

Roads Like These

by Lon Prater

Smashwords Edition

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Stops Along the Way

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My Old Friend the Road

I'll know we're there
when we stop
The road my old friend
in the seat beside
and underneath
this scabby, rust-flamed sedan

Belching directions:
Left Here. Run the Light.
This Exit. Pay the Toll.

Faster. Faster. Faster.

fuel stop caffeine jitters
Magnum. Red Bull. Revive.
The road won't let me sleep
keeps turning and tearing
at the wheel

The road is *fight* and
the road is *flight* and
I'll know we're there
when we stop

the road and I
this trip, these
day-glo dashboard memories
zip-zipping past

My old friend the road will wake me
when it's time for us to stop

Head Music

At 1:02 AM, Diego's eyes snapped open. The haunting, tuneless music was in his head again, louder than ever. Mournful tones rose and fell, reverberating between his temples. Throughout his eighteen years he had heard them: occasional faint and inviting whispers tugging at his innards. Now the deep, echoing hornsong was louder, more insistent; it had control of his body.

Bare-chested and shoeless, he burst through the painted screen door. The cool autumn night welcomed him with a clammy marsh-salt embrace.

The flimsy wood frame squealed and slammed shut behind him. The keys to his father's work truck jangled in one hand.

On the horizon, a prowler moon crouched fat and yellow behind a low fence of backlit clouds. His naked back pressed against the chilled vinyl seat. Diego would have shivered, but the music moving his body prevented it. He was glad that he had worn sweatpants to bed.

Bare feet, wet with dew and grass clippings, pumped the gas pedal and pressed in the clutch. He watched--calmly, serenely--as his right hand twisted the key. The stubborn engine roared indignantly to life.

The truck lurched onto the empty road, headlights darkened. Diego was completely out of control: a passenger within the truck as well as within his own body.

The rusty old heap hurtled down the empty blacktop, landscaping tools clattering madly in the bed. Diego felt content. He rode the swell and crash of a forlorn internal symphony; he was not afraid.

~

The beach was part of a state park and nature preserve. Red and white signs threatened after-hours trespassers with fines and jail time. The penalties were even steeper for those foolish enough to bring animals, glass, or vehicles out onto the sand.

The renegade truck bounced over the benighted dunes. At the same time, the plaintive wailing began to recede; a cacophony of lesser tones gained in strength. He realized with a start that his body was his own again.

Diego squinted through the dirty windshield. A curtain of dense gray clouds blocked most of the moon's reflected light. This far from town the stars shone with a rare luminosity. Their light was mirrored in the phosphorescent foam and sparkle of the cresting waves. Wet sand glimmered at the water's edge.

A shadowed hump lay in the blackness, just yards from the lapping waves. Leaning forward, Diego flipped on the headlights.

The head music erupted into skull-splitting shrieks. His hand shot out automatically, killing the lights. The return of darkness stifled the blood curdling screeches as well--but he had already caught a glimpse of the thing on the beach.

He wiped the sudden cold sweat from his face and took several calming breaths. Steeling himself, Diego opened the door and stepped trembling onto the sand.

He shivered. The night had grown mute and windless. Even the tuneless music had faded to a soft mewling; his brain was full of newborn kittens.

Sand and bits of dune grass scrunched beneath him as he approached the creature. It

had the length and girth of a small killer whale, but that was where the resemblance ended.

Diego walked around it, unable to fathom what he was seeing. It had slick, warty gray-green skin, flecked all over with lambent orange jewel-like scales. There were no eyes to speak of. Either end of its tube-like body presented a fleshy pucker surrounded by a forest of supple whips and barbed tendrils. Near the center of its girth there were three great vein-lined fans pressed close against its body.

The creature stank of window cleaner.

Whatever it was, it had called him here to this beach with its hornsong. The same sounds he had heard over the years, only stronger now, more desperate.

A lonely dirge-like cry sang inside him. It engulfed him in waterlogged sadness, drowning out the soft whining chorus. He felt a strange kinship with this thing, one that he could not explain.

Ancient intuition clawed its way into his awareness. The creature--no, she--was stranded, beached here in the alien air. Unable to return to the sea, she knew she was dying.

Tears scorched his eyes. He rushed her, vainly throwing his weight into an attempt to roll the immense cylinder of her body back into the sea.

As reward, Diego's bare chest, arms, and back were scored with tiny nicks from the scattered orange scales. His torso was smeared with a gritty, viscous film that made the open cuts swell and burn like bee stings. He cried out in frustration, looking around for a way to save this bizarre and wondrous creature.

His eyes came to rest on the abandoned truck. He strode toward it, for the moment ignoring the piteous lament in his head. A search of the truck revealed a lawnmower and gas can, hand tools and pruning shears, shovels and rakes, a wheelbarrow and some clear bags--but nothing that would help him return this behemoth safely to the sea.

Despair filled him like freshly poured concrete. He returned to her side. The inky waves were almost washing up against one puckered end.

The kitten-like mewling started up again in earnest. He put a hand on her, careful not to let the sharp orange speckles cut him. On some primitive level he felt the squirming fluted mass of life within her.

They could have been her brains as easily as they were her young. It didn't matter to Diego; he *knew* that they needed to come out of her.

He gulped, approaching her ocean-side sphincter again. The dank smell of salt and rotting seaweed mixed with her ammonia odor, an unsettling combination. He carefully pushed the waving tendrils away from the opening. This would not be easy.

Diego plunged his arm into the unearthly creature, straining to keep down his gorge. His heart beat fast and loud in his ears. Something skittered across his foot and he jumped: a ghost crab.

His arm was buried to the shoulder. The keening in his head was louder, more frantic. He grasped the end of a slippery fat hose and pulled. It came out with a slurping noise and a geyser of foul liquid.

Diego dropped the greasy pus-thing and vomited all over it. It writhed there, celebrating the glorious emptying of his guts. Then, like a slow but enormous blond

worm, it inched its way into the waves.

The mother's song was faint now; the chaotic internal cries of her young continued to gnaw desperately at him.

He jabbed an arm into her again, feeling nothing but the pain of his burning cuts and the squish of her organs. He removed his arm and went to the opposite end. This time it was easier. Diego eased two of the worm-things from the orifice, each over six feet long. He deposited them gingerly into the lapping water.

They lay there motionless. Diego could suddenly smell their corruption, even over the ammonia and beach scents. *Stillborn. As were the others still rotting within the duneside womb.*

He had saved one of the disgusting things. Wasn't that enough? The wailing chorus of those still in the seaside womb disagreed, begging for release. One day, they could grow into creatures as beautiful and alien as the one dying here before him. But not if he left them inside her to die.

He went to the back of the truck and returned with the pruning shears. Sticking the bottom blade into the sphincter at the water's edge, he crossed himself, preparing for what he had to do.

Diego squeezed the rubber coated handles together with all his might. The blades weren't as sharp as he had hoped. They did not cut so much as *chew* slits into her, widening the puckered hole. She did not bleed, at least not so he could tell it, but the ammonia smell nearly made him pass out. What kept him conscious was the soft saxophone moan of her pain--her fear--echoing through his head.

He finished carving a second slit out of the rubbery flesh. He knew he had the will to do what was required. Nevertheless, he was thankful that his stomach was already empty. Diego took one last look around.

The moon had escaped from the clouds, leaning closer now to cast a pallid eye on the boy and the primeval sea thing on the beach. His father's truck stood lonely watch from atop the dunes.

Diego pulled off his sweatpants and boxer shorts, leaving them in a heap on the sand. He grunted, drawing in one last breath before he burrowed naked and unflinching into the womb of the beast.

Rough slimy tissue like pus-soaked leprous scabs pressed all around him. He was waist deep in her, and clawing his way closer to the maggoty nest of her tender young. The vapors were rank, infectious. Every one of the cuts on his body screamed as they were filled with her vile inner fluids. Diego gagged on bile, worming himself farther into her.

He could feel the wind kick up, tickling his feet and ankles. Every other part of him was embalmed in the gelatinous tract to her inner organs.

Diego heard her wordless voice again, clearer and richer, a quiet ululation. From within her the music embraced him, every note entwining his soul and hers. She sang to him of the deep black ocean floor, of submarine cities chiseled from stone and shell that had never been touched by the sun. He shot harpoon-fast through majestic salt-water caverns populated by unimagined species both great and terrible. An age long past--and yet to come--dazzled his mind; those who once reigned would awaken. They would

sweep the planet clean of humanity, sloughing man's frail advances from its face like dead skin.

His reaching hands dug into a torn membrane, ripping it farther. Diego scooped up the howling coils of her knotted young, dragging them back with him through her awful stickiness in one armful. He collapsed to the sand, the writhing blond creatures squirming free of each other and all over and around him then crawling blindly into the waves.

Finally, the last one slipped beneath the surface, leaving Diego with only the moon and the gorgeous stinking carcass for company. He felt grief wash over him even as he saw the tide drawing his pants and vomit out to sea.

Scientists would come in the morning, and reporters. They'd take their pictures and measurements. Scratching their chins in wonder, they'd speak earnestly of evolution and the coelacanth. They would cut her up in their laboratories, puzzling over the secret of her genes. In time, someone would realize the horrible truth; the world would be warned of mankind's short leash.

Diego rose, his nude body sticky with foul juices and pockmarked by the swollen cuts. He dug in his toes, kicking wet sand across the beach.

He made one last trip to his father's truck, rummaging in the glove box first before grabbing the metal can from the bed.

With remorse like he had never felt before, Diego splattered gasoline all over the she-carcass and her stillborn young. He stood there feeling the loss of the music for a long time before he set fire to a wad of napkins and papers. Mouthing a silent and unintelligible prayer, he threw the flaming papers upon her.

She went up in a quick blue whoosh that in other cases might have made Diego jump. He danced an unfamiliar dance around her instead, growing dizzy from the fumes. Naked to the moon and sand and wind, he made dirge noises never before sounded upon the earth by man.

~

The pyre burned itself out about an hour before dawn. Diego hunched on the sand, watching the last smoking embers. She had no bones; the flame left nothing behind but a sprinkling of orange scales. He poked the blackened sand with the shovel before turning it over and over upon itself, hiding even this evidence from the failing stars above.

He was sweating, coated with sand and sticky filth. No one would know what had transpired on this beach; Diego was certain of that. The secret of her kind would remain hidden for another age or more, until they chose to reveal themselves.

Diego walked, then ran, then swam as far and as deep into the frigid black waves as he could. The last thing he heard was the music of underwater horns, calling him home.

Even At The End, There Was Gridlock

Some people these days were just too uptight, too quick to let the little things set them off. Trav usually thought of himself as one of those people, which was part of why he moved to Florida in the first place: to try to slow down and change his attitude around before it got him like it had his father. So far it wasn't working very well.

The other reason was the constant work the hurricanes brought in. It paid good, but there was quite a bit of travel involved. Just now, they were coming back from a job out at some condos on the coast.

The Tallahassee heat was baking down on him. He sat not-too-patiently drumming sweat slicked fingertips onto the hot chrome strip that lined passenger window slot of Charlie's truck.

"What the hell could we be going so slow for?" he asked, irritated.

Charlie didn't answer. He never was one for chit-chat. If his beat-up Ford wasn't better than the No-car Trav had, Trav wouldn't be carpooling with him in the first place.

Trav tried to keep from getting aggravated. He was paying for gas and a ride, not Charlie's company. Any way you cut it, it was better than cramming himself and his tools onto the city bus like he had been doing before.

Even so, they were on the damned palm-lined interstate--the sign said SPEED 65 LIMIT right there in black and white. So why in the hell were they only going eight miles an hour?

The cars in the other lanes were packed close, pressed into tight little lines of hot metal and glass. Somebody once called traffic the lifeblood of the city. If that was so, then this city's heart was hardly pumping. If it ever had been.

And now it had stopped.

~

Trav cursed, slapping the sun-faded blue paint of the Ford's passenger door with an open palm. If he'd left his hand there, it might have burned him.

A stiff-upper-lip type in the Cadillac next to him made a show of ignoring Trav's display. So comfortable in his air conditioned Caddy, the smug bastard. Trav turned on Charlie.

"You ever think of getting the AC fixed on this rust bucket?"

Charlie looked up from the driver's side mirror, piercing Trav with a bushy, sweaty-browed stare. "Nope."

"Might be nice," Trav said, letting his voice trail off. "Especially on a day like this."-- he wiped the dampness from his hands onto his work pants--"How much could it cost?"

"More than I got," Charlie said. He turned back to whatever he had been watching in the driver's side mirror.

Trav sat there steaming for a while. This was getting ridiculous. How long had they been stopped? Long enough that people were starting to get out of their cars and stretch their legs. What'd they think this was? A tailgate party? Trav scowled as two more people got out of their car a couple of lanes over.

The guy in the Caddy next to him was holding a book upside down and pretending to

read it. Did he think he was in a library? The least he could do was hold the book right side up while he used it to shut out the rest of the world.

How much longer was this going to take?

Trav felt his stomach rumble and remembered he had only eaten half of his sandwich at lunch today. He reached down to the floorboard and opened his black plastic lunch box--Dad had always called them lunch pails, before the hypertension had finally got him--and pulled out the remaining portion of the sandwich. The tang of heat-spoiled meat and mayonnaise assaulted his nose before he had the sandwich all the way unwrapped.

Trav blew out an exasperated sigh and tossed the sandwich out his window. The guy in the Caddy glanced over at the motion, then went quickly back to his book. *Damn straight.*

Charlie's voice cut through the hazy stale air.

"Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"You'll get me a ticket."

Trav made a sour face. "Screw 'em," he said. "The cops are all up there ahead of us somewhere worrying about the accident, or whatever's got us stopped."

"Ain't no accident I can see," Charlie said, leaning out to gaze over his side mirror, then into it momentarily before turning toward Trav again.

"Oh, what is it then?" Trav demanded. "And what is so damn interesting back there?"

He took a look for himself in the rear view mirror. The guy behind them was a slim man with a pointed chin, and a narrow nose. He fussed with a handkerchief, continually twitching it across his forehead. Trav started at Charlie's voice.

"Cops going car by car, checking."

Trav raised his eyebrows. "What for, you think?"

"Don't know, but the man in the van is sure sweatin' it."

"It's a fricking hundred plus degrees with no breeze, Charlie. We're all sweating it." Trav's voice was a little louder than he had wanted it to be.

Softer, he added, "Guy's probably got some pot on him."

Charlie didn't say anything, just grunted and went back to watching his mirror. Trav poked his head out the window. About two dozen cars up, he could see the flashing blue lights of several squad cars, and something else--working dogs, along with some green trucks and uniforms beginning to filter in. That was a little odd: Did it really take the National Guard and the police to shut down the highway?

"Yeah, they got dogs, Charlie. Looking for drugs."

"May be," Charlie said, stretching it out into two distinct words. He leaned his seat back, closing his eyes. "You clean?" he asked.

Trav tried to sound insulted, but didn't pull it off very well. "Yeah, I'm clean. I'm always clean," he said. *At least this far from payday.*

Charlie smiled, his eyes still shut. "Mind waking me when it's time to roll?"

"No problem." God, could they really be sitting still long enough to take a freakin' nap? Trav's stomach rumbled an unwelcome answer.

The heat was unbearable. Trav's clothes were damp, clinging as much to the cracked vinyl seat as to his body. Maybe some music...

But Charlie's radio didn't work either. The truck was a piece of crap. Still beat having no car at all, though.

As if on cue, the car behind the Caddy started bumping and buzzing to the beat of some of that new garbage the kids were listening to these days. Couldn't call it music. It was just a bunch of belching and grunting. Not like what Trav had grown up listening to at all.

The audio assault went on; got even louder and more annoying, if that was possible. Trav put a hand on his mirror to get a look at the deaf idiots giving the free concert.

Two young thugs with red bandannas wrapped around their heads like kamikaze, full of the same wasted confidence Trav had enjoyed at their age--sometimes *still* enjoyed. As Trav watched, the driver, who had some kind of tattoo on his cheek, thrust his head toward the partially opened tinted window. He gave a nod and a smart ass little smile to someone--probably the twitchy little guy in the van behind Charlie's Ford--then receded back into the punkmobile.

The music thumped even louder. Now it was setting Trav's teeth to chattering. He swung the mirror back and caught a look at the guy in the van. He wasn't twitching the hankie at his sweat anymore, he was shouting incomprehensibly into the wall of sound, his pointy little chin quivering under bared feral teeth.

This guy's lost it, Trav thought, then--Holy crap! He was getting out! Trav turned to look, thought about shaking Charlie. *Ah, leave him be.* If the guy could sleep through this racket, he needed the rest.

The man from the van slammed his door in time with a particularly brutal *whumpf* of bass and marched his stick figure frame over to the gold-rimmed thug car.

The driver had a big grin on, like he'd been waiting for entertainment all week, and here it finally was, just dropping into his lap like a honky from heaven.

The stick man started shouting, waving his arms at the punk, whose bobbing head never lost the beat. The purple-black sheet of tinted window glass slid slowly up, leaving the man from the van sputtering in useless rage.

The noise stopped suddenly then, and for a moment, Trav regained just a little bit of his faith in today's youth. The stick-figure man even appeared to calm down, and began turning back toward his van.

The sweet silence was replaced just as suddenly with pounding cacophony from the punkmobile. Harsher, louder, beating more angrily against Trav's ears than before. And oh, was the man from the van *pissed*.

Furious. He charged the gold-trimmed car, banging his small fists against it, baring his teeth like a small hungry animal. Through the front glass, Trav could see the two bandanna-wearing fools laughing at the man, almost howling.

Trav looked up the line of traffic, to see if the police had noticed the carrying on. Not yet, but no doubt they would soon enough. He looked down at the spoiled sandwich, then over at Caddy man. Freakin' oblivious. Typical too--"well to do"--to-do-anything SOB. Don't care about nobody and nothing but his bank statement and whose golf clubs cost more than his.

Trav looked at Charlie. Sweat beaded up on his shaved head and upper lip, but he was still snoozing. Wouldn't want to get him a ticket. And maybe it was time Trav joined the

tailgate party after all.

Trav pushed the door open and got out. There was actually just a hint of a breeze outside, once he stood up and put some distance between his head and the sweltering concrete. He reached down and grabbed the half sandwich, already hot enough to scald his fingers, and tossed it through the window back into his lunch box.

Maybe stretching his legs was just the thing. Besides, out here he could get a better view of the floorshow without craning his neck or twisting his back or squinting into that tiny mirror. He leaned back against the Ford's primer-pocked fender. The metal was almost too hot for it, but the denim of his jeans was thick enough that he could tolerate the heat. For a little while, anyway.

The man in the Caddy looked at him briefly, taking a tentative pull from a bottle of water. Oh, man, Trav thought, would a cold beer go down so good right now.

He swallowed what little saliva there was in his mouth. It did nothing for the dry ache in his throat. How much longer before traffic started moving again?

The skinny dude from the van had quit pounding on the punkmobile; probably decided he couldn't keep up with the rhythm.

He gave Trav a long searing stare as he walked around to the back of his van. The guy probably had a cooler back there, full of ice and beer so cold it'd crack your teeth. Trav could have really gone for that kind of toothache right about then. He was considering taking a walk over there to play neighbor with the little dude.

There was a moment's reprieve in the heart-thudding noise as one song ended and another began. In that second or two, Trav could have sworn he heard the rattle of metal on concrete from behind the van's open rear doors.

A second later, the wire-thin man reappeared, holding a big paper cup in one hand and a tire iron in the other. He walked jauntily, like someone in the movies on their way to a happy ending. The young thugs in the car were too busy jutting their chins to the music to notice him, until that tire iron crunched into their windshield.

The one with the tattoo on his cheek, the driver, hadn't even started cursing before the metal bar bit again, this time sending the driver-side mirror rolling down the expressway.

The thin man looked up and down the column of parked cars. Trav thought someone might have started honking, but couldn't be sure it wasn't part of the current over-amplified song.

Trav snickered. Dude had some balls doing that with so many cops so close. As he watched, the man from the van tilted up his cup and filled his mouth. He made a face like there was something wrong with the drink.

Trav was still envying that drink, no matter what was wrong with it, when the man began spurting it all out of his mouth, all over the hood and exposed dashboard of the punkmobile. What a waste, Trav thought, licking his lips.

The driver reached with frantic urgency for something in the glove box, probably a piece. Trav caught a faint whiff of something he couldn't quite place. He gave up trying to identify it. The man from the van had moved over to the passenger side of the punkmobile, smashing the tire iron through the other side of the windshield.

Again the man took a great suck from his cup. Again he made that face and sent the fluid spurting from between the thin purse of his lips, past his pointed chin and this time

all over the two hooligans huddled behind the crystal teeth of the shattered windshield. Trav saw the tire iron drop to the ground. The man from the van grinned.

They didn't look so much like thugs now as they did like panicky kids scrambling to get their hands on their stashed weapons. Somewhere beneath the explosion of every bass beat, the scorching air was filled with their high-pitched curses.

Trav caught the smell again, just as the man began drizzling the contents of his cup all over the glossy hood of the punk's car. He recognized the smell at the same instant he saw the stick-figure man fish a Zippo from his pocket and light it.

The man from the van took the last of the liquid into his mouth, and threw the empty cup onto the wide-eyed passenger's lap. Neither of the punks had managed to get their hidden weapons into their hands. At this point, Trav was certain they never would.

The man from the van spat the stuff all over the car in a wide fan that *whooshed* into flame at the touch of his lighter.

Trav felt all the heat of the day evaporate from him; his sweat turned cold and clammy in a finger snap. Despite the insistent sun still beating down on him, Trav had goosebumps. *Holy--What the--?*

The hood and dash of the car went up in flames, the boys in it screaming, screaming. Trav realized he could hear their screams now; the loud music replaced by the fire's low crackle. He couldn't rip his eyes away from the fiery spectacle. The cops would be coming now, that was for sure.

Inside the car, the boys slapped crazily at their burning clothes and hair. The driver's bandanna had landed on the dash as he jerked wildly back and forth.

Cheerful tongues of flame blackened the cloth quickly. Others leapt like dancers from the boys to the upholstery of their chairs and over their heads.

The boy on the driver's side got his door open, probably hoping to roll his flames out on the expressway. But that never happened. The man from the van was already back on that side, standing closer to the burning car than anyone had a right to. He'd picked up the tire iron.

It sliced through the air again and again, colliding with the boy's head and he fell still, continuing to burn. The other one wasn't moving either; his body propped in an awkward arch between the dash and his seat.

Trav realized he hadn't taken a breath since the flames went up, and inhaled air tainted by the smell of burning boys and upholstery. He looked around, his mouth unable to close.

Every shallow breath did little more than make room for the next and the next after that. His eyes rolled around in his head, taking in everything.

Charlie was still sleeping, sweating and snoring. The flames and smoke had obviously excited the cops. Two Florida Highway Patrol motorcycles were already weaving through the emergency lane toward the billowing smoke. Here and there, Trav saw gaping mouths and wide eyes. He made a conscious effort to shut his mouth.

The Caddy guy was fiddling with his radio, a confused look on his face. The upside down book was resting on his chest. Trav snorted. The guy was still pretending to be too good to pay attention to the shit happening out here in the real world.

The first two cops got off their cycles as Trav watched. One pulled a gun, while the

other started shouting at everyone to get as far away from the vehicle as possible.

People were obeying fairly quickly, and with good reason. Trav woke Charlie up. After a startled look at the police, the man from the van, and the burning punkmobile, Charlie hustled away with the crowd.

Trav hung close, not quite sure why. He looked at the guy in the Caddy. Back to staring at his frickin' book. Not a care in the world. Maybe he needed a blue collar guy like Trav to rub his nose in the real world. At least make him aware of how good he had it, there in his air-conditioned Caddy.

Trav stepped gingerly over to the Cadillac's window and rapped on it. Caddy man looked up at him. And those eyes--

Those eyes of his, they grew, grew as he stared into them, swelled up so huge and dark and terrifyingly *wrong* that Trav lost his balance. He stumbled backward and looked again. Nothing odd about the guy now, but Trav was spooked. He pointed mutely at the cops, the burning car, the maniac with the tire iron, and finally at the crowd forming along the outer rail of the expressway.

Caddy man just went back to staring into his upside down book, his face blank. Fine then. The jackass deserved whatever he got.

Trav stepped far enough back to keep the on-scene cops from yelling at him, but close enough to hear what they said.

"One move and you're dead," the first cop barked at the man from the van.

The wiry little guy giggled, then screwed up his face and spat. He reached behind his back and Trav heard the terrible *pop* of the policeman's service pistol, saw the rust-brown bloom appear on his shirtsleeve. The man from the van's eyes got big. He grunted and worked something free from his back pocket with that wounded arm.

"It's over!" he sobbed, pulling his hand from behind his back. Two more *pops*, two more blooms: one over his heart, the other in the throat, just below his pointy chin.

The man from the van stood there a moment, holding up an orange piece of paper, brandishing it like the Statue of Liberty does her flame. He held a desperate, thankful look on his face as he fell to the sizzling concrete.

Trav watched the cops approach; one calmly inching closer, weapon ready, while the other shouted into his radio for an ambulance, a fire truck, and someone from the G.D. army to see if this was the one they were looking for.

The cop closest to the man reached down, checked for a pulse and shook his head. He grabbed the orange paper, bunched his eyebrows at it.

"It's a pink slip, for chrissakes," he said.

"Ain't they supposed to be pink?" asked his partner.

"Fired's fired, I guess. No matter what color the paper is."

Trav felt his gorge rising. The guy got fired, so he goes postal over some loud music in a traffic jam? He suppressed an odd little giggle. *And I thought I was uptight.*

Some of the backup had arrived; mostly National Guard, or maybe regular Army, all in plastic body suits with clear faceplates. One of them approached Trav, pulling a pen and little green pad from his pocket. He spoke with the air of someone used to being obeyed, his breath fogging the plastic around his head for just a second before fading away.

“What happened here?”

“I’m fresh out of civic duty, mister,” Trav said, wanting nothing more than to melt into the crowd.

“Wiseass,” the military man sneered at him. “We’ll find out exactly what happened here--and who saw what--before you leave the perimeter.”

He seemed about to say more, but Trav spoke first.

“Honest, mister, if anybody saw the whole thing, it was that guy right there.”

The uniformed man’s eyes followed Trav’s pointing finger. They lit up when they came to settle on the guy in the Caddy.

The Caddy man had given up on his book and seemed to be shrinking into himself as he turned those odd dark eyes from one soldier to the next. They had him surrounded.

“Did he now?” the officer asked, already marching that way. His plastic suit made a whisking noise when he walked.

“Yes, he sure did,” Trav muttered as he began edging himself into the crowd.

As the distance between Trav and the officer widened, Trav kept his eyes open for Charlie. Sometime today, he hoped to finish this ride home. A noise, a scuffle somewhere behind him, and the crowd murmured almost as one.

Trav turned, putting one hand up to his sweaty brow, a shade against the slowly dropping sun. The plastic-suited soldiers had Caddy man cuffed, the Cadillac’s trunk wide open. From where Trav stood, he couldn’t see what was in there. The soldiers were all wearing their gravest faces, and weren’t letting the blue uniforms--or anyone, actually--near the Caddy.

Trav felt a blunt finger stab into his shoulder. He turned and saw Charlie standing there.

“Nice nap?” Trav asked.

“Sure. Thanks for waking me up.”

“Don’t mention it. You hear anything yet? What this guy’s supposed to have?”

“Somebody said drugs, like you did.”

“I knew it,” Trav crowed. But why the soldiers in their air-fed outfits, and why the odd way he had kept up the charade of reading that upside down book?

“Somebody else said he’s got a suitcase nuke. Said they got radiation detectors up the road.”

Trav rubbed a finger along his stubbly chin. “Why didn’t the bastard run then, if he knew he was as good as caught?”

A heavysset woman in a GIT-R-DONE shirt turned, smoke rolling from her nostrils. “Ain’t drugs, ain’t a nuke. It’s some kind of virus. Look up there.”

Trav looked down the interstate. Huge white tents were going up and more people in full-body plastic suits were setting up a human wall just past them. Even from this distance, Trav could tell they were armed.

“I just came up from that way,” the heavy woman said. “He’s got something, and we’re quarantined.”

A man in a hunter’s orange camouflage ball cap spoke up. “Naw. He ain’t infected with it, he was totin’ some kind of plague virus in his trunk. Probably E-bola.”

Trav grimaced, trying to ignore the heat, the growl of his stomach, the way his sweat-

sopped clothes were sticking to him. No way could he ignore his parched throat. He swallowed more saliva, hoping it would at least keep his voice from cracking.

“You sure about that? He was acting kind of weird,” Trav said.

“Sure, I’m sure. Heard it on the radio before they cut all the broadcasts. He’s some kinda militia man. Stole a virus. Who knows, though, if he already released it? That’s why the whole damn interstate is under quarantine.”

Trav wasn’t sure what he believed. The Caddy man sure didn’t fit Trav’s image of a militia member. He shook the thoughts from his head, not quite ready to think about the way Caddy man’s eyes had stretched into deep black pools that had no bottoms and no borders.

About the time the last of the sun was fading behind the extinguished punkmobile, Trav and the others were rounded up by soldiers in plastic suits and assigned cots inside one of the big white quarantine tents. They were told that doctors would be in to evaluate their conditions as soon as their helo landed.

At least they’d been fed. If you could call cheese crackers and peanut butter sandwiches food. He had gotten plenty of tepid, slightly chlorinated water, and even some fruit punch from a shiny little bag. After the day he’d had, Trav thought that fruit punch was the best thing he’d ever drank.

He laid the empty juice bag beside the cot he’d been assigned. “Charlie, you think we’re gonna be out of here by tomorrow morning?”

“Can’t say. Never been quarantined before.” Laughing brown eyes peered at Trav from beneath bushy brows. “Why? You need a ride to work in the morning?”

Trav laid back in the stiff cot, wondering how the United States Army ever got a decent night’s sleep.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m going to see about getting a job somewhere closer to home. Quit chasing hurricane work and try to settle down.”

Charlie chuckled. “Not a bad idea.”

Trav lay there for a long while in the plastic-smelling heat of the tent, thinking about the stick figure man from the van with his gas and tire iron and his orange slip that should’ve been pink. He thought about loud music and boys on fire. How the side-view mirror made things behind you look bigger than they actually were, but you wouldn’t know that unless you craned your head around to see for yourself, or took a good look at what really was so close you could practically reach over and touch it.

But mostly he thought of the Caddy man, with his wide, ink-filled eyes and upside down book. Trav felt his own lids closing. He yawned and promised himself silently that in the future he would make a real effort to be a little less uptight.

Charlie was already snoring next to him when Trav heard a compressor start somewhere nearby. A soft cheer skittered through the tent. From the female side of the curtained-off partition, Trav heard a voice he recognized, the heavysset smoker lady’s, a little louder than the rest.

“Oh thank you, God. Air conditioning.”

Trav smiled to himself as he started to drift off to sleep. Tomorrow’s gonna be a better day, he thought. It’s just gotta be.

Somewhere in the darkness, a man began to cough.

A Road Like This, At Night

I took a bus down to Drummond, where the state college is, to get my daughter Connie's car a week after the funeral. I'd bought it for her when she turned sixteen. Probably shouldn't have, but it never spoiled her. She was precious and perfect, and no father should ever have to take a bus to Drummond to pick up their dead daughter's car.

It was after midnight when I got there, but I'd slept on the bus, as well as anyone ever could sleep on a bus, and I was ready to start the five and a half hour trip back home. I filled up with gas and coffee and went rattling down the road after adjusting the rear view mirror. There was a perfume-scented picture of Tweety Bird hanging from it.

Wasn't too long before there's flashing lights behind me. I hadn't been speeding, and I was wide-awake listening to the usual kooks who call in AM radio shows that late at night. I edge the car over to the side of the road and a few minutes later there's a hefty cop standing in the window, sunglasses on at night, just like in the song and he's leaning down to look at me rather sternly.

"Miss, can I see your driver's license and registration?"

I raised my eyebrows and looked up at him. I keep my hair short like it was in the Corps, and I still have more muscle on me than flab. Once a Marine, always a Marine, you know? "I'm not exactly a 'miss', officer," I say, handing him the required paperwork. "This is my daughter's car. She was killed by a drunk driver two weeks ago, and I'm just now getting up to Drummond to pick it up."

"Ummm-hmmm," the cop said, shifting his belt a little under his belly as he looked at the license. "This is a brand new license. You want a ticket on your first night behind the wheel?"

I looked at the rear view mirror. A string of Mardi Gras beads hung in the place where Tweety had been just a moment ago. They looked enough like the ones Connie had put there when I first got her the car that it gave me goosebumps. And a crazy idea along with them. I snatched the license and registration from the cop's hands and peeled out of there, gravel spraying behind the car as I darted out onto the empty road. When I looked back there was no howling mad cop following me, no sirens wailing. Just the emptiness of Route 412.

I checked the clock on the dash. Quarter after one. I pulled into an all night convenience store and rushed to the washroom. Splashed cold water all over my face with shaking hands. Connie had never told me about getting pulled over on the very first day she got her license. I got a fresh cup of coffee and approached the car again, warily, like a rat coming up on a trap.

But there was no sense standing there, as weird as what had happened had been, so I got in. Adjusted the rear view mirror again, thumped Tweety with my fingers to make sure he was really there, and off I went. State Route 412 to the interstate.

Round about the time I got on the highway, the air freshener was gone--just not there anymore. And someone was riding shotgun. Icicles sunk into my gut as I turned my head sideways to catch a look at the shadowy figure slumped in the passenger seat.

When he spoke, I recognized the voice right off. That boy, Reggie Troutman's son. What was his name? Clayton, I think. Connie had dated him a few times senior year, and then they just called it quits. She had cried and cried over that boy. Her mama didn't know what to do with her, ended up they went on a girl's weekend out vacation to the coast. Seemed like Connie felt a little better when she got back.

But Clayton Troutman had no business in this car now. He was supposed to be off at college somewhere in California, not in the car with me on an empty road at 2:11 in the morning. And he was certainly not supposed to be asking me this:

"Wanna make out?"

Well I definitely didn't. But that didn't stop the boy from putting his filthy paw on my thigh and easing it up toward my crotch. It felt real, too. Solid and warm like a piece of steak just beginning to cool down from the grill.

I picked the little creep's hand up and pushed it away. He turned the radio over to one of those rock and roll stations and turned the volume way up. I turned it back down. He said, "You're a goddamn frigid bitch, you know that?"

I punched the little fucker then. Didn't care if he was really there or off in college. Didn't care if I ran us off the road. I swung with everything I had at him and was surprised when my fist bounced off the vinyl headrest.

I was alone again. Still on the interstate, little pips of yellow light reflecting at me from the middle of the road. My breathing calmed down after a few minutes and I began to reconsider whether I should get a room for the night or keep going. I think it was just knowing that the things I was seeing weren't real--couldn't be real--that kept me driving.

I was seeing ghosts maybe, but they were ghosts of the living, and they all thought I was Connie. It was a little like eavesdropping on her private life, the life that had only got more private once I'd bought her these wheels.

Just outside of Hughesville, I stopped to drain off some of the coffee I'd been drinking. I thought about calling my wife Nora and talking to her about what was going on with Connie's car. I got some coins back with my change from the cigarettes and candy bar, and probably would have called her, if she hadn't been waiting in the passenger seat, fiddling with the faded yellow pine tree hanging over the dash.

I got in, and looked at Nora, waiting. She didn't say a word. I breathed in the smell of *pina colada* and adjusted the rear view mirror before backing out.

After a few minutes, the ghost of my wife, the one who I knew to be alive and well at home, patted my knee. "Honey, are you sure you want to go through with this? I could talk to your father."

I wondered what there could possibly be that Connie wouldn't feel like she could talk to me about. We had been pretty close, I thought. Her mama answered the question for me, in her own way.

"It's a permanent decision, baby." Nora was on the verge of tears, but still kept her back straight. My wife always was one for good posture, even under the worst of conditions.

I put my hand on hers, keeping my eyes on the road mostly, and just waited.

“You’re probably right not to tell him if you go through with it. The way that man used to go on about wanting a son. You know, he had you wearing little red and gold USMC t-shirts all the time when you were still in diapers.” She took a deep, fast breath, dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “You may never be able to have another one.”

My eyes were watering too much to drive and I pulled over to the shoulder of the road and hugged the warm sobbing shade of my wife, even though she was home in bed sleeping on this secret like she’d slept on it for years. How long now had it been? She had a map sticking up out of her purse, the route to Myrtle highlighted in hot pink. Connie’s senior year.

I cried for my daughter, behind the wheel of her car, holding on to nothing and holding nothing back. It had to have been that Clayton boy, knocked her up then wouldn’t have anything to do with her. I wanted to strangle him, but more--I wanted my Connie to know I loved her and missed her so much, that I would have understood if only she’d told me. But part of me knew that probably wasn’t true either.

I’d have blown up at her, and she would have been dirtied in my eyes; and more is the shame I felt knowing that I only come to realize this now that she was dead, and everybody but her that knew about it--Clayton Troutman, Nora, the doctor--was still alive, still sleeping on the secret. Now that she was gone, it was like Connie’s secret just couldn’t be kept; not on a road like this, at night.

My wife and the *pina colada* pine tree were gone and it was about 4:40 when I cranked the engine back up and continued on toward home. I shook my head silently over and over as I drove, wondering how I would ever bring the subject up to Nora, or if I even should.

I woke up some time later to a state trooper pecking on the glass with the business end of an oversized flashlight. “Everything okay, sir?”

I wiped crust from my eyes and wondered for a moment if the cop was real or not. He’d called me “sir” so I figured he must be real as raisins.

“I’m fine, officer,” I said, once I got my tongue unstuck from the roof of my mouth. “Just got a little tired is all.” I promised to move along and drive safely, and he let me go.

~

Soon the sun is up and I’m getting more coffee and a sausage biscuit from a drive-up window a few miles from home, a place I thought I knew better than I actually did. I’m lost in thought, and feel the pangs of missed chances more deeply now in the sunlight than I ever did at the funeral or when they first told us she had been killed walking in front of a car full of drunks leaving the same party. I had always told her not to drive under the influence, and she was a good girl and never did. I’m sure of that. She tried too hard to please me. It was more important to her than I’d been aware of.

Not too far up the road I see a big billboard ad in black and white, the last one before I round the bend and our little town is laid out before me like a poor man’s feast. There’s a quote on it that I’ve never paid much attention to, until now:

Tell the kids I love them ~God.

“Hey God? You do the same for me, okay?” I say, adjusting the rear view mirror one last time so I can get a good look at the road behind me. “You let my girl know I love her, no matter what.”

Tweety’s back, this time smelling of honey and vanilla that hangs in the air like the buzz of bees on a summer day. A light on the dash comes on as I enter the township limits in Connie’s car. By the time I pull up in front of my house, the gas needle is bobbing somewhere south of E. Before I climb out and head up the walk, I stop and breathe in the perfumed air. This old car has been riding on fumes for far too long. It’s a wonder I ever made it home.

Goodwill

Rainy Saturday
nothing to do but empty
garage and closets

I’m dropping the third load off, backing up toward the open mouth of charity and this gold Lexus swerves around; I almost hit him, or he me, but regardless he thinks the rain on his castoffs will do more damage than on mine or his time is so much more precious that I should bow and scrape, acknowledge how much higher his credit limit is than my own.

my window slides down
words and tempers escalate
angry gestures shared

Fine and dandy, then. Be my guest. I block his car and unload mine. Slow as poverty, feet dragging like bad customer service. My clothes are soaked through and I’m ignoring the lightning strikes from Lexus-man’s horn and lips. He fogs his windows with curses for ten full minutes before finally I’ve finished and move my car from his path. The workers still cower inside, no policy in place for misbehaving donors.

Rain soaks out my spite
ashamed I pull from the lot
empty of good will

The End of the Road

My undying thanks to Shelley and my daughters for never failing to inspire and support me in my writing.

My Old Friend the Road originally appeared in the webzine *From the Asylum* in September 2007. Let it be a warning to those who too easily fall prey to the lullaby of the open road.

“Head Music” was the first story I ever completed; I wrote it while deployed at sea in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. With much trepidation, I sent it off to a neat sounding anthology I read about on Ralan.com. As the ship returned from the Persian Gulf, editors Tom and Elizabeth Monteleone emailed to ask if the story was meant to be a Lovecraftian pastiche. After looking that up, I told them the story certainly owed a lot to his influence, but I hoped it would appeal to a broader audience than just those writing in his tradition. It must have been the right answer, because they ended up buying the story for *Borderlands 5* (November 2003). When the book won the Stoker Award, it was republished in mass market paperback under the new title *From the Borderlands*.

“Even At The End, There Was Gridlock” first appeared in February 2006’s *Florida Horror: Dark Tales from the Sunshine State*. Editor Supreme Ellen Datlow called this story “pretty good” in *The Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror, 20th Annual Collection*. I’m awful fond of it myself. Artistically, I was trying to see how many red herrings I could throw into one story and it still work, while struggling to get a handle on how much subtlety and obliqueness I could get away with in my storytelling. Different readers come away with different ideas about what is going on here, and they’re all right: in its final version, every story experienced is a collaboration between the writer and the reader. Besides—Maybe the point isn’t figuring out what exactly happened after all. Maybe it’s the way things keep getting worse while we’re too busy proving our pet theories to notice....

“A Road Like This, At Night” came about while I was stationed in Panama City, Florida, not long after Hurricane Ivan. At the time, I was making regular trips to the Naval Hospital in Pensacola, about three hours away. Driving through so much damage and desolation filled me with the sense of sadness and regret that pervades this story. I got home from this drive one night, sat down immediately and wrote it in a couple hours without saying a word to anyone; it’s an amazing feeling when stories pour out so easily. It was selected to appear in a gorgeous hardcover book but the publisher went a little nuts and then disappeared (as they sometimes do in the small press world). Patrick Swenson, made of saner, sturdier stuff, rescued the story from oblivion and published it in the November 2008 issue of *Talebones*.

My haibun *Goodwill* (it’s a Japanese form related to the haiku) first appeared in the Connecticut journal *CHOPPER*. It was while stationed in New London that I first began reaching out to the larger writing community: the local poets who read every week in the

Bean & Leaf, the wonderful PENCILS! writing group (founded by Kristi Petersen-Schoonover and home of the Rejection Slip Bonfire Party!), the New England Horror Writers, and all the folks who frequent the genre conventions of the Northeast. Unlike in this poem, I have only goodwill to pass along to my faithful readers and fellow writers.

Lon Prater is an active duty Navy officer by day, writer of odd little tales by night. His short fiction has appeared in the Stoker-winning anthology *Borderlands 5*, *Writers of the Future XXI*, and Origins Award finalist *Frontier Cthulhu*. He is an avid Texas Hold'em player, occasional stunt kite flyer, and connoisseur of theme parks and haunted hayrides. To find out more, visit <http://LonPrater.com>.

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