

IN MEDIAS RES

The stench of death and diesel fumes filled the air as the bus driver opened the door on yet another in the long series of impending ghost towns I'd seen so many of on this trip. Evidence of past oil exploration lay everywhere but looked as if it hadn't moved in years. Apparently no one with any means of escape had stayed in this suburb of Hell. "Who'll be left to bury my bones?" must constantly occupy the thoughts of the few dregs still struggling to exist out here. Even the dog, barking at its shadow while scratching at a flea, looked like he'd rather get on the bus than stay in No Dogs Land. If these withered souls were lucky, the mutt just might be kind enough to bury what's left of their bones after he eats out the marrow.

The general store's screen door had so many coats of peeling paint it wouldn't close right. Currently, it wasn't sure if it wanted to be blue or green. The spring, brand-spanking new, slammed the door shut behind me, scrapping off more paint. Several streamers of well-adorned fly stripes dangling from the ceiling made some of the other passengers reconsider purchasing any snacks. The two flies copulating in the sun by the window initiated yet another revolution on the endless cycle of the world. I had to laugh.

After selecting a few, fine refreshments to replenish my dwindling stock, I browsed through the rack of used paperbacks. Not being too choosy at first, going more for bulk than substance, I culled some of the bigger ones. By the time I'd finished weeding, I had two romance, one general fiction and one science fiction book left in my stack. I couldn't decide which one to take. Each had its own appeal. I splurged. I bought them all.

As I stood in the middle of the empty street, watching the dust kick up around my feet, the hot breeze banged a loose board nearby then rolled a stereotypical tumbleweed across the road. Nothing had changed from our last stop, and I wondered if we were traveling in circles. Did it matter?

"All aboard!" the driver yelled.

While stuffing the candy, fruit and books in my backpack, my ticket fell out. Picking it up and smoothing it flat, the next pullout sheet read: "San Antonio, Texas." I flipped through the progressively worse carbon writing to the last page. My destination was Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Florida? Oh, yeah, right. I was going there to work the spring break crowd. I held my ticket closer, trying to make out the scribbling someone called penmanship. "Seattle, Washington," I slowly deciphered. Seattle? Hmm. Either that was where this latest adventure originated or just where I bought the ticket. God only knows what I was doing there. It'll come back to me. Yeah, sure it will. Shoving the ticket back in my bag, I watch as another Wanderer boarded. She smiled at me and I smiled back. Animals always recognized their own kind. Before zipping up my backpack, I reached in to select a novel at random. Romance. Was fate weaving a wicked web to entangle me? I glanced back over my shoulder at the woman, adding a slight nod of my

head as I smiled at her. Maybe my book would give me some new, juicy words I could use to woo her.

Another young couple with a kid moseyed on board. "I'm never coming back here again," the guy said to his wife.

'Never' is a lot shorter than a dictionary defines, I wanted to scream out to him, but who was I to burst anyone's bubble of euphoria. The asphalt treadmill we were pulling back onto would do it soon enough.

ONE

The huge, pneumatic tires hummed against the hard, black ribbon. Heat and friction were the birth of their union. Escape from the path of the road's existence? Impossible. It surrounds us, penetrates us; binds the world together. May the road be with you. Yeah, it, too, had a dark side. Relentlessly, it stretched on and on, occasionally consuming someone here, someone there.

Since the road hadn't eaten me during the night, I casually ripped open a candy bar and a whiff of chocolate drew my full attention to it. Munching, I read the wrapper and, for some reason, the nutritional information label really pissed me off. I didn't eat candy because of how much protein it provided. I ate candy because it was something to be savored, enjoyed - not good for you.

Crumpling the now useless paper and sticking it in my pocket, I eased my seat back as far as it would go then pulled my hat down to the top of my eyes. As I licked the caramel out of my teeth, I went back to my book to take my mind off my mind. Ah, reading. It was one of the true pleasures in life. It was better than sex and lasted longer too. Now that I think about it, so does a candy bar. I licked out more caramel.

Parts of my body started to tingle. Euphemistically, the author told tales that challenged the imagination - not to mention the body. No less than seven adjectives were used in one sentence to describe what a man did with his penis in a woman's vagina. I glanced at the author's name again and wondered if she wrote from personal experience. I read on. Page after page was loaded with exotic locals, anatomically perfect characters and enough salacious romance to even make the words sweat. They came with a-

"You want a brownie?" she said, tapping me on the shoulder.

"Huh?" blurted out as my intelligent reply as I turned around.

Holding a foil-covered package out to me, the girl repeated herself. "Brownie?"

I took it and the foil made its distinctive noise as I pulled it apart. Taking one, I handed the rest of the package back to her. "Thanks."

"Sure." She took one herself before putting the brownies away. "My friends made 'em for me."

"They're pretty good," I said devouring it.

"Thanks," she replied. "My name's Jennifer."

"Tony."

She smiled. "Hi, Tony."

I smiled back and asked, "Where you headed?"

"Georgia. You?"

"I'm heading to Fort Lauderdale. Anyone special waiting for you in Georgia?"

"My son's there with my ex-husband." Embarrassed, ashamed or both, she suddenly looked down. "I haven't seen my little boy in a long time."

Not wanting her to turn away, I tried to sound really interested. "How old is he?" It came out lame.

"Six. Oh, he's such a beautiful child!

"What's his name?" Better.

"Matthew. He's named after his father," she ended sadly.

"Matthew. Nice strong name for a kid."

"You think?"

I nodded yes.

She gave me the once-over, and I stared at her from behind my dark sunglasses. She then looked down to watch her hands play with each other.

"Are you from that town you got on at?"

"That pit in the middle of nowhere? Hell, no! Ran out of money and that was as far as my ticket took me. I worked there for about three weeks in the diner to get enough cash to keep movin'." She jerked a thumb at the window. "Nothin' but sand and dried up brush for a million miles around. I don't know why anyone would want to live out here."

I nodded in agreement. The conversation lulled, and we each turned to watch the scenery out our windows. My bladder reminded me that I hadn't gone for a while, so I got up to use the can.

Squeezing into the tiny, dark room, I took off my sunglasses so I could see to lift the lid. Pissing down into the open, gaping hole, I glanced at the mirror. The reflection was mine, but I'd give it away to anyone who wanted it. Although thinner than it used to be, my body was still in good shape: broad shoulders "V"-ing down to the waist, massive arms and thighs and all on a solid, six-foot frame. Leaning in, I examined my face. I shouldn't have. My eyes were sullen and dark from countless nights without any sleep. I slid my shades back on as I exited. Much better.

"Huge, with nice buns, too," Jennifer said with a smile as I walked by.

I self-consciously raised an eyebrow.

"I'll bet you could do it with one hand."

"Say what?" came my surprised response.

"Lift me with just one hand." Jennifer looked at me sternly. "What'd you think I meant?" She answered her own question. "Augh. You men are all alike." There was no bite to her words. "Make a muscle for me."

I loved being macho, and by now all the people sitting around us, listening in on our conversation, turned to see the spectacle. I obliged. Pulling my shirtsleeve up to my shoulder, I straightened my right arm with my fingers extended. Slowly making a fist and curling my arm, I flexed my biceps. I could hear the muscle fibers drawing taut like hemp rope under a terrific force.

There was an intake of air from everyone watching.

I grinned and nodded as I pushed my sleeve back down. For the next few minutes I was the main topic of conversation. The driver, getting wind of what transpired, checked out the action in his rear-view mirror.

Jennifer said, "Your arm's bigger than my leg. I hope you're one of those gentle giants." "Sadly," I replied, "I'm neither." Suddenly tired of scene and the conversation, I leaned my head against the window and watched "nothin'" go by for hours.

San Antonio came and went. Some got on, some got off, and somewhere some died. I turned my thoughts outward to listen to the world. The night was quiet except for the two old ladies up front who exchanged points of view on politics, grandchildren and Medicare between bites of their roast beef sandwiches.

A restless soul, tired of their babbling, yelled, "Shaddup, will ya?!"

The women grew silent except for their muffled eating noises. So much for that diversion. I turned to gaze out the window. Looking up at the stars, I recalled that they were indeed big and bright in the clear skies out west, but now they seemed dull and lifeless.

My right eye burned as it blinked a couple of times. I made a mental note to pull my contacts soon. I never did like wearing my glasses. With all the oil, sweat and heavy lenses, they always slid down my nose. Ah, but even extended-wear contacts had to be pulled now and again so oxygen could get to the cornea, I reminded myself. The idea of going blind didn't thrill me. I'd pull them when we reached Houston.

I wanted to lose myself in my book again, but since it was night and several people slept, I didn't turn my light on. That left thinking or sleeping. Two plus two equals four. Four plus four equals eight. Eight plus eight equals boredom. I exhaled heavily out my nose.

An insistent honking came from behind the bus. From its tone, it was a foreign car, expensive and fast. Impatiently it fought for a clear lane. Pass or be passed. That was the law of the road.

When the slow lane cleared the driver eased the bus over. I stood up in my seat so I could see what make of car hungered to burn up the road. It was a midnight black Porsche. Art in motion. Wait! What was this? The Porsche was only the front door to a very sleek convoy of its own. Following it were two Corvettes, a DeLorean and a Shelby Cobra bringing up the back door. The guy in the Cobra, his hair and white, silk scarf blowing in the wind, leaned back in his seat with his left arm on the door, savoring the moment.

I watched them until their taillights disappeared off in the distance. The thrill of living for a machine washed over me again. It was an addiction into itself. The usual creature comforts were passed up to be able to afford those extra-wide mags, an additional hundred horses under the hood and a well-endowed girl to adorn the passenger seat. It wasn't just a way of life. It was life.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the driver said over the PA system, "we'll be pulling into the Houston terminal in just a few moments. There will be a two-hour layover while the bus is cleaned and refueled. Please make sure to take all of your carry-ons with you. Thank you." The bus hissed to a stop mere inches from another one already parked in the terminal.

Leisurely, I passed by the line of snorting, farting behemoths. Some had their guts hanging out while others were eating or vomiting people. The cave they rested in was enormous. Dozens of inhabitants attended to their monsters while hundreds of sacrifices seemed to mill about aimlessly. A few unappetizing victims lined the walls, seeking coinage in which to lubricate themselves and to hopefully be more appeasing to the road gods.

I saw Jennifer standing in the middle of the frenzy, resetting her watch to the terminal's clock. "Hungry?"

"Sure. Where?"

"Couple of blocks down. Pretty good." As we made our way out, I remarked, "You could almost drink the air in this humidity."

"You'll find that most of the South is like this. Hot and muggy durin' the day. Cool and muggy durin' the night. Kinda hard to breathe in if you're not used to it."

Taking in a labored lung full, I replied, "You can say that again. I've been through here a couple of times, and each time seems to get worse, not better."

We made small talk until we reached the diner. Thankfully, it was air-conditioned - one of its main attractions.

Jennifer sat down across from me as I took a seat under the main vent. The frigid air cooled my perspiration and chilled my body. I let out a huge sigh. A faded, red and white, checkered tablecloth covered the table, and the floor, ceiling and walls were all made out of real wood. Old and bleached, the restaurant still had a charm all its own.

We each took a menu from the stack propped up between the condiments. Jen made a comment about a local specialty known as Chicken Fried Steak. I just grinned and nodded at

her. I'd tried it once. I think I can safely use the word "Never" when it comes to Chicken Fried Steak.

The sliced beef, smothered in the special house sauce, was what I salivated for. That and a root beer in a frosty mug. Jennifer got caught up in my descriptive enthusiasm and ordered the same.

After the waitress left to give our order to the cook, Jen played with a sugar packet as I continued my seated tour of the room. With the precursory small talk on the weather over, we had to come up with another topic, sit in silence or discuss what was really on our minds.

"How do you like traveling by bus?" I asked.

"Hum? Oh, it's okay I guess. I don't own a car, and it's faster than goin' by train."

"Yeah, but trains can be rather ro- ." I almost said "romantic." I faked a cough. "Yeah, they can be rather slow." I was beginning to feel like a high school kid again. Next, I'd be asking her what her favorite color was.

"Cherry apple red," she replied. "What's yours?"

"Blue." Come on, Tony. Wooing women was one of your specialties, I told myself. Shake off those rusty scales. I stared at her and said, "You have the loveliest brown eyes."

"Thanks. I've had them all my life," she smirked.

Grinning, I leaned back as the waitress stopped at our table.

"Al'righty. Who had what?"

Jen and I both slowly pivoted our heads to look at her.

"It's a joke." She said smiling, setting the identical plates down. "Y'all enjoy your dinner now." With a wink she left to greet another couple that just entered.

After giving thanks and taking a bite of the succulent beef, I shut my eyes as the juices filled my mouth. It was a little tough but still delicious.

"Are you always this passionate about food?"

"Sure," I mumbled in mid chew, washing it down with a gulp of root beer. "Eating is one of the few pleasures in life."

"What about sex?"

I stared at her and she at me. "Don't get it as often as I can get food." Bite, chew, chew, swallow. "Besides, who'd let me eat while making love to them?"

Jennifer laughed.

We were a couple of giddy school kids. It was refreshing to pursue a woman from such an innocent angle.

"So you wanna go to the sock hop with me?" I asked her.

"Say what?"

"Nothing. It's just that our approach seems lost or out-dated in today's world."

"Oh. For a moment there I thought maybe you were flippin' out on me or somethin'."

"I've been known to slip the bounds of reality from time to time."

"Who hasn't?" she said. "This world is so screwed up, or should I say that we humans have really screwed up the world. As destroyers we're experts, but when it comes to bein' constructors we're the pits. If there's anythin' to pollute, we've polluted it. If there's any plant or animal to exploit, we're there again."

"Humans are weeds," I added. "Do you think we'll ever realize we're choking Mother Nature to death?"

"Uhm," Jennifer said into her glass as she held up a finger. Swallowing, "Probably not until it's too late. It's gettin' to the point where I'm ashamed to be a human, but as a rational animal I hope we can overcome our short comin's."

"The way I see it, we're going to kill ourselves off, and what's left of the world will continue on without us interfering in the balance."

"But we don't have to die off. If we learn to live with nature instead of usurpin' it, we'll all be goin' strong until doomsday."

"Do you think doomsday will be from the hand of God or our own making?"

With her mouth full of food, she said, "Gawd, you're worse than a waitress constantly askin' if the food's okay." Shortly, "It'll be by His hand in the end, but I'm sure we'll find some way to drastically lower our numbers." Jen took a bite, changing the subject. "Have you ever stopped to think about why you're here, now?"

"How do you mean?"

"The events that led up to this moment. As a kid, where did you think you'd end up at the age you are now?"

I mulled that one over a bit before answering. I didn't want to get hit by a stray, half-buried memory as I searched the lower catacombs. "Well, I guess I ran the usual gambit as a kid. I wanted to be an astronaut, racecar driver, forester, architect, and finally a film producer. So, to answer your question, no, I'm not where I thought I'd be."

"So why aren't you producin' movies now?"

Snorting, "Good question. I did produce commercials and news programs for a few years. And blowing my own horn, yeah, I was pretty good at it. A lot of my colleagues thought so too, but since I wouldn't bow down and kiss my boss' ass, and since I didn't have the right connections, I was sort of left out in the cold."

"Bummer."

"Yeah." I hid my darkening mood in my drink as I gulped down a couple swallows. Setting my glass on the table, I said, "What about you?"

"Me? I guess I don't have as much ambition or direction as you. I wanted to be a ballerina, an artist, poet or a million other things, but after I got pregnant, I just wanted to be a good mother to my baby. I failed at that, too."

"Is that why you're here?"

"Yeah, I'm tryin' to get my act, well, I should say, I've got my act back together, so now I'm ready to see my son again."

"You don't sound very convinced," I said with my eyes on my plate and not on her. The beam in my own eye was too large to meet her gaze.

"I don't, do I?" Jen sighed heavily then her expression changed in a flash. She lowered her head then cocked it to one side. "How'd we get off the subject of whoopee?"

"Whoopee?"

"Yeah."

"Ruled by higher glands," I said.

"Gotcha there! The brain is where intercourse begins."

"I always thought it started in the back seat of your parent's car," the waitress said as she brought us our check.

We all had a good laugh.

The walk back to the bus terminal yelled with silence. All the signs and looks were there, but neither of us was brave enough to mention them. Jen made a last pit stop, so I headed out to the bus.

After cleaning my contacts then slipped them into their case, I blinked rapidly from the shift in chromic aberration I got from my glasses. I could alter the world just by turning my head.

I watched Jen enter the bus then walk down the aisle. Instead of taking her old seat, she sat down beside me and gave my glasses only a passing glance.

"I'm not wrong, am I?"

"No. Not at all." I laid my hand on top of hers. She entwined her fingers with mine. My heart beat faster as an electrical charge built between us. I wanted to be kissed. She wanted to be kissed. But we each thought about it too long and the moment vanished. Instead, Jen just leaned her head against my shoulder.

"Is this going to end when we part ways?" she asked.

"It doesn't have to. You could come to Florida after you see your son."

"Or you could come to Georgia with me," she said brightly.

I hesitated.

She sat up. "Tony?"

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking it over. With your ex there and all, do you think it'd be such a good idea?"

"I don't know. It's just that I need a friend right now. A shoulder I can lean on. And besides, I really like you, Tony." She passionately pecked me on the cheek then giggled.

"Have you bought your son a present yet?" I asked to help change the thoughts running rampant in my mind.

"Yeah, I got him a little, stuffed elephant, a truck and a coloring book. He's always drawin' me a picture of somethin'. Sometimes it's hard to guess what it is, but I think he's got real talent. Here, look." She reached into her bag and pulled out a neatly folded paper then handed it to me.

Carefully opening it like the prized possession that it was, I was really impressed by what I saw. "And you say he's only six?"

Jen nodded.

"This is good. Really good."

"Thanks. I like to think he gets it from me. I've always loved to draw. Even took some commercial art classes in college." She took the artwork back, re-folded it, and tucked it away. "But little Matt came along, so I dropped out. Don't get me wrong," she added quickly. "I enjoy having Matt around. I wouldn't have it any other way."

I just nodded.

She needed more practice at lying.

Jennifer went back to her old seat to get some sleep. A little murmur would occasionally escape from her lips. I asked myself again if I would be doing the right thing if I went to Georgia with her. My mind listed out the possible repercussions like a computer display. It gave odds of 4 to 1 in favor of a worst case scenario.

I looked over at Jen. Stray strands of hair covered her face, hinting at the beauty beneath. With her hands tucked under her head for a pillow, she looked so sweet and innocent curled up in a fetal position. I wanted to crush my lips against hers. I wanted to-

"She is cute. Very cute."

It was back again.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked it.

It stopped dead in its tracks, feigning injury. "Your words. Oh, how they slice to the very core of my soul."

It stood a good six-foot tall with six legs and a triangular head that pivoted like a human's - and what a gaudy shade of green. The thing picked its teeth with one of its sharp, hook-like claws, making intermittent sucking noises as it plopped down next to me. At least it didn't have body odor.

It unfolded a limb then reached over to feel my side. "My, you are getting thin. You should eat more."

I stared straight into all of its eyes. "Maybe I should eat you."

"Come, come now. Is that polite? You would never hear a praying mantis speak with such severity."

"Especially if you were skewered and roasting over an open fire."

It clicked its jaws together. "Please, Tony. You do me a great injustice."

"I'm curious. I don't see any other bugs doing it, so why do mantids pray?"

"We so much enjoy what we eat that it is only befitting that we pray over our vittles."

He tapped my shoulder with one of its barbed arms. "Do not you humans pray over your meals before you eat them?"

Giving thanks to God would never be the same.

He took my silence as acquiescence. "It would be totally uncouth not to thank the one you were about to digest."

Rubbing my eyes, I tried to make him go away.

"You really should sleep. It has been over three days, you know."

I scoffed. Three days would only be a drop in the bucket before I closed my eyes again. "Sleep won't help," I informed him. "If I can see you when I'm conscious - if you can call it that - it'd be even worse if I were asleep. No, I'll wait 'til my body can't take it anymore and it falls down on its own."

"The only way you will get rid of me is by going to sleep," it said as it crossed two sets of arms.

I shook my head from side to side as I laughed.

"I am worried about you, Tony."

It actually sounded sympathetic. "Why is it you always take the form of a bug when you visit me?"

Gesturing, "Well, besides the obvious fact that I am a 'bug,' we are the furthestmost form away from humans. You consider us offal, yet we still terrify you."

"We? You mean there are others just like you?"

It nodded its head up and down, and I'll swear it smiled.

"Suicide could be painless," I thought aloud.

"It is not as painless as you might assume, and it is not an easy way out. You, yourself, once said - may I quote?" He didn't wait for an answer. "'Offing yourself is the biggest crap-out,' your words, not mine, 'you could do. It would not be an eas- .'"

"It wouldn't be an easy way out. 'Wouldn't.' Seriously, if you're gonna quote me, you gotta learn to use contractions."

"Well," he said curtly.

He's pissed off, I thought to myself. Good. I leaned back in my seat and shut my eyes.

It was several miles later before my praying mantis nemesis spoke again.

"I know you are not asleep, so fake it not."

"Get bent."

He rotated his head and all his arms around as if trying to find something. Abruptly, he stopped as it dawned on him. "Oh, really."

I just smiled.

Then, as if nothing was ever amiss, he asked, "I am curious. You can see us while almost everyone else cannot. How is this?"

"Mentally disturbed," I answered flatly.

He made a rasping noise as he rubbed his chin. "Yes, that would explain a great many things, would it not?"

"'Wouldn't it.' Seriously, a contraction makes your mouth feel so good when you use it. Come on. Give it a try."

He paused and for a moment I thought he'd actually do it.

"I am sorry, but that articulation is not in my mental composition."

"That either makes you dumb or arrogant." I opened my eyes slightly then glanced over at him before closing them again. "In your case, both."

"Where do you get - ." He cut himself off. His anger quickly transformed into comprehension. "Ah, I now perceive your attack plan. You wish for me to leave, so you attack me on a personal level. I applaud your attempt. It was worthy of merit. Please do formulate a new assault. I did so much enjoy our salvos."

"Bug off."

He tried to suppress it, but the crackling noise still escaped. He put an arm up to his mouth but that didn't help either. Suddenly, the air filled with a horrendous grating sound, reaching a higher and higher octave. The praying mantis was laughing. Check that. He was into a full belly roll.