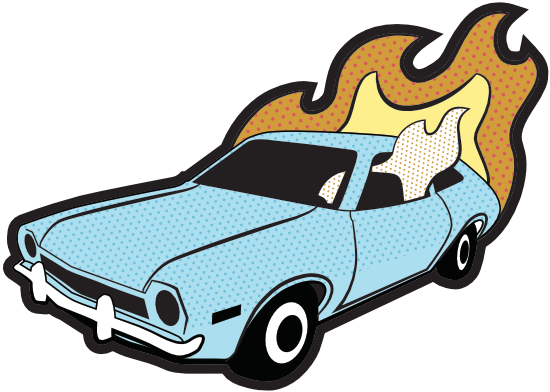
UC Creative Competition (Creative Writing)

Irlam, Connor

A (Sometimes Chilling) Journey through the mind of a mentally unstable woman, Carrie…

And her very cold Girlfriend, Mona.

Home



The air is dormant above the passenger seat. No condensation forms before the headrest, yet her life echoes, radiating across each hydrogen molecule in the cabin. Her emerald portals stare me down as I drive her home. No. Home isn’t where we are going tonight. That is unless you believe the age-old proverb that home is where the heart is. But that’s nomadic. And I’m more of the grounded type. Maybe by circumstance, maybe by choice. Maybe by neither, maybe by both. Perhaps one day I’d appreciate some more air-time. So perhaps, say; I let myself rise from the pavement, just for a moment – could you say *home* is where tonight’s narrative could meet its coda? Maybe not the home I’ve known my whole life, nor the home she thinks she’s known, either. In more than one way, her *heart* may already know the place we’d soon think of when we hear that word – ‘home’. She has been ready to pack up and move on for what seems like an eternity now, and part of me hopes this place is what she has been searching for, but I have never been as eager to move on. Like I previously stated; I’m more of the *grounded* type. Now, however, we can both turn the page and move on to the next chapter of our story – move ourselves into a new place of being, just us two. Maybe a retriever, or a cat. I’d be kidding myself if I said I wouldn’t like some little humans running around as well. But children don’t seem likely, considering tonight’s intentions. But this move is more important to her than squeezing one out, and consequently, more important for both of us.

Icy. Her palm so, so cold, resting on my thigh. Completely void of the red that warms our blood. All that red – all that warmth, turned grey and cold. Something about that feeling, whether it be the grey or the cold, reminds me of the nights we spent together at her mother’s house due to the fact that her father would never allow two queens to share a king-sized bed. Those nights that she’d pull me close and cup her seemingly frozen hands around my breasts, not to spark some animalistic behaviour, more-so an innocent action to warm her fingertips and her palms. That feeling I now fear I’d never experience again. The nights at this new place would never get as cold. Where we are going, it is always hot. May as well get used to it. As her father used to say, all queers go to hell. I’ll miss the cold. Something about it can be so relaxing. I can always put more layers on when it gets too cold. And I can always double-down in the socks department. But when it gets too hot, even if I strip bare-naked, I can’t peel my skin off and rub ice cubes on my red flesh. And most significantly, without the cold, the warmth doesn’t ever seem so welcoming. But I’m sure I’ll come to love our new place, so we drive, onwards. Onwards and *upwards.* Not even the grim can scare us now. Nor can it stall us.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~*Bang~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~*

But an animal sized hole in the gravel can stall us. How dependable of the government? Dependable only to screw us over and halt the journey of two lovers looking for a brighter future. Useless Bureaucrats pretending to know anything about governing in a small community. They build Mauderville as a truck and labouring town, funnelling money directly into their own pockets, but “can’t afford” to fix the roads that are constantly battered by 10-tonne trucks day after freaking day?! Just Smiths me with this bitch and crash one of those trucks into me already. Jesus!

“Goddamn It”, I grunt, pulling the steering wheel to the right and veering off to the shoulder of the interstate. I pull the hand break, but leave the car running whilst I open the door begrudgingly – frustrated – and step out onto the gravel using my hand on the roof of the pinto to pull out the rest of my body. I drag my feet on the gravel as I make my way to the trunk of the car.

*Loosen the lug nuts, put the jack under the vehicle, raise the jack, unscrew the lug nuts, remove the flat, mount the spare.*

Oh, Jesus I hope it’s in there.

*Loosen lug nuts, jack under vehicle, raise the jack, unscrew the lug nuts, remove the flat, mount the spare.*

I mean, it has to be there. I’ve never taken it out.

*Remove the flat, mount the spare.*

I have never needed the spare before. Right?

*Remove the flat, mount the spare.*

Opening the trunk, part of me, in this moment, is well aware that I’ll be staring right into an empty space where the spare tyre used to be. That there is now no way forward. That we won’t be in our new home tonight. No way out of this sick mess of a life, no way home and no future. The new place we are meant to occupy tonight, destined to remain empty forever. Empty – Just like the trunk.

But the trunk isn’t as empty as the new place, is it? The spare tyre occupies the trunk so magnificently. I unscrew the lug nuts that secure the spare in its place, and use all of my strength to lift it out. Out of its cavity, but not out of the trunk. I’m not out of the woods yet. My spindly arms haven’t got enough strength to lift the tyre high enough over the lip of the trunk. It catches. A rubber earthquake jars all my fingers at once, causing me to *regretfully* loosen my grip. It was only for a quarter of a second – Long enough for the tyre to flip over the trunk and plummet to the ground. The ground where I’m standing. It’s times like this when I wish I was smart enough – or gay enough – to wear steel capped boots instead of rubber sandals. Or better yet, smart enough – or gay enough – to spend an extra hour a week lifting weights. Who am I kidding? I’m lipstick. Biceps and Redbacks just aren’t my style. So, I’ll for-go the toes this time.

*Hey, it’ll be fine. It can’t hurt that much.*

But it does hurt. This is actually somehow worse than when dad rolled over my toes in this very Pinto. Somehow. There is no car attached this time, but it is still somehow far more agonizing this time. The tyre bounces vertically from my toes and just pounds right back down onto them, before folding forward underneath the trunk. Still on my toes, mind you. But you don’t mind. Not really anyway. You’d cringe a little at my obvious discomfort. How you see the world, there is a lot wrong, like poverty and sexism and racism and heavy rubber tyres crushing poor innocent unprotected toes, but there is one bright side; That none of it is happening to you. So, no. Don’t mind you. Mind me. Mind my toes. Mind this hinderance on the journey of two souls towards genesis. Mind my bitching and moaning while I lift the wheel off my foot, loosen the flat tyre’s lug nuts, place the jack under the car and raise it. Mind my aggressive unscrewing of the lug nuts and removal of the flat. Mind me whilst I curse at the spare I’ve just mounted. And mind me as I climb back into the cab and drive away. Away from your bullshit! Mind that. Not you.

“*Well, at least we are back on the road now, Carrie. At least we are one step closer to eternity together. One step closer to our destiny.”*, I hear her declare from her position in the passenger seat.

One. Step. Closer.

Soon, one step closer turns into one mile closer. Then ten. Then thirty.

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Entering town, now for the last time. Her green irises are replaced with the pale porcelain of their sheaths. She sleeps. I once loved this town. And part of me still does. But she never did, so I’ll let her sleep. What poor taste it would be to wake my love to the place she most despises? So, I just keep driving, alone. Alone, I pass the perfect green trees, never to splinter into our skin as we would lean our intertwined bodies against them.

*(Past the fake plastic trees on the sidewalk)*

I pass the pristine, uncracked concrete –

*(As it turns out, there are three types of concrete)*

trusted and true by my brother and I as we flew down them on our skateboards as juveniles. Passing the synths that sprayed down my wounds on the rare occasions I would fall off,

*(Past the soulless shells you’ve begun to sympathize with over the past three months. Restricted in their movements, as well as their power of will, yet given the torturous right to free consciousness. Much like yourself. Stuck in a state of perpetual disarray and disappointment. Get out!)*

– always there to help and provide a space to fill the void when he passed. My old neighbours watering their gardens and walking their dogs wave me on.

*(Past the canvases of your neighbours, painted with their eternal disapproval)*

The neighbours that helped guide me in the absence of my parents. Guidance I would be lost or dead without.

*(The disapproval you would never be destined to have thrown in your face again)*

It’s thoughts like that, which make relief and resent feel all too indistinguishable. I don’t know what’s more appropriate; to wave them goodbye, or to tell them to shove it. Well, I guess the former is *always* the more appropriate, but Mona would want nothing appropriate. So, I go with the latter, winding down my window to say my farewells with an erect index finger and a free flying bird. Yeah, no. That’s not right, turning my bird into a waving palm for the rest of my neighbours. It’s sad to be leaving this all. But I know it’s what Mona wants. And I want what she wants. I heard an old musician on Mona’s stereo preach once: *‘In time I will leave the city, for now I will stay alive’*. Well. Just *‘staying alive’*, Surviving; is what we have been doing all our lives. So now, that time has come, to not only stay alive. Not only survive; but to truly live – to “*leave the city”*. We are nearly out, Mona. We are nearly free. Free to run and jump. Free to fly. Free to embrace each other, and free to disgrace the walls built around us by the patriarchy.

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Here we are. Finally, at the end of the road. A road that’s quietly caving in. We’ve come so far since the beginning of our realities – life, childhood, relationships good and bad, and to some extent, adulthood – too far to pretend that we don’t miss where we started. In the dark. The oh, so friendly dark. Forecasting and foreshadowing the brilliant blaze that burns tonight. But not yet. The black that now slashes open to reveal the blood of the sleeping future, no longer dormant. Awake, aware. Ready. Ready for us.

Our future;

*“Carrie and Mona. Together forever. May Death Never Stop You.”*

Nope. It won’t stop us. It fuels us. It feeds us. It *awakens* us. The lock clicks as my left-hand presses down on the handle, cold from the night. Damn cold. Hastily to avoid frostbite, I let the momentum of my shoulder force the driver side door open. It’s even colder with the gaping hole in the side of the Pinto allowing the air to reach our skin. I think for a moment before stepping out the door. I think about what this means. Not what will happen in the future because of it, but what it really *means*. It means there’s no going back. From the moment my foot touches down on the gravel, there is no Mauderville – no cemetery – no Pinto. Just three things exist from that moment on; Carrie, Mona and the fall. So, I grip the handle again, now with a thin layer of frost built up around it from the wind, and pull it shut. I’m not ready to leave everything else behind just yet.

*(Yes, you are)*

“No! I’m not!”

*(Yes. You are!)*

Yes. I am. So again, I force my shoulder against the door, this time not pulling it shut shortly after. This time, my spine twists my pelvis left and my knees dangle out the open cavity, struck immediately by the devastating wind. It’s worse now that the sole of my converse has touched down on the gravel, a needle pulsing directly through my skin and piercing the bones. Only for a split second. But that pain is nothing compared to the shock that sets in seconds later. That step. That rubber touching down on the tiny loose stones. This is it. I know this is it. And so does she. We know that it’s almost over.

*(Pull me out)*

And before I know it…

*(Take me with you. Take me home)*

My right foot touches down to marry the left.

*(Move on)*

And I take my first steps forward –

*(Our new home will welcome us with open arms)*

Around the car and to her door.

*(Open it!)*

I press the handle down and swing it open. This time I barely notice the sting of the icy metal. I reach across my sleeping beauty and press my index finger through the blood red breaker on her holster. It swings back, the steel belt buckle all but slashing my cheek. No longer held in place, my corpse bride begins to fall limply out the door. I swoop under, arms out and knees bent. Still sleeping, She’s heavy in my arms. Heavier than I've ever known her to be. My knees protest as I force them back up. But their efforts are no match for my power of will

*– or is this love?*

I'm up. And I'm moving. One step at a time, marching towards the gates.

*– no. It couldn’t be love. I mean I know I love Mona, but could it really be this powerful?*

I think about Mr Jones back in Phys-Ed. He once told us of mothers who could lift whole cars to save their trapped newborns. Adrenaline. It gets released in our endocrine system when we are placed in moments of extreme state anxiety. Forces a fight or flight response. Boosts haemoglobin capacity and – a bunch of other adaptation type shit, I don’t really know. I was too busy thinking about how the ability of a bee to fly is contradictory to all physics. Their body is too heavy in proportion to the size of their wings. Anyway, Its not love, and its not concentrated power of will. Its simply a chemical that’s blasting through my system, because I really must get back to her.

At the edge I once again bend my knees, the ones now threatening to give out underneath me, and lay her down carefully on the gravel. I turn away, glaring back to the Pinto. The Pinto that got me from home to hospital. The Pinto that got me from home to the cemetery. The one that got both of us here. Always trustworthy. Always hardened. I can’t let her suffer in the cold. That would not be a proper death for my Mandela.

So, I reach into the pockets of my corduroy pants and pull out the box. I move towards the Pinto and twist open the fuel cap. I strike a match and flick it in, quickly turning away, crouching down and cupping my ears with the palms of my hands.

*Nothing.*

No earth-shattering bang, no radiant heat against my back, no light to effervesce my own shadow. Not even a –

*~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~Whoo-oop!~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~*

The heat now begins to strike my back, warm, hot, but not quite agonising. The licks of light only allowing a slight outline of my body to stretch forward. Not quite the explosion I thought it would be, but my Mandela won’t die cold now.

After a number of slow, deep inhalations and exhalations, I pull myself back up to full stance. Assisted somehow by ~Something~. Something powerful enough to guide my body forward towards Mona lying before the gate. I must keep going. I must fulfil this destiny. I must once again join the love of my life, somewhere better. But it’s easy now. Far easier to move than ever before. Far less laborious to breathe than usual. I let whatever this force is to propel me forward. Closer to the edge, closer to Mona’s empty, dormant corpse. At her body, I crouch down onto my knees. This time they refuse to ache. They refuse to respond to any pressure exerted onto them. They refuse to allow any one muscle fibre to burst, instead, tightening to their absolute maximum capacity, then somehow, even past that point, with no negative consequences. I shuffle my forearms underneath her. The left under the arch of her spine, and the right under her knees. My glutes squeeze and my quadriceps contract until we are finally standing upright. Three steps. Three steps are all that separates new from old. Future from past. Unity from isolation. Three steps. One left stride forward, then a right, following suit, to where the tiny fragments of eroded stone fall away, never to be heard crashing against the ground below. Then, finally, one last left leg stride past the gate and toward the manor. Toward our new home.

*(Stop!)*

I do what my lover says. I always do. That’s why I’m here in the first place. That’s why I picked her up from the cemetery. That’s why I *put her there.* I was only following her orders when she told me to plunge the knife through the bottom of her jaw. I was only following her orders when I drove away that night. She had said they wouldn’t look for me at the hostel off Sixth Street, so I did exactly what she said. “*Wait ‘til they’ve buried me and left, then come back for me.”* And that’s precisely what I did.

*(Ready?)*

I’m not. I’m not ready to start afresh. I’m not ready to leave my home, and I’m not ready to step out. I only did all of this because of the spell she had me under. But maybe it’s time to break free from her spell. Maybe it’s time to run. Time to be my own woman. To start a new life by myself, on the same plain. Maybe it is time to be *me* rather than *us*.

“Ready.”

I clench my eyes shut. Not sure if destiny would have me open them ever again. I take that last stride forward.

*Run;*

*Run away,*

*To a better place.*

*A place where the road is smooth,*

*And the traffic is never in your way.*