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The Love Song of Dale Earnhardt

Abstract

I was three-wide at Daytona, coming out of turn four. It was lap 143 of the 500 and I couldn't stop thinking about T.S. Eliot, about that one line in *Prufrock*—*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.// I do not think they will sing to me*—and the next thing I knew, Buzz was into the outside retaining wall and I was sliding across the infield grass, slamming into the pit wall. It could have been worse—no one died and the crew for the sixty-eight car was only in the hospital for a week—but it could have been better too. We'd been running in eighth place at the time, finished back in thirty-ninth. It wasn't how we'd wanted to start the season, how we wanted to begin defending the championship we'd stumbled into the year before, but it wasn't the end of the year either. There were still thirty-five more races to go.

Keywords

NASCAR, racing, T.S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

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The Love Song of Dale Earnhardt¹

Fiction by Justin Carter

I was three-wide at Daytona, coming out of turn four. It was lap 143 of the 500 and I couldn't stop thinking about T.S. Eliot, about that one line in *Prufrock*—*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.// I do not think they will sing to me*—and the next thing I knew, Buzz was into the outside retaining wall and I was sliding across the infield grass, slamming into the pit wall. It could have been worse—no one died² and the crew for the sixty-eight car was only in the hospital for a week—but it could have been better too. We'd been running in eighth place at the time, finished back in thirty-ninth. It wasn't how we'd wanted to start the season, how we wanted to begin defending the championship we'd stumbled into the year before, but it wasn't the end of the year either. There were still thirty-five more races to go.

Wendy was touching my neck in the hauler after the race, after I'd lied to the reporters, told them the car was just a little loose going in. We'd been struggling all day to get it moving in the right direction, I told them. One more adjustment and we could have been in victory lane.

“Look,” Wendy said. “Shit like that happens.”

“I was distracted,” I said. “I was thinking about *Prufrock* again.”

¹ This title is not correct. It's the love song of Lefty Temple, but I showed this to my new girlfriend and she said “Lefty, I know you've won a NASCAR championship and all, but no one who reads short stories watches NASCAR. Put Dale's name in the title.”

² Though, this is not entirely true. One of the other cars involved in the accident, the number eleven Barry's Bagels car of Nick Romo, went airborne and hit a fan who ended up dying two days later. His family sued Daytona International Speedway for an undisclosed sum.

Wendy took a long sip out of a Coors Light bottle³.

“Stop reading those goddamn poems. They write them for two kinds of people and you ain’t a woman or a queer.”

“It’s just so powerful, so meaningful. Prufrock must have been a bootlegger or a dirt track racer back in the day. He knows what this is like.”

Wendy took another sip of the “stuff.”⁴

By the Bristol race in April, we’d strung together some good runs and got back into the top ten in the standings. Not what we wanted yet, but it was progress. Jimmy, the crew chief I’d put in the ICU, was back at the track. The night before the race, I bought him Yuenglings⁵ the night and shook his hand so hard it left us both red.

“Goddamnit man,” I said, “I’m so sorry. The car was loose. Buzz moved down on me.”

“Don’t fucking worry about it,” Jimmy said. He balanced the beer bottle on top of his leg cast.

I walked past Buzz, socked him in the shoulder, and told him he’d better watch out tomorrow. He didn’t laugh, opting to punch me in the arm instead.

I hadn’t thought of T.S. Eliot in weeks⁶.

We were leading with fifteen laps to go when my crew chief came on the radio.

³ Coors Light is Buzz’s sponsor, so Wendy drinking it has always bugged me. If you’re dating a NASCAR driver, you drink his beer, not his rival’s.

⁴ To keep my own sponsors happy, I am referring to Coors Light as the “stuff” from here on out.

⁵ One of my two primary sponsors. I am contractually obligated to mention them in every piece of writing that I do.

⁶ Another lie. I’d been reading *Murder in the Cathedral* before going to bed each night.

“Check the gauges⁷,” he said. “I’ve been calculating it and I think we can make it to the end. Does everything look normal?”

“I think so,” I said. “Let’s risk it. We won’t run out of gas.”

With three to go, we run out of gas. I get rear-ended by Buzz, who looks at me like he’s a shark and I’m a goldfish.

Later, the reporter comes up to me to ask me about the end of the race.

“What was going through your head when you ran out of fuel,” she said. “We heard you on the radio saying you were good to go.”

“In a minute,” I say, “there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”

The reporter looked around, smiled. “You heard it,” she said. “Now back to the booth.”

An email I received three days later:

Dear Mr. Temple,

My name is Richard VanDorfenstein. I teach experimental poetics and literature of the oppressed at Harvard. I recently heard your reference to T.S. Eliot on a broadcast of stock car racing. I would like to speak with you further about Eliot. Please consider this an open invitation to come by Harvard and speak with me when NASCAR returns to the Northeast. New Hampshire may not be perfectly close to Cambridge, but I believe we can make something work.

best,

Richard VanDorfenstein

I called Wendy over and showed her the email.

“Should I meet with him,” I said.

⁷ Without an actual fuel gauge in a stock car to tell us we’re running low, we have to resort to checking the fuel pressure and making educated guesses.

“He probably wants to fuck you,” she said⁸.

She took a sip from a bottle of the “stuff.”

The week before we raced in New Hampshire, we were back at Daytona for another race there. I qualified the car second. Buzz was starting right beside me and during the National Anthem he whispered *and we drown* into my ear⁹.

By the fourth lap, the two of us were into the wall again, his fault this time. He’d rammed into the back of my car going down the front stretch and I’d spun right in front of him. Fifteen cars wrecked. They put me and Buzz in the same ambulance to take us to the care center.

“The fuck was that,” I said.

“Do you wear the bottoms of your trousers rolled,” Buzz said.

“You’re still mad about last time.”

“At the track, the women come and go.”

The ambulance pulled up to the care center. I got off of it as soon as I could, headed inside. They ran their tests—tapping my knee, making me read the eye chart—and then released me. Wendy was waiting outside.

“He just kept saying things about T.S. Eliot,” I said

“Maybe you need to stop obsessing over that shit,” she said.

“I’m going to meet with that professor next week.”

“I’m going to leave your ass, then.”

⁸ I know that Wendy isn’t the most culturally sensitive girl, but it’s the South.

⁹ Buzz and I met when we were nineteen, at a racetrack in Tuckersville, North Carolina. I wrecked him so that I could win the race. Things went downhill from there.

“*In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo,*” I said.

Wendy’s stuff was gone from the house by Tuesday¹⁰. I called VanDorfenstein’s office that night, made an appointment to fly to Cambridge after qualifying on Saturday. I reread Eliot’s *Selected Poems* and tried to thinking of smart things to say about them, things like “the theoretical implications of Prufrock’s actions in the fifth stanza demonstrates the philosophical idea that the body does not belong to the self,” even though I didn’t know what it meant or if it was true.

I received a picture message from Wendy that night, her naked in a bed with Buzz holding beer bottles. The text read *xoxo*.

VanDorfenstein’s office was filled with books, with the walls covered in cut-out poems. A Dale Earnhardt poster rested in the middle, with the black number three car in the background and Dale’s smiling, mustached face in front.

“It was so sad when he died,” VanDorfenstein said.

“I cried,” I said¹¹.

“I was happy to hear you quote Eliot in that interview.”

“I’m a big fan of his work. I read *Prufrock* when I was in high school and it just stuck with me. He’s the only poet that I’ve ever really felt connected to.”

VanDorfenstein smiled. “I’ve always thought Dale Earnhardt’s tragic demise,” he said, “was so much like the postmodern identity crisis of David Foster Wallace, but I can see how Eliot’s work could resonate with you as well.”

¹⁰ In her defense, I told her that T.S. Eliot meant more to me than she did.

¹¹ Again, a lie. I was fifteen and playing lots of basketball. I didn’t start taking racing seriously for another year.

“He was a damn fine writer¹².”

At the end of our meeting, VanDorfenstein extended a hand toward me, told me he’d love to speak again sometime. I headed back to New Hampshire for qualifying, ended up running the third fastest time.

Wendy and Buzz were waiting for me on pit road afterward, both drinking that “stuff.”

“How’d your meeting with that professor go,” Wendy said.

“It went—”

“Don’t fucking care,” she said.

“Gonna beat you tomorrow,” Buzz said.

I headed back to the hauler. Frank was waiting for me with a tube of Go-Gurt¹³ and a Yuengling.

“I think we have a shot at winning this race,” he said.

I took the Go-Gurt and Yuengling from him.

November. We were in Miami for the final race of the season. Buzz and I were somehow tied for the points lead. Whoever finished higher would win the championship.

Buzz had a new associate sponsor on the back of his car. *T.S. Eliot Dish Detergent*¹⁴. Before the race, he spit at me, said *I spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways*.

¹² I’ve decided not to include the rest of this conversation. It was a back and forth chat in which VanDorfenstein kept saying things I didn’t understand and I kept talking about gear ratios and how much I liked T.S. Eliot.

¹³ My other primary sponsor.

¹⁴ Obviously, this is not a real product.

After the race¹⁵, my phone rang. It was VanDorfenstein.

“Lefty,” he said. “Saw the race. Wanted to ask you something. I’m working on this book¹⁶.”

Justin Carter is the co-editor of *Banango Street*. He holds an MFA from BGSU. His recent work appears in *The Collagist*, *Hobart*, *KneeJerk*, & *Ninth Letter*. He can be found online at <http://justincarter.tumblr.com>.

¹⁵ I finish third. Buzz finishes second and wins the title. I skip this in the story because no one wants to hear about my failure.

¹⁶ VanDorfenstein asks me to help him co-write a book about Eliot and NASCAR, a full time job researching. I’m only racing during the Summer now, dirt tracks up in New England. Yuengling tried to sue me over breaching my contract. Go-Gurt took away my lifetime supply of Go-Gurt. They’ve purchased naming rights for our book, though. It is tentatively titled *J. Alfred Prufrock, NASCAR, and the American Capitalist System: How Eliot and the Petty Family Saved the American Worker: Presented by Yuengling and Go-Gurt*.