

full moon over econolodge on I-70

by Javy Gwaltney

There was no hope for the writing desk. Even if it had not been for the splintered leg held together only by duct tape, there was no way Ron could have fit into the back of the station wagon with the rest of the luggage. He asked the Mexicans across the street if they wanted it but they said no. He went back to the duplex and started salvaging oil stained sheets of poetry and drafts of an unfinished novel from the drawers, placing what was worth saving in a small cardboard box and throwing the rest in the garbage bin.

After he had finished, he glumly stared at the desk with all of its drawers open and grumbled, "Oh well, a gift for the new homeowners." He went outside and locked the door before dropping the keys into the mailbox like the landlord had told him to.

Ron still had half an hour to kill before he had to pick up Clarissa from the grocery store. He rode around town and smoked a cigarette, knowing he wouldn't be able to do so once they got on the road without her giving him that nasty look or saying something that would make him moody for the rest of day. She was waiting for him when he pulled into the parking lot.

"I called you twenty minutes ago to let you know I got off early," she said irritably as she climbed into the front seat.

"I guess you did," he replied, checking his phone. "Must have had it on silent or something."

"Surprise, surprise."

He tightened his mouth and told himself to keep his temper in check. He didn't want to have a fight—not at the beginning of the trip. At least two days without the fighting, God, that's all he was asking for.

"How was your last day of work?"

"Fine. Ramona got promoted. Some kid sent about ten watermelons tumbling to the floor and that prick Jerry had to clean it up."

"Who's Jerry again?"

"The republican. The one who calls everyone faggots all the time."

"Oh."

"Can you see out the rearview mirror?" she asked, peering into the backseat to look at all their luggage.

"Mostly."

"Are we going back by the house?"

"No, I already finished packing up."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"Nothing."

"No, 'Oh' means something. What did I do now?"

"I just wanted to see the house one last time, I guess, but it doesn't matter."

"We can go back."

"It's empty now. It doesn't matter," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"You're going to miss the interstate if you don't turn here."

* * *

She started talking to him again when they crossed the Indiana state line. They had been driving for four hours.

"How long do you think it will take us to find another house?" she asked.

"Well, it's San Diego. Might take us a while. Sonny's going to put us up in a hotel until we find somewhere more permanent."

Her eyes lit up. "Is it one of those hotels at the water's edge? Like that big Marriott with all those yachts docked behind it?"

He gave a little laugh. "I doubt it. My uncle isn't rich, after all."

"He's still pretty well off, though. It's not going to be one of those dinky places, is it?"

"I'm sure it won't have roaches if that's what you mean."

"It better be nice. I mean you're moving all the way out there just to churn out press releases."

"Hey, I'm finally a professional writer," he said with a forced laugh. "At least it's better than being a mechanic."

"Oh, but Ro-Ro," she cried playfully. "You were so hot in that little jumpsuit, sitting down in the corner of the garage with your little 30 cent pens, scribbling poetry. And you were so muscley then too—do you remember that?"

He did remember, actually. Why did she have to bring it up? He thought about his potbelly, the stomach that he looked down at in the shower, fascinated by its curves and slopes in the same way that geologists were with mountains, and he grew sick.

"You're right though, maybe you'll actually start writing poetry about me again. It's been like five years since the last one."

"I already told you—it isn't you. I just don't write that kind of poetry anymore." What kind did he write, he wondered.

"But that girl at the garage was worth writing a poem about."

"That was different. It wasn't a love poem. She said something interesting. The poem was about what she said."

"Uh huh."

"Don't be like that, Clarissa."

"You've put me back in a shitty mood. Just drive please."

"Okay. Fine. Alright."

* * *

They pulled off the interstate around 9:30. The hotel was about a mile down the exit and they got a room for 47 dollars. The television didn't have HBO, the shower had no water pressure, and the closet had mold growing inside. But the bed was alright and that was what mattered to Ron. Clarissa searched the room, saying things like "this is so gross" and "nothing works!"

"We're just staying here for the night," he told her when she came to lay down beside him.

"But I want to take a shower in the morning."

"Why? We're going to be on the road all day tomorrow."

"I'll just feel gross if I don't, baby."

"Then wash your hair in the sink."

She rolled her eyes and began to flip through the channels. "Let's get Netflix when we move in somewhere. Ramona was talking about it at work. She and her boyfriend never have to leave the house to go to the theater, and it's cheap, like real cheap. They just spend all day in their little apartment, watching movies and screwing like rabbits. We should do that." She peered down at him and gave him that smile she gave when she thought she was being sexy.

"Okay." He closed his eyes. Right when he was about to plunge into sleep, he felt her fingers walking across his chest. He opened one eye and saw her pouty face looking down at him.

"I'm not tired," she complained.

"That's because you slept part of the way here. I didn't get that privilege because I was driving."

"Just stay awake with me for a little bit."

"No, read a book or watch TV or something."

He closed his eyes again but they shot open as soon as she crawled on top of him and he felt her crotch against his. She grinned at him before leaning down to lick his neck. He thought about himself nude between her legs, with his massive gut lying on top of her little kangaroo pouch.

"I don't want to tonight."

"Why not?" she asked as she slid off of him.

"I just don't want to."

He closed his eyes again but then she started plucking several stringy hair follicles sticking out of his neck.

"Damn it, stop that," he snapped.

"I'm doing you a favor!"

"The hell you are—that shit hurts."

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

"Can I come?"

"No. Do you want anything from the vending machine?"

"Are you mad at me?"

"Do you want anything from the vending machine?" he repeated.

"I don't know."

"I'll get you a Snickers."

He heard Clarissa call his name as he closed the door. When he passed the snack machine, his cell phone rang and it was her, but he didn't answer. He walked past the parking lot, up the grassy hill where people took their dogs to piss. He lit a cigarette to calm his nerves. The grass felt nice against his bare feet. The stars were out and the moon was full.

Why was he so weak, so fat? Where had his golden adjectives gone? Why were his sentences so dead on paper? Had he committed some great sin and was being justly punished for it? Perhaps he needed a new life, needed to experience new passions—alone. Maybe he could wait until she was asleep, throw a couple hundred bucks down on the table, and then just take off. He could just leave her there like Jack Nicholson had done in *Five Easy Pieces*.

He took a puff of his cigarette and thought about the freckles that dotted her cheeks and the way she still made his hairs stand on end when she touched him in that spot where no one else had ever touched him. Maybe it didn't have to come that; perhaps he was just going through a dry spell—suffering a block. He could shake it. What was it that Hemingway had said? "Don't worry. You have always written before and you will write now?" Yes, he had said something like that. Come on, he told himself. Describe the moon. You're a poet for chrissake. Say something beautiful. Just conjure up some words, snatch them from the ether. Come on. Goddamn you, it's the moon—it isn't that hard.

Ron finished the cigarette and flicked the butt into the grass. He didn't bother lighting up another one. He continued to look up and tell himself that everything would be okay if he could just get this; he could handle everything else if he could just have the moon.

His cellphone rang once more. She was calling him again.

