

JUBILEE

By Susan Neville

Nothing matters, and what if it did.

—*John Mellencamp*

We spent the summer looking for John Cougar.

I don't know what I'd do if I saw John Cougar, I say to Jack. I think I'd die.

We'll see him, Jack says to me, by the end of the summer. We'll make it a hobby to search.

Why not? John Cougar moved back here from some place glitzy. We listen to his songs to see how we're doing, like doctors with a stethoscope listening to our own hearts.

John Cougar wants to see us, he says, as much as we want to see him.

Jack unwraps the new tape exactly like a pack of cigarettes. He puts it into the deck. They say you can see him sometimes in the drugstore. We drive by. There's one old pharmacist, no John Cougar.

Oh, I can think of John Cougar and glide. His hair as brown as maples. His voice a night-time field of dry beans, husk on husk.

We drive around two hours with the windows open, listening to John Cougar's voice, hoping to see him on the back roads.

We tell each other second-hand stories about his house. A family farm, with rooms added on. A studio in the barn. I read in a magazine that there's a room for watching movies, a full-size

screen. I imagine him singing as he climbs over fences. I see it in slow motion, like a cowboy movie. He has this sort of sad look like he knows things and has come home. It makes me feel good to know I never left.

Now and then we think we see him, and we speed up. But it's never him.

Will you always love me? I ask Jack.

There are some questions you can't answer, he says, and shouldn't try.

Like how we could live ten miles away from someone like John Cougar and be the only people in town who haven't seen him.

At any moment we might see him, I say, riding his bike on the road, hear his real voice, his knock at the door, asking to borrow a cup of something, like any neighbor.

It was a strange year. It was like all your life you'd counted on things and then you couldn't. In the spring there was this plague of locusts. They coated the tree branches. There was this ringing sound all day like bells, it wasn't pleasant. Sometimes they'd all rise and then squeal down like bombs on old movies. They left their dried shells on the ground, and when you walked outside they flew in your face.

Then there was the ice storm. It was beautiful, every bit like diamonds. But all the wires snapped and even some of the old oak trees were uprooted. And that April snow where the flakes were so thick they looked like slices of Colonial.

Two of my friends had miscarriages when the corn tasseled.

And then the summer, no rain for three months. It made you want to stop thinking. It made you want to look for John Cougar. We spent the summer looking for John Cougar, and we would have headed on right through the fall. But in August, there's this sale on cars, in town where the

buildings are falling in. The dealer was moving to the strip by the highway. So he puts up flags and colored lights like a garage sale. Someone sets up a corn dog trailer, polish sausage with peppers, and lemonade. It was the last business to leave from that block. Everyone else had left, a couple of bars moved in, but they strike like a match and just as soon fade.

For a few weeks there's this festival feeling. In the center of the lot was a tent with white lights beading the edge. Underneath it was a new white car. They were going to have this contest. The contest was why we stopped looking for John Cougar. Jack stands outside the tent, his eyes filled with that car.

It's one of those nights I look at him and I know how young we are. He's tall, but his body is a boy's. I want to touch him, but he won't have it, not here. He moves away from the tent and sits on a stack of tires, waiting with his friends. They put on these James Dean faces. The strip of grass on the road is dry and white. Jack spent the last week waxing our old car so he can sell it when the new one comes. He has faith.

The dealer motions to the boys on the tire. He picks up a big bullhorn and announces that it's time for the New Car Jubilee. Thirty or so men come forward, a few women. They all lay their hands on the car like something holy. A few of the men who weren't as fast are kneeling on the ground, their hands on a hubcap or a fender. The dealer takes all their names. They'll keep their hands on the car for days. If they lift them off at any time but the scheduled breaks, they're out of the contest. The last one holding on will win. The white car, it glistens on their faces.

Jack's wedged in sideways but has a good spot in the center. He can lean on the roof without bending. He's pressed his body tight against the car so no one can get underneath and make him lose his balance. He looks at me and smiles. This is it, the look says, our life is starting. Watch out John Cougar. Last year the winner stuck it out for three weeks. He's cleared it with his boss. They say they'll hold his job until the day he sails into the parking lot in that big white car.

The wives and girlfriends stand outside the circle of the tent. We're ready with pillows and thermos jugs of coffee, home baked pies and sandwiches. During the breaks, some of the wives are as smooth and well-trained as pit crews.

He's brought a lawn chair for me and set it up where I can watch him. The night is close. The plastic webbing sticks to my skin.

Several men drop out, laughing, within the first hour. They make jokes about why they're leaving. They laugh too loud, wish the others well. The bars across the street are filled with yellow light. Hours pass and after each break there are fewer bodies touching the car, someone lying stretched out on a sleeping bag saying Oh God I can't do it, this feels so good.

I stay through the night. I talk to him and wipe his face with cool water. He tells me to go home during the hot part of the afternoons. I leave him with a thermos of shaved ice. My dreams are busy, full of lakes and water.

After the first day, only the committed are left. There are eleven of them. We went to high school with several. There are a few older than us, not many. For most of them, this is the only way they'll ever have a new car. That's probably true for us, though my husband is convinced he would someday have the money.

One of the men ran for mayor in the last election. Like that, this is something to do with his time. He talks to everyone now, has that politician's smile. He acts like he knows things. He has five children. His wife lives in a van, driving them to lessons. He wears a regular cloth shirt with a button-down collar. Everyone else wears t-shirts. When the talk turns to the weather, he smiles. Oh yes, he says, it's the end, it's all over. Everything's ruined. But me and my husband, we're just starting, I say. He waves his hand, no matter.

The other men laugh and say come on, if that were true, we'd see it on television.

Twice a day his wife drives by and brings him food. He waves to his children through the van windows before they drive off.

No one thinks the contest will last as long as last year's because of the heat. But days pass. Some nights it's quiet on the lot, some rowdy. When the nights are cooler, and on the weekend, it seems like everyone in town shows up. I get tired from all the talk. In the middle of the night, men stumble out of the bars and have slurred conversations with those holding onto the car. Their voices begin to slur as well. They start to look pale, like this is something they wish they hadn't started. One night the politician passes out, and an ambulance is called to take him home.

I read in the paper that John Cougar is giving a concert at the fair, in the city, an hour away. The day of the concert I go to the grocery in the afternoon. I make a special dinner and pack it in an old basket I find in the garage. I line the basket with a soft blue cloth and put another cloth over it like a pie. I spend a lot of time on it, making it right.

The lot is quiet when I go there at night. There are only six men left. They all look drowsy, leaning on pillows. None of them are talking. They've told their life stories, every joke they've ever heard. One man sits on the ground, his arms wrapped around the fender. I put my hand on my husband's arm. He jumps when I touch him. His eyes look glossy. His face is flushed, his white shirt wet and transparent as a boiled onion.

He tells me this crazy dream he had, about all our bodies breaking apart into glitter like *Star Trek*, our spirits turning into rainbows and shooting into the sky. I put my hand on his forehead. It feels clammy. Don't you see, he says, we're snared in a difficult time.

One of the wives looks over at me from where she's been giving her husband water. He's hallucinating, she says, delirious. It's been happening to all of them.

It's all energy, Jack says, nothing is real.

It's the old End-times thing, another woman says. They should call this whole thing off; give them all a car to drive around in for a couple of weeks. It's too hot for this.

Jack is looking at me like he thinks I'll fly apart. Shh, I say. I start humming.

You're hungry, I tell him. I give him food. I give him chicken, a chunk of cheese, a glass of cold sugared tea. I feed him cherry cake and chocolate cookies. I buy him popcorn from the stand. Nothing fills him up.

At eight o'clock the sky turns milky hazy blue, the sun red and close. The lights come on in the lot. The stars are hidden behind a haze.

I look around. Everything seems shabby. The concrete is cracked and laced with spikey weeds, windows covered with grime. A brick wall that used to be one side of a furniture store has fallen in and no one bothered to fix it. The sidewalk in front of the store is embedded with purple quartz. Most of the pieces are missing. No one walks over it now without trying to kick another one loose. The air smells like burned grease.

An hour before the concert, there's a breeze. The bar across the street opens its doors to let in the air. They're playing one of John Cougar's songs, distant and tinny. The men around the car try to sing along.

We hear this roaring. Dust rises in the street. I see a tired face in the window of the bar. Goddamn, someone shouts, it's sure enough him.

John Cougar! John Cougar! We all yell, just like that. We run out to the street and cheer.

Forty thousand waiting to hear him sing, the Midway lit up like popsicles. Part of me wants to race him to the city, demand he look at me, and tell me what he knows. Part of me sinks close to the earth's spin, still believing he'll see me in his own good time.

We head on back to the car lot. The six men are holding onto the car for dear life. Tell us about it, one of them says, tell us what you saw.