

SCENIC BYWAYS

EPISODE 9

"ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH"

by Ben Sembler

Looking back.

The recorder switches on, truck drives on.

NARRATOR

How many tapes have I made? How many stories have I shared with you? My father used to say, you can best tell the state of the union by lookin' to the state of the roads. Well I've seen so many potholes, crossed so many bridges I couldn't begin to count 'em. And these great roads that once connected us all now barely keep us alive. But I've seen something else while out on these roads, too. Patterns, sounds and images, all repeatin'. Sometimes I close my eyes when I hear a new voice, so few and far between, and it sounds just like one I've heard before. Faces seem so familiar. I'll drive down a road, lulled by the same drum of Old Stars' engine, and I'll have sworn I'd just driven it. By this point, I probably have. That could be it, couldn't it? I could have passed the same towns, driven the same roads, met the same people in this broken country so many times that I've simply forgotten. Lost count of those chapters, too. Or is it something else? I listen back to these tapes, and I can't help but wonder. Is there something bigger behind it all? Are these far plains and valleys connected by something other than these broken roads? Something more than Old Stars and I? Or am I just a sad, old man, lookin' for meaning where there isn't any. You'll give me an answer, won't you? Listen to the tapes, and let me know. There's no rush. Either way, I'll be waitin' for you.

SFX RECORDER OFF

CREDITS UP

PRESENT DRIVING TRUCK

SFX TRUCK DRIVING

NARRATOR

Well, you don't sound pretty, Old Stars, but Matteo was right, you're runnin'. And we don't have that much further to go now. I'll get you the help you need. Just hang in there. Only a few more mountains to round. By God these Rockies are something, else, aren't they.

SFX STRANGE ENGINE NOISE

NARRATOR

Easy girl. Take your time.

NARRATOR HUMS "SHE'LL BE COMING AROUND THE MOUNTAIN" SLOWLY

SFX TRUCK SLOWS, STOPS

NARRATOR

Huh. Again? What is goin' on with these roads? That's the last turn off south-east, I think. Let me check the map.

SFX RUSTLING MAP SOUNDS

NARRATOR

Hmm, we're here. Yeah, that's the last one. The only other roads are the ones north, the high roads through the peaks of what was once Rocky Mountain National Park. Well, it's quite a detour, but it'll be a sight to see, at least.

SFX RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

Matteo had worked his magic. Old Stars was runnin' again. But I knew if I wanted to keep her in that condition I would need to take her to that Company Depot in Colorado Springs. I was never a good student, but reason and experience instilled in me a

decent enough education on the Company. I knew how to run routes in territory they controlled, and how to steer clear of their way. Headin' straight to the front gate of one of their operations ran against that education, true, but sometimes you gotta go against your teachin'. And with every shake and rattle from Old Stars engine on the road out of Utah and into Colorado, good sense receded farther and farther from the surgin' necessity of the situation. But weren't those roads beautiful. Late summer had finally begun to shift, and small signs portendin' a rich autumn were all around, especially at the higher elevations. Summer wouldn't go quiet, though. She'd see me and Old Stars through the Rockies to Colorado Springs. If the roads would take us there, that is. Every turn off so far had been blocked by landslides, and I'd had to maneuver around, turn back when rocks had taken out the wide road east to Old Denver. I'd passed a few roads headed north that seemed in decent condition, but they were peak roads, leadin' to steep climbs, high elevations, and harried descents. Nothing I'd wanna put Old Stars through in the best of times, and certainly not now. I'd driven her long enough to learn better. But if I was already goin' against my education... Hmm... Sometimes, despite all indications, you gotta go north to go south. And the further away I go, the closer Old Stars and I get.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, DRIVING TRUCK

NARRATOR SIGHS IN RELIEF

NARRATOR

There we go, Old Stars. Estes Park, just ahead. God, ain't she green. I've seen some things, but the weather in these mountains has been something else. We're finally through the worst of it, though. How about we take a little break, huh? You certainly deserve it.

TRUCK DRIVES ON

MUSIC FILTERS IN

WINDOW LOWERS

NARRATOR

Huh. Well that sounds awfully familiar, doesn't it.

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

I was right when I said the high road would be a sight to see, though I couldn't have imagined what those sights would end up bein'. It was like drivin' outside and above the flow of time, every season on full display. The mountains were covered in snow and ice, all the way to the side of the road, massive glaciers un-meltin', chillin' the air and me in Old Stars. But the roads to the lee-side were covered with spring wildflowers, leadin' down the slopes to valleys between the peaks, where the tops of trees were rich green, at the height of summer. And across the way I could see red and yellow leaves, as deep as the latest, coolest fall would bring. I followed the Skyline Ridge, perfect, passable roads, half-awed by the alien weather, on edge as I listened to Old Stars struggle up steep grades and around sharp cliffs. Every so often I'd pass by a group of mountain rams, brown and ruddy. They turned to look at Old Stars and I each time, but I couldn't spare more than a glance to 'em. Too focused on the road. We made it through, slow and steady. But the strange sights weren't close to endin'. And in Estes Park there were strange sounds, too. Familiar music, all the stranger for its familiarity.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, OUTSIDE OF TRUCK

TRUCK DOOR OPENS

FAMILIAR MUSIC PLAYS

NARRATOR HOPS OUT, TRUCK DOOR CLOSES

NARRATOR WALKS SLOWLY

WOMAN
Hello!

NARRATOR

(warily)
Hi there.

WOMAN

Welcome to Estes, we don't get many visitors here. You're just time in for the celebration.

NARRATOR

(wary, a bit freaked out)
I can see that. Looks like....

WOMAN

(cheerful)
Hm? It looks like what?

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

Looked like quite the shindig. Before me in the center of that town they had raised a maypole, and a fair few of 'em were dancin' around it. As soon as I saw the dancin' I realized where I had recognized that music from. It shouldn't have been too strange, there were plenty of communities that were celebratin' the old ways, stands to reason the dances and songs would be similar, or even the same. Only it was far from Midsummer everywhere but Estes. And despite it bein' "the longest day of the year," there was a darkness around that pole, a sense of forebodin' thicker than the fog around the other. I didn't stay long. Old Stars and I could find some respite elsewhere.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, OUTSIDE TRUCK

WOMAN

There's plenty of food if you're hungry, or if you'd rather--

NARRATOR

I actually have to be on my way. I'm in a bit of hurry, as it were. But next time I'm passin' through.

QUICK FOOTSTEPS BACK TO TRUCK

DOOR OPENS, NARRATOR CLIMBS IN, DOOR CLOSES

ENGINE STARTS

OLD STARS DRIVES

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

I set out from Estes Park, finally headed southeast, en route to Colorado Springs. Didn't get too far. Not often that I do, though. Is it? There was no fog this time, but I was in a hurry to get out of there. The Company ahead, strange occurrences behind, and I wasn't even thinkin' what might be standin' in wait on the road between. Not that it would have much mattered. I've long since learned there's no use in guessin' at what I may find on these roads. Only worthwhile thing is to keep drivin' turnin' on the wipers when it rains, and the high beams at night. 'Course, there's plenty of things that get caught in those high beams. And this time if I hadn't caught Old Stars in time, I'd have been the casualty.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, DRIVING

SUDDEN BREAK

NARRATOR

Woah, there. Sorry to startle yah, little... Well now. You don't look too friendly, do ya? Don't suppose you might wanna get out of the way? No, that'd be too easy, huh.

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

It was well past dusk, already the summer of Estes had faded to a premature fall in the high elevation outside of what was once Boulder. I'd made it much farther down the road than I ever did in Astoria, and had begun to fix my mind away from the Maypole and toward whatever awaited me and Old Stars at the Company's base. I was more distracted than I should have been, but I saw that Ram from far enough away, Old Stars lights reflectin' back from those deep, black eyes. I recalled that white bison I'd come across so many roads ago. How surprised I'd been by the whole herd of 'em, how taken I'd been by the eyes of that bison.

This Ram was far different. Or maybe it wasn't? Maybe I've changed. This whole journey to the Company's western base had me on edge. I stopped Old Stars and climbed out, but no sooner than I did that Ram had its head leaned down, one hoof pawin' the road, ready to charge. I walked a few steps toward it, then retreated. I climbed back in Old Stars, drove a bit closer, but it wouldn't budge. From that close I saw its horns, noticed a massive chunk torn out of one of 'em. Maybe from a tussle with another truck on this same road. I'd wager that the Ram had won. I maneuvered Old Stars around. I've gotten real good at that over these years. Then I headed back to Estes in the night. The darkness had come on swift, the leaves almost looked brown and rusted in the night, even by Old Stars' headlights, and the sounds had been muted, even Old Stars' engine. Like the darkness of the night was swallowin' all. Before long the leaves looked normal again, and the sound came back. It weren't quiet in Estes, though. That was for sure.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, OUT OF TRUCK

FAMILIAR MUSIC PLAYS

NARRATOR WALKS AS MUSIC LEVELS RAISE

NARRATOR

Still at it in the darkness, I see. Maybe this place is more like Astoria than I thought. Hey there! Hi!

LOCAL MAN

Hello--- ah.

NARRATOR

Woah, you alright there?

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

I wasn't expectin' that. No sooner than the man broke from that group of dancers around the maypole to address me he collapsed to the ground, losin' all control of his body. I rushed to his side, but the dancers kept at it. I could see the concern in their faces, but it didn't seem that concern was for their

fallen friend. I rushed to Old Stars for some water and returned to the fallen man. As I helped him I cast on my gaze around, searchin' for what had the other dancers so on edge, if it weren't the man before me. I saw it soon enough. The trees, at the edge of the town, they're leaves had started to turn a rust-colored brown. Brown as the ones back on the road, only this brown fully lit by the fires the townspeople had to set-up to dance by. Brown as the ram that wouldn't let me pass. And that brown decay was spreadin', seepin' away the green from the clearin', the town, and I could only imagine even further. The man had begun to recover, and the dancers yelled at me to join 'em. The man nodded up at me, pleadin', so for the second time in not so great a period of time I danced around the Maypole. That same frantic jig, only this time without the magic to keep time from passin' and me from tirin'. I kept at it, near close to faintin' myself, but it didn't seem to matter. The brownin' had slowed, but it hadn't stopped. After a while, how long I couldn't say, when the brown was all around us, across the valley came a massive crash, like a cannon ball bein' fired into a mountain. We kept up the frantic jig, but the crash was enough to wake some of those sleepin' in town, and soon there was a steady stream of townsfolk into that clearin'. The first few to reach us jumped straight into the circle around the maypole and joined the dance, while another helped the fallen man up and supported him into a nearby buildin'. I fell to the ground myself and watched as others joined the dance, and slowly the green started returnin' to the land. The ones that weren't dancin' milled about in the clearin' for a while, then started back off to their houses. The dancers kept dancin', and, my questions unanswered, I picked myself up and headed back to Old Stars, exhausted, to get some rest. For all the strangeness on this road, I still had my destination fixed to the front of my mind. But I couldn't help from wonderin'. Whatever was happenin' in Estes, it seemed like quite the story.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, OUTSIDE OF TRUCK

The Narrator approaches a small "cafe," some people eat breakfast.

LOCAL MAN

Hello again, stranger. Join me for breakfast?

NARRATOR

Don't mind if I do. You almost look a different man without exhaustion cloudin' your face.

LOCAL MAN

Yes, I'm grateful to you. I'm not too old, if you can believe it, and yet the dancing takes years off of us. It seems switching to double shifts was just enough to set me over. Thank you for joining the others.

NARRATOR

I'm just sorry it wasn't enough.

LOCAL MAN

Of course it was. You helped hold back the tide.

NARRATOR

But that wave still crashed down nonetheless, and took that mountain-side with it.

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

It was a cold night. I had bundled myself up in the bison hide I'd been given some roads back, but I awoke the next mornin' in a puddle of sweat. The heart and heat of summer had returned. When I stepped outside the first thing I noticed was the missin' mountain-side. I'd seen the same massive peak, towerin' over the town as I drove in from the mountains. It was covered in glaciers, far more than I'd ever seen in the Rockies before the collapse. Now, I could see a whole chunk of the mountain was missin', the side hidden from my view on the way down from the mountains. And if I squinted, the sun at my back, the twisted peak with the missin' chunk looked almost like the ram's head, the same ram that had stopped me on the road. I stared for a while, but as I turned back to Old Stars I saw below that was another chunk, smaller, but missin' as well, slabs of broken ice crushin' trees below it. It looked like a fresh wound. I wasn't the only one lookin' at it, either. Around the Maypole the townsfolk still danced, a different group than the night before, and different musicians played that same tune. And beside 'em there were others, starin' up at the mountains, inspectin' the damage from afar. They were whisperin' amongst themselves, but I

could barely hear 'em over the musicians. And then through it all broke the sound of my rumblin' stomach. I ventured into the town, lookin' for some food, and that's when I found my collapsed friend from the night before. The townsfolk sat at their own tables, meager meals before 'em, but before him was a veritable feast. He offered to share his food, a generous gesture that I took him up on. And that wasn't all he shared. I had many questions, and he was as generous with answers, too.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, OUTSIDE TRUCK

LOCAL MAN

So you saw the Ram? That's... well, I've only seen him once, and that was years ago, the first time we failed to dance. When we were still learning its ways. I'd say it was rare for you to see it, but it's rarer still that you were let into the town.

NARRATOR

How long has the Ram been here?

LOCAL MAN

It showed up not too long after the collapse. Winter came early that year, but a new kind of winter, a cold that none of us could withstand. The mountains froze over, though we held on. But come spring there was no thaw. We got a steady trickle of survivors from the city, people escapin' the hunger and the marauders. It was a hard time, back then.

NARRATOR

Hmmm. Now still, in different ways.

LOCAL MAN

But we couldn't support ing. Some of us left, though we don't know what happened to them. Come summer the mountains were still frozen, the town covered in snow. None of us knew what to do, but those who had taken charge decided to hold the annual festival still. We lit a fire, put up the pole, and started the dance. That beast wandered right into the middle, and it brought the summer with it. We all cried, stopped the dance and rushed to break the ground. But with the thaw the glaciers started to go, and a massive landslide took out a third of the town. And if that weren't enough, the cold came back. It took a while to put two and two together, but we started the dance back up, and it's been summer in Estes ever since.

NARRATOR

And you haven't stopped once, in all those years?

LOCAL MAN

We stopped twice. The first many years back. Some of us forgot why we had started, but that scar on the mountain reminds us. It spared most of us, a warning shot. But we didn't stop dancing again. Until last night.

NARRATOR

My apologies.

LOCAL MAN

Oh, it's not your fault. We're not sure why, we never have been with anything since the collapse, but these last couple weeks it's taken more and more of us to hold back the tide, keep the glaciers in their place and keep summer in Estes. We've had to double our dancing shifts, and, well, I'm not a young man anymore. I failed.

NARRATOR

It can't be that terrible, not if they're feedin' you like this.

LOCAL MAN

Hm. A farewell meal. If I can't dance, I'm a burden.

NARRATOR

It was just once. And you said yourself, you've had double shifts.

LOCAL MAN

Once is all it takes. I'll be trekking out of here today, headed down to the city. I wonder how it is, after all these years.

NARRATOR

You mean to say none of you have left and come back?

LOCAL MAN

We can't spare anyone. No one that can dance, that is.

NARRATOR

Well, the cities ain't too terrible these days, though I do my best to steer clear of 'em. You're still in decent shape, and used to dancin' at all hours, I'm sure you'll find some kind of work.

LOCAL MAN

I hope so. Where are you off to?

NARRATOR

Colorado Springs. If I can leave. That ram wouldn't let me go last night.

LOCAL MAN

There must be something it wants from you.

NARRATOR

I can't imagine what. I don't have much beside's Old Stars, and she's not in the best shape these days.

LOCAL MAN

Whatever it is, it must be important. You're the first visitor we've had in years, and you came over the mountain roads. They've been frozen over as many times as we've tried to pass them.

NARRATOR

Funny, they were as green and summery as Estes when I drove 'em, and the roads were pristine.

LOCAL MAN

(suspicious)

How long have you been traveling this way?

NARRATOR

I came into Colorado about ten days back.

LOCAL MAN

That explains it. The ram's work. It wants something. Say, you have space in your truck?

NARRATOR

Plenty of it. Why?

LOCAL MAN

Could you give me a ride? Spare my tired bones some of the effort. And I wouldn't mind seeing that ram again, before I leave for good.

NARRATOR

Works for me.

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

I couldn't help but wonder if that man's exile had been my fault. He'd said it himself, the Ram wanted something from me, enough to bring summer to the high roads as it had brought it to Estes, and at the cost of all that extra dancin'. So I couldn't say no to givin' him a lift. And besides, you know me. I'm always one to take on a passenger. Regardless of the risk.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT DRIVING TRUCK

SFX TRUCK DRIVING

LOCAL MAN

Well, there it is. Hello there, old friend.

SFX TRUCK STOPPING

LOCAL MAN

You sure that's what it wants? It doesn't seem so special.

NARRATOR

This has to be it. I'm just surprised I'd made it this far without noticin' it in the back there. Thanks again for findin' it. I'd be in quite the pickle if I'd made it to my destination and it was still in Old Stars.

LOCAL MAN

Of course, sometimes it takes a fresh pair of eyes to see what's right in front of our noses.

NARRATOR

Right you are. Well, here goes nothin'.

SFX DOOR OPENS

SFX NARRATOR HOPS DOWN, WALKS AWAY

SFX RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

I cradled it in my hands, gingerly, and walked the twenty or so paces up to ram. It leaned its head down and pawed the ground, but it didn't look to charge, so I kept up my walkin'. Got so close I could see the black of its eyes, and that horn with the chunk missin'. Only, just below that missin' chunk was a smaller piece missin' as well. Had that been there the night before? I couldn't remember. When I was a few paces away I leaned down, and as softly as I could I set it down. A sleek, black Company box. Then I backed up, my eyes on both the ram and the box, until I could feel the heat of Old Stars behind me. Only then did I break eye contact to hop back in. The ram didn't move for a while, though, just stared ahead at us. Finally it stepped forward, and nudged the box, then grabbed it its mouth and leapt away. The man beside me let out a long held breath. And we kept drivin'. It was shortly after that I had to stop, the blindin' light reflectin' off all of Old Stars mirrors, and that shockwave shakin' her on the road. When I opened my eyes and blinked away the light I looked back in the mirrors, and saw it. My new friend saw it just the same. That mountain, the one that had towered over Estes with a chunk tore out its side, only no chunks were missin' now. It had healed. Just like the mountains in Yosemite. Just like the Ram must have, only I weren't wishin' to see it again to confirm. I just kept drivin'.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, DRIVING TRUCK

SFX TRUCK DRIVING

LOCAL MAN

Wow.

NARRATOR

Yep, this here is a city. I do my best to stay out of 'em, and I got pressin' business further south, so I'll skirt around. Drop you at the exit just outside. But it isn't a long walk to get in from there, and you've got plenty of daylight left.

RECORDER ON

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

I dropped him off, my thanks to him and his to me, and set off around the city toward Colorado Springs. It wasn't too far away, then. Much closer now. I'll be there soon, with the last dregs of twilight to spare. Already the sun has sunk below the mountains, no chunks missin' off these ones. Stands to reason that if anything had fallen off, this close to the Company base, they'd have fixed it, same as that sleek, black box fixed up Estes. Same as they can fix up Old Stars. Not sure what I'll find at the base, though. I never am, to be fair, but this time that uncertainty is sittin' worse in my belly. I can feel it, and it ain't pleasant. But that can't stop me from facin' it, not if I want to keep drivin' these roads. And I've gotta keep drivin' these roads, keep pressin' east. East until I hit the water, then south until I hit it again. Only there's a bridge now, I've heard. Figures, the Company would fix that break in the land, too. But they can't fix everything, no matter how hard they try. Something's... Something's you gotta fix yourself. And all I'm askin' for is the chance to try. Will you give it to me, when I find ya? Or is it too late? Only one way to find out. A few more miles to Colorado Springs. I'm headed in the right direction. Sometimes you gotta head south to head east. My life is nothing but detours, these days. There's plenty blockin' the roads forward, beyond their general disrepair. You ain't careful, you'll miss something right in front of you. Without a fresh pair of eyes you're liable to smack right into it, or fall right off the edge. Straight down the cliff. Course you know me, once the camera pans down I'll be there, hand around the one tree growin' out the side, spared the fall, clingin' on somehow or other. I've managed to these past years. Cling on. But still. I'd rather avoid that fate. Hmph. You know I hate cliffhangers.

RECORDER OFF

CREDITS UP

JASON HUMMING "SHE'LL BE COMING AROUND THE MOUNTAIN," SLOW,
MOURNFUL

.....
.....
.....

!!SURPRISE ENDING!!

PRESENT, INSIDE TRUCK, NOT DRIVING

SFX ENGINE OFF

NARRATOR

(awed)

Well, here we are Old Stars. So whaddya say? Shall we head in?

END OF EPISODE