

A Brickyard Dream

A short segment from *'Til You See God*

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Note: *this is brief excerpt from my 2007 NaNoWriMo story. It's still an extremely rough draft, so yes, race fans, there are liable to be a few historical and technical inaccuracies. My suggestion, as always, is to sit back, relax, and enjoy the story and let the details take care of themselves...as they generally do...*

What's it like out there? I am asked. Often, too, and by people who should know better.

Of course, there is no way to describe it, this sensation. It is a physical extension on one's self, literally a mating of human and machine. It sounds clichéd, yes, but it's true. When things are right, that's exactly how it feels. You *are* the car, the car *is* you, *you are one*.

But it is not something you can adequately put in words. You simply must feel it for yourself to understand, and in order to do that, you've got to be willing to put yourself through several wringers, obstacles that are physical, emotional, and social.

I have jumped through all those hoops. And now I am about to reap the ultimate benefit.

The asphalt, diamond-ground so often to an almost perfect smoothness, stretches before me like a light gray taffy ribbon. In a deceptive and even dangerous illusion, it appears to lengthen if you stare at it too intently when you're at speed. Before you know it, there's a ninety degree sweeping left turn before you, you're thundering into it at two hundred and forty miles an hour, and you'd better not be making plans for the next few weeks because you're going to be a guest of Methodist Hospital's Drivers Ward. Or worse.

You don't think about that though. At least I don't. You just look up, way down the track, always up, off into the distance. I need my glasses to make this work. I look even more geeky than I really am with them on, but once I discovered just how they affected how I drove, I never got behind the wheel without them. Now I *do* scream into that first turn at 235, setting up for it well in advance, entering wide and dipping down almost to the white line marking the place where pavement ends and grass begins before allowing the car (me) to drift up toward the wall.

There is a short straight here, a few hundred feet, not enough time to relax, before you need to once again make that ninety degree sweep. It doesn't take a big turn on the wheel to do it, a gentle twist and again we are down playing tag with that line and then back out to the wall to begin the long trip down the back straight.

Here you have a chance to think. It's almost a mile long though it seems a lot longer, longer even than the front stretch. I think that's because there's no huge grandstands here, just a few sets of bleachers here and there, and the spectator mounds they put up for the years they held a Formula One race here. I like to think that this part of the track is for the drivers; the turns all have vast piles of fans watching your every move, but this place, it's just you (the car) and the track. It's very personal, almost sensual. This is for you, the driver (car). Your own personal bit of nirvana. If the traffic is light, as it is now, you can even safely take a hand off the wheel, flex your fingers, get some blood flowing. You can relax, such as it is, force yourself to take a cleansing breath, as Becca says. She will sometimes make sure I am reminded to do so over the radio. It helps.

The north end of the track is not so different as the south; two more ninety degree turns connected by a short "chute", and then back out onto the front stretch, as long as the back but nowhere near as relaxing, what with the inside wall making the section look terribly narrow, and the enormous grandstands to the left and right enhancing this effect, making it all look rather like a tunnel. In traffic, this can be hairy, even truly scary. But it is this to which you (the car) aspire, this moment: the man on the ornate, brushed aluminum flagstand I now scream beneath, he is waving a flag at me. It is white in color. It means, of course, one lap to go, but today I consider it almost indicative of surrender, the track finally yielding to me what I have sought for so long. For today, I am the first one who sees this flag.

There is one more flag to see.

Into one, then. Eyes focused well ahead of me (the car), feeling the tires as they grip the track surface, just a little bit of lean from the enormous G forces exacted upon the car (me). Out to the wall, plenty of room, which is to say about a foot. Really hustling it, I might actually brush it with my right rear. Not now. There is no need. I ran fast early so I might be able to take it easy late, the exact opposite of the strategy I had employed for years, and it has paid off in spades.

Through two, and down that back straight one more time. It's in the bag now, but I don't allow myself the luxury of thinking thus, not yet. It has been too close too many times for too many people. Focus. Cleansing breath for Becca, then focus again, sweep through three, down the chute and into four.

And now, finally, I am allowing myself to smile.

The man in the flagstand is holding the final flags now, the checkered, and two of them. I can almost--no, I (the car) can see him grinning as my hand goes up in the air. He is as excited as I (the car) am, twirling the white and black bunting with vigor, with enthusiasm. Congratulations, it says, long deserved and well earned.

Easing off on the throttle now, not so much as to upset the car (me) but to allow it to gradually slow. My hands do not grip the wheel so tightly now. It is an almost leisurely pace that I set through the south end of the track, then back onto the backstretch.

Voices in my ears. The crew, the spotters. Becca. All full of joy.

Motion beside me for the first time in quite some time. Another car. It is Castroneves, twice a winner here. He holds a hand in the air, thumb up. I wave back. Then Michael Andretti, who is second again. If it wasn't me (the car) winning, I would wish it for him, he who has come so close so many times to be denied by chance or fate. He holds both hands up as if to say, what could I do? and then claps.

I do another lap. There is plenty of fuel in the car. It was that strategy, run hard early, conserve late, that assured this and doomed so many, like Michael. Others tried to maintain my early pace and either pushed their cars past the breaking point, or pushed their own luck past the limit of their talent. Those dreams ended up as black marks on the wall, the same sort of marks I'd been leaving for the past eleven years.

But not today. Today, it is meant to be. Today is mine, utterly. The month of May is over and I own it and this town and this speedway, *the* Speedway, the only one worth winning, the only one worth bragging about for the rest of one's life. Politics be damned; this is Indy, the Brass Ring, the Greatest Spectacle in Racing, and today, it belongs to Donnie Sexton.

I think of that as I ease into the pits, that entrance impossibly narrow, the name they tagged me with. Donnie. I've not been called that in what, twenty years? Thirty? Even when I was young I insisted on being called Don, and Becca has *always* called me Donald. It wasn't till the track announcer referred to me as Donnie that I realized that big change which had stolen over me in the past few months. Like a fountain of youth. I'd gone from child to young adult to adult to child again, and now, as I roll down the concrete, past the tire marks of cars accelerating out of their pit stalls for the past three and a half hours, only now do I understand what this place does to you. It can cripple you, it can break you, it can leave you in bits and pieces. It can drain bank accounts and level homes. It can kill you, or worse still, drive away those you love. It can also transform you. As I am transformed, this moment, waving

to the crews joyously lining both sides of pit road to greet me. They look at least as happy as I know Becca is right now.

Me? I am merely content, I think, in a job completed and done well and right. It is well and truly finished for me, this is it, the height of a career, and like Sam Hanks so many years ago, I know I can go no further, that it's time to step out and let another, younger driver take my place. Oh, I'll be back, but only as the car owner, not the driver. Let Becca have the peace she wants, the ability to breathe on race day, to see the blue and green car shriek past and know it's somebody else laying their life on the line. She has earned it. But for now...

...I come to a stop at the turn at the base of the massive steel and glass "Pagoda", an artsy-cutesy attempt to recreate the old wooden timing stand of days past. I'd never liked it before; now I think it's quite possibly the most beautiful building in the world, save perhaps the Hall of Fame Museum, where my car, gorgeously hideous green and blue Bess, will be spending the next year. It's part and parcel of the glory. People will be posing for pictures with my car (me) for the next 365 days. I can't think of a more delightful way to spend a year.

Now, the engine finally off, the roar continues, but it's the roar of the crowd surrounding me now. Chunk Napolitano swats my helmet with gusto as he heads toward the back of the car, where he will join the rest of the crew in pushing it into Victory Lane. The big one, so big it transcends all others in that it's too important to stay earthbound; no, at Indy, Victory Lane actually rises into the air and then, once aloft, slowly revolves for all to get a good view. Here it is, world, the car (me) that triumphed at the Brickyard. Number 42, the Sexton Associates Green World Dallara-Honda, the winner of the 93rd Indianapolis 500 Mile International Sweepstakes, the driver, Donnie Sexton.

It is almost surreal now, the car stationary, inert, after so long at speed. It takes time, as always, to adjust, but there is so little to spare. Everyone, it seems, wants my attention. There is a wreath for me and a huge silver trophy adorned with the likenesses of the men of preceded me to this place, and which will soon bear my own. There are the reporters, television and radio, who will want interviews. There is Colie Redd, my crew chief, who walked out of the crowd at Las Vegas last season to "tell me what all was wrong with the car", and he was right too. He's crying. Chunk, who never shows emotion at all, is crying. Becca is the only one not crying, but not because she's emotionless. She's just waiting, waiting to see what I look like after the 500 miles. It's a long time at speed for a guy not far from 50, and she knows it.

Colie reaches in and unhooks the Pi Systems steering wheel/display system. An amazing piece of work, all by itself it costs more than my first three

race cars, and it's worth every penny. He then goes to work on my helmet. Com link, cooling tubes, emergency oxygen. All disconnected. I take care of the chin strap myself as he grabs the seat harness release.

I grab his hand. Not yet, I mouth. Not yet.

I savor one more moment of that feeling of oneness with the car.

Bess, we did good, didn't we?

The car (me) gives just a little lurch. Perhaps it's someone kneeling on the sidepod for a picture. Perhaps it's Bess replying in her own silent way. We've been together a long time, she and I (us) in race car terms, more than four years. She's been hurt and so have I but we came back, *together*.

Yes Donald, we did good. Very good indeed.

So now I start to take off the helmet. No fancy Technicolor paint job on mine; plain sky blue, my favorite color, and my name in red trimmed with green. Some sponsor decals, my IndyCar inspection sticker, and that's it. The helmet is as pretentious as the head it protects, which in this case is to say not at all.

The weight off my head now, I shrug off the belts and the HANS device they'd held in place all day long. Another couple of thousand in that little carbon fiber wonder, but again, well worth it when weighed against the risk of a basal skull fracture. And finally, the balaclava, and the world can finally see the winner.

I sincerely hope it's not a terrible letdown. I am not exactly the Hollywood stereotype of a race car driver. I am tall and wiry, true, but I am also pushing 50, I am mostly bald, and I'm not classical handsome, though Becca thinks I am in a roguish sort of way. I have never managed to get her to define that, by the way. Maybe someday.

All of this goes through my head as I look around, squinting as the revolving turntable spins us gracefully up into the full Indiana sunlight. It is a warm day, downright hot inside the car, and yet I know I will be facing some pain as I climb out, so I am not in that big of a hurry. Becca slaps a Green World hat on my head and adjusts it so it'll look good for the cameras. She still doesn't speak, but her eyes tell me enough. As long a day as it has been, the night will be longer still. And pleasantly so, once all the press and sponsor obligations are seen to, of course. Then she and I will retire to our RV, parked in the Speedway infield, and we will have our own little private celebration. She is, after all, carrying our child now. We haven't told anyone yet. Yet.

Colie and Chunk both reach inside the cockpit now and gently tug me up. Everything hurts now; I am stiff and sore from having been so confined for the past three plus hours, and that's it's a "good" hurt doesn't make it any better. I have been beaten and battered from my years behind the wheel, suffered trauma in every way possible, those obstacles I referred to earlier.

I've lost two wives, three houses, and most of the money I ever had, earned and inherited. But this, this makes up for it all. I wince as I wriggle out, much I suppose like Buddy Lazier did back in 1996 when he won this same race, running the entire distance with a backbone with the rough consistency of a shattered eggshell. He endured, he outran 32 others, he won the greatest race on earth. And now I am following in his footsteps, his and a very select few others. The wince changes almost magically into a smile, then a teary-eyed grin.

Becca hugs me. Now she is crying. Chunk hugs me, painfully. He is also crying, and the tears make his usually fearsome features look positively cuddly. Colie hesitates, his usual reserve kicking in, then he joins in and the four of us just huddle there for a moment, live on ABC, trembling with openly expressed exhaustion and emotion.

Back to reality. I feel something going over my head. It is the winner's wreath. It is prickly on my neck, but the smell is pleasantly evocative, the fields I used to roam and all, just like the song says. I will be going home to those fields soon, back to Orleans, where no doubt I will finally be greeted as a returning hero instead of just something of a local curiosity. Then I sense a presence next to me, the Festival Queen, and I give her the obligatory kiss, followed (not unexpectedly) by a sock on the arm from Becca, who is fiercely protective. But not jealous, she always says.

The interview is about to begin, but first I see something I want, something I need, something I've been waiting for a long, long time. It's part and parcel of the whole that is Indianapolis, the bottle of milk given to the winner in Victory Lane. I understand this started back in the 30s when a driver asked for buttermilk as a refreshing drink following his race—Louis Meyer, I think—and the local milk folks were only too happy to jump on that as a promotional device. With a few notable exceptions in the 80s and 90s, milk has been the drink of choice at Indy.

I love milk. I have always loved milk, from boyhood when my mother used to complain, kind heartedly, that I was drinking her out of house and home. She also said I'd almost surely never break a bone due to my calcium intake. She should have only known how wrong she would be at least in that regard. I have, in fact, broken many, many bones; not Evel Knievel by any stretch, but more than enough to keep the nice folks at Orange County Physical Therapy Associates busy. Their name is on the side of the car too. It's always been there, and I won't let them pay me a dime for the ad space.

The milk. A tall, sweaty bottle, the old-fashioned kind, just like my dad used to deliver door to door when I was a child. How I loved those bottles. I still have several Mom kept after Dad passed, apart from the photographs and

memories my only tie to the man who helped put me where I'm at today. I shrug out of my gloves and reach for the bottle.

My hands are, like my gloves, wringing with sweat. Perhaps I should have left them on.

Too late, I think to reach with both hands. Too late, because the pretty lady representing the Indiana Dairy Association has already turned the bottle loose, thinking I have a firm grip on it.

It's a sickening feeling, watching it happen as if I am separate from my body, the bottle slowly, ever so slowly slipping from my fingers, then down, bouncing off the composite sidepod, almost high enough to catch on the rebound had I not been so transfixed by its descent, then down again and onto the metal surface of the victory lane platform, where it shatters.

If the feeling was sickening, the sound is even more so, especially in that the crowd suddenly hushed as they saw the bottle dropping. It is all at once a dull thud, then the gentle tinkle of scattering glass.

I think, *damn, and I wanted to keep that bottle...*

...and then I notice that the sound is not stopping. In fact, it is rising all falling in volume, as if running back and forth across my consciousness, an instant replay of what will no doubt be a signature moment of my career at Indy. I finally win, and I drop the bottle of milk, this is what I will be remembered for, after all is said and done, this one act of clumsiness.

Or not.

"Donald?"

I look over at Becca. It is her voice.

"Donald, over here."

I blink. And suddenly I understand. Part of me is intensely relieved, part of me equally disappointed. It is, as it ever has been, just a dream. The sound I am hearing now is my travel alarm; the crashing sound, unfortunately, was Becca having dropped our morning coffee tray onto the only bit of tile in our hotel room. She must've seen me crying and was startled. It happens.

"Are you all right?" she asks worriedly.

"Are you?" I say, looking at her, splashed with coffee on her bare ankles. Lovely bare ankles, I must add.

She smiles sweetly, affectionately. "I'm fine." She sets the tray down on the nightstand and sits on the bed next to me as I sit up, still feeling that pain just as acutely as if I had been in a racecar all day. "Same dream?"

"Same dream." Ever the same, always and until it comes true.

"How close were you this time?"

"Had the milk in my hand." And then I tell her what happened.

"Well," she says, "I suppose that when you do win the damned thing I'll just have to hold the bottle for you. Feed you like the big baby you are." Then

she smiles, that brilliant, wide-eyed smile that had so attracted me the first time I saw her.

And that was how my Friday morning began, far from home in Richmond, Virginia.

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