

A Nasty Taste of Freedom

by **Jay Bush**

James held tight onto ropes I'd added as makeshift Oh Shit! handles while we drifted around a corner in my first car, a 1980 Honda Civic—which had been dubbed “The Nasty” by friends and family. In desperation for my first set of wheels, I bought The Nasty from James—who dressed and acted like a bad hybrid of Hunter Thompson and Neo, from *The Matrix*—for four hundred dollars and an ounce of weed. The exterior of the Civic, when I bought it, was rust covered sky-blue with black rims. I never was one for a sky-blue car and black rims didn't fit my Toontown-esque idea of life. I decked out The Nasty with some adornments and new paint. A few cans of neon blue for the body; blaze orange for the doors; canary yellow for the tires and rims and, with the addition of a bowling trophy (stolen from the local high school) as a hood ornament, the outside of the car was as flashy as a Jr. high girl's Bedazzled purse. The car was ready to take bored kids from point A—wherever that may be—to points B, C, D, and back to A where they can rest quietly after a full day of ... yikes, did we actually do that?

The Nasty got its name from the layers of black mold inside the car. When I bought it, the mold was so thick you could scrape it off with a putty knife. The car leaked from every possible opening. Rubber gaskets around the door had dry rotted, the sealant around the windshield was so deteriorated that my mullet fluttered elegantly even with the windows up. Rain poured through the windshield like water through a colander. The hatchback let in water by the gallon. After my exterior modifications, I had to do some interior work to get rid of the mold—for some reason none of my friends wanted to ride around in a clown car that smelled like a trashcan.

Under the wet, rotting carpet I discovered the water had done its damage on The Nasty's floor pans. The holes were so big I could put my hand through them. The

jagged edges cut me when I was stupid enough to try. With the addition of a little plywood, I set that safety concern aside.

The next and biggest issue was the rotting back seat. Rain and summer sun had turned the spongy seat medium into one giant, putrid dish scrubber. When I removed the seat, three of the four rusty bolts broke off, leaving sharp, tetanus laced surprises for unknowing passengers. A few dollar store candles super glued to the dashboard had The Nasty smelling better. Free of its black mold and the accompanying city-dump-on-a-hot-summer-day scented air freshener as and looking better. the car was ready to take me and my friends from point A to all points beyond.

WARNING: Candles inside a car may seem like a good idea but if you burn them while driving on curvy roads, and the wax spills onto the dashboard, it will catch on fire.

“I’m riding in front on the way back!” James shouted over The Nasty’s brand-new Sony in-dash—the only thing James spent the money to fix when he owned the car. Four new speakers and a black and red Sony stereo complete with digital equalizer display turned nightly excursions into a disco and day rides into melodious mechanical mayhem.

“Not a chance,” Jason, my older brother, said as he calmly licked the joint he was rolling and pushed in the car’s cigarette lighter.

The road narrowed from a two-lane with fresh gravel to a single lane with grass growing so high in the middle I’d have to mow The Nasty’s grill when I got home.

We were getting close to point B.

The Great Snake Migration in LaRue Pine Hills is a yearly event that closes Snake Road—yes, that’s what it’s called—to drivers from March 15th to May 15th. People come from across the world come to witness something like *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*’s snakes-in-the-tomb scene. They expect the bluffs to be dripping with snakes. They expect snakes to be hanging from the trees like Spanish moss from a Georgia oak. They expect to need their knee-high leather boots to protect them from the vicious bites of angry cottonmouths, copperheads, and timber rattlers. Instead, for their expensive plane tickets and rental cars, they typically see a turtle or two, a few bullfrogs, and maybe, if they’re lucky, the odd snake. But to three stoners with a freshly painted and mold-free Nasty, two bags of grass, a fifth of rum, a vial of

coke, a handful of hot Coors and nothing else to do, a walk down Snake Road seemed like great idea.

The Nasty rattled to a stop and wheezed as its four cylinders slowed. I wondered if it would be the last time my fresh wheels would get me from point A to point B. For luck, I rubbed the bowling trophy mounted front and center to the hood. My pot-infused mind ran through a list of possibilities from: stranded on Snake Road on the one day of the year that it *did* look like a scene from Henry Jones Jr's nightmares to running out of beer before the end of five-mile hike down the crescendo-less tourist attraction.

Jason passed the glowing joint to James who passed the bottle of rum to me. I took a quick sip of the Calypso and nearly spit it back out. "Swill!" I shouted. "Toss me a beer so I can wash this shit out of my mouth."

The Coors assaulted my tongue with hot, frothy vengeance. Too many bumpy back roads in a car with bad shocks and no back seat. We might as well have put the beer in a paint mixer, then microwaved it. I threw the nearly full can at The Nasty, leaving a beer splatter across the driver's side door, and took a long pull from my water bottle.

The joint made its way around the circle by the time I tossed the Coors and, needing to taste something other than hot, cheap liquor and beer, I broke the golden "Puff Puff Give" rule of pot smoking etiquette and smoked it like Snoop Dogg.

Snake Road lies between the LaRue Pine Hills bluffs and a swamp often referred to as "the scatters." Through hundreds of yards of snake infested, mosquito filled yuck, on the other side of the scatters, is the Big Muddy river—a tributary to the Mississippi. In most places, the Big Muddy looks like its name suggests: a big ... muddy...river. Local legend gives the river a bit more personality. Some call it the "Big Muddy Monster" others call it the "Murphysboro Mud Monster" but what eye witnesses report is a seven-foot-tall white hair covered, muddy, sasquatch-like monster. It's been said to attack people in campgrounds and leave twelve to fifteen-inch footprints on the river banks.

As the three of us hiked, smoked, and searched for something interesting, our endeavors turned up empty. Five miles through sweltering heat and humidity got us a few million mosquito bites, a couple ticks, sweat soaked t-shirts and forced James to

take his leather trench coat off—something that rarely happened even in the humid, Southern heat.

On our return, parked beside The Nasty, a Japanese film crew was unloading a rented cargo van and trying to get directions to the snakes from James who was high and drunk enough by then that his ability to decipher their broken English was no better than his ability to dress appropriately for the heat. Between the three of us, we encouraged the film crew to hike right beside the cliffs where snakes might still be moving. It was as likely for them to see snakes up there as it had been for us to see them on the road.

Sending the film crew on their way, we sat down in The Nasty's sweltering interior, candles still burning, giving the car that "Fresh Linen" scent. James mounted the old, worn-out boat seat I used as a replacement for the original bench. It was a half-torn, camouflage seat with a raised, swiveling center that rocked and rolled on the uneven steel. He wasn't happy about it.

"Where to?" I asked my brother.

Rolling another joint, he said, "Let's go check out the bridge." Jason was conductor of our aimless symphony, director of our stupid teenage movie. The bridge Jason mentioned was about three miles from Snake Road. It was a railroad bridge that traversed the Big Muddy at one of its widest points. Rusty, hot rivets held the ancient bridge together like the old webs of a dying spider. Under the bridge, the river ran through fields and swamps, an enormous, spiny sea serpent with no beginning and no end. Trees that had been uprooted by erosion and engulfed by the river's ever-growing boundaries floated downstream like logs from an old lumber town. Garbage and other drifting monstrosities floated alongside the old logs, turning the river into a flowing superhighway of debris.

Something about the Big Muddy sent shivers up my back. Maybe it was the stories of the Mud Monster I'd heard from the time I was a child. Maybe it was the dying trees that lined the edges of the filthy water. Maybe it was farming run-off that turned the water a diseased looking pearlescent-brown. The sickness that seemed to roll from the Big Muddy's mouth into the vein of the Mississippi was arsenic coursing through the

countryside. Nothing grew around its edges and dying fish washed ashore, spreading the odor of death miles around.

Despite my disgust of the Big Muddy, I wasn't opposed to checking out the bridge, as Jason suggested, and God knew we had nothing better to do with our time, so I passed the joint, laughed as the Japanese film crew slid half-chaps over their boots, and turned The Nasty's key. It roared to life—as much as a four-cylinder engine can roar—and I pushed the clutch. With the high-pitched whizzing old manual transmission cars give when shifted into reverse, The Nasty took us from the parking lot to the grassy road. Robert Plant's subtle warning, "When the levee breaks I'll have no place to stay," blasted from the car's best feature. James, Jason, and I felt the music as the rolling joke took us from point B to point C.

I brought The Nasty to a halt in a small turn-out used by fishermen who were brave enough to eat the mercury and pesticide laced piscine meat. Shuddering to death along with Robert Plant's shouts The Nasty had taken us to a serpentine crossroad. Steel tracks crossed liquid poison at the bridge where Jason was leading us.

"You been out there before?" James asked, motioning toward the bridge as Jason mounted the tracks.

"Yeah. Couple times. Never been across, though. Wanna try?"

I had my hesitations, but James and Jason were both game. In the way teenagers often are, I was stuck between common sense and what the group wanted. Of course, being a constant victim of peer pressure, I agreed to journey across the bridge.

The gravel road we'd arrived on was a high banked levee made to keep the Big Muddy at bay during floods. Below it, on both sides, swamps spanned the expanse. The train tracks had also been raised so goods could be shipped through the swamps even during high water. The two raised pathways crossed and spread out like arthritic fingers from a giant's hand. As we stepped away from the road and onto the tracks, gravel changed from small broken limestone to larger chunks of jagged granite. The kind of thing that, if you fell on it, you'd need stitches rather than a Band-Aid.

Chemical-scented wooden ties almost masked the smell of some decaying animal that had been hit by a rushing train. The pelt, which lay between the two steel

rails, crawled with insects. I wanted to say, “Think that’s meant to be a warning?” Instead, I kept my mouth shut, held back the vomit that threatened, and ignored my racing heart.

Tossing rocks and railroad spikes off the edge of the bridge into the murky waters below, we paid no attention to anything but our tiny bubble of life. As kids do, especially high and drunk kids, we missed the very obvious signs of upcoming trouble.

When I was small, growing up in tornado alley, my parents warned that tornadoes sound like a rushing train. I had heard trains from our car at railroad crossings, so I knew they were loud. So loud you couldn’t talk over them, couldn’t even hear the Sony and four new speakers blasting out music in The Nasty.

Stoned, a bit drunk, a little freaked by the river, the Mud Monster, the corpse of whatever animal met its fate on the bridge, I heard a tornado.

“Fuck!” James shouted as he dropped the rock he was about to toss at a dead fish floating in the water some sixty feet below us.

“MOVE!” Jason screamed.

Our responses were different. Jason’s was to get off the track ASAMFP. James looked at the train with a sort of mild confusion. He knew it wasn’t a good thing that we were standing in the direct path of a steel dragon but didn’t know what to do. I took a brief moment to better understand the situation. We were in the middle of the bridge, I knew this because the highest point of the steel framework was almost directly above us. We had no time to go back the way we came, the way from which the train was coming. I looked the other direction, trying to judge the distance, how fast I could run and how fast the train was coming.

The only thing we could do was try.

Jason and I took off at a full sprint, James lagged, trying not to trip over his coat and heavy boots while also trying to keep a good hold on the bottle of rum he’d been nursing.

With my legs moving as fast as they could carry me, after the first fifty meters, I checked over my shoulder to see my progress. I had no chance of outrunning the train. James and Jason were left in a Road Runner-esq dust trail behind me and would be crushed by the train in fifteen, no, ten seconds.

Jason, I noticed, was waving his arms, emphatically, toward one side of the bridge. I thought for sure he meant for me to jump into the chemical stew of the river below. If I had the choice of being smashed by a train or drowning in a log and trash filled, radioactive wasteland, I'd take the train. But when I turned back around, I realized Jason wasn't waving for me to jump, he was waving for me to scoot to the side of the narrow train bridge onto a platform that hung off the edge of the rusting monstrosity. A three-foot by three-foot steel platform had, for whatever reason, been welded to the bridge's architecture. It was out of the way of the train and, I hoped, would hold our weight, if we could squeeze onto it.

I took an ankle twisting, right turn and nearly fell in the monster's path. Recovering, I jumped out onto the rusting platform. It had no handrails and no lip on the edge. The bottom of it was rusting through, like The Nasty's floor pans, allowing a clear view of the river through its holes. The platform gave, just a little, when I stopped on the outside edge. Rusty flakes fell in slow motion to the river below.

Jason was right behind me, almost to the platform, by the time I turned around. But James, clown combat boots and huge leather coat slowing his run, was closer to the train than to the platform. The conductor had been pulling the airhorn for the last twenty seconds but never once hit the brakes.

Jason stood at the edge of the platform, risking his arm as a sacrifice to the dragon as he waved James on shouting something incoherent.

James never made it to the platform.

He dropped to the gravel, elbows first, less than a foot away from the train as it flew past us so fast it pulled my hat from my head. Mullet blowing in the wind, I covered my ears at the screeching and crying of steel on steel. The bridge swayed—back and forth, up and down, as heavy train cars raced by.

When the last car passed, James stood, obviously shaken, but not stirred by what had just happened.

"What the fuck?" Jason asked, glaring at James.

"What?"

"Dude, you couldn't run faster than that?"

"It's this goddamn gravel!"

“Are you hurt?” Jason asked. James took off his drug filled coat, laid it carefully on the ground, checked out his elbows. They were red but had been protected by the thick buffalo leather of his ridiculous trench coat.

I stepped off the platform, loud squeals emitted from the steel as my weight shifted from the edge of death’s diving board to the main bridge. My shaking hands still held the glowing joint we’d been passing before the tornado came. I took another Snoop Dogg puff and handed it off to Jason.

We walked back to The Nasty in silence, each of us ruminating on what happened. James never mentioned it again, nor did Jason for that matter, but on the way home, as I shifted gears from first to second, second to third, third to fourth, I began, as much as a teenager can, to understand the responsibility that came with my choices. Fear, it seemed, was a factor that had the potential to change a life for the better, or, if ignored, the worse. Freedom, say the freedom of one’s first car, was more than just doing whatever we felt like, freedom had consequences. Freedom required responsibility. Responsibility was an adult’s word—a word that didn’t fit in my youthful, stoned lexicon.

I looked in the rearview mirror as James slid from side to side on the uneven boat seat. It occurred to me that if we had an accident, the ropes his white-knuckled hands gripped would be worthless. It wasn’t that I started worrying about everything, overanalyzing everything, it was that I realized, as we drove a rusted-out, mold-filled, shit-box down a gravel road in the middle of nowhere, pockets full of drugs, high and drunk, that my car, among other choices, could kill me. We’d always been careless. We had BB gun fights. When we ran out of BBs, we’d use our wrist rockets and hickory nuts from the trees that lined our property. We jumped off cliffs onto nearby trees and shimmied seventy feet down. We swam in rivers with currents so strong they would overtake fishing boats. We were careless, stupid, and as The Nasty rumbled down the curvy, gravel road, my pot and rum-infused mind realized what carelessness could do.

Point C could have been our last stop. And all the points between C and today could have been lost by a single careless moment. That car took my friends and I on dozens of trips from points A through Z and while it was my first experience of real

freedom—the kind of freedom that requires responsibility—it left a nasty taste in my mouth.



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