything. I want to tell him, but I don't.

We're finally off the highway. To get to Len's grandparents' condo, we have to pass through the center of town. As we glide past the town green, I notice that the sprinkler system is on and that some of the water is shooting into the road. My car is going to get soaked.

For a second I want to roll the windows up and turn on the air conditioning, but of course I don't. Because Len already has his smiling head
out of the car like a dog, waiting to catch a blast of the spray. Because it’s a muggy and refreshing June night that reeks of summer. And because I finally want to get a little wet, too.

SPLASH!

“Wooo-oooo! Ha ha! That was crazy!”

My leather seats are drenched and still smell like skunked beer. It is crazy, but maybe that’s the way it’s supposed to be.

We pull onto the driveway in front of Len’s grandparents’ condo at 1:47 in the morning, almost four hours past his curfew. A dim light suddenly flickers in the downstairs window of the otherwise invisible building.

“Whatever. I’ll deal with them. If they don’t let me in, I, well...I’ve been meaning to sleep on the back porch one of these nights anyway. And it’s not going to rain, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

A short, smooth handshake. Flawless. He springs out of the car, wildly smiling, ready to face his grandparents.

“Hey Len, wait. I’m really sorry about tonight, man. I bet we missed a great party.”

“What are you talking about? Tonight was the best time I’ve had all summer.”

Now it’s over. He runs around to the shadowy backyard with all the stealth and confidence of a real ninja cowboy. I know he’ll be all right tonight.

I leave the windows down, turn the radio off and drive back through a silent suburban jungle of coffee shops, movie stores and police cars, just listening breathing it all in. A bum kids call Cardboard Ralph stumbles out of the shadows, frozen for a moment in the shimmer of my headlights. I swerve and he gives me a stiff, apologetic wave, because he’s anxious to get back to another drunken adventure. I trail him for a few blocks as he swerves past dumpsters and telephone poles, watching his bald head soaking up the moonshine, perfectly happy.

[Chris Vola]