



**PASS THIS ON TO A FRIEND!**

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... to my destination. I could walk all night if I wanted to, to someplace else where I could sell my ability to correct problems with technology, someplace that can not even be confused for home, but I will not. I will follow these frayed rubber pieces south until I stop, and fall asleep watching television, bored and lonely, in a hotel room, in a city that is not my home.

The orange line at the left of my gas gauge has been peaking out at me from behind the needle for the last thirty miles. I have been looking for a cheap gas station for the last fifteen. I am nervous, bordering on desperate; my fists are wrapped around the steering wheel, knuckles whitening, turning to stone, unable to wipe the sweat that wets my brow. I roll the windows up. I turn the air conditioning off. I accelerate only when I need to. I watch pieces of rubber, exploded from tires, slide by out the window to my right. The decay of the rubber helps me to keep my mind off of my current predicament, helps me to stay focused on moving forward and finding a gas station before I am left stranded on the shoulder of the interstate, hazard lights flashing, kicking around a shredded hunk of rubber and waiting for a patrolman or truck driver to stop and offer assistance. In the summer my car becomes an oven in which I bake. Its body absorbs the heat and warms the air around me, presses against my skin bringing me to the point of hallucination. Tonight I am forced to resign to this heat and the accompanying humidity.

I see a sign. It is three quarters of a mile ahead of me, one of those blue signs placed about a mile before an exit, listing lodgings, restaurants, gas stations. I read the sign as I pass it. The exit, one mile from here, has

my knees touch the ground my head, nasal cavities first, then in its entirety, is filled with gasoline. I can smell it. I feel it soak through my pants onto my knees. I lean down and see a spray of liquid landing in a puddle, from my car, onto the concrete. I stand up and shut off the pump.

My total is forty-seven dollars and fifty-three cents. I only have thirty on me so I charge it and decide that I will worry about it later. I ask if I can use the phone to call a tow truck but the phone is broken. The clerk's thin voice sends me out the door with sympathetic well wishes. I smile. I give him a half wave. I go back to my car and grab my coffee and my bag, a small over-the-shoulder affair that one might use as a carry-on while traveling by air. Slinging the bag over my shoulder and walking away from the gas station, I notice, one last time, the finger picked acoustic guitar. Songs shouldn't be this long.

I am walking south now on foot, guided by the white line that marks the shoulder of I-75. My eyes keep drifting down to the road to examine each shredded scrap of tire that I come across. I am always amazed at how the rubber crescent moons seem to trail off at their tips, frayed into delicate fibers—shoestrings and licorice. I used to think that these were all the result of tire blowouts, as if it is disturbingly common for a car to be driving and for a tire to just explode, sending the car into the median or another car, leaving these rubber skins as a memorial. I have since learned that these tire parts are old tread, glued by truckers over current tread for long trips as a means of preserving the current tires—to keep them whole longer. Eventually, the rubber and glue give out and, as if it were a transplanted organ, the original truck wheel will reject the new tread leaving it frayed and broken on the side of the road.

This broken tread, like breadcrumbs, guides me home ... no, not home

three gas stations. The gas will be expensive, but cheaper than paying for a tow truck to bring it to me. One mile is all I need. Just one more ...

One mile dissolves--turns to dust and ash and is absorbed by the light pollution that blots out the sky like gauze--and I am on the exit ramp, turning and coasting into the gas station. The car settles, gas tank bone dry, parallel to the unleaded pump. I unfasten my safety belt and think about how perfectly Ohio this location is. On the right side of the street there are two small motels and a handful of fast food restaurants, on the left are all three of the gas stations promised by the blue sign a mile backward from here. Both directions down the street are not quite black construction paper, almost if not for the faint glow of traffic lights cycling through their colors every two minutes, the soft gold halos of street lights every quarter mile. And there is the ground. The ground is composed of varying shades of gray and black, asphalt and concrete, the occasional splotches of white and yellow paint; I can not ever imagine there being grass here, or trees. This ground might as well have been born dead—earth, still birthed for the sole purpose of some day becoming concrete. And of course there is the sky, that famous Ohio sky, not to be forgotten, separated into three levels: the first made of insects, swarming and buzzing in the thick humidity, kissing the fluorescent lights that hang over the gas pumps; the second a thin veil of sidewalk gray, light absorbed and reflected by the atmosphere, intangible and capable of being sensed by sight alone; the third, the sky itself, a memory, a recollected presence, a ghost with eyes made of black holes staring dark and limitless. The sky gives its stars away as faint punctuation – periods and commas – through chinks in its first two layers, only occasionally. It makes me believe that maybe someday I will see the natural curves and imperfections of the sky again.

I get out of the car, open the gas tank, insert the nozzle and lift the

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latch. I prop it up so I can move freely while it fills, so I am not stuck leaning against the side of my car squeezing...the hose and nozzle shudder, sigh, release and then the sound of liquid traveling through pipes, like a winter wind wrapping itself around a house, comforts me. It assures me that I will not be caught, stranded, stuck. I am always and forever mobile.

Leaving the gas pumping, I walk inside to buy a pack of cigarettes and a cup of coffee. As my muscles start to relax and the sweat that I hadn't even realized had been soaking my hair and face begins to dry, as my senses begin to dull from the instinctual edge they had assumed during the hunt—when the tension blurs—I notice that the PA speakers mounted on the light posts are softly singing a nameless ballad by some hard rock band of the seventies. The song begins softly with finger picking—the PA translates the code of radio waves and fingerpicks it for me.

I walk inside where the same song is playing from an old transistor radio sitting behind the counter. I walk to the back of the store and pour a cup of coffee into a styrofoam cup. When the cup is full I walk back up to the front counter and put it down next to the cash register.

"You know you're supposed to prepay for the gas after midnight?" This is the clerk, pale to the point of translucence, wrinkled, thin, a wiry mess of ghost white hair on his head.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize." I answered.

"It's okay, you look honest."

"I am."

"You wanna pay for that coffee now?"

I do, and so I pay now for the coffee and also a pack of the cheapest cigarettes on the shelf. I head back outside assuring the clerk that I will be back to pay for the gas as soon as it is done pumping.

Outside I check the pump; it is working slowly, the gallon counter just now rolling into the tenth gallon, the price just rolling past fourteen

dollars. While I wait for the last five gallons to make their way into my gas tank I walk to the side of the building to a small patch of grass that I can sit on. I open the pack of cigarettes, drop the plastic wrapper and the foil seal on the ground next to me, press the filter between my lips, a flick, a flame—I inhale. It has been a long time since I have smoked a cigarette. This pack was purchased out of boredom and the desire to stay awake for the last hour of my drive. As I smoke, I think about my destination: home; however, I am not going because it is home. I am going because I have been commissioned to fix a company's computers. And anyway, it isn't really home anymore. It is nothing more than a series of lines on a map, a place between other places, an emptiness amidst a world of being. As I smoke, I dissect memory, separate its organs from their casing, examine its workings, and remember that home is little more than a ghost town—everything once held so dear all turned to ash and phantoms that move coolly through the atmosphere. This is why I will stay in a hotel. The place is not my home. I am not going home.

I finish half of my cigarette then stub it out on the ground noticing the fingerpicking PA speaker again. I walk over and look at the pump. It is still pumping. The counter is up past twenty gallons, the price is past thirty-two dollars. This is not right. My car only holds fifteen gallons. I check the area where the nozzle enters into my gas tank. There is no overflow. The flow of the gasoline seems to be increasing. For a moment, I imagine a tidal wave of fuel rushing through the hose and in to my car. I expect my car to balloon up, spring leaks, burst at the seams with gasoline, popping apart, sending car part shrapnel through the insects and fluorescent lighting. I imagine my car as a hand grenade.

I look down and see moisture slowly crawling toward my feet. Without stopping the pump, I get down on my knees to look under the car. When