

Jack Driscoll

an excerpt of

The Dangerous Lay of the Land

BARE-ARMED and bare-legged in mid-February, Geneva is maybe a minute or two shy of the serious shivers and shakes. And Mr. Silvo, accidentally on purpose—or so she believes—has left the key in the ignition and, having returned to his classroom to make a phone call, is taking his sweet time getting out to her. He’s been doing this more and more lately, testing not her road skills or her knowledge of the driver’s manual, but rather what he deems to be her “impetuousness”—whatever that is.

As a consequence of the even-tempered and grown-up way that Mr. Silvo speaks to her, Geneva rarely flusters or turns panicky or indulges anymore in a tirade of obscenities. Neither did she get visibly pissed and—look, Ma, no hands—flip Lawson Ritt the double-barrel bird that day he tailgated tight to her ass and laid on his horn, flashing his headlights for her to pull over and let him pass.

Lawson Ritt is a nitwit. A loud-laughing, lost-cause high school dropout whose concerted efforts to repave every four-way-stop intersection in Chipewewa County with burnt rubber defines, as Mr. Silvo maintains, the recklessness of a world gone mad. Road rage, he says. Hit-and-runs and rampant carjackings and bridges collapsing under the stress and fatigue of so much rush-hour traffic, sinkholes cavernous enough to swallow transport trailers whole. He says it’s a veritable minefield out there, potential calamity lurking around every next bend, and the debris of human misery everywhere present and immense. This is why, guided by his calm and soft-spoken cautions, Geneva listens carefully and stays ever watchful, eyes on the road and both hands locked on the steering wheel as she’s been taught.

Mr. Silvo’s Subaru Outback doubles as the driver’s ed car. It’s got Oklahoma plates, which she finds curious, given that this is already his second

year teaching English and music appreciation not forty miles south of Sault St. Marie on the Canadian border. A Sooner—that's what he once called himself. And later, when Geneva got out a Rand-McNally to better visualize where he was born and raised—the exact location—she fantasized about the two of them pushing hard across a half-dozen state lines to arrive there. Grain elevators and missile silos and unfamiliar road signs peppered with bird- or buckshot, and a take-what's-left motel room in another time zone when neither one of them can keep their eyes open anymore. Yet even in their exhaustion they'd stare wide eyed out the car window at the full moon's illumination across those boundless acres of winter wheat—shimmering, she supposes, like ocean swells on the far side of the highway.

She has never ventured outside of Michigan, and her mom's metallic-red high-mileage wreck of a Mustang is so old it doesn't even have AC or an air bag or a catalytic converter. The license tags are already more than six months expired. But as her mom makes clear, that very same vehicle in showroom condition and her life waiting tables at Oney Jeez Roadhouse translate to ancient frigging history. Maybe so, Geneva thinks. Maybe knowing when to cash it in is always a matter of timing and foresight, of seeing that vanishing point *before* it vanishes, before it all goes up yet again in smoke.

Geneva's a senior, B-level grades as of this semester, and a B-cup. She's grateful that Mr. Silvo did not know her as a flat-chested sophomore, her hair high spiked and dyed a sheeny half-shade shy of antifreeze. The hair is fully back, as of the New Year, to her original raven black, and it's braided tight as a rope. Thanks be to her Ottawa blood—honest Injun, as her mom insists, yoo-hooing such ancestral nonsense whenever she's into the firewater, which means every time she soaks in their leaky, third- or fourth-hand hot tub and watches the stars blur through the Smirnoff and the pain pills, her head tilted back, elbows hooked on the mildewed ledge, and the rez squeezed in too tightly around her. That's what the pale-faced pantywaists at school call it, as if Geneva and her mother sleep in teepees, decked out in loincloths and crow feathers and fancy Air Jordans after toking on a peace pipe to pass away the nowhere afternoons. The rez. She hates the handle and the taunt. She thinks, *Lamebrains*. Thinks, *Gutless liars, every gas-bagging last one of them*.