

Strasse der Nacht

Twilight came out to play as I cruised down Highway 101. Traffic was sparse, and the scenery seemed to almost flatten out, as if I were heading into the Nevada desert. Now was the appropriate time to wonder where the hell I actually was.

I pulled over to the gravel shoulder and got out. I closed the door, carefully, and turned to receive a faceful of dust. After the obligatory coughing and flailing of the arms, I stood before a tapering concrete thread which continued on into the horizon as if it wanted to sew the sky shut. I marveled at my mind's choice of metaphor and turned one hundred eighty degrees to see nearly the same thing.

Now this was not at all what I wanted to be looking at. This highway wasn't just sparse, it was blank! The remaining scenery amounted to nothing more than sand dunes, tumbleweeds, and gravel. Such an optical delight. Suddenly an extraordinarily diligent group of dust particles invaded my nasal passages. I sneezed.

I opened my eyes just in time for a glint of distant metal to cause two percent blindness. I employed my incredible powers of deduction and the direction the car was facing to conclude that it was coming from a place I'd once been, maybe. At any rate, it was moving toward me quite rapidly. It appeared to be a car of some kind; a damned expensive one at that. I couldn't tell for sure, but it seemed to be glowing red.

And that was the believable part. It was still twilight, but everything I had seen since I sneezed had appeared as though in full daylight. I scanned both sky and horizon, but found no bright light sources that could have acted like the sun. Well, fine. My whole week's been like this, so if it wants to be noon and twilight at the same time, go right on ahead. I'm certainly not in charge.

My attention reverted to the car, which was less than a mile from me now, and glowing more intensely. It burst into flame like a wood chip on a smoldering coal, and I darted about twenty feet off the side of the highway. At about 100 yards' distance -- I was pretty good at judging 100 yards -- I heard who I assumed to be the driver, screaming like he meant it, and when I squinted I could see that he was also aflame. His scream lasted the full thirty seconds it took to donate 13% of his tires to the pavement before he stopped beside my significantly less exciting automobile.

I leapt back and hit the gravel, waiting for the sleek sports car to explode, but instead I saw a young woman in a business attire spraying the whole thing off with a fire extinguisher. After the foam cloud cleared, she wiped it from bumper to bumper with a designer chamois.

The car looked like a Delorean with an attitude and seemed to be completely cooled off. I sensed it was time to get the hell outta Dodge in my Buick. I headed straight for the left side of my vehicle.

"Leaving so soon? We just got here," the brunette pouted as she opened the driver's side door of the Racing Machine from Below. A steaming, blackened corpse slumped out onto the road, and she jangled the keys at me.

"Don't you want a pulse-quickenning, blood-boiling test drive? This year's model is HOT!" she said and blinked coquettishly.

"Get away. Just get away," I said slowly as I climbed into the front seat of the Buick. I started the engine and slammed on the gas pedal, flattening it until I could no longer see the salesperson's face. I slowed down to about sixty and hoped my engine wouldn't overheat.

I noticed mountains ahead of me, while the landscape continued to manifest itself in the eerie yellows and browns of midday. I stared out the window like a tourist and imagined myself as yet another traveler on the proverbial desert highway. What was that proverb again?

Imagination is a funny thing. I passed a large, friendly billboard with a painted sun and cactus: "Welcome to the Proverbial Desert Highway."

Perhaps I'm an English sitcom who just thinks he's a young American man. Yeah, maybe we're all trying to read our scripts before air time, to find out who we will be. We revel in moments of iconoclastic bliss that we foolishly call our unique human personality, but these are really commercials. Could be. And I probably run at two in the morning, to confuse the poor insomniacs with my strange adventures. Such an epiphany.

Well, this was by far the longest twilight I'd ever experienced. I don't have anything against the ambiguous time of the evening, but even I could have made up my mind by now. I leaned forward and glanced up at the dim sky, as if to show the weather deity I noticed. Nothing. All right, buddy, I'm gonna see red.

I groped around the front seat, brushed the rubbery skin of Pet Pylon, but found no paper bag of presents. I looked askance and my eyes came to the same conclusion: still in the trunk. Yeah, why not? I pulled over again and popped the trunk. Seeing-Eyeglasses. This should be interesting. I left the flares in the trunk and got back in the car.

I removed the surrogate sight spectacles from their package and admired their synthetic anonymity. Myriad possibilities awaited me, for I was not blind. Would I become blind? Would I see that which others do not? Or would everything just be a little more red? Fortunately, this was one of the great answerable questions of the universe. I put the shades on. Everything was a lot brighter now, but with a reddish tint.

I restarted my personal transport device and returned to the highway. I noticed a sign coming up on the right. This place never lets up: the sign wasn't just getting bigger as I drove toward it -- it had little metal stick-figure feet and was running toward me like an eager child. In big, white, reflective letters, it said, "ROAM -->", suggesting something or other to my right. I whizzed past.

Glancing in the rear-view mirror, I could see it jumping up and down in frustration; after three short hops it proceeded to give chase. It quickly lagged behind like a spent marathon runner, but it occurred to me that I had no idea how fast a street sign could run. I kept glancing in the side mirror just in case, and sure enough, it was gaining on me.

After a couple of minutes, it caught up and started tapping on the top of my trunk. As I passed under an overhead sign that reiterated "Roam", I felt an evil thought enter my head. I shot a brainwave at it and concluded that it was only a little evil, and funny besides. I reached down and opened the glove compartment. I looked back and made sure the sign was still there. I tapped the brakes and pressed the black button marked "trunk" just inside the glove box. It worked: the poor sign went sailing backwards and to the right. It stuck in the dry earth upside down, and flailed its metal pseudopods pitifully. I laughed.

I stopped briefly, got out, closed the trunk, and laughed again... but my conscience protested. I decided not to go back and free it; that would spoil the humor. However, when I saw the next exit to Roam, I took it. After I rounded the cloverleaf, I came to a typical intersection. A sign just off road claimed that I could get to Roam by all three of the exits. Moderate that I am, I took the middle road.

A line of medium-height evergrays (red will do that to green) formed the corridor through which I traveled. There were a lot of signs here and there, some on the trees, some on posts, others painted on the road itself. They unanimously urged me to Roam -- I began to theorize that Roam was not a place, but instead a directive for tourists. Well, I didn't to Roam just yet. I located a wide section of shoulder and made a U-turn.

As I regained the intersection of my recent passing, I found that a sign identical to its predecessor stood before me, demanding that I roam. I was not to be fooled. I came in on the middle road, and I could exit that way as well. I drove on through, and the signs on the side of road that I had failed to notice before seemed to lean toward me. Ha. No sale. Suddenly my decision was revoked: not more than 500 yards ahead, the highway ended in front of a large, unfriendly sign that demanded, "You will Roam." Well, okay then.

I pulled over to the side of the road -- I seemed to be doing this a lot -- and got out. I spied a grove of trees and decided to check it out. The tall pines were arranged

in a perfect circle, and within lay a bench. I sat down, put my head in my hands, and wondered how I was going to get out of this warped place.

I noticed a brown paper bag lurking under the bench and picked it up. It contained a bag of tortilla chips, a sandwich, an apple, twelve Oreos, two cans of Dr. Pepper, and a handheld radio. I rose and scanned the grove for any sign of whomever left this behind, but no one was there. I was hungry anyway, so I munched down on this bit of providence and examined the radio.

It seemed ordinary enough, but I discovered it had no buttons or knobs of any kind. Wait: the speaker sank into the plastic when I pressed on it, emitting a click. It began playing a fifties song, at which point I pressed the speaker again, shutting it off. I guessed it only received one station.

I still didn't know whom to thank for this, but I felt I had to do something. I stood up straight, cleared my throat, and said, "To whom it may concern: I sincerely appreciate your beneficence." I gathered up all the trash I could find and put it into the bag, then left.

I came upon the most eccentric little circus act I had ever seen. A dozen or so large snakes were circling around a trampoline upon which a like number of red chickens were jumping. Suddenly, one of the snakes leapt in a sinusoidal arc towards one of the skinnier birds, carrying them both over the other side. The prone poultry when halfway down the python's throat upon impact. Some of the other reptiles began to do the same as the first continued its meal. I watched curiously, slightly repulsed, but interested nonetheless. After about half the chickens were gone, I saw a snake jump for a fat hen. The snake bounced off like a rubber ball, scooping in a mouthful of dust instead. Another scaled projectile gave it a try and was equally and elastically unsuccessful. I gave up and moved on, leaving six hungry pythons and six chubby chickens in my wake. I glanced down and noticed a small pink slip of paper (probably white, actually) about the size of a fortune cookie message. Indeed: "Don't bounce your chickens until they're fat." No really, I'm leaving.

I discovered that an additional bench had sprung out of the landscape midway between me and my car. A large open book lay on it. I brushed my bangs out of my eyes and sat down. The tome was very old, or so I assumed, because it was leatherbound, and each page had a distinctive gold leaf trim. I flipped through a few pages, scanning the heavy script for some long forgotten metaphysical insight into the universe, but I could only read every other word. Two gnarled hands abruptly snatched the ancient volume from the bench. I looked up and met the perturbed stare of an old man in a wizard's costume. Clutching the book protectively within the folds of his velvet robe, he croaked, "This is my property. Why don't you look before you leaf?" A few seconds elapsed, pounding the pun deep into my forehead while I rolled my eyes and shook my head. That's it. I'm going, and don't try to stop me. Maybe it was only a

couple of dry leaves, but I could have sworn I heard the typical ba-dum-bum nearby as I unlocked my car door. I tossed the bag and radio next to Pet Pylon and got in.

When I reached the intersection again, the sign had changed. Instead of all roads leading to Roam (yeah, that too), the middle lane was designated "the open road". What else could I do? I headed for the open road.

I turned the small radio on. Some extremely bored weathergirl was describing the cloud movements over California in a duck voice. A high tone cut her off. She was replaced by a standard-sounding news man with a special bulletin.

"This just in. Motorists are warned to be on the lookout for small orange cones called Pet Pylons. They are dangerous and unpredictable. Repeat -- dangerous and unpredictable. Exercise extreme caution."

Another high tone followed, and the weathergirl was carrying on an imaginary conversation about the accuracy of the five-day forecast. I pressed the speaker on the radio and glanced over at Pet Pylon. Too late. I had forgotten to close the glove compartment, and the deceptive orange cone was devouring the map I had recently purchased at the corner store. I reminisced briefly, remembering Kristin's smile, but the image broke when Pet Pylon stretched toward my emergency condiments. "Hey! I need those!" I snapped as I reached over and batted the cone to the passenger-side floorboards, and then closed the glove box. I couldn't think of what I really needed a couple packages of fancy ketchup for, but I certainly wasn't going to let a pile of polymers have them for a snack.

I nearly ran off the road by watching Pet Pylon, but corrected my path and kept my eyes on the concrete. I heard a snap like a breaking rubber band and glanced down to see the pylon suck down my air freshener tree. That's it. I pulled to the side of the road and stopped. I grabbed Pet Pylon, which seemed to squirm in my hands, and got out of the car. I ducked back inside, opened the glove compartment, and popped the trunk. I squeezed the plastic nuisance between both hands and wondered if it felt pain. I slam-dunked it next to the flat spare, and picked up the package of Fun Flares. Eat a tire, coneboy.

Before I got back to the driver's door, I heard a loud thumping and saw large bulges appearing in the trunk. I didn't know what would happen next, so I took a run for it, just in case. I tripped on a rock as my Buick exploded. Claustrophobia.

I waited tensely for exactly thirty-two minutes before I got up to assess the damage. The car was totaled of course. A television cop show couldn't have topped this one. I decided to save despair until I was tired, so it would taste better. I began to walk down the deserted highway, anagramming the word "martyr" in my head, though "my tray" and "may try" were about all I came up with. No new wisdom gained there.

After two miles, my feet were starting to get sore, and I had to fight off the urge to discard my trenchcoat in the muggy evening. I noticed a rectangular structure of metal ahead: a telephone booth! I hoped. I found three quarters in my pockets and gripped them like worry beads as I reached the booth. It was real, all right. I even got a dial tone when I picked up the receiver and dialed zero.

"Your name, sir?" droned a nasal female voice. I don't remember being asked that before, but I didn't see how it mattered, so I replied.

"David Ariel."

"And what is your transaction, sir?"

"Well, let's see. I'll need a tow truck, or a cab, maybe Coll-n-Cal," I muttered. "Uh, could you..."

"Undertow Towing Company, 869-7227, Crabapple Cab Service, 943-7386. Collision and Calamity Insurance, 773-6586."

I fished around for some paper and a writing instrument. "Could you repeat that, please?" She did. I was impressed by her complete lack of inflection. I hung up and dialed the towing company.

"Undertow Towing. What the hell do you want?"

"I'd like a truck to get my car. I'm out in the desert, and my car blew up. I have good credit..."

"Hey, tell it to someone else. We don't do deserts!" He hung up. They probably couldn't have towed it anyway, but I'd still stab the guy if I met him face to face. I tried the cab company next.

"Crabapple Cab. How may we help you?" This was much better.

"I need a cab."

"Of course, sir. Where are you located?"

"Well... I guess I'm on the Proverbial Desert Highway."

"Yes, aren't we all, sir? Could you please be more specific?"

"No, that's what it's called. I'm at a phone booth, and -"

"OH MY GOD, IT'S YOU!" she suddenly shrieked, and I got the dial tone. Scary. I was a little apprehensive about calling the insurance company, given my success rate so far, but I needed help.

"Good evening, Collision and Calamity. My name is Jane. How may I help you?"

"Yeah, my name is David Ariel, and..."

"Please, sir. We'll take care of this by mail. Right away." The receptionist sounded a little scared.

"Well, I can't do it that way. I'm at a phone booth, and my car blew up. What do I need -"

"Please, sir! I have a husband and three children. Show some compassion!" She was almost crying.

"Yikes, sorry." I hung up. I had no idea just what it was everyone was afraid of, but I still needed some kind of assistance. I dialed the operator again.

"We're sorry. This extension has been disconnected. This is a recording."

"What? Wait a minute!" I fumbled frantically in my pockets for more change as the line went dead. I knocked a small metal box out of my coat and noticed a digital display on it. I let the receiver drop and retrieved the box. "Extra Cars: 3" was what the readout told me. I remembered that this was my prize from the video game I played at the corner store. Maybe this would help. I felt a button on one side and pressed it. The 3 changed to 2 as my feet were knocked out from under me.

I quickly regained my bearing and found myself in a small, glowing race car. I was still holding the box, and I turned it over. I saw a "Time Remaining" display which showed just under thirty minutes, and was counting down. This was no more wondrous than anything else that had recently happened to me, so I found the ignition and fired 'er up. I heard a synthesized buzz just like the video game. I groped around for the accelerator with my foot, found it, and pressed hard. I lurched forward as if I were falling and made a vain attempt to peel myself from my seat. I soon reached maximum speed. I discovered that the car had no brakes, and the accelerator pedal seemed to have disappeared, whereupon I took a deep breath and focused on the road. From the looks of the streamlined scenery on either side of the highway, I was moving pretty damned fast. The straight road leaned to the left in a mild curve, and I was reminded what it was like to crash in the game. I hoped the handling was comparable to the simulation and gave the steering wheel a slight turn to the left. I moved almost sideways into the other lane, and quickly corrected my trajectory. Even with no other traffic on the road, I would have to pay close attention.

After a little while, the car began to decelerate gradually. When I was nearly stopped I looked at the metal box and saw four zeroes flashing back at me. The artificial auto stopped and vanished, depositing me and the box mercilessly onto the pavement. I panned around. Not much had changed, except that I was approaching a valley of some kind, and hopefully that meant a city.

I pressed the start button again on the box again, and as expected, I fell into a new electronic car. I resumed my breakneck speed toward possible civilization. I continued in this way, through this and two more vehicles. When the last car disappeared, I tried pressing the button again but was the readout merely displayed "Insert Coin". I wished I'd known about this sooner and kept my quarters instead of spending them in the phone booth... but it was too late for that now. I looked ahead and saw that the highway disappeared between two hills a ways ahead. It was hard to estimate in the failing light, but I guessed the valley was about three miles ahead. Much more than a hundred yards in any case. I decided I could see better without the Seeing-Eyeglasses and took them off. I learned this was simply not true, so I put them back on.

I started walking forward, but fatigue overtook me almost immediately, and I nearly fell flat. As I paused to gather energy, my mind painted an unauthorized picture of a drooling coyote, and I rose immediately. I realized I still had the package of Fun Flares in my right pocket, so I opened the package and decided to try one. If nobody came, at least I could get my money back. Sure, no way to lose.

I unwrapped a purple cylinder and aimed the covered end toward the sky. I yanked the cord on the other end and flinched as the charge rocketed into the air. As it exploded into a bright purple light, I heard a crowd of people cheering. I looked around me, and sure enough, I was surrounded by the merry multitudes, pointing to the sky and whistling excitedly. I approached one of the spectators and tried to get his attention, but he ignored me and continued staring upward. I turned to the woman next to him and waved my hand in front of her face, but she didn't react. I moved to tap her on the shoulder, but my hand passed right through her! I waded straight into the crowd unobstructed. They were only holograms, and as the flare's light began to fade, so did they.

I walked another few yards towards the valley and fired another flare at the hills, hoping someone would see it or at least hear the ensuing crowd. Anyone. I could still see well enough with the aid of my Seeing-Eyeglasses, but the flare gave an added clarity to my vision, and I saw the tops of several large, unlit buildings, a few more miles into the valley.

I felt rejuvenated and marched forth, holding my head high and watching the faint pink cloudlessness above. I was totally oblivious to my surroundings at ground-level, for when I next looked down, I recoiled in horror at a sight I certainly would not

have overlooked. A man lay crushed in a pool of blood, apparently the victim of a hit-and-run, even though I had neither seen nor heard any other cars since I first came upon the Proverbial Desert Highway. I recognized the gray, shabby coat and red spectacles identical to my own. My heart fell: it was Eric, the old man I met in the corner store. I gently dragged him off the road and checked for a pulse, but he was already dead. I went back and picked up the bloody but unbroken Seeing-Eyeglasses, which appeared to be crying. Maybe they were actually alive, because the sight of them, or something else, caused my own shaded to darken significantly. I wanted to bury Eric or at least build him a cairn of some kind, but the ground off the shoulder was packed and dusty, and there was no great quantity of rocks or other objects within my line of sight. I took my wallet out of my left pocket and took out my wallet. Inside I found a five-dollar bill, which I took out and folded into Eric's hand. It was a useless gift, but it let me remember him happy, even though I hardly knew him at all.

I resumed my journey, no longer tired, but instead driven to find someone; at least someone to help me bury Eric somehow, if not get me back home. I entered the valley and saw that there was indeed a city ahead, but the buildings were dark and lifeless. No sound. No movement. I picked up my pace when I heard a feeble cry for help. I saw a drainage ditch ahead and heard a soft sigh from the same direction, and I rushed to investigate. No! Not her too! It was Kristin, the clerk from the corner store. Her arms and legs were badly scraped, and her breathing was shallow. She looked up at me and forced a smile.

"David," she said weakly.

I didn't remember telling her my name, but I decided that wasn't important. I knelt down in the ditch and lifted her into my arms. She winced with pain, so I held her as still as I could.

"Kristin, why -- why you? I mean, I'm very attracted to you and I wonder if maybe I'm even in love with you, but I -- I don't even know who you are. How did you get here? What happened to you?" I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

"Perhaps you don't know me... but perhaps all is not as you see it. We may meet again. Go into the city, and don't be afraid. Don't be afraid." Her voice trailed off, and her eyes closed. I bent down and placed my lips on hers, but she didn't respond. I took off my trenchcoat and tried to cover her, but she was taller than I was. I had to find something to cover her legs... then I realized her legs were gone! I blinked and refocused, but all I saw were two wooden planks nailed together. I lifted my coat, revealing two fence boards connected crudely, upon which was scrawled in black, "I know who you are."

I turned toward the city and heard low, echoing laughter. I put my coat back on and stood up defiantly. The laughter continued as I walked toward the murky streets, and it was very hard not to be afraid.