

Nahor

Finalist

By Austen Coogan

It's 8:20 at night and I rush out the door through the cold winter air. As usual I'm running late for band practice at my friend Brady's house, which starts 20 minutes ago. I can't afford my own car yet, so after a quick sprint down the driveway I jump into my Mom's Toyota Rav 4. Being a teenage guy who drives his mother's car is already embarrassing, but it doesn't help that her license plate proudly says "WHIMZCL" (unlike her, I don't have a very "whimsical" personality). I hit the ignition and after a moment of shivering, the engine coughs itself awake. I quickly put on a generic Spotify playlist, and the car and I start speeding to Brady's house for band practice.

This routine drive is different than usual because we aren't coming from our house. Instead, we're coming from the home of the Basingers, a family in our church that leads a home group Bible study. Since we're coming from there, the GPS says a shortcut through the nearby Nahor road will take us to Brady's about 10 minutes faster than usual. The drive just started and I'm already 20 minutes, so this shortcut seems like a no-brainer. We exit the driveway, and at the next turn the car and I pull onto Nahor.

Aside from the shortcut, everything's normal at this point: the music's at full volume, WHIMZCL is driving fine, and my running-more-late-than-last-time anxiety is breaking another record. But after roughly two minutes of driving, a large white sign comes up in the headlights. "END STATE MAINTAINENCE" it says, and beyond it the road narrows to a single lane of gravel.

Now I've only been driving for a few months, so I don't have much experience. I know every driver has moments where their wisdom and skills behind the wheel are put to the test, but I haven't had any such moments yet. However, upon seeing that white sign, my instincts immediately suggest we turn around. Under normal circumstances we could, but right now we're too late; there's just no time for another route. Plus, the GPS

says in three miles we'll turn off Nahor onto a more familiar road close to Brady's house. We can press on.

For the next mile or so the gravel road stays tight with a few potholes, but then we pass by a few houses running close alongside the road. Their lights are off, only illuminated by Whimzy's faint headlights. Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if the GPS led us onto private property. I seriously don't want tired, angry country folk to burst out their creepy off-the-grid cabins and shoot me for trespassing. Whatever – we can't go back now, or I'll be 45 minutes late to practice. Only two more miles until we turn off Nahor anyway; we can make it.

As we drive the road becomes increasingly foreboding. Eventually, we stumble into a little clearing in the woods. Past that Nahor turns extremely narrow, with just enough room for little WHIMZCL to crawl on through. The GPS says 1.0 miles now, and again my instincts recommend we turn around. 0.9 miles and the gravel fades into a trail of dirt. 0.8 miles: the ground begins rising on both sides of us. 0.7 miles: the ground climbs high enough that we're now driving in a car-deep trench. 0.6 miles: the malevolent trench is now too narrow to turn around. 0.5 miles: I lower the music's volume to help me focus. 0.4 miles: sinister tree limbs in the trench reach out and claw poor Whimzy's windshield. 0.3 miles: the road turns muddy. Very muddy. Too muddy...

Ahead I see a menacingly large mud puddle threatening to swallow WHIMZCL's tires. We stop briefly so I can stare at it and think. This is it. This is the moment where I'm tested. Despite the alarming circumstances, something surprises me: I feel calm. I'm running incredibly late and I'm three miles deep on a clearly forsaken road with no easy way out, and yet I feel calm. I feel focused. I feel confident, even. With this peace of mind, I start weighing our options: Little Whimzy is only front wheel drive, and it's quite possible she'd get stuck in the mud if we went forward. But on the other hand, turning back now would be incredibly difficult and make us nearly an hour late. Should we risk the puddle, or back out and accept being even later?

After a moment, the right choice becomes clear: we can't risk being stuck. Getting out would require I either call my parents to come, or walk a mile in the dark to the nearest haunted cabin. Honestly, I'm not sure which is worse. Plus, by the time

WHIMZCL was free, practice would be over anyway. Even though I'm 0.3 miles away, I reluctantly text the band saying I'll be an hour late. The trench has no room to turn around, so Whimzy and I must drive in reverse for several minutes. Only her reverse lights illuminate our path backward, but after narrowly dodging trees for a few minutes, we eventually reach the clearing we passed earlier. With room to turn around, we can finally drive out the rest of Nahor. Good riddance.

Eventually, we arrive at Brady's house after taking the normal route. Upon entering, the band gives me a round of applause for being so prompt. I start telling them what happened, and Brady's father suddenly says, "Oh yeah! I've been on that road. Some mean people live back there. It's a good thing you turned around; you definitely would have been stuck."

You might think I was frustrated during practice. Actually, I was rather proud. Sure – in the grand scheme of life, that 40-minute drive may seem rather insignificant. But in that ominous trench my driving maturity was truly tested for the first time. And I wasn't proud because I passed the test. I was proud because I passed it calmly.