

The Esso Roadhouse

by John Riley

The night we crossed the Madres my father stuffed his Stetson full of cash. "Gotta be smart, son, these people are poor and desperate." He knew most of them had guns, an old truck or two, and if they knew we had money there was nothing they wouldn't do to rob us. When I pointed out his hat would be the first place they looked he said his hat was big enough.

He'd bought four bottles of mescal in Los Mochis because it'd be a shame to go home with nothing. He was drunk by Mazatlan and I had to drive his Cadillac over the mountains to Durango. There was no law in Mexico to stop me from driving at fourteen. At least that's what he said.

I drove in the night. It was hard work staying in my lane. I think it was Highway 40. You can look it up. The road's probably changed by now. That night it was a snake withering through some scrubby brown hills.

The old man lived alone, in Dallas, before that San Antonio. He lived pretty high on the hog, as he put it, from selling Ford Rangers to "goat ropers with no credit and weak minds." During the school year I lived with my mom a thousand miles away. I spent at least half the summer with him.

On that trip he was forty-three, looked sixty, and would die in three years, twisted on a bed in Juarez, his life leaking out of his asshole, begging a quack for laetrile.

Late the next day we got back on the road. We hadn't gone far before he ran out of mescal. There was no place to buy a bottle. We finally found this sad little roadhouse in an old gas station that had been halfway converted. You could still make out the word Esso

under the whitewash on the outside wall. I don't think they'd bothered to name the place. I've thought of it since as the Esso Roadhouse.

The pine bar was laid out where the oil pit and tire changer had been. Behind it stood a bored middle-aged man, a little fat. A couple of other guys about his age sat along the bar at one end, and at the other end a skinny, younger guy sat by himself. The younger guy held half a cue stick. There wasn't a pool table.

The old man, he spoke a little of what he called "gringo Mexican," asked the barkeep to sell him a bottle of mescal, tequila, or anything else. The barkeep stared right past him, like he saw something on his shoulder that shouldn't be there, and said in fairly good English that he didn't have a bottle to sell him.

That didn't go down too well with the old man. He started yelling the sort of stuff he always yelled when he was drunk and someone tried to stop him from getting what he wanted. He had come to their pitiful country to spend good American dollars, and goddammit if he wanted to buy some of their cheap ass booze they should be happy . . . I'd long before learned how to not listen to him, drunk or sober. I concentrated on slipping closer to the door.

The skinny guy with the sawed off pool cue took a run at the old man. I'm sure it caught him by surprise when his stick was jerked from his hand on the down swing and his face was slammed against the floor. Fortunately, the concrete had been covered over with some type of boards.

I grabbed the old man's shoulders and tugged and cursed until he let the man go. I don't know why one of the other men didn't find a gun or pick up the cue and beat the old man in the head. He could have killed their friend. Instead, they set a bottle of tequila on the bar. That was the old man's biggest problem. He always got what he

wanted. He tossed about four times what the tequila was worth on the counter and headed for the door.

As we were walking out, the old man winked at me. His black eyes looked like snails wriggling in lukewarm grease. I felt like mercury falling.

Why? I don't know. Some knowledge is incapable of existing forever. I'd seen him win fights before. He was strong and still in good enough health to usually come out on top.

We were back to Dallas by next morning. He passed out ten minutes after walking in the door. I took a nap. When I woke up I cleaned out his wallet and his hat, drove his Caddie to the bus station, and bought a ticket home.

