



Highway  
To  
Hell

Buck  
Paiva

# Highway To Hell

A Short Story

by

Buck Paiva

The only piece of advice my father ever gave me that was worth a damn was *never name a business after a street*.

The day he imparted that little nugget of wisdom to me I was only nine years old. Walter Dunn, my father, and I had spent the better part of a Las Vegas summer afternoon in a car with no air-conditioning, driving up and down Warm Springs Road in search of Warm Springs Road Garage—it made sense to me. Only the business had moved to East Russell and hadn't bothered to change its name.

The frustration my father felt that day resulted in a bruise on my arm, the size and shape of his meaty Irish fist. That was his way of adding emphasis to his words. He even had a name for his special brand of infliction. He called it *Punchuation*.

Yeah, Walter was a real class act.

Good old Walter's words of advice came to mind, sixteen years later, as I stood staring at the neon sign of the Fourth Street Pawn Shop, on Sierra Street in downtown Reno. I guessed the owner hadn't received my pop's memo.

Jerry Fischer, my life-long friend and general pain-in-the-ass woke me from my spell. “Zach, let's go. Come on. Before he gets a customer or closes up.”

I nodded. Jerry was right. Get in, get paid, get out. Besides, it was freezing outside. Winter nights were damn cold in Reno, as I was quickly learning.

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We could see between the painted letters and showcase items behind the big storefront window that there was one balding, heavysset, forty-something-year-old man behind the counter. It appeared he was alone; exactly what we were hoping the case would be late in the evening. Coming in while the clerk was preparing to go home increased the chances of a speedy transaction, or of any transaction at all; he'd be more willing to do business with us just to get us out of his face. At least, that was our reasoning—actually, it was Jerry's reasoning.

An old-fashioned bell chimed as I pushed open the glass door. This was about what I expected from Reno. Pawn shops in Vegas were usually equipped with the laser trigger

variety.

The middle-aged man behind the counter sported a loud Hawaiian-style shirt over a wife-beater t-shirt. He gave no indication that he was aware of anybody entering the establishment.

I did a quick survey of the place. Used guitars lined the wall to the far left, held up slightly above eye level by metal rods. A row of drum kits formed an aisle before the guitar wall, followed by a row of mostly home electronics; stereos, TVs, microwave ovens, blenders and other domestic gear. Jewelry and hand-held electronics were housed in the long glass display case that doubled as the cashier's counter. Vertically aligned shotguns and rifles lined the wall behind the clerk like a picket fence crafted from personal firearms.

Forty-Something still did not look up from his calculator and small stack of receipts as we stepped up to the counter. Jerry set the diamond ring on the glass and offered a greeting. The overweight man glanced up briefly over his thick eyeglasses at the piece of jewelry and then returned his attention to the day's tally.

An uncomfortable silence followed. Forty-Something couldn't care less, so it seemed.

"Well?" I finally asked, too impatiently.

"Well what?" he grumbled.

Jerry caught my eye. His turn.

"Excuse my brother, sir. He's not himself right now."

"He's excused."

"He'd like to know what he can get for his fiancée's engagement ring?"

"Ex," I added.

Without skipping a beat or raising his eyes our incurious shop clerk behind the counter replied, "Nuthin'."

I opened my mouth to protest but Jerry held up his hand to stop me. He had this one.

"With all respect, sir, my brother blew three paychecks on that ring. It has to be worth something. You ever been dumped by a girl after pouring everything you make into her? He just wants to get a little something back for the hell she's put him through. You know how it is, right?"

Forty-Something sighed heavily; he gave the impression of a man at the end of a really long shift. “Yeah, I know. I know more 'an either uh you two young bucks can poss'bly imagine.”

He put down the pencil, removed his glasses from his face and let them hang down on his chest from the lamp chain around his neck. He fixed his weary eyes on my “brother” and apparent representative.

Jerry was dressed in gray slacks, a black shirt—open far enough to expose his solid gold chain and generous lack of chest hair—and a black leather jacket. He possessed a pompadour that would make a young John Travolta envious; he looked more Italian than Irish-Jew, and I often joked that he liked it that way.

I had on tan slacks, a white dress shirt, and brown suede jacket. The idea being we were out on the town celebrating, when everything went to shit and my engagement took a nosedive and ended in a fiery death. The last thing we wanted to portray was a pair of small time crooks from Vegas, which is why we changed out of our normal t-shirts and jeans at a gas station just outside of town.

Forty-Something looked us up and down like we were from another planet.

“Where you boys from?”

On the way up from Vegas, we had argued—among other things—about the back story. For some reason Jerry was adamant that we hail from Sacramento. Yet, other than it being the home of the Kings and Governor Schwarzenegger, neither of us knew a damn thing about the place. I had argued that the best lie was the one closest to the truth—hell, he was the one who had taught me that, when we were just kids—and Jerry had countered with the standard discussion-ender, *trust me*.

“Sac,” he replied.

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I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes. *Dammit, Jerry, I did not feel like being put on the spot.* What was I going to say if this guy had ever lived in Sacramento, or had family there, and started asking more specific questions? It was only something like a hundred

miles away. It was entirely within the realm of possibility.

But Forty-Something seemed to have already forgotten the subject of our hometown. He hung his thick glasses back on his sizable ears and finally picked the ring up off the counter. It was a massive chunk of gold for a lady's ring. I wasn't very knowledgeable about ring sizes but I knew it was an unusual size because it was practically too big for me, and I have thick fingers.

I was half expecting him to comment on the size of my “ex-fiancée”.

“You got a receipt for this?” he asked.

That was my cue. “She just left me an hour ago. Receipt's back home. Hey, I just want enough dough to play some blackjack and keep me drunk all night. And we need to get another room somewhere. I'm not going back to that hotel, not even to get my bag.”

“I'm getting mine,” Jerry countered. Nice touch.

“Fine,” I said, “later though.” The act was easy now, and we were rolling with it.

Forty-Something rolled the diamond ring between his fingers. He held it up towards the ceiling lighting and examined the reflection from the array of diamonds. The guy was making a real show of it. For a moment, I wondered just who was scamming who. For all we knew he had a figure in mind the moment the ring hit the counter.

“This thing's hotter'n my ex-wife's girlfriend.”

My heart almost leaped right out of my throat. Forty-Something was a colorful guy, I had to give him that, and a part of me was beginning to like him. The rest of me wanted to get the hell out of there before the bomb he just dropped detonated in our faces.

That might have been the end of our visit right there, if not for the fact that Forty-Something continued to scrutinize our little offering instead of tossing it back, or reaching for the telephone. It was obvious he was doing some mental calculations—even as he was talking like he was going to kick us to the curb.

Jerry braved a glance in my direction. He seemed somewhat unnerved himself, but tilted his head slightly towards the man behind the counter, encouraging me. Great, the ball was still in my court and it was time for me to attempt the game-saving three-pointer. “Then she's one ugly bitch, dude,” I said in friendly surfer-like banter, “cause that thing cost me a small fortune.”

Forty-Something didn't laugh, didn't even smile. But what he said next more than made up for it.

“Well, I got a profit margin to think of, kid. So, you ain't gettin' no fortune back.”

“I figured.”

“Nowhere near it.”

“Got it.”

He shoots, he scores, and now we had a deal, of sorts. Suddenly, I was getting optimistic about our chances at unloading some boot here in the “Biggest Little City in the World”, or at least less cynical. All we needed now was an initial offer so we could get the ball rolling.

Jerry was playing it as cool as ice. He was staring down at his shoes like they were somehow more interesting than the conversation taking place. Without saying it, or even looking in my direction, he was telling me not to jinx it, to just shut up now and wait for the guy to make the next move.

I should mention here that Jerry and I had a knack for communicating to each other without uttering a word, a skill we had unintentionally developed from being best friends since we were toddlers—our parents had been friends for years before then—and from living under the same roof for thirteen years, since my mother died.

Some people found it downright spooky.

Following Jerry's lead, I glanced at my watch and then feigned interest in a Seiko behind the glass, like maybe I was interested in trading up. Forty-Something was consulting a lamented sheet—some sort of pricing guide, I assumed. Then he swapped his eyeglasses for one of those monocles that jewelers wear, and I looked back to the watches.

He was taking his sweet time and the silence was threatening to become awkward again. I was getting nervous. Then, as casually as if he were commenting on the weather, he asked, “I don't suppose she gave ya back any other pieces, eh?”

Jerry's head sprung up and he practically gaped at Forty-Something—so much for playing it cool—but the guy was back to studying his price sheet through his bottle-bottom lenses, behaving as if he hadn't just hurled a blazing ball at us from out of left

field. Jerry looked back at me wide-eyed and just shrugged.

What the hell, I thought. “Yeah, maybe. What, you interested?”

This time the heavy man behind the counter looked me dead in the eyes over his glasses and allowed himself the slightest of smirks. “The more the merrier, kid.”

Bingo. Forty-Something was game. Hell, he was probably a fence and was just being cautious. I couldn't believe it; we had come to Reno, gambled, and hit the jackpot on the first pull of the lever. Who'd have thought?

I knew I was getting my hopes up too early. We had no idea how much stuff he was willing to take off our hands or what he'd pay for it; from experience, I knew we still had a lot of negotiating to do. But things were definitely going in the right direction.

Jerry reached into a jacket pocket, produced the keys to his Camaro and handed them to me. “Go get the rest, bro. I'll hang with, uh...”

“Paul.”

“Right. I'll hang with Paul.”

Paul had started gathering up his receipts and putting them into a metal cash box. As I turned to leave he said, “When ya get back, I'll lock up and we'll move dis lil' party to muh office in back.”

Was it my imagination or was Paul struggling not to slur every word? Had he been hitting the bottle all day? Hey, who cares, right? Things were going better than we could have hoped, certainly better than I had expected. All we had to do now was not screw it up—piece of cake, as far as I was concerned.

I was grinning with relief and a bit of gusto when I reached the door, only to discover it was blocked by a woman standing directly on the opposite side of it. Our eyes met through the glass, and it was obvious to me that she did not share my enthusiasm.

Not one bit.

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The first thing I noticed about the woman standing firm outside the shop, and preventing me from leaving, was her eyes—I had a thing for eyes. They were dark brown

and beautiful, with long eyelashes. It was a shame they projected such anger and dark determination.

The next thing I noticed, as she pushed open the door and forced me to step back, was that she was absolutely stunning. She was probably in her early thirties, with long black hair and striking facial features that were accentuated by two tiny, dark piercings—one in her nose, the other above her mouth. Her gorgeous figure was obvious beneath the green sweater she wore buttoned over a black, laced t-shirt and her worn-out blue jeans.

She could've walked right off one of my fantasies.

Unfortunately, the last thing to reach my senses regarding this goddess was the revolver she was clutching, a massive piece that looked ridiculously large in her petite hand. I've never been a huge gun enthusiast, but Jerry was and I was sure he could have told me the make—not that it mattered a whole hell of a lot at the moment.

When Paul saw our female visitor he burst out, “Emily, what the *fuck* do you want?”

Emily strolled right past me like she owned the place; so close I could smell her—and damn she smelled good. I should have grabbed her right then and there before she got any further—should have done something, anything—but I was simply too stunned to move. This was all happening too quickly and before I could even think to stop her, she was facing the counter, at a distance of maybe five feet, and holding the gun up with both hands.

She aimed it right at Paul's chest.

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There are unexpected, life-altering events in this world that can leave a person completely unable to think, let alone react; moments that explode into existence without any consideration for those in the immediate vicinity; unforeseen and unforeseeable byproducts of a chaotic world that are destined to catch you off guard even at your best. When a drunk driver killed my pop while he was changing a flat tire, with my mom and I watching from the front seat, that was one of those moments. When the following year I found my mom at the bottom of the tub and the worst shade of purple I had ever had the

displeasure of meeting...

Well, you get the idea.

Abruptly, I was facing another one of those moments; our deal suddenly the farthest thing from my mind. Within a span of a few seconds, I had completely different priorities.

Jerry appeared as paralyzed as I was. But even if he could have moved, he wasn't in any position to do anything but get himself shot. He was too close to the counter, too close to Paul. He was just barely out of Emily's line of fire.

"You sonofabitch," said Emily. "I told you to leave her alone, to leave *us* alone." Even in the middle of this intense situation, I couldn't help but detect some kind of Latin accent—Portuguese, maybe.

"Fuck you," replied Paul, apparently unimpressed and unshaken—which only added to my state of disbelief. What in the hell was he doing, trying to get himself killed? How could he remain so calm at the wrong end of that damn hand cannon? What could he have done to her to provoke such hostility?

Just what kind of shit-storm had we stepped into here?

Emily looked disgusted. "Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you? You probably think about it all the time, fuckin' perv. Me, you and your wife in bed? Is that what you want, Paul, you sick fuck?"

"Ex-wife," Paul inserted calmly. So, he hadn't been joking about that earlier. "And who you calling sick, carpet-muncher."

I had a feeling that this was not going to end well.

"That probably keeps you up at night, doesn't it? Eats at you every minute of every day. Is that it, Paul? Is that what's wrong with you?" Emily was losing her cool quickly. I could see the emotion flowing freely now, could hear it affecting her voice, and could see she had begun shaking.

Great. My fantasy woman was an emotionally disturbed lesbian wielding a shiny pistol, about to make what was probably the biggest mistake of her life.

I looked to Jerry and he met my eyes with an expression that said he had been trying to get my attention. With jerking motions of his eyes he gestured up and behind the

counter to the wall of shotguns. Was he mad? But no, he wasn't indicating the shotguns but something higher up.

The security camera.

So this was going to end badly; no doubt about it.

We had been willing to take a risk on being taped upon entering the shop and trying to pawn the stolen ring. It was not likely the tape would get viewed unless the owner was a complete hard-ass and reported every suspicious item that passed through the place—and wanted to spend a great deal of time on the phone with the cops—so, it wasn't much of a concern. But now, with an armed woman on a personal vendetta? What would happen if she killed our new fat friend right there in front of us? How long would it be before our faces were run through the system and picked up by LVPD? Somebody there would recognize us for sure.

That was assuming, of course, Emily didn't eliminate all witnesses.

Currently, Jerry was edging back along the counter, away from the action, and giving me the “now what?” look, to which I could only return the “how the hell should I know?” look. I was an arm's length from the door, but I couldn't leave Jerry there to fend for himself, and though I was within a few steps from Emily, I didn't think I could rush her before she had time to swing that big ass gun in my direction.

So, I was fresh out of ideas.

Jerry glanced down. My eyes followed, but I didn't see what he was getting at. I looked back up at him and he tried again, angling his glance just so. Now I could see it wasn't “down” but “behind”. Behind him? But, there was nothing behind him—

Oh, Good God, I thought. *Jerry, are you packing?*

Our nonverbal communication was functioning at near-full efficiency. Jerry understood my unspoken question. His nod was barely perceptible. I wasn't sure whether to be pissed, or thankful. I decided to run with the latter for the time being. Jerry was just the right kind of crazy for the situation at hand.

In the meantime, Paul, with a pistol still pointed at his big head, and apparently not going to be outdone in the insanity department, actually laughed. “You ain't gonna pull that trigger, Emily. So go home, lil' girl. I ain't playin' with ya ta-nite.”

But, Emily didn't go home. Instead she steadied her hold on the revolver, squinted her eyes, and took a deep breath.

I looked at Jerry. Jerry looked back at me. *It's now or never.*

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An emotional women with a loaded gun, a defiant idiot with no sense of self-preservation, and now my best friend slowly reaching behind his back for the 9mm he promised he'd leave back in the car—I was surrounded by madness.

The next few seconds passed as if time itself had paused to watched the show; a slow motion, incredibly unlikely, mad circus act.

Despite his large size and likely inebriated status, Paul became a blur. He disappeared behind the counter just as Emily fired a shot into the wall, right through the space he had just vacated, and visibly recoiled—obviously not a seasoned shooter. Jerry, gun now in hand and leveled at Emily's head, actually yelled, “Freeze!”; an absurd, laughable thing to say. It would have been funny had it been happening to somebody else, in a movie or something—too bad it wasn't.

Emily ignored Jerry, and started searching for Paul through the glass counter.

Then, we were plunged into darkness.

As I made a dive at the floor, multiple shots rang out, among them the unmistakable sound of shotgun blasts. Then silence, except for the ringing in my ears. Somebody hit the floor hard near me, probably Emily. Somebody else—Paul, I thought—moaned.

Then nothing.

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“Zach. You OK?” It was a whisper, but he sounded unharmed.

I did not whisper back. “Jerry, run!”

In an instant I was on my feet, out the door, and running to the car with Jerry close

behind me. The Camaro's doors were locked, Jerry searched his pockets. “Shit, the keys.” Surprised to find them clasped tightly in my fist I yelled, “Catch.”

Inside the car, there was no time for words. The engine started, the wheels spun, and we were on Interstate 80 before I could catch my breath. If Jerry ran any stop signs or lights, I didn't register it. It was a good ten minutes or more on the freeway before I could bring myself to speak; my nerves were shot, my heart was still pounding in my chest.

“What the hell happened in there?”

Jerry shook his head, never taking his eyes off the road or his hands from the wheel. “I don't know,” he said. “Paul must've had a kill switch behind the counter. Killed all the lights at once, inside and out—”

“No,” I said gravely. “What *happened* in there?”

A quick glance at my face, and he got the point. “Oh.” He took his right hand off the steering wheel, and with it reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. He withdrew his gun and handed it to me. “Toss this out the window when it's safe.”

“Jesus, Jerry.” I didn't take it right away, but opened the glove compartment and found some fast food paper napkins which I used to wipe it down and wrap it in. I placed it under my seat. “I am *not* just throwing this thing out the damn window. Find a gas station and I'll throw it in a dumpster, or stop at that lake. What's it called? Walter Lake?”

“I don't wanna wait that long.”

“Fine. Gas station it is. Now, *what the hell happened?*”

“I—I can't say for sure,” he said. “The lights went out. I heard a shot, saw the flash from the crazy bitch's gun—”

“And you shot her?!” I exclaimed.

“Fuck, Zach! I didn't know who she was gunning at in the dark? It could've been any one of us. Then that stupid ass with the shotgun. I—”

“You shot him, too?” It could have been, I thought I had heard at least one gunshot after the shotgun blast.

Jerry wiped his face with the back of his hand; it was wet—but from sweat or tears, or both, I couldn't be sure. There was only so much illumination between the dim light of

the dashboard and the passing freeway lampposts. “Everybody was shooting! I just reacted,” he said. “I don't know that I hit either one of them.”

Maybe he hadn't. But both Paul and Emily had stopped firing, and excluding the moans, had gone silent. That much was certain.

“You could've shot *me*,” I told him angrily.

“No,” said Jerry adamantly, “no way, Zach. I knew right where you were, directly in front of me. She was to my right and he was on my left, and I only fired at the muzzle flashes.”

Whatever. I let it go.

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Somehow, I managed to drifted off to sleep.

We had stopped in Fernley, about fifty miles out from Reno, to drop his 9mm in a garbage bin behind an Arby's. Jerry had parked a block away and then walked there himself. When he had returned, he informed me that there was blood on his shoes. We changed back into our casual clothing, right there in the car, and tossed the other clothes, and the driver's side floor mat, in another dumpster outside a Kragen's Auto Parts. We returned to the highway immediately, and apparently I had fallen asleep shortly thereafter.

When I woke, Jerry had the radio tuned to a news talk station.

“Anything?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. He told me how he believed it was possible that—with the lights out at the pawn shop, and its slightly isolated location on the block—nobody would notice until morning.

“Are we even getting Reno area news out this far?” I asked. “Where are we?”

“We passed Fallon about an hour ago.”

I knew from the ride up that we were now in the long stretch of US-95 where we were unlikely to see anything for hours on end. “How we doing on gas?”

“We'll make it to the station in Hawthorne, they're twenty-four-seven.” His demeanor was very matter-of-fact, and I realized that he must be taking the entire incident very

hard. I asked him if he wanted me to drive, but he said he was fine.

“Look, Jerry,” I began, unsure what the protocol was for apologizing about getting angry at somebody for possibly killing two people. I know he didn't set out to do it. And, if it had been me, it might have gone down the same way, or I might have froze like a deer in headlights and we both would have died—who knows? Then again, I wouldn't have had the gun in the first place, so...

They didn't make Hallmark cards for these types of situations.

“It's OK, Zach.” He turned his head and I could just make out a smile on his face. “Really, bro, it's fine. You don't need to say anything. It is what it is.” He returned his gaze to the long, dark highway before us. “I don't blame you for being pissed off.”

“I'm not, really. I was just freaked out. I'm scared, man.” Neither of us had brought up the topic of the security camera, but I know we were both secretly hoping it was just for show, and not hooked up.

“Me too,” said Jerry. “We don't have not talk about it right now.”

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“Zach, wake up.”

How I was finding it so easy to sleep under the circumstances was beyond me. Maybe my mind was just trying to shut down, so it wouldn't have to deal with the reality of what had happened.

“I'm up,” I said groggily. “What's going on?”

“Something's wrong.”

I thought maybe we were being pulled over, so I sat up and looked around, but there were no flashing lights. In fact, there no lights of any kind in any direction—no headlights, behind or ahead of us, no street lights, no indication of any civilization at all—nothing but eternal darkness, and the faded paint of the divider lines on the road. A glance at the dashboard revealed a full tank and nothing out of sorts.

“You got gas?”

Jerry looked down at the fuel gauge in disbelief. He reached up and switched on the

interior dome light. “No. We haven't reached fucking Hawthorne yet.” He sounded seriously upset.

“Broken gauge?” I asked. His Camaro was a '68; things broke down regularly in a vehicle that old, especially his. A broken fuel gauge could be really bad news. We could be running on fumes at this point and not know it.

“It gets worse, Zach.” We were fleeing from the scene of a multiple homicide, or at the very least manslaughter, and might be running out of gas in the middle of the Nevada desert at night. During the winter, no less. How could it *possibly* get it any worse, I thought.

It was already a goddamn disaster.

“What—what's going on, man?”

Jerry turned the dome light off again. “Just wait. It should be coming up again.”

I didn't know how to respond to that; I couldn't even imagine what he was talking about. I was feeling light-headed, and a pain was forming in my side.

When was the last time I had eaten?

“There! Look!” He pointed at a green road sign that was fast approaching, the Camaro's headlights allowed us a few seconds to read it: Hawthorne 10 mi. There was nothing even remotely interesting about it, except for the fact that we would soon be able to refuel.

“I don't get it,” I said. “That's a good thing, right?”

“That's the fourth time I passed that sign.”

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I reached back into the cooler in the backseat that we had brought up with us for the ride. There was still a good amount of ice, although much had melted. Without looking I grabbed the first can I felt and yanked it out. Good, I thought, an energy drink.

“OK, pull over. I'm driving,” I announced.

“No bullshit, Zach,” barked Jerry. Never before in our life had he been so fierce with me. Whatever was going on with him, whether he was hallucinating or not, he was in no

mood to be questioned, or humored. He was being serious—dead serious. “Hawthorne ten miles. Hawthorne ten miles. Same thing, four times. Four fucking times!”

“Alright,” I said, “I believe you.” I didn't, of course. Where we were, there were no junctions, no “business loops”, no way he could have gotten mixed up and circled around even once; US-95 was just one long lonely line running basically north and south. At this point, I was sure he was losing it; the pressure, and the guilt, must have been taking its toll on him, either that or he was just whacked out of his mind from lack of sleep. Seeing Jerry like this was unnerving; he was always the rock, always the one with a handle on the situation, whatever it may be.

I was freaking out slightly.

Jerry gunned the engine, and I watched the needle of the speedometer angle dangerously to the right side. “Damn right you'll believe me,” he said, “because you're about to see it again yourself.”

Sure enough, a few minutes later we flew right past another road sign.

Hawthorne 10 mi.

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“You gotta be shittin' me.” It was impossible, but I couldn't very well deny it after seeing it with my own eyes. “You were right.”

“Ha! Told you.”

There had to be a reasonable explanation, and I was struggling to come up with it. I took a swig of the energy drink, even though I knew it would aggravate my empty stomach. “It's a joke,” I said at last, relieved. “Some stupid kids must've changed the signs. It's a prank, man. That's all. Damn teenage boonies with nothing better to do.”

“Maybe.” He pressed further down on the accelerator. I couldn't tell exactly, but from my point of view, it looked like the needle was hovering at around a hundred miles per hour.

I checked my watch; it was roughly three-forty in the morning. “Look, man. We've been on the road for, what, four hours now? We have to be coming up on Hawthorne any

minute. Slow down before we hit a speed trap.”

“Uh huh,” mumbled Jerry, maintaining the same insane speed, and I realized he was not going to shake the crazies that easily.

I was going to have to talk him down.

“It's a prank, man,” I insisted. “A badly timed, fucked up prank, I'll give you that. But there's no way the county, or NDOT, or whoever is going to make a mistake like *that*.” Governments agencies were imperfect, granted, but the Nevada Department of Transportation couldn't screw up so badly—could they?

“Five signs in a row,” said Jerry, “that's some prank.” He did have a point.

“OK, so somebody has a lot of time on their hands. If we lived out here as kids, we'd be doing shit like that just to keep from getting bored.” But I was no longer sure who I was trying to convince, him or me. I started gulping down the energy drink quickly, figuring that, whether I took over the driving or not, I would need the caffeine.

I said to myself, it has to be a prank.

Jerry said through clenched teeth, “One way to find out,” and he slammed on the brakes. The drink flew from my hand as I tried to brace myself. It bounced off the dash, then my lap, and fell between my legs to the floor as we came to a full stop.

I shouted, “Dammit, Jerry! You out of your mind?” But he was already out of the car, keys in hand, and marching towards the rear of the Camaro. “Where in the hell you going?” You asshole.

I picked up the can, and started brushing the sugary liquid off my jeans, when I happened to look up and out the windshield—and there it was again: Hawthorne 10 mi. I stared at it in amazement thinking that six signs was really pushing it.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Jerry walk up next to the passenger side, just his torso, but I could tell he was facing the sign. What is he doing now, I thought.

Blam. I jumped. A hole appeared in the middle of Hawthorne, taking out the “w” and most of the “t”. Jerry walked back towards the trunk; his rifle at his side. I heard the trunk slam shut, and he climbed back into the car.

“Feel better?” I asked.

“Not yet.” He started the engine, peeled out, and we were speeding down the

highway again within seconds.

“What are you doing, man?”

“I’m either going to prove you right, or—” He didn’t finish. I rolled down my window, tossed out the wet and sticky aluminum can, and quickly rolled it back up. I opened the glove compartment again looking for more napkins, and not finding any. I took off my seat belt so I could rummage through my bag in the back seat and find something to wipe my hands on.

“No more sudden stops,” I ordered. I pulled out a spare t-shirt and sat back down, reached back for some ice and set to washing my hands. “I swear, if there is a highway patrol out here you’re going to get us popped. Or have you forgotten all the crap we have in your trunk? Or where we just came from?”

Jerry slowed us down, and I thanked him reluctantly. He was watching the right side of the road like a hawk—or a loony bird. But, if it makes him happy, I thought, the hell with it. I finished using my shirt as a towel and threw it behind me.

Nervous and fidgety, I checked my watch constantly. Where the hell was this godforsaken little town, anyway?

Seven minutes later, we were approaching another sign.

And my heart flat out stopped.

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“We are so screwed.”

I don’t remember which of us had said it, but I know the other did not disagree. We both just sat there in the car on the shoulder of the highway, the engine purring steadily, staring out at the road sign before us—the sign that declared that the Hawthorne exit was ten miles up the road ahead.

The sign with a bullet hole in it, the same damn haunting road sign. If this was a prank, it was being played by the mother of all pranksters.

Jerry rested his forehead on the steering wheel. He was giving up.

“Go back,” I said softly. Jerry barely whispered, “What?”

I said plainly, and with all confidence I could muster, “Turn the car around and go back the other way. Now.”

Without another word, he straightened up in his seat, shifted into drive, cranked the wheel hard to the left. He pulled on to the road as calmly as if he were pulling out of our driveway on a Sunday morning. I turned around in my seat and watched the bastard sign disappear under the red glow of the Camaro's tail lights.

My watch said it was a little after four, on the longest night in my life.

“I have to pee,” I admitted, and Jerry actually laughed a little. He kept driving and I didn't push the issue; I was as eager as he was to learn what we would find as we headed back north. Rational thought was long gone—we were basically trying to backtrack our way out of hell now, and we both knew it. We kept our eye on the left side of the road this time, praying we did not see the other side of that goddamn sign; or maybe that's exactly what we should have wanted to see, but only a specific number of times, seven, at which point we could find a different exit—one that lead somewhere other than the fucking Twilight Zone.

I wasn't at all sure how this was supposed to work.

I only looked away from the road to check my watch, which I was doing often. Two minutes passed, then three. Four. Then five. So far so good. Nothing to the left. There was actually a road sign coming up on our right, for northbound traffic, and when it was within reading distance, I screamed.

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It was almost dawn, we could see the sky lightening to our left; which was just one more fucked up fact as by all logic—if there were such a thing any more—that should have been westward.

The sun is *not* supposed to rise in the west.

We were lying on the hood of Jerry's Camaro, unaffected by the cold, drinking the only two beers we had brought with us—at least they were Heinekens, that was some consolation. We were exhausted, having screamed and cursed and cried in great guttural

sobs as we ran down our wounded road sign with the car, then gotten out and stomped on it, and beaten it to death with our bare hands.

At one point, I had urinated on it, and Jerry joined in before getting his rifle back out and putting a whole box load of slugs into the sign's remains. All this took place without any conversation whatsoever; it was just primal response. Pure apelike rage.

Not once during the entire time had we been passed by a car, or a truck. We were all alone out on the road that literally went nowhere, at least nowhere we wanted to go.

The highway to hell. I half expected Bon Scott to make an appearance.

I finished my beer and threw the bottle at the mountain range behind which the sun was evidently going to rise. It landed on the opposite side of the road with an audible pop. I announced that I had to piss again, but Jerry didn't respond. He just laid there with his empty beer in one hand and his spent rifle in the other.

I yawned and stretched out my body as I crossed the road. I didn't want to think about what was happening to us, it was too unreal, and it seemed Jerry was in silent agreement. I was numb and wanted to stay that way—I wished I had a dozen more beers.

I would have killed for bacon and eggs.

Gathering just enough of my senses, I was able to perform the simple act of relieving myself on the side of a road. As I did so, I looked out to the east, as I now thought of it, and my eyes were drawn to a shiny spot on the horizon, like sunlight reflecting off metal. I zipped up, and tried to find the glinting object again, but it was lost.

A little more dawn had forced itself upon the night, and now I could see what appeared to be the silhouette of a car maybe half a mile away, out in the middle of the desert.

And shadows. Movement.

“Shit, there's somebody out there!” I don't know if Jerry heard me or not, I just took off at a full run. My legs were burning, they were so weak, and I almost fell several times as I traversed the hard terrain. There were dry plants, weeds and little bushes, and skull-sized rocks threatening to take me down, but I kept running. I was drained, physically and emotionally, yet I ran.

I came to a downward slope, and the silhouette was gone, hidden by the other side of

the little ravine, or whatever, that I was in. The grade leveled out again, and I sprinted like there was no tomorrow—which I could easily believe. Then I was running uphill, my breath visible in the freezing air, my knees ready to give out as I came up on the crest of the slope.

Dawn was in full glory now, half of the sun was peaking out over the mountains and it blinded me. I throw up an arm to block it. Then, when I reached the top of my little hill and my eyes adjusted I saw that I had made it to the other vehicle.

Only, it was not another vehicle. It was Jerry's Camaro.

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Jerry leaped out from behind the car. “Who the fuck are you?” He had his 9mm in his hand.

“Jesus, Jerry.” I doubled over trying to catch my breath, my side was killing me. “I thought you dumped that thing.”

“Yeah, I'm not falling for it. Sure, you *look* like Zach, and you *talk* like Zach, but I just watched *Zach* run off in the other direction. He walked right up into the fucking sun and then *you* show up.” Great. I leave him alone for ten minutes and he's auditioning for a role in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

“Circles, Jerry,” I managed to say as I lay down in the shadow of the Camaro, leaning up against the passenger side door. “It's all circles. We've been driving in circles, now I'm running around in circles. It's all so... so damn circular.” It felt better to be off my feet, but the pain was still there. I was worried that I had ruptured something internal while running like a nut case through the desert. “I don't know what to tell you, man. It's me.”

“What was my mother's name?” He still had the gun pointed at me.

“Carol,” I answered. “Carol Anne Fischer. She practically raised me, OK? She was my godmother, and a saint. The woman was a saint. It's me, man. It's Zach. Me, Zach.” You, Jane. Psycho Jane.

Jerry let the hand with the gun drop to his side, and he sat down next to me. I guess I

passed his little test. “Jerry, I thought you left that back in Fallon.”

He examined the gun in his hand like it was some strange growth he hadn't noticed before. “I did. I swear I did.”

Well, that figured. Par for the course.

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Having brought up his mother, we gradually started reminiscing about our childhood—it was a whole lot easier to discuss than this little slice of hell we had wandered into. After my mother had passed, Carol had taken me in without a second thought. Our parents had been friends since before we were born, since high school, and she was my godmother after all—not officially, as she was Jewish, but she had agreed to it anyway—so it was her duty, although I'm sure she would have done it regardless.

We talked about stupid things we had done as kids, the precursors to our life of crime. We agreed it was a miracle, or perhaps a testament to our respect for Carol, that we did not get involved with illicit drugs, besides the occasional joint—that would have broken her heart, had she seen that before she died.

I even shared some memories of my father, the massive, angry Irish force known as Walter Dunn. Some of the things I shared, Jerry had heard me tell before, but they were humorous in their pathetic way, and soon Jerry was smiling, even laughing some. He was almost back to normal.

Almost.

“Zach,” he said, “I need to get something off my chest. Before it's too late.”

“If you're going to say your gay for me,” I joked, “I already know.” That got a heartfelt chuckle.

“No, bro. This is serious,” he said, and he wiped moisture from his eyes. “I think you're ready now, and I have to tell you this so they can save you.”

Oh, no. Crazy Jerry was still in there somewhere, and he wanted to play some more. So, fine, I thought, let's play. “I don't know what you're talking about, man. So who can save me?”

“Just listen. Everything will be clear soon. Trust me.”

I didn't challenge him on that one, I was willing to roll with it if it kept him talking and out of his own head.

“When I was sixteen—and you were, what fourteen, fifteen?—I was going through some stuff in my mom's closet, looking for something to sell, you know? Like jewelry or antique shit, I dunno. I was a real little prick back then, you don't have to tell me.

“Anyway, I found a shoe box with a bunch of old letters. Just like you see in the movies, bundled up with twine and all. I was curious, you know? My mom never talked about my dad, no matter how hard I pushed her, and here I was with a stack of love letters in my lap. I guessed they were, cause they were different colors and there were hearts on some of the envelopes.

“So, I started reading them, and they *were* love letters. Only they were written to Walter, Zach. To him, and from him.”

After all the madness that I had endured during this road trip—the shootout at the Fourth Street Pawn Shop, and all this surreal business with the endless loop of highway—I still had room in my head for utter shock.

“Jerry, what the—”

“Wait. Just wait. There's more.” I knew what he was going to say even before he said it. Carol and Walter were lovers, that much was clear. And even though he would probably receive the beating of his life for snooping around in her personal things, Jerry had confronted Carol. But instead of whipping him, she broke down and told him the truth: he was Walter's illegitimate son, the name listed as his father on his birth certificate was made up. She wanted to spare my mother, her friend, from the knowledge of the whole sordid affair—and that she did. Mary Jo Dunn had died without ever knowing the truth, although she may have suspected.

The things people do.

I stared at Jerry, speechless. But he read my face. “Why didn't I tell you before?” he asked.

I only nodded, and just barely so.

“I've been trying to fucking tell you all night. You just ain't listening. We keep going

off on tangents.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Look, she made me promise not to tell you. She knew you looked up to her, Zach. She was worried you'd lose all respect. Even though I was pissed—and I'll tell you I was out-of-my-mind, super fucking angry at her not telling me before Walter was killed—I kept that one promise. Even after she passed, I just didn't think it was right to say anything. So I kept my mouth shut.”

Until now, that is.

“So, we're really brothers? Or, uh, half-brothers?”

Jerry cocked his to one side. “Surprise.”

It made sense, actually. It all sort of fit. Walter was a real piece of work, I could see him doing something like this—not the love letters, but the screwing around. Jerry was half-Irish, and was never told anything about his father until the day he found the evidence. Walter had seen to it that Carol got everything, if and when he and Mary Jo died before I was out on my own; some legal crap I had heard about, but to which I hadn't paid much attention. Carol had raised me like her own son—in a way I'm sure that's just how she felt. During all the scams we pulled, Jerry always wanted to “play” the role of my brother.

*The best lie was the one that was closest to the truth.*

“So, why are you telling me this now?”

He sighed. “Because, it's almost over.”

I didn't want to touch that one, because deep down I believed him.

“Let me show you something,” he said, and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. He flipped through the few pictures he had in plastic viewing sleeves, until he came to one of a hottie named Sharon that he used to date—I didn't even know he carried pictures. He stuck a finger behind Sharon's smiling face and pulled out a folded piece of paper. It was worn with age. “Just so you know I wasn't about to take any chances. I wrote this the same day I found the letters. Made my mom sign it, too. Part of the deal.”

He unfolded the note carefully, and handed it over to me. It was a fragile torn section of notebook paper, on which a sixteen year old Jerry had stated, in handwritten blank ink,

that Walter Dunn was his biological father, and that should anything happen to Jerry, I should be given the note. It was indeed signed by him and Carol, and dated a dozen years before. I was impressed that he the foresight to document the truth at that age, even as poorly as it had been done, and was even proud of him for honoring his deal with his mother all these years.

“Now, my brother,” he said softly, “I have to go. Just remember, I love you.”

Then he put the gun into his mouth using both hands, and pulled the trigger.

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I tried to scream, but there was something jammed down my throat.

There was a bright light overhead, and lots of commotion around me; strong voices, shoes scuffling, and electronic noise. When I could focus, I saw that I was the center of attention. Masked men and women were busy performing indeterminable tasks.

They were wearing scrubs.

“Mr. Dunn,” said one masked face that came into my line of sight, “it's going to be uncomfortable, but I need you to try and say something. Can you do that for me?”

The skin above the mask was dark; the eyes soft, the voice feminine. Attempting to speak, I gargled at first, but managed to say, “OK”.

“Good. My name is Doctor Sharma. Do you understand me, Mr. Dunn?”

“Zach.”

“Alright, Zach. You're doing fine. Do you know where you are?”

I was in a bed with tubes in me, surrounded by doctors and nurses, and one angry-looking, butch, uniformed officer standing just inside the curtain that defined the “room”, out of the way of the medical staff. What was I going say? A bar?

“Hospital.”

“You're at Saint Mary's emergency.”

“Hawthorne?” It was getting easier to talk around the tube.

“In Reno, Zach. Do you remember coming to Reno?” She had no clue what wild memories were swimming around inside my head, and she wouldn't believe me if I could

tell her.

“Yes,” I answered. “Jerry?”

Dr. Sharma glanced back at the butch officer, but if she got anything from that steel mug, I didn't see how. She turned back to me, “Is Jerry your friend?” I nodded. “I'm afraid he's in worse shape than you, Mr. Dunn—Zach. It's unlikely he'll pull through, I'm sorry. But he is being tended to by the best, and they are going to do everything they can. I promise you that.”

That didn't come as much of a surprise. Point blank shot to the roof of the mouth, it was amazing that there was any chance of saving him at all.

“He was shot in the chest, and he's lost a lot of blood. He has fluid in his lungs.” OK, I didn't expect *that*. What the hell was going on here?

“The girl?” I asked. I had to know.

“I don't know much else, Zach. Except,” she paused, as if in some kind of internal struggle, “I understand two bodies were sent to the morgue.”

“Doctor!” That was the butch cop.

“Really, lieutenant? Does it matter? Won't he find out soon enough?” With that, the officer huffed and exited. “Looks like you're in bit of trouble, huh?”

Yeah, you could say that.

Dr. Sharma pulled her mask down. She was cute, she had a kind face. “Zach, we need to talk about your condition now. Alright?” Again, I nodded. “You probably don't feel anything right now, but you suffered a gunshot wound to the abdomen. More specifically, a shotgun spray right across your lower abdomen, and you got a good amount of buckshot in you. You are one tough cookie, I can tell you.”

I could see the blood stained material over my gut, and more tubes. Blood and other body fluids being pumped in or out of me, I couldn't tell which. But a shotgun? When did that happen?

“Luckily, you were only a few blocks away and you were brought in quickly. But you're going to need some help, and I am going to need help from *you*. Alright? So I need you to be strong for me. Can you do that?”

“K.”

“We're going to need to replace one of kidneys, Zach. We can repair the damage you sustained to the intestines, but you are going to require a new kidney, and possible a liver. At the very least though a new kidney, as both have sustained damage and are possibly failing. We haven't yet assessed the full damage. Do you understand what I am telling you?”

“Donor.” I got the gist of the medical talk, but I still couldn't understand how I had gotten back to Reno.

“Very good, that's right. We need to find you a donor. Now Zach, I hear you are from Las Vegas. Is that correct?” She rolled her R's slightly, it was a pleasant sound.

“Yes.”

“Do you have any relatives in this area? Do your parents live nearby?”

“Dead,” I said.

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“No,” I said automatically.

“I see,” said Dr. Sharma sadly, obviously not the answer she was looking for. She put her mask back on and told one of the others that they needed to get my name on an organ list.

“He's a criminal,” objected somebody, I couldn't see who.

“And I'm the senior staff member at the moment,” replied Sharma, standing up abruptly, “and it's my call. If you don't like it, you're welcome to take it up with the Chief of Medicine.”

“Jerry,” I said. It was suddenly all clear to me. We never did made it back to the highway; we hadn't even left the pawn shop, at least not on our own. But I knew it wasn't all a dream, it was more than just a coincidence—it had to be.

I repeated as loud as I could, “Jerry.”

Sharma sat down next to me again. “Zach, I'm sorry about your friend. There's nothing I can—”

“Jerry's my brother.”

“He's delusional,” said the other voice, “he just said he didn't have any brothers.” I was really starting to dislike whoever that was.

Reese called out for a Lieutenant Reese, and the butch cop returned. “This man claims that he and our other patient are related. Is that possible?”

“I suppose anything is possible,” replied Reese, sarcastically. “Information I have is that they are just associates, roommates. They share the same address. But, you know they have different last names.”

That endless loop of road out there on the highway, repeating over and over. I likened it to somebody trying to beat something into your head, something you didn't want to hear, so that they had to keep repeating it. Over and over. Each time, you absorbed a little more.

*I've been trying to fucking tell you all night. You just ain't listening.*

Of course, I was probably on some mean pain killers—maybe even morphine—and might not be thinking very clearly.

I said, “Check his wallet.”

Sharma turned to Reese, “He said—”

“I heard. Dan, do you still have Fischer's personal affects?” A few seconds later, and Reese was fishing Jerry's wallet from a plastic bag with his things in it; I could make out the gold chain.

“Behind the blond.”

Reese found the note, handed the wallet and plastic bag to some officer on the other side of the curtain, and unfolded it. “I'll be damned,” she said. Then she started to read it aloud, but I already knew what it said. Word for word.

“To who it may concern. Walter Dunn is my real father. My mother lied on my birth certificate. If you are reading this, I am probably dead, because I am not going to tell anybody about this before I die. I made a promise. Let Zach Dunn know that he had a big brother all along.”

The room had gone silent, except for the whirring of fans and the beep-beep of the heartbeat monitor. My eyes were filled with tears.

“There's a couple of signatures,” added Reese, “it's hardly a legal document.”

“It's our best shot,” said Sharma, and was up in a flash and whisking her crew back into a frenzy of activity. “Orderly, get down to OR3, stat. Tell Mendez he has an organ

donor on his hands. Now, move!”

Then she said to me, “If you're right, Zach, your brother may have just saved your life.”

“I know.” That was what he wanted.

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I didn't serve any time.

The owners of the house that we had burglarized had learned the whole story through my public defender, and had decided not to press charges. Besides, they got all their belongings back. There were some minor charges from the DA's office in Reno, but they didn't amount to much. I wound up getting my current probation extended, and community service; that was it.

Maybe my story was that compelling.

Of course, I told nobody about the little detour to Hawthorne.

Police investigators had determined that Jerry hadn't hit anything with either of his shots, except for the cash register and one of the big safes near the front window. Emily got lucky and tagged Paul and then Jerry, not so lucky for either of them. When I threw myself at the ground, I also managed to get close enough to Emily, and twisted at just the right angle, so that Paul hit me square in the belly with one of his shots. With the other, he nearly cut Emily in half.

According to the official reports, both Jerry and Paul had fired after they had been shot. Incredible, but stranger things have happened—as I could attest to.

I went back to Las Vegas, back to the house where Carol had raised Jerry and I. The house he and I had never left, since it had been paid off several years before his mom died of cancer. I still live there today.

I got a job, at a bookstore believe it or not, and worked my way up to manager after just a few years. I spend a lot of time these days reading about paranormal experiences. Go figure.

I have a lawyer now, or rather I am a client of a local law firm, and am trying to get

the house in my name so I can sell it. I decided I want to move out of Las Vegas—maybe to Reno, or even Sacramento, who knows, either would be sort of poetic—and open my own bookstore. It's a quiet kind of way to pass the time, but I like it.

I've had enough excitement for one life.

I think about that night in Reno often—well, not as often as I used to—and it seems to me now that I have two sets of memories. One, where we lived long enough to get ourselves snared in some metaphysical trap, and the other—

The other is where, for a brief moment, Jerry and I could see each other, on our separate gurneys, before being rushed off to the hospital. And during that time, Jerry was desperately trying to tell me something, using that nonverbal communication of ours, but I was unable to comprehend.

At least, not right away.

But that's all over now, and I have my life to live. Thanks to Jerry, my big brother.

I love you, too, man. I love you, too.