

Me and Frisco on the Road

by Jason Neubauer

"Ain't no coon. 'At's a dog."

"Betcher wrong. That's a raccoon ever I seen one."

"Look at his head! You kin see his brains!"

"I betcha it was hit more'n once. Got hit by at least two different trucks, I bet. Take a look at how small he is, at's gotta be a coon."

"Yer crazy Billy. 'At's a dog all right. Look at it's tail!"

It was a dog.

It was my dog.

It was Frisco.

I don't think I minded so much watching the trucks hit him, one breaking his spine with a decisive snap, and the other finishing the job by splitting his skull. I don't think I minded watching as much as I did watching those two boys poking around at his carcass with sticks in order to satisfy their morbid curiosity. Perhaps it's a matter of remembering when I was fascinated with death as a child and being somehow unsettled at their fascination. Perhaps I just didn't want them disturbing him. I was out in the countryside though, where a boy's curiosity more commonly wandered into nature and death.

"You should leave him," I warned.

"He your's mister? He your dog?"

"Was."

"Told ya, Billy. It's a D-O-G dog."

"Where do you boys live?"

They lived in Stringtown. Small place. Poor people. Type of town so small it says "welcome" on both sides of the sign, and neither side really means it. It would have fit nicely around me. Anonymity was my religion in those days, and a drifter finds that the smaller towns usually are easier to keep secret later on. You tell people you're from Chicago or New York and they all have cousins from this or that place and begin asking questions. Tell someone you came from Stringtown, Oklahoma and they'll ask you where in the hell it is.

"Any place in town to get a new dog?"

"Harlan Graves got a dog just birthed a new litter a few months back. He's up th' hill."

"Show me. And stop pokin' at my old dog."

The stick Billy had been using clacked onto the pavement and we walked away from the highway. There wasn't much to the town, as I said. A small store with a gas pump and a place that sold used tires. We passed a nice big graveyard on the way.

"I ain't goin' all the way up to Graves' place. I'll show you the way though," said Billy. He pointed to a clapboard house on a hill with a shed in the back. I had to have a dog. Someone once said that a dog is the only creature capable of loving you more than you love yourself. I think they make better company than most people and

I've never had a disagreement with one. I travel a lot and find that a dog doesn't mind travel and won't argue with me when I decide to stop somewhere for a while.

By the time I reached the front door I noticed the bright human blood and made haste wiping it on my pant legs before knocking. I know from experience that small town people spook easily and I wanted to make this as quick as possible. Harlan, at least I presumed him to be, answered the door and I guessed he was about twenty-eight.

"Help you?"

"Billy told me you got a dog that just had a litter. I'm in need of a new dog."

"Yeah. Factually, I do. You say Billy told you?"

"Yessir."

"Well, lemme letcha take a look. Where you say you from?"

"Didn't. I'm coming through from McAlister on my way south. My dog was hit out on 69 just an hour ago."

"Sorry to hear."

Out by the shed four beagles sat in a small pen. They looked healthy enough and one of them walked up to me almost right away.

"How much for this one?"

"Oh, I can let 'im go for fifteen. He ain't much for huntin."

The dog's big, wet eyes started back into mine as I held his head up with my hands. His tail wagged immediately. Harlan's wife, I think it

was his wife, came out the door and stood on the gravel looking at me and the dog.

"You git back in there."

She started at the sound of his voice.

"They say you shouldn't hit a woman," he said to me, "but I tell ya, sometimes you got to earn the title of woman."

"You say fifteen?"

"Yeah, that should do."

I didn't want to get involved. I'm no one's savior lord knows. I'm not a hero of any sort at all, and I don't believe in getting involved. I've seen a lot worse and done worse and I pretty much keep to myself. Harlan's hands were large and rough and I could tell she'd felt them upon her recently. Any animal gets skittish like that in the first few minutes after harm has been inflicted.

I peeled three Lincolns off of the bankroll I had hidden in my boot and handed it over. The new Frisco bounded out through the makeshift gate when Harlan opened it and came straight to me. I don't think Harlan really had any idea what was happening. He seemed a little slow and didn't catch on too quickly, and of course when that flicker of realization showed itself in his eyes it was too late. Even little Billy had caught on quicker and started getting scared before I began.

The woman stood at the door of the house but it didn't matter because nobody was around to hear if she decided to be loud about it. The rest of dogs all ran off on their own into the countryside, but Frisco stayed with me as I neared the house and made my way in. "What's your name, ma'am?"

"Who...who are you? What do you want?"

I was surprised by how calm she was, "Just wanted a new dog, that's all."

"Have we met before?"

"No. No, I don't believe we have."

"I got the strangest sensation when you were out there with my husband that I know'd you before."

I didn't like it when strange women flirted with me. I wasn't used to it and it made me nervous. More so than was usual. Penny didn't appreciate it either and she told me so whenever it happened. By the time I got back outside to take my fifteen dollars back from Harlan, his wife wasn't bothering me anymore. He didn't seem to mind. Frisco followed me out along the same path I'd taken to get there and when we got back out to the highway he eyed the old Frisco and wanted to go sniff at his carcass but like I said before, I didn't want anyone else disturbing him. I lead him to the car and got him inside. A woman came down from the hill and started calling for Billy and I thought better of telling her where he was. It would only have lead to questions. I don't know much about where I came from or even where it is I am trying to go and when people ask me questions about it I get nervous. It isn't that I'm too stupid to know anything about myself. I've met those types before and they bother me. I've got brains. Lots of brains. I'm not bragging, it's just a fact and I know it's the truth because people who don't like me have told me.

I headed north for a while. It was time for a change of scenery.

I bring change with me wherever I go. A lot of people hear

something like that and think positive things. Change is usually equated in an optimist's mind with progress. People are all of two minds. I mean People with a capital "P" meaning every individual on this tenth rate rock, not just people with a lower case "p" meaning a general cross section of a given society. People are of two minds. Optimist minds and pessimist minds, and we all have each of them buried deep inside the little eight pound balls of phlegm we have in our heads that we assign our higher functions to.

Change is equated optimistically. "Change is good," say all those pop psychology books. The thing to remember is that those books are written for an audience who is at bottom. Change for them is from the ground up, invariably. I equate it as a pessimist. I bring it with me wherever I go and sometimes I go to places where change is not accepted.

I ended up in Bixby. There was an old church and a post office. A corner store too. It all seemed very strangely familiar to me and I had the most whimsical sensation that I'd been there before. It was the store that really got me, you never see those anymore. It's all big monolithic buildings now with their own generic brands of everything and seventeen-year-olds making minimum wage trying to get through another six hour shift in order to blow their paychecks on six packs of beer and grass. Corner stores have the staples, fresh meats and bread and maybe a few extras like magazines and after market cassettes of blues music for two dollars. There is more charm than you can fit into a monolithic warehouse though. More importantly, this one had a car wash out back with a vacuum. The car was starting to get that stench that came around after I'd let it go too long without a cleaning. I live out of the car most of the time and the odors that collect there get the best of me after a while.

A few trash bags full of my life for the previous week went into the dumpster after I'd let Frisco pick through some of the morsels of edibles that were left. Inside the store, an older man stood at the

counter and nodded at me when I entered. He was talking to woman I assumed was his wife.

"She have any family?"

"None to speak of, not that anyone knows of. You know her, just sat in that little house by herself with no one around but that damn dog."

"Shame. She was so lonely and to go that way...it's a darn shame."

I bought a newspaper and a sandwich and went back to the car. I'd fond my in, it was just a matter of detective work by then. The obituaries listed only two deaths in Bixby, one was a man named Clark Hetcham and the other was Millicent Harber. She was eighty seven and had lived in Bixby for twenty years with her husband, Harold, who had died a year earlier. Harber was listed in the phone book at 127 Oak.

The place was small but well kept. You could tell an older woman had been living there. All lace and flowers. It would do, though.

I doubled back to the store and entered again.

"Hello again."

"Hello. My name's Harlan Graves. Sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for someone."

"Who'd that be?"

"Relative. My aunt, her name's Millicent. She sent me a letter a few months back saying she was ill and I came out to help take care of her."

The storekeeper's wife looked over at him and then at me.

"Oh my," she said, and covered her mouth.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh my I'm sorry, there's been an accident."

"Accident? What do you mean?"

"You're aunt passed away last week. She fell in her house and wasn't able to get back up."

I feigned a quick look of concern, the look I have come to know well from my travels, and asked if the funeral had already taken place. They told me that it had the previous weekend and there weren't many visitors but it was very peaceful. I asked where she lived and the old man said he'd show me.

It was a nice little place on the inside. It looked bigger from the other side of the windows I'd been staring into a short time earlier. It smelled like me. The kitchen was where she'd died. A small farmer's table in the corner was where she'd hit her head on the way down. She was found, the old man said, on the faded linoleum flowers there next to it. I already had a feeling for how it all happened before he'd said anything. She had gone down easy and she barely made any noise. The linoleum had made cleaning it all up very simple.

He told me that for the time being he guessed that no one would have anything to say about it if I stayed in the house sine I had been planning on it and she hadn't had any other next of kin that anyone knew about.

He asked about the blood on my pants and I told him about Frisco

back in Stringtown and the accident with the two trucks. He said Millicent had a dog of her own that must have run off after the accident. It had taken them a few days to discover that she'd died, he said, and by that time the dog wasn't anywhere to be found. Just the same there was a nice yard where Frisco, the new Frisco that is, could run around in.

"By the way," he said, "I forgot my manners. My name's Mason."

His hand felt strange in mine. It had been a long time since I'd had anyone shake my hand. Women look at me strangely most of the time nowadays and I think it's because sometimes I catch myself whispering to no one. I have an unshaven face and I always smell of whiskey and tobacco. My hat doesn't sit right on my head. My act had won me some favor though and I think perhaps a little pity.

Mason went back to the store after telling me to let him know if there was anything I needed. I told him I didn't know how long I was going to be staying. A few days at least on a solid bed and a room I could stretch out in was a luxury I had forgotten though, and I was looking forward to it.

I used to have a family somewhere.

Sundays were my favorite. I'd wake the children and we'd get into our best and we'd go up the big hill to the church. They'd greet me at the door. There was always talk of the Chamber of Commerce and the bake sale. The adults gathered for more coffee after the fire and brimstone while the children played in the churchyard. We'd have roast beef for dinner and tap our feet on the wood floorboards to the radio afterwards. Later at night the children would talk of ghosts under the bed. I told them I believed them and I did. Penny and I would smile at each other and make love and stay up too late. Something out of Norman Rockwell.

I don't know what happened exactly, but something tells me it's good for me that no one knows me when I go places. The changes started following me when I began living on the road. I've been through cars, I could tell you, so many cars. I don't remember what it feels like to open a piece of mail. I have to keep moving though because the more sedentary I become in a place the more nervous people get. Nerves usually lead to anger, or worse, curiosity.

The bathtub was one of those old fashioned claw footed tubs that you see in old movies. It was comfortable and I let Frisco lay on the floor next to me as I soaked all the dust and road grime off myself. There was still some blood under my fingernails and it took a good deal of scrubbing to get it loose.

In the morning I took another trip to Mason's store for some food.

"Mornin'. How's your first night?"

"Fine thanks. Just need to stock up on a few things. I don't think I'll be staying more than a few days but I'll need some food to last me until then."

"Well, you can get a few things here, but the farmer's market is a good place for fresh produce and things."

"I might try it, thanks."

Mason's wife came in and said hello. I could tell there was something uneasy about her when she was around me. I realize that the nomadic life tends toward paranoia and I know that I have less than a tenacious grip on social grace, but there was something about her that seemed especially odd. Curious would probably be a more apt way of putting it.

"I was just tellin' him about the market. I'm going out there myself

Harlan, you're more'n welcome to follow me if you want."

"I think I will, thanks."

Mason's wife whispered at him to be careful when I was out the door.

It took a good half hour to make it out to the market and I was glad when we finally stopped. The roads that lead us there were mostly gravel and dust and it seemed they didn't really have names, and I always get a little nervous when I'm not sure where I am. Still, there was an iota of quaint comfort in the small gathering of people.

Mason saw someone he recognized. She was pretty. Her hair was auburn and she had narrow eyes and looked around thirty. He introduced us and she was very put off by my appearance, I could tell.

Her name was Jessica and she was his niece.

"You should come tonight for dinner, Jessie," he said, "I have that CD you wanted me to order for you and I know your aunt Mary'd love to see you."

"Maybe," she smiled, "I don't know for sure but I'll try. Hank has a late night at work and I want to be sure and be home when he makes it back but I might make it out your way."

There was a wedding ring on her finger.

I wasn't attracted to her the way a man is attracted to a woman. I had stopped thinking of women sexually a while before. I gave myself to Penny when she and I were married anyway, but I think Jessica caught my attention because of the way she spoke. It reminded me of Penny just a little bit, just enough to make me

notice. I guess I found it a little comforting.

She avoided eye contact with me and was uneasy when I told her it was nice meeting her. That reminded me a little of Penny, too. Toward the end, toward the period of time I can't really remember, she was nervous a lot. It was like the beginning, when we were just starting to learn each other and she was unsure of herself around me, only toward the end it was more like she was unsure of me rather than herself.

The ride home was a little less unsettling since I know I'd be returning to a marked highway. Back at the store Mason told me I was welcome to come over for dinner also, but I wanted to get back to the house and rest for a while. I asked him where he lived in case I changed my mind.

"Oh I'm just on the other end of Oak. Up toward the church. We're number 219."

That would do nicely.

At the house I fed Frisco a few cans of dog food I found in the pantry. The front window looked out onto the intersection at Main and Oak and I waited. I saw Mary and Mason come and turn down toward the church in their truck. The sun was going down and things started getting even quieter in the subtle darkness of the evening.

Her old Pontiac came not too long after that. I went out to meet her at the crossroad and waved her down. She seemed to hesitate a moment before rolling down the window and squinted at me with those narrow eyes out of worried confusion. I could tell she was rolling down the window against her better judgement.

"Hi, Penny."

"Hey there," she said.

"Miss me?"

"Of course I do. How have you been?"

"Missed you. I don't know what happened, but I keep trying to remember."

"Don't try too hard. It'll get you. I've been watching you and I know you don't know what's going on, but it's best you keep moving."

"I want you to come with me though. I've been looking for you and the children."

"We'll be there. We'll be there watching when you find it and we're safe."

We spoke for a few minutes and made our goodbyes again. She showed up every once in a while and it was always a treat when she did. I really did miss her. We met in college. Somewhere. I think I went to college. I don't recall the exact setting but I remember her. She had on a black and white striped shirt and her hair was darker than her natural color. She looked very sophisticated, I remember, and I was really turned on that someone so sophisticated was interested in knowing me. She had lots of boyfriends back then, but I'm the one she married.

Jessica was still nervous when I was done talking to Penny. She asked me if she could go but by then I'd gotten her out of the car and over next to the house. Frisco was barking too, so I asked her to quiet down and stop aggravating the dog. I could tell I was scaring her at that point, so I offered to drive her back home. We got into the car and she gave me directions, which I swear I followed to the

letter, but she was in the game playing mood and we ended up in some field surrounded by trees and high brush. I think she was trying to tempt me into something immoral and I told her as much.

A lesser man may have followed that temptation, but I couldn't. Penny was watching.

I told Jessica I wanted nothing more to do with her and that I'd walk back to the house, thankyouverymuch. I left her there in the field, quiet as a mouse next to her car, and it was far enough out in the brush that she'd have plenty of time to think before anyone found her. It was a long walk back, but I was glad for the fresh air and when I got back Frisco was whining. There was something hungry in his voice and I decided it wouldn't hurt to let him have a little more to eat that night. He was a growing dog and had taken to the meat quite quickly, quicker than his predecessor had in those same walls. The last Frisco was slow to take on, but once an animal gets the flavor in it's mouth it's overtaken with a voracious craving for it.

The bathtub felt really quite wonderful again that night and the cleansing water enveloped me in its warmth. Frisco snuck up and licked my fingers as my arm hung out the side of the tub and I kept my eyes closed, smiling quietly.

I slept like a stone in my bed.

The next morning there was a knock at the door and Mason asked me where I said I'd come from again. I told him I came from Kentucky and he asked me if I'd seen Jessica, which of course I answered with an adamant "no."

"She called last night and said she was coming over. Never showed up. Her husband's worried, too. If you happen to see her, lemme know, will ya?"

"Course I will," there was suspicion in his voice and I knew it well enough to know it was the kind that grows quickly. He looked in the house behind me and nodded before turning to leave, and I knew that it was time for me to go.

With the house and the store and Bixby safely behind me and Frisco, I rolled down the window and let the breeze clear the smell of Mason's aftershave out of his truck. Frisco stuck his head out the window. Penny smiled at me from the passenger seat and we held hands as the radio played to oldies. I've always liked oldies radio and it's convenient that no matter where you go it's usually pretty easy to find a station that plays them.

"Remember this song?"

"I sure do. And there really is something in the way you move me."

"We were nineteen. Getting high in my bedroom. It was raining."

Don't wanna leave her now...

"That's right. You said you loved me for the first time that morning."

You know I believe her now...

"I still love you."

"I know it. I'll always love you. And I'll always be here watching, you can count on it."

You're asking me, will my love grow?

"I don't knooooowww...I don't know," I sang.

I don't think Mary liked my singing too much.

After Penny was gone again she seemed to wince a lot when I sang along with the radio. I chuckled and asked if my singing was all that bad and she gave me a funny look. She started making Frisco jumpy though so I turned the radio off and asked her to calm down. Once she did, I told her I'd let her out and found a nice scenic area off of country road with a view she could enjoy.

Frisco was getting hungry again anyway.

The scenery was unyielding and it seemed I passed the same barn over and over every five miles. Lots of grass and the occasional silo. Cows. I really don't like the countryside very much, but there is something about its smallness, its in-the-middle-of-nowhere safety that keeps me traveling in it. I feel a little safer enveloped in the monotony of cornfields. Out there people keep to themselves for the most part until you become an interloper in their personal affairs. When I was a kid my family was very private like that. We didn't talk to our neighbors much and when we did it was unsettling for us, especially me.

I let a few hours pass after turning west and found myself in Rogers, Arkansas when the sun was going down. It seemed an evenly spaced town in between the other civilizations that popped up on the rural highway. The bathtub at the Rogers Super 8 wasn't nearly as relaxing as the one at the house in Bixby. It was shallow and plastic and the bottom of it was abrasive. I also didn't like the feeling of not knowing how many people had been in it before me and how dirty it was. When I got out, Frisco whined and I took him out on a leash to the grassy area between the motel and the road. An unattractive woman in her thirties was at the pool and eyed me suspiciously, and in all fairness I probably did cut a very strange figure.

Back in the room I was hungry and I called a pizza place that was on a brochure by the phone. Frisco growled at the girl who delivered it,

and so I gave her a nice tip and sat on the bed watching the television. Television was a novelty to me anymore. Something I was no longer used to and didn't miss, but I still found it curiously occupying. There was an old movie with Elvis Presley in it on one of the channels and Frisco and I watched it for a little while.

There was a restaurant next to the hotel with a dingy bar in it. Frisco had fallen asleep and I felt like a rare drink, so I ordered a Havana sidecar and sat quietly with a pack of Winstons while a few other people came in and out to eat. It was sickening, really. Watching all of them sit at dirty laminate tables eating assorted greasy spoon fare while laughing insipidly at their conversations. Those who didn't talk to each other just sat and stared off to the side. They'd been together too long to find each other interesting anymore.

I felt sad for them, and I wanted to help them.

I wanted them to know that love such as the one I had existed. They seemed to forget it. They sat and yelled at their children out of annoyance or bickered with their spouses. The bartender's name was Kenny and he asked me who I was and where I was headed.

"Jessie Mason. Headed to St. Louis for my aunt Mary's funeral."

"Ah. Sorry to hear it."

I was nervous. I don't like it when people I don't know ask me about myself. I don't really like talking about myself with people I know either, much less anonymous characters in little out-of-the-way hotel bars.

"Nah. She was ready to go. It's late I should settle my tab."

I paid and Kenny didn't say anything else. He seemed lonely and

part of me wanted to feel sorry for him, but I just didn't have it in me. On the walk back to the room there was an old Buick with a couple inside it and they were arguing with each other about something, so I stared for a while until the man looked back and stuck his head out of the window of the car.

"Mind your own goddamn business."

I didn't need trouble.

The room was cool and dark when I got back and it smelled of cigarettes. Frisco was on the floor next to the bed sleeping and gave out an occasional sigh, which was comforting to me in a way. I slept well that night, better than I had in a while, and I think it had something to do with the rum. I don't drink often enough, I'm told.

When I awoke it was early, around five, and a cigarette helped my head stop hurting. I went back over to the restaurant and Kenny was there. I sat at the counter and ordered an omelet. The couple who had been fighting the night before were there too, and they sat next to me.

"Morning, Jessie."

"Hi Kenny."

"Morning," said the man who had yelled at me the night before. The woman sat by him and smiled at me politely.

"How's your night, Jessie?"

"Oh, just fine Kenny, thanks," I was feeling rather amicable this morning which was a detour out of character for me.

Penny walked in and sat on the other side of me. She was wearing a

short dress with small flowers and smelled good. I introduced her to the couple from the night before. They all shook hands and Kenny poured some coffee for all of us before sitting down across the counter. We spent a good hour just talking and laughing, and it was some of the best coffee I've ever tasted. The couple was married and lived in Pennsylvania. His name was Eric and he was a steel worker, and hers was Cassie. She worked in a bank. They invited Penny and me back to their room but we decided it was time to hit the road. They said that we "have to do this again sometime" and Kenny told us the coffee was on the house.

We walked out to the car, Penny and me.

"Where are you going now?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'll let you know when I get there."

"I'll be waiting."

"You know, I trust you with my life, Penny."

"No, that's too easy," she said, "trusting someone with your life is easy. Trusting someone with your heart is the real test. Do you trust me with your heart? Do you?"

"I trust you with my heart, Penny."

"I knew you did."

"I love, my Penny prize."

I went in to get Frisco and when I came back out she was gone again. He hopped into the old Buick that had been Eric and Cassie's and we took it to a car wash a few blocks away to leave their things in the dumpster. There was some cash and a nice cooler that we

kept and I was sure they wouldn't have minded. I really had gotten along with them well.

We stopped for some gas and a new pack of cigarettes. The air was cool on my face with the window down as we steered Tennessee-ward and Frisco was content to hang his long tongue out into the wind. I had been to Tennessee once as a boy with someone. I don't remember my parents well at all but I know that I was on a trip there with an adult. I don't think it was mom or dad. I think it was someone named Jake, an uncle or something of the sort. I remember smelling the forest off of a country road and I'd wandered from the car, and Uncle Jake was looking for me. I think we'd stopped so he could use the bathroom.

I was hiding, I remember, in a little creek and my bare feet felt safe in the soft mud. The cool water wrapped itself around my ankles as it rushed past and I was crouched down behind a bush. He was yelling for me, calling my name, and when he found me I just laughed. He laughed too. We climbed the hill toward the car laughing together and our dog Frisco waited for us, wagging his tail happily. I must have been about eleven.

Later on that day after Uncle Jake let me get my clothes back on, Frisco and me were alone for a little while. Highway 51 took us to Ripley, where we'd found a little place to sleep in an abandoned house and Frisco ate well that night all those years ago. I remember the place well, it smelled of mildew and animal droppings but it was empty except for me and Frisco and there was this gnarly old tree right outside one of the windows of the room we were in. The glass had long been broken out of the casement and there was a long branch reaching in into the room. I remembered thinking how odd it looked. It was like nature was taking back over. The land there had started young and raw and was built up into a clean and private place for a family to live in and love each other and fight and make up. The chaos of nature was reclaiming it though and I was

strangely comfortable in that odd and unfamiliar surrounding with my dog. I was too young to know what it was I should really be afraid of yet. Sometimes I think I still am.

Anyway, the Buick was roomy and I liked it so much I decided we'd sleep in it that night. I found a rest stop with some vending machines and parked and Frisco had fun running in the grassy area growling at children and scaring them. Most of them were about the same age of my own children as I remember them. I had three of them, two girls and a boy. One of them was named Sarah or Sadie. They were angelic.

I had a bagful of fast food for dinner, which I shared with Frisco, and we listened to the news on the radio for a little while. Billy's name didn't come up and neither did Mason's. As I drifted off in the driver's seat I could hear people arriving, leaving, arriving, and leaving again. The rest stop is kind of like the prostitute of the highway. Lots of people entering and exiting anonymously, some of them going somewhere else, others going back home. No one really knows who has been there before or what they were like. It's dirty and honest though, honest because it's filled with people who are acting as they truly are and not putting on a show. Dirty, really, for the same reason.

I woke up with a kink in my neck and there was a kid a good ten feet from the car staring at me. He was about eight and had jet black hair, and there was something about him that made me uneasy. My family, as well as I remember, had always been very superstitious while I was growing up. I remember my grandmother telling me that saying goodbye to someone on a bridge meant that you would never see them again. She said that if a dead person was buried with his eyes open it meant that he would find someone to take with him. And she told me once that sometimes black haired children who stare at you are agents of the devil trying to draw out your soul so they could read it to see your sins.

Penny told me not to worry. She told me it was just a curious kid and that my grandmother was old fashioned and belonged to another age. Provincial...that was the word she used. She always was the sensible one and I often wonder how I lived without her before we met. She said that we should just drive like we used to, with no real direction or intent. I thought it sounded like a fine idea, so I gave Frisco the last of the french fries for breakfast and started the car.

"I can probably get that kink out of your neck if you want me to," she said.

As I drove north her long, thin hands soothed me the way they did before I started living on the road. I was nearly entranced by the rhythm of her fingers as they pushed and kneaded at my flesh. I lost myself in her aroma and the dull, constant drone of the tires as they covered mile upon mile of pavement. My eyes were fixed in front of me, but I wasn't really looking through them.

"Do you remember that trip to New York?" my voice broke the silence.

"Yes, you were sick on the way."

"I still can't fly in a plane."

"What about it?"

"There were lots of people there. In the city, I mean. Just think of all the people you see each day that you will never see again. Are they real? Do they exist? Are they phantoms? If everything has a reason, why have I come across them?"

"You think too much, you know. You've always thought too much about everything."

"I can't help it, you know that."

The black haired kid was crying by then that he wanted his mother. I don't know how exactly he got in there with us, but the crying was starting to make me angry.

"He may not be evil, but you have to quiet him down," she said.

"I know it."

I must have been going about seventy on the highway and made sure there wasn't anyone else on the road. I watched him kind of bounce a few times on the asphalt as he was jettisoned from the Buick by yours truly. It was kind of a dance and it made me smile.

Frisco licked my ear.

It's an interesting thought I had during our talk. How many people do you see in your life that you only catch a glimpse of for a few fleeting seconds, never to come in contact with them again? How can you be sure they are real? I think if I had to face the possibility that all of them exist absolutely, I'd go irreversibly insane.

Penny told me to relax again and her favorite song came on the radio. She sang along in warm breaths into my ear, "and in a dark-brown voice she said Lola...L-O-L-A Lola."

"I love you Penny."

"I will always love you."

"When will I see you again?"

"Soon. On that you can always rely."

"I need you in my life, Penny."

"Something for you to look forward to."

"Something I'm willing to die for to make my life worth living."

I turned to smile at her and she was gone, and Frisco and I were alone again.

The state line was nearing and I decided it was time to get something else to eat. Frisco wasn't hungry, but he'd had breakfast and I needed something more substantial than french fries, so I pulled into a little roadhouse with motorcycles and lots of gravel out front. Nobody really gave me a second glance inside. They were all interested in the television set, something about a boy found on the highway. His parents were crying and the news said no one knew how it happened. I ate fried chicken and stared out the window.

Back on the road I found a radio station with some good music and crossed into Missouri. I decided I'd stay clear of Springfield. Too many people in college towns all interested in getting to know each other. A younger guy was hitchhiking on the road and I passed him by. I wondered if he was real.

Sometimes I wonder to myself if I can even trust that Penny's real. When I think about it, and of course Descartes beat me to it by a few centuries, I could really deny anyone's existence, save my own. A solipsist is the ultimate in egotism though, and I'm anything but an egotist. I don't really even know myself very well, never mind have any arrogance about me. Still, all I can do really is assure you that I exist and that I'm out here and have to leave it up to you whether you will believe it or not. That's what faith is all about, really. Most people live their entire lives based on the premise that they want to believe in something without having any real proof of it.

I vaguely remember once finding my mother's hand mirror when I was young. It had a plastic handle and she kept it under the sink in the bathroom. I used to stare into it for hours on end wondering who it was that was looking back at me. I used to imagine that when I touched it with my hand the only thing that kept me from reaching through the mirror was my doppelganger's hand pressing back against mine. I became obsessed with the idea that he existed in a separate reality and that he saw me when he looked into mirrors.

Some of that magic was going when I grew up a little more and lost the obsession.

No, at this point I don't fantasize too much anymore. I'm pretty down-to-earth and don't let my imagination wander too far away with me. Still, like I said, I can only tell you that I'm real. And that maybe we will meet someday, or perhaps we have met already and you didn't realize it. Perhaps I'm there next to you now, the man with the dark hair on the bus or that unnamed strange in the diner who asks you to pass the cream, please.

Please.

I'll use the word "please" when I ask you.

It makes it so much easier for people to trust you when you are polite to them, after all.

