

Dead End

by Jim Breslin

I had been driving most of the day and felt the pangs of hunger which led me to pull off the road and stop into the fast food joint. My doctor said I should stop eating this slop, that I've exceeded my weight limit, but it's tough when I'm traveling up and down the east coast, making sales calls in places such as Hartford, Greenwich and Nyack.

Now, I wait patiently in the little cattle chute until it's my turn, checking out the bright colored menu overhead, with the magnified beautifully propped burgers and fries. Behind me, I hear a sniffing, as if someone needs a tissue. I turn around and see a young man with a Yankees cap cocked sideways on his head. He snuffles again, raises his hand to wipe his nose, and I see he's got the shakes. The kid stares at me with dilated pupils, thin red lines traversing his eyeballs, and I feel a cold shiver down my spine as if I've just downed a frosty too quickly. After a moment, the teenager behind the counter calls out, "Next," and I step forward. I order a #4 and biggie-size it, reasoning I don't know when I'll have a chance for another meal. It could be a long time. The kid takes my money, then shuffles off and returns with a tray holding the burger, fries and an empty cup. I turn with my tray to see the young man has vanished.

I sit down at a crumb-littered table from which I can see my car. This neighborhood unnerves me, and I want to insure nothing gets stolen, particularly the sales samples in my trunk. I don't need someone running off with one of my femurs, or a tibia bone, or an intact skull. If I were to lose a body part, I would need to replace it out of my own commissions. The skull in my trunk has all it's teeth, which makes it quite valuable to some.

The place is empty except for an elderly couple quietly eating together. There's no conversation between the two. It's as if they have said everything there is to say. The man is wearing a plaid flannel shirt jacket and a trucker's cap. Black rectangular glasses sit propped up on his wrinkled face, and he has white stubble sprouting

from his chin. Little tufts of hair are growing out of his ears, out of his nose. A black walking stick hangs from the table by his feet. The woman sits with her hunched back towards me, but I can see a sprawling white head of long hair, pulled back in a ponytail and braided. She's wearing a house dress, in greens and blues, and she's eating a salad. I wonder if either of them has dedicated themselves to science, if one day I may be making a sale off their remains to a chiropractor in Albany, or an orthopaedic specialist in the Catskills.

I unwrap my #4, the greasy smell wafting over my nostrils, and I pause, with the understanding that *this* will be the highlight of my day, and that I should savor the moment, and then I bite in. It's late afternoon, and the sun is setting across Route 63, a four lane road, two lanes each way, with barricades separating the north and southbound lanes. Across the road sits a strip mall, and as the giant orb dips below, it casts a long shadow in front of the Radio Shack, Carmine's Pizza, and the Blockbuster.

I have this bad habit of whiffing down my food. I inhale my #4, and slurp out my Dr. Pepper. As I lift a ketchup drenched fry to my mouth, a small red glob falls onto my dress shirt, on the stitched chest pocket, just missing my tie. "Crap." I blot at the stain carefully with a napkin. I glance up to see if anyone has noticed. The woman picks at the greens with her fork, while the man picks up his burger, takes a bite, and then places the burger on the wrapper until he's chewed and swallowed. This couple is in no rush at all.

The cold clink of metal reverberates behind me, and I see the old man turn and look past me, his mouth open in horror. From behind, I hear a "Pop! Pop!" and the old man slouches back, his head hitting the glass. The old woman falls forward, her face splatting into the salad greens. A plastic fork falls to the floor. I turn to see the barrel of a gun being shakily held by the Yankees capped kid. "Pop!"

Now, I'm walking across a field in Montana. The sky is so infinite and blue that I can see why they call it Big Sky Country. All the colors are vivid, super saturated, the greens in the grass, the yellows and whites in the daisies pop out vibrantly, I feel like I

should have sunglasses on. As I crest the hill, I spy a young man and a woman sitting on a red plaid blanket having a picnic.

The man is handsome and clean shaven, with a thin lanky frame, and he's wearing an old pinstripe baseball uniform with dirt on the knees. He's sporting a baseball cap. On the blanket next to him sits a voluptuous young woman in a fifties era dress, and she looks as though she could be a young movie star, a Grace Kelly perhaps. They are talking quietly, I can hear the woman giggling, I can see the man smiling, but I can't make out their conversation.

Beyond them, I see the field slopes down for miles, and it's a beautiful vista, with a lake off in the distance. Cows are grazing quietly in the grass. I have a backpack with me, and I swing it over my shoulder and open it to pull out a fresh mozzarella and basil sandwich and a glass of iced tea. I sit down in the cool grass, and the couple doesn't glance back my way. It's as if they are unaware of my presence or they just don't care, for they are engrossed in each other's company.

I nibble from a small pack of carrots and sip my iced tea. The breeze counterbalances the sun as the sky complements the grass. For the first time I can recall, I'm comfortable wearing shorts and a t-shirt. I have nothing left to lose. I am content. I watch the sacred cows graze on the high grass.

