

Thank you, Johnny

A hot, humid day near Houston,
driving along a beach white
with sizzling sand. The back seat
of Uncle Prentice's car is hot enough
to cook an egg, much less my
ten-year-old flesh. Cousins Sally
and Patsy and a neighborhood girl,
we are *all* there in the car with tall
Daddy Prentice, whose long legs stick up
above the accelerator, knobby knees
reaching upward toward his chest.
He can't *ever* sit still. His nervous
fingers diddle on the steering wheel,
the dash and the seat beside him.
Windows down, humid air blows
in my face, a headache like
sickness above my eyes, aching pouches
press in, turn my tummy to acid.

The radio blares a new song about walking
the line, about somebody who couldn't
quite trust himself to do the right thing
with the right person at the right time.
A promise to be true, a voice sounding
so hillbilly that I don't want to hear
it, don't want to admit that I'm enchanted
by a regular beat and a voice
that's steady too. It talks about simple
things and love, about life and mistakes
and challenges, and about forgiveness,
all to a rhythm that sounds like
the steady beat of big truck tires
on the highway.
After all, I *am* just ten years old.
All I know about life is that grownups
always seem to know what they are doing

all of the time. But this song, this voice, this man, here he is singing about being uncertain, about making mistakes.

On the way home, Uncle Prentice stops at a gas station, goes inside to buy a cold six-pack of Lone Star, long-neck bottles sweating in the cardboard container. He pulls out the first 100 dollar bill I’ve ever laid eyes on, flashes it quick and crisp at the guy pumping his gas. He gives us some bills, lets us buy those pop-up popsicles, the ones you push up through a tube to lick the red and white and blue sherbet inside. The cool ice soothes my mouth. The radio plays that song again, the one where the man sings about trying to live right and about making mistakes. Prentice rolls up the car windows and starts the air conditioner and we start home. My headache is gone. I close my eyes and listen to the steady rhythm of big truck tires on the highway.

Nancy Owen Nelson