A Drive in the Country
Susan Carlson

In the faded red car they argue. The babies are strapped into yard-sale carseats in the dusty back seat, their stained snowsuits zipped open so they don’t sweat in the sun. The interior of the car smells old and musty, full of other people’s dirt.

"Where were you and Joe all last night? Where did you get the money to go out drinking?” Her lips are tight and thin, her voice even, except for a slight tremor.

His hands tighten on the wheel, he drives faster. She draws her breath in sharply as the tires slip on a patch of ice, then catch again. He continues to accelerate. She studies him as she would a stranger, out of the corner of her eye, seeing his big, blond head, his straight full nose, and narrow blue eyes. In the back seat one of the babies whimpers.

"Can’t you shut them kids up?” he shouts.

The baby begins to scream. She throws the man a look of disgust and jerks her hands through the huge diaper bag at her feet. She draws out a white plastic bottle of water. She turns around in the seat and thrusts the nipple into the wide open mouth behind her. The child’s lips close around the nipple, then he opens his mouth again, snuffles, and begins sucking noisily on the bottle. As the woman sighs and turns back to the front, the two-year-old girl begins to whine. "Want some, too. Meirsty, too, Mama. Want juice, Mama."

She loses her hands in the enormous diaper bag again, jerkily rummaging through diapers, plastic pants, little t-shirts and toys while the child continues its high-pitched, insectile whine. She finds the last bottle after dropping clothing and toys on the slushy car floor. She turns and pushes the drink frantically toward the pleading, dissatisfied sound. The three-year-old boy’s anxious hands find the bottle and pass it to his sister.

"Jesus Christ, “ the father erupts.

The little boy cringes back into his carseat and his big, green eyes move from his mother to his father. His mother pushes herself back into the seat with a sigh.
The man says, "Them brats are drivin' me crazy, always whinin', always needin' somethin'. I gotta get away from this sometimes." For a moment his voice takes on the same pleading, whining tone as the daughter's.

The woman glances at him sideways for a moment, opens her mouth, closes it, then sits very still, staring ahead of her. She takes a deep breath, straightens her shoulders, and says, without looking at him, "We have to go to Welfare." She grips the torn armrest tightly as he accelerates, not glancing at her. She continues to talk, the words racing out of her mouth. "I talked to Linda and she's on this WIC thing and she says that while your kids are little they give out these coupons to get free milk and eggs and cereal and things like that down at the store and you can get your kids on Medicaid to go to the doctor free and get free medicine and we can get food stamps and please, honey, you wouldn't even have to go except once to sign the papers. I could do it all."

"So then all them down at the welfare would think I'm a man that can't support his family. No, Joann. We ain't goin' on no goddamn welfare. Once the government gets its clutches into you, it has a record of you forever, you never escape. You better quit talkin' to that bitch Linda behind my back."

"Norm. Honey. We need the food stamps. We cannot live on oatmeal. The kids need milk and meat and vegetables. No one has to know about it."

"I said no. I can handle it, Joann. I'll earn some money this week. Joe asked me to help him work on some cars. We'll have everything we need. I'll take care of it, just like I always do."

She stares at him, then shakes her head.

"It's always the same, Norm. You say you'll take care of it, but you never do. This time your kids are going to go hungry while your buddy Joe screws around. Eventually you'll find out, just like you always do, that Joe maybe heard from another guy that somebody's cousin might want possible work done on a non-existent car. You can't starve your kids while you sit around waiting for Joe's mights and maybes to take shape. We need food stamps. Maybe I can go down there and get them by myself!" Her voice is a tired monotone.

"That's enough of your shit, Joann. Don't you even think of goin' down there to try and get it on your own. I'll beat your ass 'til you can't even talk about it. I'll find out."

"Oh, God," she says, and "Then you tell me, you just tell me you're going to eat for dinner tomorrow? Your kids' clothes? Your son doesn't even know what we going to do?" She is screaming, knuckles white on the steering wheel. "We need food stamps. We need food stamps. Might be I can go down there and do it myself!"

"That's enough of your shit," he says, voice not looking at her at all, "We ain't goin' on no goddamn welfare."

"Norm, Look out." He does not reply. He says nothing to her at all now and finally he slams on the brakes. Too late. They hit the dog out to the road. An older woman comes to the doorway of the farmhouse yard. The woman says something and watches solemnly from the corner. Norm gets out. He exclaims, "Damn dog nearly wrecked..."
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of goin' down there to try and get no food stamps on your
own. I'll beat your ass 'til you can't see straight. I'll know
about it. I'll find out." He speaks with an even, reasonable
voice, not looking at her at all, but accelerating even more so
that they are flying down the narrow road.

She licks her dry lips and begins again. "But Norm, no
one would have to know but us. We could go over to Baldwin
to shop and nobody would see us. Please, honey."

"I said no."

"Oh, God," she says, and her hands clench into fists.
"Then you tell me, you just tell me, big man, what are we
going to eat for dinner tomorrow? How are we going to get the
kids' clothes? Your son doesn't even have boots. What are
we going to do?" She is screaming now, not watching as his
knuckles whiten on the steering wheel, not even seeing it
coming as his right arm swings over, knocking her into the
corner by the door, slamming her head against the window.

"Shut the fuck up, Joann."

She lifts her head slowly and feels the growing lump on the
side of her head.

The kids howl in the back seat. She looks up and sees a
dog standing in the road ahead of them. They are hurrying
towards it at the same steady speed. She can see now that it
is a mutt. It has the same brownish, wiry look that all mutts
eventually acquire generations gone from a pedigree. The dog
just watches them come. It stands there on the center line,
seeing them and doing nothing. They speed closer. She can
see its eyes now and still it just stands there like a deer hyp-
notized by the headlights, and they're getting closer now and
still it doesn't move. "Norm. Norm, there's a dog in the road.
Look out."

He does not reply. He speeds up. They are almost on it
now and finally he slams on the brakes and lays on the horn.
Too late. They hit the dog and it screams. Two old men run
out to the road. An older woman in an apron stands in the
doorway of the farmhouse. Children run out from the back
yard. The woman says something in Spanish and they stop
and watch solemnly from the corner of the house.

Norm gets out. He examines the front fender and bumper.
"Damn dog nearly wrecked my car." He turns to the old men,
who watch him silently. "Get your fuckin' dog outta my way," he says.

The dog whimpers and shakes in the road. Blood runs out of its mouth. One of the children in the yard begins to cry. The woman in the door turns and says something into the shadows inside the house. A slim young woman comes outside and pulls the three smallest children out of sight behind the house. Norm glares at the silent old men. "Move that thing outta my way." The two men grab the dog's legs and carry it to the side of the road. It yelps once, as they lift it, then lies panting feebly in the grey snow.

Norm sits heavily in the silent car. Then he starts it and drives away, overreving the engine, as the farmhouse people silently watch. She sits slouched against the door, staring as if she sees a car coming.