

Tim

Tim shouted at the demons of rightist propaganda on the radio, overpowering their railing, fiery voices. He finally spun the dial and tuned in an oldies' station, and came to his senses to the voice of Smokey Robinson, and realized he was driving 90 miles an hour, straddling the centerline of the two-lane blacktop. He dove into the right lane, and Aretha Franklin took him all the way down to a sane 65.

"If you want a do-right...all-night woman..."

By the time Bobby Vinton came on, singing, 'Mack the Knife' he was calm again.

Bob, the dog, was less nervous now that Tim had quit screaming. Bob smiled his dog smile as he leaned against the passenger door, his long fine nose out the window, the wind rippling his silky, black and white coat. Bob smelled the entire high desert as they passed through it, he could smell the distant pines of the mountains, and the Blue River, which was still another hour up the road. Through the general pall of cows and cow shit, Bob could smell the occasional jackrabbit, prairie dog, antelope, and sage grouse. Off the ridges came the scent of aromatic sage, while in the lower swales, the bland scent of rabbitbrush teased his nostrils. He sneezed occasionally. He would pull his head in, and send a fine mist in Tim's direction.

"Goddamn it Bob, you want me to roll up that window? Is that what you want?"

Bob slumped down against the door and laid his chin on the armrest.

"I don't know why you can't just rest your head at the edge of the window, instead of sticking your nose right out in the wind. You know you're gonna sneeze, and then I'm gonna yell at ya. You know the whole scenario as well as I do!"

Bob pretended to be asleep.

"Hey," Tim said, snapping Bob on the butt with two fingers. "You listen to me when I talk to you," he said pointing his finger at Bob.

Bob barked and growled from his side of the truck.

"Yeah, talk back all you want, you damn cur! I'll roll that window up, and then we'll see who suffers."

Bob resumed his position on the armrest.

"You get driven around like a damn debutant, and you get all pissed off if you can't sneeze all over me! Hey! A cow, Bob! A cow! Get that sonofabitch!" Tim swerved his truck over to a Hereford who had wandered to the fence at the edge of the highway berm. He slowed down while Bob hung out the window barking and snapping at the terrified bovine.

Bob spun around on the seat a few times and barked for approval from Tim.

"OK, that was pretty good...just don't blow your nose at me anymore."

Bob lay down next to him on the bench seat, and Tim ran his fingers through the dog's sleek fur. Tim was on his way to Rocket City. He had held off working for as long as possible. The winter was now months behind him; his funds were running low, and it was too hot to rock climb at most of the areas he had been frequenting. He called Karl to find out if he had a job, and if so, where he might find the crew, or more specifically, where he might find Hanna. It was fundamentally understood that Tim would work with Hanna. Tim did not have a field archeologist's certificate; he was really not anything very specific, but he practiced a little of everything. He was a damn good carpenter, and a licensed electrician. He had done some time roughnecking in the oil fields and spent one dismal winter as an apprentice to a diesel mechanic. Tim had a bachelor's degree in English and had begun a law degree. He had attempted a second bachelor's in engineering, but found it tedious. He completed another bachelor's in biology, and ran out of energy while finishing a master's in anthropology. He liked to sum up his academic career by stating the old saw, "I learned more and more about less and less, until I knew absolutely everything about nothing." Even though Tim was not a certified archeologist, much of the fieldwork he did was not exactly hard science; mostly he drove truck shuttles and walked survey lines looking for artifacts. Lately, Tim had a list of employers for whom he did good work, and spent his years here and there, doing this and that, living out of his tiny camper with Bob the dog.

Tim always liked the particular stretch of highway he was driving down. It was empty. There was an hour of it without towns, houses, or facilities. It was a long, hollow two-lane that passed through a low desert spotted with alkali flats, where the salty ground was white as snow and all that grew was saltbush and greasewood. It was one of the very few roads that he considered long enough, or desolate enough. It made

him feel as he had once felt, nervous and uncertain, as he prepared for trips across the West; like shoving off to sea.

The huge treeless expanses had seemed larger when he was a young man, pattering along at 55 miles an hour in an old, green Volkswagen. Roads appeared longer and more vacant then. Time had moved more slowly.

That was when Babe was his dog, the dog of his adolescence, a little old terrier curled up asleep on the passenger seat. He and Babe crossed an ocean of highways and wore out two engines in that Beetle, in searing heat and howling blizzards, through mountains, and deserts, along four-lane highways and two-track dirt roads. They sometimes stopped for work, but that was only for gas money. He and Babe had traveled down this road before, one vicious winter night. He had stopped and considered the blinking 'Road Closed' gate at the town of Rock Creek. A patchwork of black ice and dry tarmac formed a tenuous surface, and a howling wind ripped across the desert, raking snow and dust into blinding ground blizzards. But that was certainly no reason to close a road, and he had an alluring date to keep, so he looked both ways and went around the blinking barrier.

He drove on in his little capsule behind the faint glow of his speedometer, behind the weak stab of his headlights, into the blackness. He drove slowly, wondering where he might stay. He knew they would probably never make it to Felicidad. Babe was old by then and shivered on the passenger seat. He tucked his down vest around her and pulled his ski cap tighter around his head, burying his chin down deep in his parka. When the blinding ground blizzards swept across the road, Tim locked the wheel on its path, pushed in the clutch, and took his foot off the gas, coasting with faith, swallowed by a whirling maelstrom. Babe raised her head suspiciously until they passed through the dervish, and Tim accelerated the engine once again. Several times he drifted across the black ice, and again, with faith, he turned slightly into the slide, and straightened out the VW before it hit the dry, sticky blacktop.

Time passed slowly as he drove in and out of range of the fading AM radio stations, the odd stations that travel so distantly in the dark, as if they were nocturnal, a companion of night travelers, a friend to the Diaspora and dispossessed. WROK, 'The time-pieces from Tulsa'. KWST, 'The best of the West from Omaha'. 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' was the favorite of every station. Gaudy lights appeared and disappeared on distant ranch houses; wreathes and bows adorned the occasional mailbox and gateposts, like impotent parodies of hope and joy.

Perhaps it was the eve of Christmas Eve; maybe it was the eve of the eve of Christmas Eve. He couldn't remember. It must have been close, because he was sad and anxious about spending Christmas with an intended lover instead of family. When he had told his mother that he wouldn't be home until New Year's, she replied with silence.

He was nervous about the woman who'd invited him to Felicidad. She had cajoled and coerced him. He was afraid of realizing that she was merely an ideal whose allure would fade. He was afraid of the lie that he would ardently assume just to lie with her and smell the richness of her skin. He was afraid of being trapped at long clumsy dinners with her roommates and friends, and long evenings in Christmas houses whose lights burned brightly through the inky arctic nights, seemingly awaiting anyone but him.

Babe stood up and pranced in place in her seat, looking out from under his down vest. She sat up and stared into the shaft of the headlights, the vest slumping to the floor. Tim thought that the moan came at first from the tires as they passed over a different textured surface, but then he heard it next to him; he could see that it came from Babe. The sound grew and elevated in pitch until the radio was drowned and the VW was filled with Babe's mournful lament. He watched her with her eyes closed sweetly, her lips raised and parted delicately, the wail departing her body with the steam of her breath. As her howl continued, Tim feared she would asphyxiate from a lack of air, her life ebbing with one long lugubrious note. She stopped and looked at Tim, and then sat leaning against him.

"What is it, Babe? Are you sick?" He put his hand before her face, and she licked him reassuringly and grumbled softly. "Are you cold, Babe? Is it too cold in here?" Tim reached down and pulled the vest from the floor and tucked it around her. He felt that the heat of her body was warm and strong. He put his arm around her and pulled her snug against the side of his body. She lay down with her head in his lap. Anxiety gnawed at him and he knew that, unless conditions improved, Felicidad was out of range for the night. He could drive it, but there would be little sense in it. It'd be too awkward, standing on the steps,

pounding on the door in the middle of the night, a sleeping bag under one arm, and a frigid dog in the other. He thought he might call to see what his date thought of him coming in so late. He hated the idea of staying in a motel, sitting in a room, the pacing, watching TV, waiting for the morning, as if there was something he needed to stay ahead of, something that could close in on him during moments of immobility. Tim craned his neck and looked up at the sky. He saw that a few stars shone brightly. It was only the wind that caused the poor driving conditions. He realized how foolish and paranoid he was.

There were lights on the road ahead, and he felt relief that others also casually traveled on such a night. He noticed that the lights were stationary and wondered if a rancher had gotten stuck at the end of a driveway where the plows had bermed up the snow. As he approached, Tim could see that the headlights were angled off into the sky. Babe whined, retreated to her seat and howled her sad song. Tim's heart sank as a woman appeared, running into his headlights, her red, crazy hair flying wildly, one hand out to halt him, the other clutching at the lapels of her thin woolen jacket. She ran angrily up to the window as if accusing him, "That's not a deer up there!!! That's not a deer, you know!!!"

The wind leapt through the window, stinging his face with spindrift. "What's not a deer?" he asked rhetorically, but the answer was obvious from the truck on its side with the cab leaning against the bank of the elevated road, its door sprung, hanging back unnaturally.

"She's alive! What are you doing? She's still alive! Hurry!" Babe wailed woefully.

Tim stepped out into the biting wind. He reached back and grabbed his sleeping bag, which was loose in the back seat. The woman stood halfway between Tim and the shape at the edge of the highway, pleading with her eyes, motioning with her hands for him to change things. She hiccupped huge sobs. "I didn't know...there was no one here..." She choked. "Just the truck.... I ran over...I thought someone hit a deer..." She stood with her mouth agape and silence running out.

Tim saw the figure at the edge of the road, thrown so far from her truck. He knelt down beside the tiny woman there on the pavement, looking like a child. She was unconscious, sprawled and askew on the shoulder of the road, in her dungarees, and waist-length down jacket. Blood made parts of her face appear black in the night. She was hopelessly broken. His tiny first-aid kit was useless against this. He had no training for this. There was nothing he could do. He covered her with his bag. "Turn on the flashers of my car and go for help! Go find a phone! If you pass any plows, have'em radio!" The redheaded woman nodded obediently, ran off to her car and sped past seconds later, her taillights disappearing into a swirl of spindrift, harried by a vision she couldn't outrun.

He knelt down beside the victim there on the side of the road, spreading the sleeping bag over the woman's body, gently lifting her head into his lap. She was dying. The cold of the pavement sapped the life from her body. There was nothing to be done—moving her would kill her and waiting would kill her. There was no bandage or pill that would save her. She needed heat, and oxygen, and doctors. She breathed in fits and gasps. There was fluid in her lungs. Tim could hear it rasp as she breathed. He pulled the bag tightly around her and around his own legs as he sat with her. Streamers of snow snaked across the road and a small drift began to build on the lee side of the woman's body. When the wind faltered, he could smell her cologne. He could also smell the beery bar smell. She had been drinking with her friends, laughing, flipping back her shoulder-length hair, full of holiday cheer, perhaps eluding a hopeful suitor. But, then she slid on the ice and rolled her truck when her tires stuck on a dry patch of blacktop, and here she was, in the darkness, on the shoulder of a highway, with her head on the lap of a stranger.

Tim heard voices now and then. They carried across the prairie, back behind the din of the VW's engine. They called and whistled, and fell into rhythmic chants. The breeze came to him just so, and he realized that the woman's radio was still on, singing happily as her life was drawn away by the winter wind.

"Jingle bell time, is a swell time, to dance the night away."

Tim sat cross-legged at the edge of the road with the woman's head in his lap until his legs went numb. Babe watched him from the car, barking now and then. He thought of Felicidad, and of sitting on a couch in a warm house. He imagined that the woman with her head in his lap was the woman who invited him to Felicidad. He would sit on the couch and stroke her hair after her guests left, and her roommates had gone to bed. He stroked the broken woman's hair and whispered loving words to her, as she shivered uncontrollably. At one point the wind lulled, and the radio became acutely clear. It was Johnny Mathis. He sang, 'Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire'. The young woman gasped and sighed softly as if it might be her

favorite song. Tim sang along and stroked her hair until she stopped shivering and her head was cool in his lap.

The highway patrol came late and lifted him to his feet, warmed him in the cruiser, and gave him coffee from a thermos. They drove him and Babe to the next town and arranged to have his Bug left at his motel room. The redhead never did return.

The next morning, he sat in his car at the junction. It was cloudy but calm. A skiff of snow lay quietly on the ground and formed cresting, corniced drifts at the tops of the ridges. He scanned the horizon for the winds that had raged the night before, but they had moved on, or maybe he had left them up North where they perpetually raged.

He sat at the junction undecided. South would take him to Felicidad. East would take him home. His car was facing east and Babe looked straight ahead, whining anxiously. Tim reluctantly turned his car south and rolled ahead a few yards, and Babe whined desperately. He stopped again and reconsidered. He felt intoxicated from the lack of food and sleep. Felicidad now seemed less attractive. Down there, he would either have a huge unpleasant tale to tell to endless strangers, or a deep secret to keep. He would have unwelcome sympathy, or he would have to cover his suppressed distraction. At home, he could quietly relate the accident to his mother, and then share simple rituals. Felicidad was little more than an hour away, while Lincoln would be most of the day. He did a U-turn, drove to the highway ramp heading east toward Lincoln with Babe barking and dancing in her seat.

Now, whenever he drove this highway, it seemed to be under the hot, summer sun, and he tried to pinpoint the empty spot where it all occurred. He wondered what her name had been. He thought that he would brave the cold and go back there and sit with her again, if he could have Babe in his car, a girl in Felicidad, and family in Lincoln. But this time he would save her and drive her to safety across an ocean of short grass prairie.

Bob knew. He could smell the whole fateful scene, the arctic air, the highway patrol, and the volunteer fire department. He could still scent the entire tale from a decade ago. He could feel Tim's searching eyes and smell Tim's confused sorrow.

The radio signal faded, and Tim spun the dial, looking for a sweet female voice.