

## The Drive Out

“I can hear the bullfrogs callin’ me.”

Surely, John Fogerty wasn’t referring to Green River, Utah when he penned the eponymous tune. I coasted into the no-name gas station on the waning vapors of a Denver-filled tank with empirical evidence that my little Toyota did indeed exceed thirty miles to the gallon. I calculated it to be right around 34.

I got out and it was warm and windy. Across from me a large pale high-school boy sported a maniacal hairdo that looked like he had just fried himself in an electrical socket. I stretched and cracked my neck. He got out of the car and fumbled with the pump. He had big shiny pig-nose earrings dangling down and I couldn’t help but picture him as an eccentric old coot stumbling around with distended earlobes.

The pump stopped and I hung it up. I walked into the store and picked up a bag of sunflower seeds and a box of Gobstoppers. The green Mexican dwarf at the counter had a hard time scanning the seeds, but the barely pubescent hirsute manager showed him how to peel back the plastic wrapper so the laser could pass cleanly across the bar code. I asked for the gas receipt and the kid was reluctant, but a cold look motivated him and he stamped off and returned with a smudged copy. I took it and turned to leave. I briefly thought about stepping into the Burger King next door, but I saw the kid with the future elephant ears and decided to press on. It was just after three.

In Richfield I fell asleep listening to a scary John Zorn piece outside of a Wendy’s. There are no quaint little mom and pop cafes along the most desolate parts of I-70. An only partially dehydrated meat patty is the best case scenario. Zorn gave me disturbing dreams and I woke up an hour later in a sour mood and stumbled in; the staff was disconcertingly nice to me and served me a cheeseburger that tasted mostly of meat. I watched a woman shaped like a turnip feed two small bulbous clones while glaring at them as they masticated. Next to them the tall lean father looked blankly off into space as he munched in silence. His jaw moved like an old horse’s mouth systematically chewing through a bale of hay. I finished off my sandwich as the man and woman left in a giant white Ford F-350 and a gold Expedition, respectively.

I thought about making Vegas and I could have done it, but after talking to my brother I decided to stop in Mesquite. I hated Vegas and their false advertising of cheap rates and great deals. He spoke of better prospects in Mesquite. I had seen dozens of billboards along the freeway promising cheap hotels with various perks and deals. A free breakfast here, a ten dollar gas card there, etc. I made up my mind to stay at the cheapest one-the Virgin River Resort and Casino. I missed the exit however, and ended up at another casino that was booked up. The automaton at the desk said she could reserve a room for me at The Oasis next door for forty dollars, but I declined and went back to the Virgin River. As I walked across the parking lot I wondered if maybe my bushy unkempt appearance forfeited me the room, but I quickly saw a random sampling of the clientele around me and decided that at worst, I was just an apple core, rotting slowly somewhere in the middle of this pathetic little desert compost heap. But there wasn’t any real difference between a high roller and a filthy vagrant like me until we emptied our wallets

at the blackjack table. Even the real money looked trashy. Everyone was equally disrespected in this town, and what's worse is that we all deserved it.

The Virgin River was somehow also sold out of rooms and a different woman again offered to make me a reservation at the Oasis. This time I understood how it worked. I accepted as rudely as I could and tried to convey my loathing for her through my signature scrawl. She was not as obtuse as I thought and thanked me as warmly as a coral snake. I drove back to the hotel and when I pulled into the parking lot it was empty except for a few solitary skulking shadows. The neon sign outside was dull and gray and the place looked like it was on the verge of shutting down at any moment. Put *those* people in *that* building. I walked into the lobby and was greeted by a pair of cold aluminum eyes sunk into an amorphous hunk of meat clothed in a tawny hotel uniform. Pinned to her left pumpkin-sized breast was a nametag that read: Gina-Hotel Manager.

I spit out my lame little sob story and she asked for my credit card and license. I gave these to her and she began processing my information. I watched her meaty little stubs prod the keyboard and her indifference made me seethe with rage.

"So all of those billboards along the highway advertised the rooms at your hotel for twenty-four ninety-nine," I said, unable to tolerate her any more.

She continued to smack the computer and didn't look up.

"When the hotel fills up, the rates go up. Please sign here, sir."

She stood and I saw that it pained her. She pointed to an electronic card reader that was flashing. I signed it and we briefly made eye contact.

"What about the free buffet or gas credit?" I went on, but she stopped me dead in my tracks.

"Look, sir. I can offer you nothing. There is no restaurant here and these are the only machines we have." She swept her chunky open palm disdainfully across the room presenting me with the horribly sobering tableau. She was right. A few dusty figures wobbled on barstools, smoking and robotically pushing the buttons whenever they lit up and made the jackpot noise. The entire place reeked of stale menthol and imminent death. I was sure I had holed up in a morgue for the night. I wanted to grab the sow by the jowls and scream into her face.

"Look here, you rotten old crow! You won't just cast me aside like so many of these withering corpses that wander in here with their dwindling pensions. I have my dignity. I'm not just another sucker on the vine. I want--"

"Here is your room key. Have a pleasant stay at The Oasis."

And that was it. Gina had beaten me-badly. She was well-adapted to dealing with my kind and she never even flinched. She returned to her chair and it creaked underneath her bulk and I mumbled under my breath. She had already forgotten about me. Only outside did I finally curse her, but it was too late and I felt like a fool. It smelled like tobacco everywhere and could already feel the smoke seep into my clothes. As I drove to the room in building 5, I noticed that the shadows were all sporting crew cuts. They stood alone like sentries, guarding their luggage, barely visible except for the bright embers smoldering inches from their faces.