

BUTTONWOOD

A Story by Ricardo Santos Bell

Orange barrels lined the highway like unarmed sentries on a march to nowhere. They guarded the seemingly endless “improvement” project that demonized what should have been a monotonous drive. With one lane scattered with heavy equipment bent on devouring vast stretches of asphalt and the other bearing the scars of consumption, the decision to drive to Memphis instead of flying no longer looked like a wise choice to the driver. The disfigured roadway transmitted its ailment through rubber and metal, reaching his seat with the same effect as a vibrating bed in a cheap motel.

He occupied himself by making a game of guessing what each of the workers was doing. He felt confident, assuming that the ones doing nothing were supervisors, much like the managers at the company that employed him. Observing their sweat-soaked shirts, he appreciated the comfortable, controlled environment of his ubiquitous Detroit Special that was today’s rental. This comfort would evaporate in a sequence of events that would leave him feeling anything but comfortable, ordinary, or routine.

Brian Davies could no longer content himself with insipid games, even with speeds occasionally increasing to a blistering thirty miles per hour. Wanting to reach Memphis before the next decade, his fingers nimbly pressed the screen of the portable Ground Positioning System affixed with a suction cup to the front window. *Anything else must be better than this*, Brian thought. This trip felt too much like Brian’s life, an endless grinding existence traveling to seemingly drab uniform destinations punctuated by delayed flights, indistinguishable hotel rooms, and cardboard food. The on-again-off-again romance with the attractive but distant Cindy, currently in its downward cycle, provided the only lasting human contact compared to the numbing procession of faces. Even a favorite Bon Jovi song, playing through the car’s Bluetooth connection, only reinforced the dark mood:

*It’s all the same; only the names will change
Every day, it seems we’re wasting away
Another place where the faces are so cold
I’d drive all night just to get back home*

Absent-mindedly, his lips mouthed part of the chorus. "I'm a cowboy, on a steel horse I ride; I'm wanted, dead or alive, dead or alive." An interesting diversion would be a welcome respite in so many ways.

However, the GPS's alternate route feature was not interested in providing any helpful information. As his eyes focused ahead on what remained of the highway, Brian reached over to flip open the glove box. Pulling and tossing papers and manuals aside, he finally grasped his quarry. For once, his habit of not trusting the moodiness and idiosyncrasies of his alternating friend and nemesis, GPS, paid off. He contemplated salvation as he opened the map and placed it on the wheel in front of him.

A light, squiggly line that bent back and forth across a fold beckoned him. Maybe a lower speed limit, but probably no slower than the sadistic alteration to the Interstate. Perhaps a little longer, but there had to be more appealing points of interest than a perpetual construction zone peppered with giant boxes on wheels that managed to fill the single available lane and seemingly blot out the sun.

What the hell? I've never seen this part of the country. As the exit approached with its smooth paved ramp tempting him, Brian's hands moved to the right. The endless vibration that had numbed his backside came to a merciful end.

His eyes, unburdened by attention-demanding traffic, soaked in the meandering green hills decorated with trees and bushes. Unlike home, they were not jailed in boxes or carefully placed at specified "aesthetic" intervals. Brian certainly did not mourn the loss of the endless procession of burly companions that hauled tomorrow's delivery. As the vibration highway became a distant memory, he floated the Detroit Special through the ambling curves and gentle hills generously populated with maple, hickory, oak, and dogwood, all standing over a parade of color courtesy of Indian pink bladderpods and painted trillium. Leaves danced to unheard music as he spied the occasional remote farmhouse or ranch, their locations betrayed by friendly mailboxes with raised flags that waved at him as he passed.

As time faded, Brian ventured to lower one, then two windows and felt "real" air circulating around him. His thick brown mane tossed about, encouraged by the warm flow. Scents of grasses, moist wood, and budding flora filled nostrils accustomed to concrete, filtered air, and plastic. A small creek joined him near the side of the road, its gentle flow serenading him as he rolled past. His hands released their death grip on the steering wheel as his shoulders dropped a full two inches. He had not felt this relaxed in years. There was nothing to bother him here: no upstairs neighbor with leaden feet, no boss with a manic need to set arbitrary deadlines, no insipid clients to cajole and brown-nose, and no need to negotiate the minefield-laden sidewalk created by local canines.

However, he could see that the passing countryside did not impress the Detroit Special. A red light complained loudly from the dashboard like a petulant child. Brian knew his trip would end as soon as the car's gas tank sacrificed the next gallon of gas to the purring engine.

Shit. I haven't seen a gas station in over an hour. Fingers again prodded the GPS, imploring it to check its resources for a gas station. *Fifteen miles. I should make it... but not by much.*

"Right turn in two miles," warned the fickle woman hidden inside the GPS, nagging him like his building superintendent. Really? A glance at the map did not suggest any road nearby, and certainly nothing big enough to feature a gas station.

"Right turn ahead," the GPS advised indignantly.

Fingers again inquired of the GPS. No, there were no other gas stations closer than 38 miles. *Damn you. You'd better be right!* He had not trusted the GPS ever since he missed his flight to London years ago because it had failed to consider a recent change in the highway. His lips formed a fine line across his handsome features as dark eyes peered through slits. Finally, he succumbed to the demands of his electronic guide to venture deeper into the wilderness.

His heart sank as he absorbed the view on this supposed route to obtain a thirst quencher for the Detroit Special: skeletal remains of what had once been a small barn; a small dwelling that featured plywood for windows and gaping holes for skylights; fences that served no useful purpose other than to mark where overgrown foliage merged into tree-induced shadows. The face of the roadway showed the wrinkles of age. It was in dire need of a shave, with weeds pushing through cracks to create an unkempt look. No cosmetic surgeons featuring the asphalt-eating machines he had escaped miles ago had visited this path in decades.

This isn't good, Brian thought as he spotted the red light continuing its lament, persistent in its reminder that he would soon be coasting to a stop at a location that he couldn't begin to describe in a call for roadside assistance. *I'm going nowhere.* He reached reflexively to his hip, drawing his mobile phone like an old-time gunslinger. No signal. Of course. With the realization that "rush hour" likely consisted of one car every other day, he slipped into resignation that he was going to "enjoy" this countryside much longer than he thought. His head fell back against the headrest with a muffled thud. A slow exhale squeezed through clenched teeth. One thing was sure: the GPS would not survive this mistake. The execution would occur at dawn. The only question was how. Boot Hill? Careful placement on the highway? Drowning in the next creek? He would have to plan this. The betrayal had been severe.

WELCOME TO BUTTONWOOD

POPULATION 00

The faded sign, featuring partially obliterated demographic data, caused his eyebrows to jump up his knitted brow. A smile crept across his face. *Oh, GPS, you are forgiven. How could I doubt you?* As the Detroit Special rounded a curve lined with thousands of beckoning hands in the form of the mitten-like sassafras leaves, Brian imagined a greeting of waving and cheering from enthusiastic townspeople as he pulled victoriously into their fuel depot on the last drops of Mobil's finest.

No cheers. No townspeople. Just a smattering of old relics — lifeless structures that served only as grave markers of a time that had come and gone.

"You have reached your destination," mocked his electronic companion. *Screw you, GPS. Dead. Do you hear me? Dead!*

The destination so cheerfully announced by the little monster might as well have been a black-and-white picture. The old "service station" was a collector's gold mine. It featured two single-arm white pumps with rotating gallon and price dials topped with faded round globes bearing a blue "Gulf" on an orange field. An air meter sat next to them, proudly offering free air for wheezing tires. An empty royal blue and white Pepsi-Cola soda machine, once a dispenser of glass bottles for ten cents to thirsty travelers, sat patiently by the station's office door. The remains of an old Triumph Tiger Cub languished in the service bay. He half-expected "Goober" to step out from the building as he pulled up to the pumps.

As he climbed out of his parched conveyance, a few strides toward the building confirmed what he already knew — no one would be stepping out any time soon. The broken glass, a film of dust covering the metal desk topped with a manual cash register, and the countless structures erected by the local spiders' union laughed at him. He reached for the dispenser and inserted the nozzle into the Detroit Special's waiting mouth. He pulled the lever on the nozzle. Nothing. His shoulders slumped in surrender. *Welcome to Buttonwood.*

Brian's eyes narrowed as he glowered back at his betrayer mounted on the window of the Detroit Special. He surveyed the area, in part to find some kind soul but also to find a fitting final resting place for the computerized traitor. The buildings across the street were as dead as the service station behind him, vestiges of another time abandoned to a boneyard of aging remnants crumbling toward entropy. Next door, Betty's Diner did not look any more inviting with its "Welcome Friend" sign over the front door that hung from one corner on a single chain as it kept time with the gentle breeze.

Brian decided he would venture over there anyway. *Maybe they have a payphone that still works.* He caught himself laughing. *Who has payphones anymore?* He could only hope that a place this old would feature a device slowly being starved into non-existence by cell technology. Anticipating a long wait, he grabbed the neatly folded newspaper from the passenger seat, an amenity from last night's hotel stay. He wondered if there would be a hotel bed in which to sleep that evening. The back seat of the Detroit Special did not look as if it would comfortably fit his well-toned six-foot-two frame.

The windows at Betty's, obscured by time and weather, disclosed nothing about the contents within. Brian reached for the door, rejecting his brain's admonishment that it was a wasted exercise. As he touched the knob, a tiny spark arced between flesh and metal. Nothing spectacular. It was just like the ones he used to get as a kid when he'd scuffle in his stocking feet along the carpeted floor at home before touching his younger brother on the neck and laughing as the usual squeal escaped his sibling's mouth. But there was no reason for such a spark here. *Is the door connected to some electrical current? Is this some kind of protection system?* He slapped the knob a couple of times. There were no further sparks, no sense of current. He tried to peer through the glass but still could see nothing but a glow he had not noticed before. *It must be a hole in the roof.* Again, he extended his hand to open the door. He paused momentarily, then grasped and turned the knob. It was unlocked! He cautiously pulled, careful of hinges he suspected of conspiracy with the GPS, ready to betray him at any moment.

"Good afternoon, honey!"

Brian's eyes grew wide as he stood paralyzed by a blast of surprise. He couldn't respond to the plump, matronly woman standing behind the counter, her fading blonde hair neatly pushed under a small red and white cap, with just a wisp curving in a gentle fall past her right temple. Her pink uniform with white piping along the collar, lapel, and sleeves was pure kitsch. It brought to mind the Fifties, early Sixties at the latest. He couldn't help but wonder why anyone would go "classic diner" theme out here.

"You look parched. Come on in and take a seat wherever you like!"

Brian's mouth stalled. He scanned the room as his already wide-open eyes expanded to full saucers. A white counter, bordered by stainless steel, fronted eight candy-apple red-vinyl-covered stools. Six booths, three on either side of the midpoint-placed entry, featured the same white counter, steel trim, and red-vinyl motif. A white-frosted cake perched on a covered pedestal. A light-green Hamilton Beach milkshake machine, no doubt resurrected from the dead many times, seemed to be still working. And the object of his search he found back toward the restrooms on the left: a black payphone featuring a rotary dial. While

he still could not figure out why they had chosen to go with the diner theme, he had to congratulate them on a job well done.

There were also a half dozen other folks scattered throughout. At the end of the counter sat an older man hunched over a coffee mug, his grey skin and hair almost perfectly matched by a grey overcoat that was out of place on such a warm day. Just past him, a girl, perhaps a few years past high school age, peered into an old Jukebox that sat next to the alcove for the restrooms. On the other side, the first booth to the right featured a middle-aged American couple engrossed in reading, he with a yellowed newspaper and she with a magazine whose cover had managed to escape the confines of staples. Beyond them and toward the back, a thin man in denim overalls poured water into a bucket held with sinewy arms that extended from the rolled-up sleeves of his blue work shirt. Finally, a young lad in his late teens, straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting, sat quietly in a booth, judiciously eyeing the perfect legs attached to the admirer of the Jukebox as if committing every inch to memory.

“Cat got your tongue, honey?” the waitress asked.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t expect to find anyone in here.” Brian’s mouth finally decided it would agree to function. “I stopped for gas. My damn GPS said your gas station next door was open. I’m almost out.”

The round woman looked quizzically at him and then smiled. “Oh, you got a friend with you?”

Brian’s left eyebrow crawled up toward his hairline. “Sorry?”

“Jeepie?”

What the hell is she talking about? “I said ‘GPS.’ I have a GPS in my car for directions.”

“Oh, of course you do.” A hollow titter belied embarrassment. She hesitated as she stole a glance toward the old man at the counter who looked up through bushy grey eyebrows, not moving his head, his stone-colored eyes stern and unyielding.

“So, is there somewhere I can get some gas?” Brian tried to refocus her on his predicament.

“T’ain’t nothin’ for quite a ways,” offered the man in overalls as he stood up from his bucket, quickly gathering some tools, sponges, and squeegees and placing them in an old-fashioned wooden box with a dowel-bar handle. “How far can you get?”

“Maybe to that bend in the road. Seriously, I barely made it here.” Brian didn’t mean it to sound like a whine, but it did. He would never make it to the next town, wherever that was.

“Well, set yourself down and have somethin’ to eat. I got to get to my chores right quick ‘cuz I ain’t got much time. But I think there’s an old hand pump at the fillin’ station. I’ll bet I can get you a couple of gallons out of the old tank. Not sure how good it still is. Engine may spit and cough some, but it’ll have to do.” The man winked as he brushed by Brian on his way to the door.

“Uh, thanks....”

“Bert. Pleased to meet ya.”

Brian stretched out his hand toward his potential savior. Maybe he had found Goober. Their hands connected. Not quite sandpaper, but Brian knew that this man worked with his hands. Today’s overalls were no doubt the usual look for Bert. His kindly face, lined with untold years, framed faded green eyes and a sharp nose.

“Brian. Brian Davies.” He thought a moment, wondering whether he should follow Bert. “I am hungry.”

Bert gave another quick wink and pointed to the counter just before he scrambled outside with his bucket and box and attacked the floundering welcome sign. “This just won’t do,” Brian heard him say as the door closed behind Bert.

“Well, Brian Davies, I’m Betty.” The round woman’s face beamed as she welcomed her new customer. She picked up a menu and placed it on the counter in front of him.

Brian picked up the menu as he slid onto the nearest stool. “The Betty?” Brian pointed to the name on the menu with a smile before realizing that even her evident middle age was probably not old enough to be the establishment’s namesake, given the apparent era of the place and the sign outside.

“One and the same.” Betty smiled as she tilted her head a bit to the left and placed her hands on her hips.

Brian did his best to hide his surprise but knew he had failed. But Betty was gracious and didn’t show that she had noticed.

“Cup of coffee to start?” Betty whisked the Curtis pot off the warmer while grabbing a thick white mug that fit the Fifties or Sixties theme. It was effortless, born of thousands of cups poured.

“No, thanks. But a Coke would be great.”

Betty nodded as her smile grew to show white teeth that had missed an opportunity for braces as a kid. She returned the cup and pot with the same effortless motion with which she had retrieved them. She grabbed a glass resembling a classic Coke glass with a narrow bottom and wide top. Flipping back a stainless-steel hatch in the back counter, she reached in and pulled out a grey metal scoop teeming with ice and transferred the cubes to the glass. Next, she put the glass under a thin metal tube and gave two quick pumps to the adjoining knob. A dark brown goo squirted into the glass. She moved to a handle and pulled. Soda water flowed into the waiting glass. After a quick stir with a spoon, the newly minted Coke sat on the counter before Brian, eager to quench his thirst.

“Cool.” One side of Brian’s mouth curled up as he unconsciously shook his head. He had never actually seen a working soda fountain before — just on television. He opened the menu and began to search for something to fill his stomach. In the meantime, Betty whisked the coffee pot from its heating post to refill the cup of the creature at the end of the counter.

After a moment, Brian looked up from the menu. Betty was still at the other end of the counter, so he looked around again. Bert was busily sponging the windows with a soapy brew. It struck him as odd that Bert was in such a rush to clean the windows because it was clear they did not see the need to do so very often. *Couldn’t he pump the gas first?*

“What’ll it be?” Betty startled him.

“Tuna sandwich on wheat, please.” He looked at the menu again. “And some coleslaw.”

Betty frowned for the first time since he met her. “Sure you don’t want a tuna melt, honey? It takes a bit longer, but Benny makes a real nice one. Maybe with some fries?”

“You know best.” He placed the menu back into its frame behind a chrome napkin holder, salt and pepper shakers, a glass sugar dispenser, and a bottle of ketchup. He was beyond caring how long it would take. It didn’t seem like Bert would be moving on to pumping gas anytime soon.

Betty turned, put Brian’s request on the order wheel, and spun it toward the kitchen. “Order up, Benny.”

Presumably, Benny was the black man who quickly appeared to examine his assignment. He looked like he had just stepped off the cover of an old box of Cream of Wheat. With a broad grin that displayed tobacco-stained teeth, he disappeared back into the kitchen just as swiftly.

Betty circled back to her new customer and launched into an enthusiastic interrogation. "Where ya' from?... Where ya' headed?... What kind of work do ya' do?" It was the usual banal questions of new acquaintances and elicited equally bland responses. Still, Brian could not help but notice that Betty seemed to hang on to his every word as if what he had to say was new, exciting, and different. Her curiosity for even the smallest detail intrigued him. It was as if she had just come to the United States from some remote island that did not receive news or know of the advancements here in the United States. Her eyes were wide open as she learned about this exciting and wonderful new world. *Mental note: never live in a town this small.*

Betty kept the patter going until the plate hit the metal of the pass-through to the kitchen. Her face fell while letting out a deep sigh as if the sandwich had rudely interrupted her banter with what she apparently believed was this charming young man. As she retrieved the tuna melt and fries and placed them in front of Brian, she leaned forward and opened her mouth, another question gurgling in her throat. After a moment, she leaned back and simply smiled.

"You enjoy that, honey. And don't be shy about asking for anything else!"

Brian dove into the tuna melt, and after many bites, he placed the remnants of his sandwich back on his plate and wiped his hands on his napkin. The meal so far was more than good. It tasted like homemade. He grabbed a fry and tasted perfection. He closed his eyes, focusing all his senses on the flavor and texture in his mouth.

As his eyes reopened, he noticed the girl at the Jukebox still staring into the abyss of the song list as if waiting for divine direction from within. He swung his body on the stool toward her and tried his hand at conversation.

"Why don't you play a song?"

Her hands remained on the Jukebox as she turned her upper body toward him, looking over her right shoulder as her head tilted slightly. Her attractive face slightly blushed as her long auburn hair cascaded around it, falling to her white cotton blouse, while short bangs decorated her forehead. "Costs a nickel."

A nickel? Is there anything that still costs a nickel? Brian reached into his pocket to retrieve some change and found a couple bearing Thomas Jefferson's likeness. "Here you go."

She stepped toward his outstretched palm. Her hand lingered for a moment, soft and cool. She gave him a smile with her full lips and her bright blue eyes as long, slender fingers retrieved the fare. "Very kind of you, sir." She curtsied. "Any requests?"

“Don’t mention it. Play whatever you like.” Brian returned the smile as she retreated to the music machine. He watched her every move as another French fry found its way into his mouth. He could not keep a subdued chuckle from escaping when he noticed the short white socks protruding from the top of black and white saddle shoes. *She must work here.*

The bobby-sox beauty fed both nickels to the waiting Jukebox and pushed an assortment of ivory buttons. Brian watched in amazement as a silver arm moved within the glass enclosure, retrieved a licorice-colored disc, and placed it on a turntable. He had only seen “45s” once before on a trip to Cleveland, where he spent some spare time at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Another arm dropped a needle onto the disc, and soon Bill Haley was rockin’ around the clock. Not exactly what he expected her to pick. Was she playing it for his benefit? The road was a harsh life, but he hoped he didn’t look that old. That song was already an “oldie” the first time he heard it.

Brian watched her auburn hair float as she danced toward the Norman Rockwell boy, who sat nervously looking up at her. He was younger, maybe by four or five years. His letterman sweater looked nothing like the over-amped letterman jackets that kids wore where Brian lived. But he had the same retro sneakers that were so popular again. Brian even had his own pair of Jack Purcells that Cindy told him to buy to look more “with it.” He looked closer. P.F. Flyers. I guess all the old brands are making a comeback. The lad completed his look with Levi’s 501s and a white T-shirt. Practical. Basic. Brian himself had recently bought a pair of 501s in rebellion to the denim market that featured pre-faded and torn designer jeans for over \$200, sometimes well over.

The young girl glided into the other side of the booth from the Rockwell boy and stretched her hands across the table. She tilted her head slightly downward and looked up at the boy through long eyelashes. A light nibble on her lip completed the flirt and the victory. The boy reached across and placed his hands on hers, and they became lost in a mutual gaze. Brian caught sight of the old man at the counter, who also watched the events unfold, turned back toward the counter, and shook his head.

Looking past the hormone-charged table, Brian could see that Bert had finished the big window on his side of the diner, letting him peer across the street. *Well, now one of the windows in the town is clean.* He looked for the handyman, expecting that he would be starting on the other main window. His lips curled down below a furrowed brow as he spied Bert working on the front steps. More delay. Meanwhile, Chuck Berry followed Bill Haley and the Comets as the Jukebox continued to rock.

Brian rotated back to the counter and absent-mindedly opened his paper while downing another bite of the best tuna melt he had ever tasted. As he did, he

could sense eyes piercing him. He glanced to his right and caught the couple with the old newspaper and magazine at the nearby booth staring at him. The reading material lay flat on the table as they smiled and waved. Brian managed a smile and raised his head in affirmation. He turned back toward his tuna melt and fries and opened his eyes wide as he formed a silent whistle. *Okay, now that's too friendly.*

"Dan," Brian heard a voice say. He was startled by a hand reaching toward him from the stool on his left. He turned and realized that the male half of the overly friendly couple had joined him at the counter. He looked back to the booth on his right and saw the woman still sitting there, smiling at him.

"Name's Dan."

Brian turned back to the man next to him. "Brian." The obligatory shaking of hands followed.

"You from around here?" Dan seemed friendly, though his eyes constantly shifted toward Brian's newspaper. He adjusted his black horn-rimmed glasses before smoothing down Brylcreamed hair, combed straight back.

Brian swallowed a bit of French fry. He was sure Dan could hear everything he had told Betty but still asked the same questions. "No. Just passing through on business. I'm headed to Memphis right now."

"Memphis. Went there once. Me and Trixie stayed at the Peabody. You know, the ducks and all." Dan gestured toward the newspaper, which seemed to hold some strange power over his attention span. "What's the news today?"

"Not very much to report. It seems like it's always the same stuff if you ask me. Besides, I only care about the sports page. I watched two hours of Sports Center last night, so there's not much new to read there either."

Dan continued to pepper Brian with small talk, all entirely annoying and awkward because he spent the entire time admiring the newspaper. A small drop of sweat ambled down his temple toward his jawline while Nixon-like beads appeared on his upper lip. His high-pitched voice had a grating twang that amplified the irritation. It finally dawned on Brian that if he gave him the newspaper, perhaps he would go back to the booth and let him finish his food in peace.

"Hey, I'm not really going to read this. Do you want it?" Brian pushed the paper toward Dan, hopeful for a respite.

Dan looked like he had won the Lotto. "Me and Trixie like to follow what's going on. You know, stuck in a small town and all. It seems like time just stands still here." Dan offered a nervous laugh as he glanced over his shoulder at the

gray relic at the end of the counter. He turned back to his benefactor of new reading material as he edged off the stool. "Enjoy your meal... uh...."

"Brian." Brian smiled and winked, then turned toward his food. *Go back to your table. Please go back to your table.*

"Brian. Well, thanks, Brian!" He retreated awkwardly and scrambled back to his table, where he and Trixie devoured the new source of the world outside of Buttonwood like dogs that had missed their last two feedings.

Brian caught Betty looking at him as she returned from dropping off some pie for Dan and Trixie. She smiled sweetly and shrugged her shoulders as she poured the old man another cup of coffee.

"Where's Walter?" Betty's voice showed concern, not curiosity.

Brian looked up from what little remained of his meal long enough to see each of the diner's patrons looking about with concern etched on their faces. It seemed evident that they were not waiting for one of the usual patrons to show up for his daily repast. Walter was supposed to be there. He was missing.

"Ain't back here," Benny called out from the kitchen. "Haven't seen him since last time when...." His voice trailed off as Betty's eyes grew moist. Her lower lip quivered.

She hurried toward the restrooms and knocked on the men's room door. Before anyone could respond, she rapped again. "Walter? Walter? Are you in there?" With a glance back at the gray relic at the counter, who briefly nodded, she entered. As she exited, the moisture in her eyes crawled down her cheeks.

"He's been left outside!"

The words barely escaped her lips before the Rockwell boy jumped from his seat. Despite her finest efforts, the disapproving pout of his older paramour lacked the magical power to restrain him from continuing to the door.

As Rockwell continued out the door, he almost shouted, "Bert, we can't find Walter. We think he got left outside!"

Brian could see through the now entirely transparent windows a dance of points, gestures, and arm movements. Quickly, the duo split, disappearing around opposite sides of the building.

"Left outside?" Brian was trying to make sense of this local colloquialism. "Is he homeless?"

Betty's face expressed the visage of a child caught borrowing a piece of candy from the local store. Trying to compose herself, she uttered, "He... uh... he...."

“Yesss. Homelesssss.” The old man at the end of the counter finally spoke with a disquieting hiss, although with his chin buried in his chest, he appeared to be talking to his coffee. Otherwise, he remained motionless, his grey monotone appearance making him look like a stone gargoyle standing watch over the diner from his perch on the counter stool.

Brian watched as Betty managed an awkward nod and then turned to survey the others. The jilted damsel continued to work on her impressive pouting skills as she sat alone in her booth. Benny emerged from his lair to comfort Betty, now breathing in a staccato fashion punctuated with odd peeps. Dan and Trixie stopped pouring over their newspaper treasure and focused outside. Dan looked at Trixie for approval and, receiving a nod in return, rushed toward the door and followed Bert’s path. Brian’s eyes followed him until he passed from the view framed by the window. He swiveled on his stool, turning back toward Betty and Benny.

“Is there something I can do?” As he said it, Brian realized he had no idea what he could do since he would not know Walter if he was sitting next to him.

Betty briefly composed herself, struggling to curl the corners of her mouth. She quietly patted his hand as she looked out the window. “Oh, he’ll be okay. You go ahead and enjoy your sandwich.” Brian looked down at the four French fries on his otherwise empty plate.

“Be okay.” The gray-looking gargoyle was now getting downright chatty with his coffee.

As Brian turned to engage the ashen relic, the door burst open. Bert, Dan, and Rockwell helped a man into the diner. Indeed, he looked like he had been outside. But it wasn’t like the homeless folks Brian would see around the train station. They were dirty, their hair matted and oily, their faces rugged from exposure but not raw, and their clothes tattered from daily wear that saw no end. Walter did not look like those lost souls. He looked like he had been left outside like a scarecrow in a field. His plaid shirt and jeans were faded, with small holes that looked like birds had picked at them in defiance to anyone who might place a scarecrow in their domain. His hair was not oily but dry as straw, tousled and meandering. His skin, red, chapped, and peeling, appeared like a man who had just crossed the Gobi on foot. His blistered lips shown cracked and fissured.

The café’s patrons rushed over toward Walter as Bert eased him into the booth in the far corner. Even the pouting damsel joined the group, her self-absorption replaced by a look of horror as she held her face in her milky-white hands. Betty hurried to the back counter and retrieved a glass of water and a towel. “Darla, we need some bandages and first aid cream or lotion or something.” The chanteuse had a name.

“Well, I don’t have any!” She looked helpless.

“Find something.” Betty’s tone was sufficient. She didn’t need to include the obvious, “you idiot.” No one expected Darla to be carrying a first aid kit. Betty pushed past her and back to Walter, her focus entirely on the man who had remained outside.

“General Ssstore,” the gray man at the counter hissed.

Brian noticed for the first time that the gargoyle had not left his perch and was still engrossed in conversation with his cup of Joe. Brian’s mouth parted as he started to inquire what he meant, but a soft hand gripped his arm and jolted him off his stool. Brian could see tears cascading from Darla’s eyes as she continued to pull him out the door and toward the street. Looking up, he caught sight of the “General Store” sign over the entryway of the dilapidated structure across the road, and he understood.

He moved quickly. Long strides drew him even and then past his guide. Suddenly, Darla stopped short as he reached the street. Tears continued to flow, her teeth firmly biting down on her lower lip. He grasped her hand. His eyes called her to join him, but she withdrew.

“I... can’t... go there,” she stammered. “Please!” She pointed towards the General Store.

Brian dashed across the street without looking, not that he needed to. There had not been a single vehicle pass since he arrived. He bounded onto the wooden deck. The wood creaked and cracked in complaint but held long enough for Brian to reach the door.

He grasped the knob. It would not turn.

He knocked and peered inside. *I’m an idiot. There’s no one inside.* He looked back at Darla. She remained at the far edge of the street. She hopped about as if her bladder were full. But she came no closer.

He looked toward the back of the decaying structure. No, checking for a back door would be a fruitless exercise. He eyed the panes of glass on the front door. The glass shattered in response to an abrupt introduction to his right elbow. He reached in and unlocked the door.

This isn’t a general store. It’s an antique store! Brian grabbed a box from next to the counter. His eyes scanned the dust-covered shelves of what once served as the central supply source for the needs of the locals.

He moved swiftly down the aisles. His right hand shoveled anything he thought might be helpful into the awaiting box — bandages, lotions, emollients of any kind. Anything with a red cross on it, even though the faded and peeled

labels made it difficult to discern actual contents. *This isn't going to help. All of this stuff has gone bad for sure.*

He bolted out the door and headed back. The wood deck no longer complained. It quit. Brian's right foot plunged through the decking. A sharp pain cried out from his ankle as he hurtled forward. The box flew from his hands, its contents spilling into the street. Hands and elbows met the ground hard, bracing his fall but not sufficiently to keep his chin from finding asphalt.

The world slowed as he looked back at his ankle and saw the sock slowly darken to a deep red around the area where a piece of the deck had pierced cotton. He studied the curious design created by the lost contents of the box, entropy at work in its simplest form. His eyes closed as breath returned to his lungs, the deep intake slowly restoring cognizance of pain beyond the pierced ankle that, like a leaky fountain pen, continued to darken his sock. His eyes gradually opened to survey the situation.

"I could use a little help," Brian cried. He could not believe that Darla still stood on the other side of the street, her hands covering her mouth as she continued to sob. She started forward but stopped as if some invisible chain held her fast.

Slowly, Brian gathered himself and tested his ankle. A jolt of pain shot up his leg, but he could move on it if he had to. Balancing on one good leg, he grabbed the box and began salvaging the remainder of its former contents from the street. No wonder most companies use plastic these days. He occasionally glared at the worthless girl thirty feet away, with little effect other than more tears. Having picked up what he could, he hobbled and hopped his way across the street.

"I am so sorry!" Suddenly, Darla was Florence Nightingale, checking his chin, hands, elbows, and ankle in seconds. She started a search of the box, the contents of which bore labels and writing that somehow seemed more readable and less faded than they had been in the store.

Brian blinked twice. *It must have been the dinginess of the store.* "Let it be. Let's get the stuff inside first."

Darla reached around him and put his arm over her shoulders. She looked up into his eyes and locked there as if silently begging forgiveness while she helped him back to the diner. As they reached the porch, Benny and Betty flung open the door and rushed toward them.

"Here, take this." Brian extended his arms toward Betty, handing her the box. "I'm okay."

Betty nodded and stood for a moment as her head swiveled between this Good Samaritan and Walter, whom Brian could see through the diner window.

She nodded again, grabbed the box, and quickly disappeared into the diner. Benny and Darla helped Brian back inside and gingerly lowered him into the nearest booth.

“You wait here.” Darla had a penchant for stating the obvious. It wasn’t as if Brian was in any mood to get up again.

She retreated toward the group gathered around Walter. Brian examined his left elbow, now home for a sampling of dirt and gravel from the street in front of the general store. As he did, a small drop of red appeared on the table before him, followed by another. A touch of his chin revealed a warm, gooey substance. Retracting his hand, he looked at more blood on his finger. *Shit. I’m going to look like crap at the presentation tomorrow.*

“Let me see that.” Darla stood over him with towels, bandages, and a brown bottle in hand.

Brian looked up into her eyes, quickly drawn to the piercing blue that stood out from the redness caused by her earlier tears. She dabbed at his chin with a wet towel in her right hand while her left hand held his cheek. Her skin was soft and warm as she gently moved her thumb across his angular face. She moved closer, alternating her gaze between his eyes and his chin. Brian smelled lilacs.

“It’s not bad. Really,” Darla almost purred. “This is gonna sting.” She applied something from the brown bottle to his chin. She wasn’t kidding. Brian instinctively jolted his head back. She paused before slowly moving to continue her task while her patient gradually relented. After the cleansing, Brian’s nurse placed a medium bandage on his chin. She cupped his face with both hands and inspected her handiwork while biting lightly on her left lower lip. The corners of her mouth turned upward as she looked back into his eyes. Brian inhaled a deep breath of lilac.

“Let me see the rest.” Darla quickly went to work on his elbows and hands, cleaning away the embedded gravel and dirt inhabitants. She kept smiling at him, softly caressing his arm as she worked, never looking back at the last booth where a group tended to Walter. All except for Rockwell, who stood by the last booth with arms crossed, eyeing Brian’s nurse as the muscles in his jaw twitched in response to clenched teeth.

Darla knelt on the linoleum floor beside the booth, her hand gliding down Brian’s calf to his ankle. He hardly noticed as she gingerly withdrew the large splinter protruding from his ankle. Quietly, tenderly, she carefully removed his shoe and then sock as she continued her expert care of her more than willing patient. As she leaned forward, Brian could not help but notice the opening in the “v” of her white cotton blouse that revealed her bra underneath, the delicate lace moving up and down with her milk-white breast to the cadence of each breath.

She glanced up, and Brian quickly shifted his eyes toward hers, hoping she had not noticed. She looked down, and then her gaze again met his. A sly smile crept across her face, followed by the seemingly habitual nibble of her lip, before returning to his wound. She made no effort to adjust her blouse. *My God, she is beautiful.*

After bandaging the ankle, Darla gently placed his sock back on, her hand lingering on his leg just above the sock line. She then completed the process by placing her warm, soft lips at each injury location, finishing with his chin.

“There. All better.” She slid into the booth beside him and placed her hand on his thigh. He quickly sensed a warm, tingling sensation nearby.

Rockwell steamed in the corner.

Brian’s attention focused so entirely on his attending nurse that he did not notice Bert had left the diner. The result was surprise when Bert walked back in, wiping his hands with a faded red cloth.

“Got the pump. I was able to getcha a couple of gallons. That should get you to the next fillin’ station.” Bert nodded with satisfaction.

“Thanks, Bert. I can’t begin to tell you how much I appreciate your getting that for me. How much do I owe you?” Brian was polite and tried not to show his disappointment. On the one hand, he needed to get back on the road — and the colorless life he knew. On the other hand were the lilacs floating on crystal blue Aegean pools framed in auburn.

“No need. Sure appreciate your helpin’ out with Walter.”

Brian had forgotten about Walter, absorbed as he was with his Athena. He looked toward the end of the diner, where he saw a man covered with a blanket, drinking water and sipping soup. His face, covered with some sort of cream, made him look like a clown preparing for a show under the Big Top. While he appeared uncomfortable, he no longer looked like a long-abandoned scarecrow.

“Glad I could help.” *It certainly worked out well for me.* His eyes reverted to absorbing the ethereal beauty of his attending nurse until he heard Betty say, “How about some dessert, Mr. Davies?”

Brian looked at his original greeter. The brightness on Betty’s face grew dim as the setting sun flowed through the spotless windows. She was busy tidying the counter area as she spoke. He glanced outside and realized that there would not be light much longer. Memphis was still a long way away. The spell of Darla’s allure began to fade with the realization of what still lay ahead. *Damn. No! Double damn.* “No thanks, Betty. I should be getting on. It’s a long way to Memphis, and I have an early meeting in the morning.”

“Nonsense. There’s always room for pie,” Betty cajoled.

“Betty makes the best cherry pie anywhere,” Darla cooed. “You have to try it.” Both seemed bent on keeping him around as if they were not ready to let him go just yet. Brian didn’t necessarily disagree, but he always hated driving long hours at night when the only view was of a centipede of white lights passing on his left.

Before Brian could say “no,” a fresh piece of Betty’s finest cherry pie and a cold glass of milk appeared before him. A mischievous smile flashed across Betty’s face. “You have to try a bite... at least!”

“You’re too kind.” Brian smiled and shook his head. *What a breath of fresh air. No one is like this back home. They’re too busy with whatever else is happening in their lives to slow down and enjoy another person’s company.* He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, quickly popping out the platinum business credit card he always used. He extended it toward his hostess. She looked at it, blinking several times as she pulled her head back.

“What do I owe you?”

“Oh, no bother, honey. You just eat your pie.” Her eyes remained fixed on the card, her head tilting side to side.

“No, no. I insist. You’ve been so very nice to me here.” He again extended the card toward her.

Betty stood frozen for a moment, looking at the object.

“Casssh only.” The gargoyle spoke to his coffee again.

“Oh, yes, we only take cash.” She looked at the gray relic. “Two-fifty.” It was more a question than a statement.

“Seriously?” Brian’s eyebrows craned up his forehead in amazement.

Betty looked back at her guest as she wiped the perspiration from her palms on her apron. She took a deep breath as her head swiveled back toward Brian. “Is that too much? I don’t know what they charge in the big city, you know.”

Brian laughed while he reached into his wallet, pulled out a five-dollar bill, and handed it to her. “No, Betty. That’s not too much. I’d probably pay that much for just the Coke where I live. Keep the change.” With that, he dove into his pie.

Brian’s taste buds rose and applauded. The pie was divine. He turned to Betty to congratulate her on the culinary achievement and watched as Betty glanced back at the gargoyle who stared at her through lids raised to half-mast, his lips pursed in a fine line across his wrinkled stone face. Brian sensed the conveyance of a silent command emanating from the gray creature to the diner’s

proprietor. He seemed in control. Her father, perhaps? But there was no resemblance. The round woman shrugged her shoulders and managed a weak smile as she retreated to the safety of her station behind the counter. Brian glanced out of the corner of his eye at the gargoyle but found him staring into the brown liquid in the cup before him.

Brian began to polish off the last bits of what was undoubtedly the best pie east of the Mississippi. "Rockwell isn't going to be happy with you," he said between mouthfuls as he noticed the young man had walked by several times.

Darla's face scrunched in puzzlement. "Rockwell?"

Brian nodded toward the young man in the letterman sweater. "Your boyfriend. He looks like a Norman Rockwell painting."

Darla laughed in amusement. A light lilt that made her eyes twinkle as she looked at Rockwell. "Oh, you mean like the Saturday Evening Post." She studied the young man as if he were a painting in a gallery. "I guess you're right. He kind of does, doesn't he? But he's not my boyfriend."

Brian pondered his booth-mate. Some things that appeared so obvious seemed to saunter by her unnoticed. But then she appreciated historical rock music and knew about the golden era of a magazine whose most famous artist's last cover hit newsstands in 1963, not counting the 1975 Christmas edition. Maybe her parents or grandparents had a Rockwell art book, like the one Nana, his long-passed grandmother, treasured. She also knew a lot about tending wounds, which the twenty-somethings in Brian's circle of acquaintances would have failed miserably. And she knew, and had mastered, the art of the flirt and seduction.

"Oh, I thought..." Brian stammered.

"No, silly. Kenny's just fun." Her head fell back as she giggled. Suddenly, a cloud of darkness fell over her face. "Jake is my boyfriend."

"Well, then Jake's a lucky guy to have you." As if anyone could contain her, Brian thought. He nodded toward Rockwell. "But you're breaking Kenny's heart."

She again studied Kenny. "He's adorable. But I'd be bad for him." She was matter-of-fact and analytical, like a chemist analyzing a potential reaction between two compounds. "Besides, Jake will kill us when he finds out." Her eyes seemed to lose their luster as her mouth formed a frown. It was an unusual statement, not in what she said but in how she said it. She was entirely serious and deliberate, with the good humor that had been one of her redeeming features wholly drained.

"Jealousy can be ugly," Brian had to agree.

She nodded as she looked deeply into his eyes. She sighed. "You need to go, don't you?" It was almost a whisper, as if she knew but did not want the words to come out.

"Yes. I have to get to Memphis tonight." *But I'd rather stay longer with you.*

Darla looked out the window at an orange sun nearing the edge of the hill to the west. "It's okay. It's time." With that, she eased out of the booth and extended her hand. "C'mon, I'll walk you to your car."

Brian reached up and grasped her hand as he slid out of the booth. He stood on his injured leg and decided he could make the walk without too much pain.

"Betty, thank you for a wonderful meal." His smile was broad and genuine.

"Thank you, honey! You have no idea how nice it's been to have you here." She gushed while stepping around the counter to squeeze the arm opposite Darla. She leaned closer and whispered as she briefly looked at the gargoyle engrossed in his coffee, "You come back when you can!"

He placed his arm around her round frame and gave her a quick hug. "I will if I'm ever back this way. You can bet on it. Make sure you have a piece of that pie waiting!" She blushed as he winked at her.

As he followed Darla out the door, Brian returned waves from Benny in the kitchen and Dan and Trixie as they took a brief break from their reading. Even Walter gave him a nod. He smiled and thought of the coffee place he frequented back home. No one there knew his name, and no one there ever waved goodbye as he left. They were like the gray man at the counter, who simply ignored him.

Darla and Brian stepped outside into the amber of the late afternoon, only to find Bert outside pulling some weeds. How did he get outside again? He decided he missed a lot by staring into blue pools and taking deep breaths of lilac.

"Headin' out?" Bert tipped his hat. "You drive safe, ya hear!"

"Thanks again for helping me, Bert. You take care."

Brian and Darla walked toward the gas station, her arm tucked in his like high school sweethearts. As they reached his Detroit Special, Brian looked over her head at the General Store he had vandalized. Her inexplicable flaw of the day. "Why wouldn't you cross the...."

Darla placed a finger on his lips, stopping their movement. "I'm sorry. You wouldn't understand." Tears welled up in her eyes.

He started to inquire again, but her finger became a whole hand as she shook her head. Brian nodded in acquiescence. She leaned toward him, rising

onto her toes and replacing her hand with soft lips. She lingered for a moment before stepping back with what Brian read as a satisfied smile.

“Can I give you a ride somewhere, Darla?” *Can I stay with you longer?*

A cold wind wandered by. “I can’t.” Her eyes peered into the distance, toward the bend in the road. “Jake is coming.” Her glance then moved wistfully to the diner. “But I’ll be here if you come back, Brian Davies.” She turned back toward Brian and allowed a light, lilting laugh to escape. She teased him with one last bite of her lip and ran off toward the diner, taking the sweet scent of lilac with her. As she passed Bert, Brian saw him quickly pick up his tools and head inside, though a fair amount of weeds still needed pulling.

Brian folded himself into the car and started the engine. GPS responded, turning back on with the power provided by the revived vehicle. Brian laughed aloud. “Well, you get a stay of execution, you worthless piece of crap. This has been an interesting day,” he said to the now-purring Detroit Special.

He pulled the car onto the street and started down the road. He could see Darla’s hand pressed against the window as she followed the car’s passing from her booth. Rockwell had resumed his seat across from her.

As Brian headed down the road, an old beat-up red pickup truck passed in the opposite direction. Its driver looked unpleasant, with a stern look on a scruffy face topped with a trucker-style cap. He looked a little younger than Brian, maybe thirty. As Brian reached the bend in the road, he saw the truck pulling to a stop in front of Betty’s Diner. *It must be Jake.*

* * *

“Pump number three, and I’ll take some of that gum, too.” Brian handed the gas station clerk a bottle of water as he pointed across the counter with his credit card.

“Sure thing. Where ya headed, mister?” The clerk passed him the gum and accepted the credit card in return.

“Memphis. I have to tell you, though, I would have gotten stuck a long way back if some nice folks at Betty’s in Buttonwood hadn’t helped me out.”

The clerk looked quizzically at him, raising a single eyebrow. “Buttonwood?”

Brian hated it when he went into a gasoline station and the attendant had no idea where things were. He could remember his redneck father ranting, “Back

in my day, those people at gas stations filled your car with gas, cleaned your windows, checked your oil, and knew every direction to any place you could fire at 'em. Now, they hire snot-nosed kids who sit in a booth and don't do anything but act like you should be grateful they haven't taken all of your money for the privilege of letting you fill your tank with their gas."

Brian retrieved his card and receipt, grabbed his gum and water, and returned to his car.

The clerk looked over to the kid mopping the floor of the standard-issue gas station mini-mart. "Did you hear that? The folks in Buttonwood?"

"Yeah. Crazy. Isn't that where some jealous nutcase wiped out a bunch of folks in the diner back in '59? Everyone around here has heard that story." The kid stopped mopping as he watched Brian walk to his car.

"Uh-huh. The whole town folded up and died right then and there. Anyways, that's what my daddy says."

The two employees stood and looked at each other. Then they turned to watch the Detroit Special head toward Memphis.

The kid went back to his mopping and shook his head. "What a goof."

"Uh-huh. But you know what? He's not the first guy I've heard say that."