

Providence

Sebastian Albu

By the time the pair of buzzards started circling above my head it was almost time to call it a day. They were watching a small Jack Russell Terrier sleep in the strawberry patch. When they got too close he quickly came to and burst into a fit of yelping. Disappointed, the birds made one more pass then sailed away on a cross breeze. I picked a bunch of asparagus and ate a few strawberries while watching Murphy, one of the old border collies bury her snout into a small gopher tunnel beneath the drip line. A few seconds later she emerged triumphantly with a large vole dangling between her teeth. The rodent struggled briefly before she clamped her jaws down, pulverizing its head with a loud crunch. She gnawed the body and I saw her teeth turn a deep shade of crimson as the tail disappeared down her throat. She licked her chops and immediately set upon another hole.

Later, in the car, I looked at the needle and decided I wouldn't be able to make it to Fresno on a quarter tank so I pulled into the gas station. There was a long line at the pump and I was anxious to get going. It was already after five so I decided I'd stop somewhere along the road. I spun the Echo around and got on the 101. It had been a long day of weed-whacking and toiling in fields of horse manure. At Atascadero I got on highway 41 and soon I was admiring the stately oaks and skidding around sharp turns at high speed. I was glad to be on the road again and free to roam for a few days.

I felt great and rolled down the window. The warm evening breeze rushed into the car and I detected the aroma of freshly baked bread. Somewhere an apple pie was cooling on an open windowsill. I flew by small cottages nestled in groves of flowering apricot trees. The gentle pale green coastal hills soaked the waning rays of the sun like fat sponges. A gaunt old man in a straw hat looked up from a flowerbed as my tires squealed in front of his house. Above him, the gnarled limy scary fingers of an oak tree pointed downward like an arthritic's ossified claw. I passed through Shandon, a hamlet on life support. On the edge of town, a codger in overalls leaned back on a plastic chair outside of his gas station waiting for business. I blinked and the town disappeared and a mile later I was just another shiny plastic capsule zipping through the Cholame Hills.

It occurred to me somewhere around Cholame to check the fuel gauge. I knew I had left with an insufficient reservoir and the needle was now just below empty. I wasn't immediately worried because I had done this sort of thing before. I had utmost confidence in the one thing that I find myself diurnally reproaching-development. There are very few places left devoid of a shopping mall or chain restaurant or Starbucks or, yes, a gas station. A man has to be pretty careless to run out of fuel in this day and age in America. Even as the needle dipped further below the line I didn't panic. I knew that sooner or later I would see some signs of life. The only stretch of desolate wasteland posing any real threat to the reckless traveler is the hundred mile burn in Utah between Green River and Salina. This was California, for Christ's sake. Still, as the car gobbled up asphalt, I eventually slowed down to sixty as I climbed a large hill. At the top I shifted into neutral and coasted until the road leveled out again. Back in the valley there were plenty of cars, but no semblance of a town. As the sun sank into the west, traffic

formed behind me, but I refused to push the Echo over sixty. I turned the radio off and put up the window.

The pavement rose and fell into the hills and so did my hope of finding gas. All types of scenarios played out in my head as I passed by expansive fields littered with rusted out skeletons of tractors and backhoes. I imagined sputtering in the middle of the highway and idling on the narrow shoulder as night crept over the land. My phone's low-battery light was blinking. It didn't even matter though, since I had no service anyway. I checked the fuel gauge and the digital pump on the screen started flashing. I had my tent in the trunk and a head lamp. I thought that if it came down to it I would jump the barbed wire and camp in one of the fields. If I got lucky someone would pick me up and drive me to the nearest town. But I knew that the chances of any reasonable person picking up, let alone seeing a grizzled hitchhiker in the middle of the night were marginal at best. I scanned the amber horizon for a farmhouse or ranch, but there were none. I had made a grievous error. I realized that I was on my own.

Hope came in the form of a decrepit old billboard 2 miles outside of Reef Station. I saw it from a quarter mile away. It seemed to glow and I strained my eyes to see the three precious red letters painted on by hand: GAS-Next Exit. The gas light had only been blinking for ten miles so I knew I was going to make it. A sweet sense of relief briefly came over me.

The giant red barn loomed in the distance just left of the traffic light. As I approached it something seemed amiss. I looked for another foolish car among the bays, but saw only a torn banner whipping around in the wind. I turned at the light and pulled into the lot. A chain prevented access to the front of the building. I circumvented the barrier and came to the other side where a banderole hanging from another manacle of oxidized iron links heralded my imminent doom.

Gone To Australia-Back In April.

Could I last until then? I shut the engine off and assessed the situation. It briefly crossed my mind that I could put a rock through one of the windows and hole up in the barn for a few weeks. There would surely be enough dry goods inside to provide ample nourishment for that long. Perhaps the owner had left the electricity on and I could charge my phone and walk to service. I was savvy enough to activate the pumps. I could just turn one of them on and take enough gas to get me to an operating station. I'd use the rock to weigh down the money to pay for the gas and window. I would write a short note describing my dire straits and the reason for...

I snapped out of my delusion and poured out the peccant broth stewing inside my head. A burgundy Toyota sedan was idling alongside the road just in front of the barn. I quickly started my car and tried to reach it, but they sped away as I approached. I killed the motor again, reached in the back and pulled out the only map I had. It was an ancient leather-bound tome that my father had given me years ago. I thumbed through its snuff-colored pages torn at the corners until I found southern California. I pinpointed my location and the prognosis was grim. The map gave only an approximation of my actual whereabouts. I had only two options. I could either continue eastbound on 41 into the foreboding Kettleman Hills -which my map depicted as completely devoid of life for at least another twenty five miles and hope for a desultory petroleum miracle- or I could change course to highway 33 and pray that the speck on the map called Avenal was actually inhabited by humans and not just some stricken sulfurous refinery. My spanking

new rubber tires bit into the gravel and spit out a few rocks as I headed north towards my precarious gasoline dreams in Avenal.

A week earlier I had backed myself up against a similar wall, albeit in less dramatic fashion. I had successfully driven from Denver to Green River on one tank. As I fueled up after that mild heart attack, I calculated the miles per gallon of my efficient little puddle-jumper. For a ten gallon tank I figured the mileage to be right around thirty-four to the gallon. This gas mileage (spectacular for a 2003 non-hybrid model), while typically a point of gasconade, was currently proving to be the bane of my existence. I had grown overconfident and was now paying the price. After a frantic mental tally, I reasoned I had no more than ten miles left in the tank. The sign next to me told of a nine mile jaunt to Avenal.

The first four miles were terrible. In between stomach pangs and violent spas of rage upon the wheel, my eyeballs darted back and forth like those of a speed freak and my spine burned as a cold layer of brine formed on my brow. At mile five I thought I felt the engine choke, but it was only the slight grade. I cursed myself for this incredible lack of foresight. A half-mile later I saw the Corolla that had sped off earlier. It was parked in a turn-off along the side of the highway. In an abrupt decision, I swerved off the road and screeched to a halt. My box of Willy Wonka Gobstoppers flew out of the cup holder and spilled its contents all over the passenger floor mat. I was unaffected. The Toyota had a Providence University sticker on the rear windshield. Two college-age boys were leaning on the trunk. They wore hooded sweatshirts and looked like a pair of monks. One of them was pointing a camera at the sunset. I stepped out and approached them. I wasn't sure how they would react to maniacal rants spilling out from beneath the grass covered beard of a raving lunatic.

"Do you know if there's a gas station up ahead? I'm about to run out of gas any minute now."

"Yeah, there's one in Avenal. Do you have four or five more miles left?" said the one with the camera.

"I think so, but I've been on empty for a while now."

"Well, there's one just up the road, about a mile past the state prison. I'll give you my number. If you run out just give us a call and we'll come give you a ride."

I wrote down his phone number on a piece of paper and thanked him. As I prepared to drive away it occurred to me that I had a box of my discs in the back. I pulled one out and handed it to him. I told him I hoped I wouldn't have to call, but I was greatly obliged at the gesture, nonetheless.

I passed a sprawling penitentiary wrapped in concertina razor wire and across the street a few rusty dust devils trembled among the tumbleweeds. I scanned the roadside for a benzene beacon, but the tallest structure for miles was the guard tower. A truck pulled out of a housing development. Ahead the desert licked up the last slivers of light and I swung my dying hunk of metal onto a small nondescript road. No sign, but up ahead there was only sagebrush and oblivion. This was my last chance. I went as far as the first semaphore, hung a right and a block later I relieved a great umber burden with great mirth as the Echo greedily drank from the stainless steel utter. Inside, I happily paid for the gas and beamed at the attendant. I wanted to hug her, but that would have been strange. I sent a text to the Friar's phone letting them know I had made it. He responded a few minutes later:

“Peace be the journey.”

I would indeed relish the sight of a needle pointing northeast for the next two hours.

As I watched the gauge spurt backward to its limit several things occurred to me, which I will list in order of significance to the aforementioned story:

1- I’m retarded (disputable).

1a- I place a disproportionate amount of faith in the notion that “everything will be alright.”

2- That said, I also possess an uncanny ability to estimate distance and volume (I pumped 9.8 gallons into a 10 gallon tank). I rely on my sense of direction as a substitute for forethought. Had I chosen to remain on highway 41 I’d surely be writing a more interesting story, assuming of course the hills had no eyes and I didn’t meet my grisly end excoriated in some abandoned mine shaft wishing I had gone to Avenal.

3- Venturing against the erstwhile story line, I have come to the conclusion that as long as I’m still breathing, there is little I need to worry about. The worst scenario is death. And correspondingly, when I’m dead I’ll have nothing to stress me out. Yes, the grisly movie scenarios involving chainsaws and cannibals are unpleasant to consider, but as I’m a gambling man, their odds are low enough to merit them insignificant.

4- Finally, it dawned on me during my after-hours detour through California farm country that I’m hopelessly addicted to the adrenaline that my body produces during periods of high stress. It’s not the tension of the moment that I lust for, though. That’s actually the worst of it. My stomach is a rumbling bilious mess, my mouth dries up and my blood turns ice cold. But the release following that splenetic frenzy is worth it. It’s like hiking a naked mile in the snow only to stumble upon a hot tub. Driving away from that colossal corrugated blushing clam I felt angelic hands take the wheel. I could have easily relinquished control of the reigns and lounged back into my seat. I could have slept soundly, dreaming of ungodly things. I could have called my brother and apprised him of my miraculous salvation from the hood of the car without the slightest concern. I could have craned my neck out of the window into the crepuscular twilight and spit into the wind. It would’ve never hit me. Not on that night. Because after all, I’m also incredibly lucky.