

AS-IS FICTION

Volume 2 Issue 2 - September 1997

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As-Is Fiction Masthead and Announcement of Changes

Gone South Productions... and AS-IS FICTION are excited to announce a comprehensive set of changes to our online fiction magazine. AS-IS FICTION will now be distributed freely via our website in PDF, and new compensation schedule for submitting authors will apply. For more information on the new compensation system see: [How To Submit Work](#).

The new compensation system will extend to authors featured in the next issue of AS-IS FICTION. This issue (which was scheduled for the beginning of April) was delayed as changes were implemented. The next issue will come out as scheduled in October.

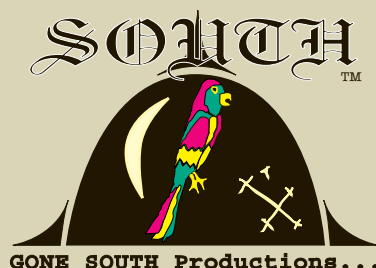
We will also be implementing advertisement opportunities for artists and artist's services in AS-IS FICTION. For more information on advertising opportunities please refer to: [How To Advertise in AS-IS FICTION](#).

Thank-you for your patience as we strive to provide the very best on-line fiction magazine anywhere on the web.

If you have any specific questions regarding these changes please contact the Chief Creative Director of Gone South Productions... via e-mail: ccd@gonesouth.com

Gone South Productions... and AS-IS FICTION are pleased to provide this publication as a forum for the presentation of WORK by new authors and artists. The material in AS-IS FICTION is presented in the format to closely resemble the author's and artist's original work. The material is only lightly edited for typographic errors. Our desire is to keep AS-FICTION true to it's name. Thank-You for taking the time to examine our publication and to enjoy the refreshing experience of original WORK. - Gary M. Blakely II (fall 1996)

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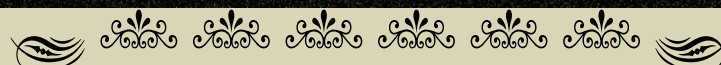
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On Reflective Surfaces

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The bicycle wobbled drunkenly as it sped past a background shaded by trees. Its antique red body spun across the asphalt as its journey drew quickly to a close. A metallic yelp swam through the air as the bike slide onto the pavement.

“Damn that bike! This is the third time I’ve fallen.”

The young woman stood and wiped a trickle of blood from her shin. Checking the tears in her patchwork dress, she walked quickly towards the bike, picked it from the ground, and continued toward her home.

I stare back into the foamy ripples of the half drained styrofoam cup of coffee as if searching its hazel eyes for a reason. A million irrelevant words scramble through my head in a despite race to avoid breaking the silence that creeps around us. She glances shyly at me weighing my lack of expression and dodging my downcast eyes. The silence stumbles forward on the stuttering hands of the clock.

I finally sigh and trip over several interrupters before finding the easiest question to respond with, “Why?” She nods as a slight giggle skids from her school girl countenance.

“Somehow I knew that was all you’d have to say. Oh well, I guess I could only expect you to be surprised.”

I smile in courtesy as my mind spins the world recklessly around its fingers. “Surprised” seems to be only a lame euphemism for the insane changes her words have made in my little crystal world. I guess the fragile worlds our minds create are meant to be broken. Without slivers of glass digging under the skin of our bare feet we may forget we’re real.

I stumble through the void of silence again and finally mutter, “I once had a idea about a concept everyone called tomorrow. I thought I really... I mean... do you really believe in what you’re doing?”

She giggles again as I search the grain of the fake wooden table top for a veil to hide the blush that dashes across my face. The cheap cigarette smoke and sickening acidity of the coffee drag the rejection of the moment closer and closer around the claustrophobic turmoil of my mind. As the silence multiplies itself into a deafening roar, I snap out at some unidentifiable enemy.

“You never even bothered to learn anything about who I am. You stole every breath I had held dear while only finding it to be convenient to be in love with me. And to think I once believed it all, that I once... oh what does it matter. I’m just...”

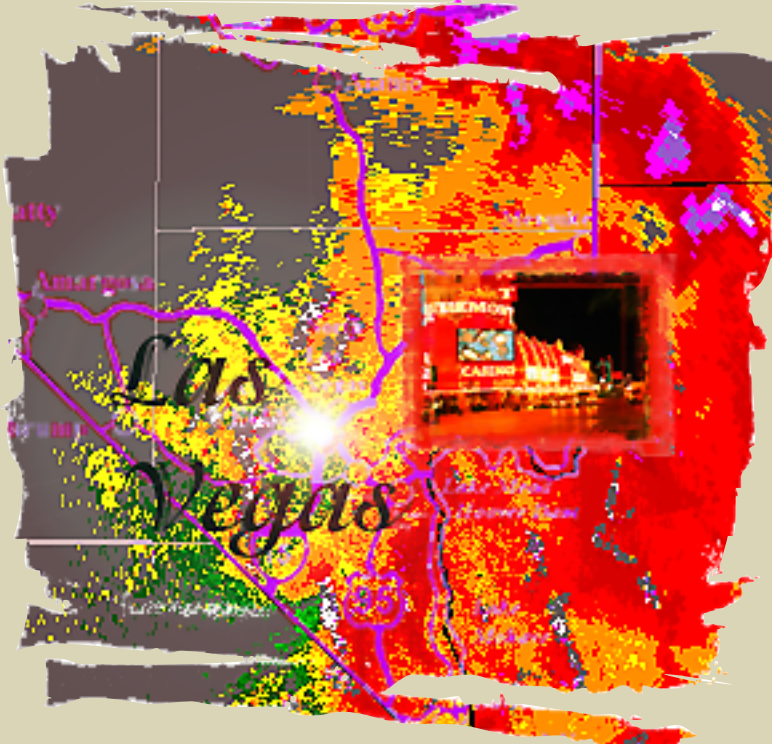
I rushed out of the trendy cafe into New York’s solitude as if loneliness was a cure. In retrospect, dashing away from her and the confusion she poured into my emotions only drove the solution to an unattainable level. But, the harsh apathy of the city seduced me. All I sought that night was a pillow to embrace alone. My mind begged for sleep to shove false security back into the instability that now dwelled there. In the end I slept little, preferring the indifference of New York’s neon and autumn air, preferring to wander aimlessly in self-pity. I questioned whether jumping off a building or being hit by a subway train would be more productive. Finally, the dead weight of sleep dragged me to a grating behind a bakery where I spent the short hours of sunrise dozing.

She stood with tattered unkempt dignity like a mannequin in an out of business 5th Avenue store window. The dim flicker of the electric lamp illuminated the mirror's fading surface as well as throwing dyed black shadows across her bare, pale stomach and wilted face. She stood there in the darkness of a morning that felt like damp laundry as the city hummed dully in the background. Cringing, she poked the plum colored bruises that dug snugly into her stomach and thighs. She rubbed the discolorations with dazed amusement. Sliding her fingers gently across the cuts on her shin she winced and stumbled into reassuring sobs. Glancing at the dark scars on her stomach she let her head drop as she turned from the mirror in a subtle rejection of shame's bitter cynicism. She supported herself with a rickety wooden chair on which her patchwork dress lay wilting across the back. Catching herself before she could take any consolation in tears, she wiped her lackluster eyes. Tiptoeing back to the cracked frame of the bed, she slipped between the frayed sheets. She clicked the tiny glow of the electric lamp away. Her mind then darted to the safety of a trendy New York cafe and her wrists lay limp, locked together in passive acknowledgment of the fresh plum scars growing on her belly.

I never saw the girl again after ditching her decisions in a tiny little New York cafe that served bad coffee and overpriced breakfast food. But, the memories of the Saturday evenings we carelessly spent together on the parkway discussing books, quoting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, and laughing at ourselves were never chased from my shifting mind. I always envision her standing in the middle of the river laughing inexplicably as the moonlit water glides lazily around her unshaven calves. I pensively watch the scene from the crumbling beach while skipping stones toward her. As I stare at the cloudless night skies, I often wonder if she remembers my name. Whenever I eat salty fast-food French fries or drink watered down coffee her name rings in my mind. I often lie awake on warm summer nights and ponder how she sleeps at night under the memory of her pale Christmas lights and that star-decorated fan. I fear she's trapped alone in low paying jobs and run down apartments. But, somehow I manage to keep myself believing she made the right choice, that she could perceive.

I believed in a hopelessly optimistic fantasy world for her. I held my carefully constructed world dear to my heart for almost ten years of my own starvation. One late October night, I wandered the streets, afflicted by insomnia and nowhere to go. As I stared at the hidden beauty of one of New York's old run down neighborhoods, I was slapped back to reality for an hour long eternity by gunshots and a familiar voice cracked with frustration. She fell into the street clutching a gun and wrapping the last shreds of ripped clothing around her. She just lay in the street screaming with years of fractured dreams and saved anger. I stood incapable of comprehending the scene, observing carefully her battered frame and noting the two deep bruises on her shoulders. I observed every breath that forced its way in and out of her gasping lungs, and I noted every pitch that sliced the night with uncontrolled frustration like shards of crystal pressed against one's wrist. When the police shoved her into their cars she had already gone back to a fantasy, a possibility, not a cruel answer to the only question, "Why?"

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I Want to Go to Las Vegas

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When I was eight years-old, my parents and I saw a flying saucer. We sat on our back porch watching an eclipse of the moon, looking up now and then as the Earth spread its shadow over the gray and white ball. It was summer. I remember we were talking, about many different things. After midnight, the moon became

mesmerized in a dark orange trance, and the UFO passed low over the pine trees by the side of our lawn. We hushed. I remember the silence. Stillness where night insects withdrew from tapping and buzzing; the trees stood quiet without a wind. The flying saucer did not come as a glowing ball of light, but as a low, transient passage of an unlit, concrete object, metallic and intrusive. The silence remained after the object passed beyond the roof of our house, when we could no longer see it from our back yard.

My mother broke the stillness. "Must be something the government's doing."

"They're probably studying the moon," said my father.

We never mentioned seeing the UFO again.

On a more recent morning another UFO passed across my skies. My wife went insane and we were moving to Las Vegas. We left at night, stopping by the side of the road part way. I slept. When I woke up in the truck, Oona had gone. I looked for her, and decided when I could not find her that my life had come to some sort of end, and been summed up as a series of incomplete goals and misunderstandings.

My lesson after these events: Be afraid of the truth, so horribly afraid that it requires a change, a change of habit, a change of underwear, any kind of change.

After my search through the desert all I could do was sit in my truck and lose myself in the memory of when I was eight and my parents and I saw the flying saucer, and how the one that night looked just the same, and that Oona was gone. Outside came gray early morning and the sprinklers hissed in the strip mall parking lot. I breathed in the hot oil smell of the engine. I had parked off the interstate. The gas gauge rested on empty. I tried to sleep, but kept waking to the memory again and again.

I turned on the radio, to the news station, to get another voice inside my head.

A man had killed his family, then himself. The broadcaster said that there were no details. The radio rarely gives the kind of details that you would want to know. I wondered what his day had been like, before he killed his family. I know how it is to be driven to extremes. I understand nothing if not the drama of life. Hell has a way of needing to be brought into the world, and I have brought it in many times. But so far, I've avoided drawing blood.

Oona worked maintaining statistics and indemnity schedules for a large life insurance company. Her life was a dance with statistics, probability and marketing. Or as I saw it, fiction, gambling and fear. My work was simpler. I saw myself as a kind of adjuster, not in insurance. I adjusted the methods by which humans lived life.

Death obsessed Oona. We met in college, where she was paying her way through the marketing graduate program. She was older than me, and began her career before I did. She changed then. She became afraid of accidents and stopped driving. She imagined her own death, focusing on it with disturbing concentration. She thought about it more than can be comfortable for anyone. She feared earthquakes, solar flares and comets. She subscribed to left-wing journals and cut out pictures of atrocities in Africa and Asia. She wore black.

I loved her.

Oona left because she didn't understand commitment. She had wrapped herself in a cloud of death, and endings, and finalities. She feared the end of the world, and I guess, more than that kind of ugliness, the end of herself in it. She didn't understand that commitment meant communication, that death could happen more than just once in life. She wanted life to stop all around her. The quiet moment of time made frozen never comforted her. It obsessed her. In the end, all of her life had to come to a halt.

The week before we left for Las Vegas, I came into our home and found Oona rocking incoherently in one of our dining chairs. She had the medium wave radio on the table, listening to gibberish that I couldn't get off my company's bandwidth. The noise came in a monotone, repeating a series of phrases.

"first and foremost GET OUT — you do not belong to that unnumbered horde walking up this road — that great lost tribe of people who are more numerous than American wieners — the angel's head has fallen — perhaps the rudder twisted in the collision — the act of sexual intercourse was made to understand that the course makes no claims of magic alchemy — that he could not be turned in such a way that his wife will last over the ugly and the deformed — the wrangles of love."

I turned off the radio.

We never saw much of each other toward the end, our work occupying us always. When she decided that she had had enough of her work, and enough of putting up with my work, she wanted to stop life cold and move to the desert.

I had flown home from my trip to Montana, and it was a weekday and we both were home. Oona called in sick. Recently, she had finished a large project, and I had included her in one of my company's beta tests, something special I wanted to share, which was what the Montana trip was all about.

We rented a condo in Venice beach outside of Los Angeles. Personally, I liked the street vendors there. I liked the happy desperation of the performers, and the homeless people made it seem all the more real. Oona liked the noise and liveliness, watching the basketball games. The streets have that third world entrepreneurial spirit, but without the critical despair and the sewage smell. There's more violence than there used to be, but I thought I'd never leave Los Angeles, no matter how stupid it might seem to stay. I have money, and money in large sums will always be easy to get in LA. Everyone who gets money moves here, especially the physicians. And physicians know nothing except that they don't know what to do with their money.

Don't misunderstand me. I take advantage of no one. But I am a dreamer, and it takes a certain personality to invest in a dream.

Dr. Husband was a small broodish man, with a sick dry rot smell around him, like odor in the hallways of a convalescent hospital. He was my partner.

First and foremost, I have never believed in miracles, or really anything which cannot be explained. Yet, I cannot explain what happened to Oona. But I believe it had something to do with the broadcasts.

When we first started hearing the broadcasts, our consensus was that a government had begun utilizing a new spy code and frequency. Nonsense had been a mainstay on the medium wave bands for seventy years. I was familiar with most of it: The four number codes the Colombian drug runners use to broadcast their flight schedules, or the nursery rhymes and piano melodies that are a favorite of the intelligence community are good examples. Espionage, drug deals, weapons transactions, did any of it matter? Only that it was interfering with our broadcasts. Otherwise they could babble on all they wanted for what I cared.

When I played Oona the code, I was innocently bitching about my problems. I complained about how we would have to find a new bandwidth before we produced the marketing units. Oona spent an entire night listening to the broadcasts.

Simple discrete messages were our stake, things which made sense. I was co-founder, along with the good doctor, of Whisper Tech. There was no magic there. In the face of it, I saw the downside to the project as how we would convince people that the Whisper was useful.

I have to admit that I had my doubts. It was one of those weird projects. One of those dreams carrying all the songs of success, but I still had a feeling that it just might fail miserably.

The Whisper was a small pin. It could be fashioned into jewelry, or worn on a collar. It made a nice ear fitting. For practical, every day purposes, what the Whisper accomplished was to transmit short messages directly to individuals anywhere in the world, in one's own voice, in real time, without the need of a telephone, pager, notebook, or any other device. One small message, of about five seconds in duration, could be sent to you from anyone, anywhere.

The only technical problem (well, I consider doubt a technical problem) was the interference on our bandwidth. Still, I had to get on with the beta test, with no idea what to do about the interposing broadcasts. It was just gibberish. I'd solve the problem later.

Dr. Husband was a good man, intelligent, honest, rich, and bent on fulfilling dreams. He pointed out my real inspiration for the Whisper. I learned from him that my dread was the antithesis of Oona's recent obsessions with death.

"Do you know what it is like to die?" he once asked me.

"I imagine a lot of different things," I told him. "Really I take from all areas, and figure I'll recognize some of it when it happens."

"No, no, personal beliefs are not what I am talking about," he rebutted. "You see, the brain remains alive for approximately four minutes after the body dies. Several things happen in this amount of time. There's no magic. It's a very simple event, much less complex than the digestion of food, and much less fascinating than the system of its excretion. Serotonin levels rise dramatically. This is the chemical which keeps you awake. While the neurotransmitters are undergoing their sudden mass entropy, this allows the serotonin to combine chemically with the endorphins flooding the brain. There is no pain. But there becomes a very powerful hallucinogenic effect.

Some people get to describe it. Seeing loved ones. Witnessing the presence of a loving force. There are many common threads. But the only living people who get to see this process are doctors, nurses, and a very few brave loved souls who stick with their loved ones at the end. For most of us, death is a private thing.

What you have invented is one way to transmit a last thought, a way to say good-bye, and a way to say that, maybe, everything is really OK. I wonder if people will think that this is a good thing?"

He was right. I loved Oona with a passion and an obsession. My own great fear in life is that in some tragedy she would die. I would lose her and for hours not know that she was not in the world with me. That had been the single most unbearable thought of my life. I wanted to hear her last dripping words. Secretly to myself, I invented the Whisper for her, because on the day she died I wanted her to say good-bye to me, no matter where I was.

I had flown to Montana, and set out to send the first whisper. I had Oona wear the other unit, back in the lab in California. She would receive the whisper. I drove out of Billings to a brown field under a bright blue sky. I arrived early. I walked into the field. The pin was hooked on my ear. I stood for five minutes, until 3:00pm, the scheduled time. I didn't know what I would say at first. But the sky folds long up there, just like they say, and it made me remember a small nursery rhyme I knew as a child. Three o'clock came. I pressed the pin and spoke the nursery rhyme:

The world is so full of a number of things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

I never got a reply from Oona. I found out later on the phone that the message did not transmit. Problem was that she got the gibberish right when I sent the message. On the way back I got the gibberish myself. I took the pin out of my ear. I was heavily annoyed. The interference came as that same sexless monotone voice. The drop time for a whisper was nearly five seconds, five seconds of speech, five seconds of wait. That's why I kept picking up the interference. The Whisper would ignore any continuous transmission. Within five seconds any broadcast had to sign on and sign off.

I was humorless.

Back home, the day Oona decided to move to Las Vegas, I sat on the balcony and Oona slept, and she would have probably sleep all day in bed. I decided to wake her up.

I heard a police siren when I turned around, and instead of going inside, I looked over my shoulder. I had been so out of my mind there on the balcony thinking about my wife that the noise, and screaming and pleading, from a stabbing on the street had drifted right over me.

Oona rested folded in half on the edge of the bed. I bent over her. Her eyes were open. "I'm not here," she said, her head tucked under her arms.

"It's all right. It's all right." I told her.

"I'm not here."

"Yes you are. You're right here, you're upset, but it'll pass. You've been working very hard."

"You don't understand!" She looked up at me. Her eyes were glassy and had a dead on size, the eyes of an unoccupied body. "I'm not here anymore!"

I stood on my feet, trying to remain calm, but I was shaking. I decided to leave. It would be best if I weren't there. She would be better when I came back later.

But when I came back, I could not get her out of her spell. She was rocking back and forth. I set out a bottle of wine and waited across from her until she went to sleep in the dining chair. I had sat for three hours, and it was dark. I went to bed.

The next morning I stepped out of the bedroom to find that our living room had been ransacked. The bookcases were missing from up against the wall, and the stereo was nowhere to be found in the cabinet. The coffee table was missing. Oona didn't notice me as she came out of the hall closet carrying a box of books. I stood behind her, watching her set the box on the sofa and separate the objects into two smaller boxes. I walked into the spare bedroom. The CDs sat arranged on a banquet table from the closet; I had struggled to wedge that table in there. She must have been up all night, sorting all of our stuff into something very like a garage sale. I looked at her from the hallway. "We're selling everything and moving to Las Vegas," she said.

"Everything?"

"Everything. I'm having a house sale. We have enough money that we can get a trailer somewhere around Vegas, and start over. We could spend years out there."

"What about my work?" I asked her. "I can't leave the Whisper project."

"Choose what you care about. I don't want to be whispered to. I don't have anything to say to anyone anymore. I don't want to hear any of it."

"I think you should get some sleep. You've been up all night."

"No. But I'll tell you the truth. I haven't paid the rent here in three months. The marshal's padlocking the place next Tuesday," she said.

"You're full of shit. I would know about something like that."

"You're never here. How would you know? Should I whisper it to you?"

The doorbell woke me out of bed at 5am. A Mexican family stood at the door, the father holding the paper under his arm. I looked past them and saw another car pull into the parking space below our condo. A couple younger than us came up the stairs. That began the mad invasion of my life. The people kept flowing like greedy parasites until six that evening.

Strangers were carrying away everything. By three that afternoon I found our beautiful coffee table, a hand-crafted wood original. It was in the corner of the spare bedroom. I broke off one of the legs and was prepared to beat one of these animals mindless with it. I was walking around with it clenched tightly in my fist. People were keeping out of my way. Oona was shoving things into strangers arms as fast as she could deal.

At one point, I found myself alone in the living room. Out the window I saw her carrying one side of our marble and wrought iron dining table, with an old man, horrified at the weight of the table, going down the stairs gripping the other end. Oona looked unconcerned. She looked intently as if her goal was to get that table out of her life in record time, and move back up the stairs to sell more stuff.

Two people had come shopping in my home, a housewife picking through the cookware on the kitchen counter, and a kid sifting through the CDs. I grabbed the lady's arm. I wanted to tell her to get out, to leave my life alone. Then my insides imploded. I tried to keep the juice down, but my efforts only led me to throw up on her all the more forcefully.

It was Tuesday when we left. She made me hock my Acura. Oona sold her Volvo. We drove out I-10 in a black 4wd Toyota. It must have been 3am when we pulled off at an exit, onto a road that came to a dead end before the ancient and imperial desert. I began immediately to let the heaviness of my head fall me off to sleep. Oona rolled down the window and laid her head outside. She ran her fingers through her hair. At first she seemed to be in a dream, twitching and mumbling to herself, but then came out of it, frozen solid staring at the night sky. She looked around attentively, as if she were looking for something. Something was missing.

"When I was a little girl," she began to speak, "I stayed up all night one night. Just to watch a full moon pass over. I learned that night that the moon contains all the magic in the universe, and that the magic was beamed to Earth by moonlight. I learned how to use that magic. But there's no moon in the sky tonight."

I woke up with my head resting against the steering wheel. In my dream, a great trumpet had sounded. I woke up and looked out onto the desert. I saw the desert hills and the ridges behind ridges in a dark blue otherworldly glow. The desert was occupied by an old and indifferent ghost.

I looked at the passenger seat. It was empty. Oona was gone. I got out of the truck and stood on the dead end road. The bottom edge of the sky was pink with morning against the far ridges. I walked off into the wasteland to look for her.

I journeyed out a quarter mile to the top of a hill, then another three hundred yards to a small ridge. What was the use? She could have gone in any direction. She could be miles up the interstate hitchhiking. How could I find her? I had nothing left: no home, no work. I checked. She had taken my money. I didn't have gas left to finish the trip to Las Vegas, or make it back to Los Angeles.

I walked on.

I climbed to the top of a high ridge in the moments before the red sun would explode over the desert. The back half of the sky was dark blue, letting in the light of the stars still brilliant out in space. I reached the top of the ridge and sat there. I caught a first glimpse of it from over my shoulder. Just like the time when I was eight years-old, the object slid across the sky silently, ominous with an indifference more supreme than the desert, a flying saucer. The same as the one in my memory.

It occurred to me that Oona had climbed aboard. I thought of what the aliens were like, having been skimming over the Earth for years, and this morning picking up a fallen angel, whisking her back into the pink heaven. She had hitchhiked a ride to the moon, to all the magic that had been lost to her. She had escaped the confines of the Earth, and I hoped, found happiness.

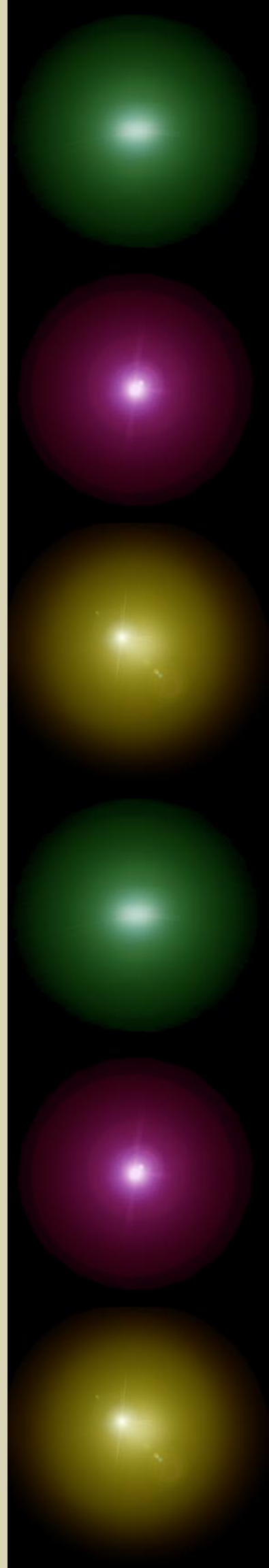
I returned to my truck, with no money and low on gas, without watching the UFO finish its journey into the sunrise. I knew they were there. They knew they were there too. We both agreed we didn't care about each other.

The sun was up by the time I made it back. I realized the idea of Oona being with them was just a notion that comforted me, because then she wouldn't be dead. I knew her bones would be stacked out there somewhere, kept lighted by a secret part of the sun in an indifferent desert.

I opened the ashtray in the truck. I had snuck along the Whisper. I put it to my ear. Maybe Oona had taken hers. Maybe she would call me. But something extremely strange happened. Like they had crossed one end of the universe, came out the other side and back around. My own words swung back on me:

The world is so full of a number of things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

###





Tales From Table #1

©1997 Jary McKinney

They can't take it in Billings, never could. So they used the available technology to build something tall enough to jump off more comfortably. Sad cowboys, and kids afraid of fate.

They have the Sheraton to look forward to. It's always been considered good form for the cowboys not to lose their hats on the way down. They used to take the long step off the rimrocks, but too many lived with only broken bones to match their spirits. Another testament of defeat. So now it's the Sheraton which has a better record.

that's what I was thinking as we drove past, but I didn't bother to tell Bill. It would have been too much for him, and he was happy though he didn't know where he was going. I did it's not my job to comment on the destination after the journey has begun. I'm just the navigator happy with the case of beer, and a rear view all to myself.

It's a little sad for me cause all Bill wants to do is raise vegetables to eat, and peaceful children to call him pappy or some such thing, and to smoke in the middle-of-nowhere the pipe, and smile to himself while the top heavy world tumbles, topples on either side.

So we keep going at eighty miles down the limit free Montana highway till we hit Forsythe Montana Pop. about 2200 now that we are in town. The highschool mascot is a dead cow head, and their school colors are blood, and sweat. Bill is high in spirit, and there's land as far as the eye can see just like anywhere else. There are skinny cows, and fat cowboys. Plenty of bars, the only thing I'm taking an interest in, and I note with some satisfaction that there are no buildings over three stories. Probably a zoning law to protect the people from themselves. We are early so I steer Bill into a bar to shoot some pool while we wait for the Chicago connection to show up, and lead us to the 'land of promise'.

Absolutely no action, and no chance there will be any for the next hundred years. We hook up with the city boys, and head out in the general direction of the land, and a rancher who is supposed to show us where the eighty acres to Freedom is located, I can't help but chuckle a little to myself. I know the water out here is undrinkable, and the thought of finding enough in the arid hills for a forty acre garden sends me into fits of laughter each time I think about it. I brush aside Bills questioning glances with a shake of my head, and blame it on the beer. I don't want to get him down before he sees the plot.

A storm starts rolling in before we have a chance to get to the land, so the rancher offers his campsite to us for the night. The ranch site consists of a meager house equipped with two satellite dishes, and a trailer house presumable for guests. We settle in to the house which is reminiscent of plateau indian dwellings that are discovered with no clues as to why the inhabitants fled. I think they just moved into town. A plateau can get pretty boring.

The boys have a bale of hay, and a bottle of Ernie, and Julio, so the night isn't a total loss. We mostly sit around wondering at the childrens toys, maybe the cowboys play with them when they spend the night here. The thought of a rough old cowboy with a gut hanging over his oversized belt buckle jumping out of his old truck, and running up to the house to play is almost too much for me in my degraded state.

In the morning we eat porridge or something. There is no coffee, a mouse was discovered in the coffee pot. The mouse was dead, very dead normally I would have just washed hell out of the pot and used it anyway, but the boys are a bit squeamish so to hell with it.

One of the cowboys shows up with some drinking water, and draws us a map to the eighty acres that one of the Chi boys inherited from a grandfather who lost half of his spread in a card game long ago, and couldn't make it on the rest so avoided the Sheraton by fleeing to the midwest.

I walk the few miles to the land land land, and that is all there is. Water would be nice, but there is none, and wells around here can go thousands of feet if one can even be drilled, and it still wouldn't be enough to irrigate more than a dandy lion.

The cactus, and scorpions rule here, and kids who read the grapes of wrath, and get silly notions of land should best stay home. If they don't want to find out for themselves why they built that hotel in Billings.

###

*A Romantic Abecedarius
in Trochaic Diameter*

*Arid Santana breezes
Blow on city filth and
Children, driven in throngs
Down to the park on the hill,
Eagerly taste life in the
Final stronghold of cooling.
Grass and shaded playgrounds,
Helter skelter they forge
Into riotous groups, quite
Joyous for they have the
Key to childhood happiness.
Life's importance is the
Merry go round ride which
Never ends. Yet one sees
Older ones steer apart, new
Perspectives dawning. They're not
Quite adults, yet they can't
Rightfully be children.
Scoffing at both worlds, they
Turn to themselves, their own
Uniformed rules answer
Vague new questionings. They,
With their cloistered group set
Xenophobic while their
Yesterselves play on and
Zealously enjoy life.*

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Sometimes

*Sometimes,
In the morning time,
I can see you as a beardless youth
Like your mother did.
With pretty long lashes an tousled hair,

Even the few distinguished lines etching your face
Don't detract
From that aura of vulnerability.*

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Breaks Like Skin

*plucked leaf
speaking smooth and low
and honeyed
like an old smoker drinking lemon tea
to scare off winter and loneliness
but weak like a whine
it lays limp as death
and veined like me*

Never

There were pretty yellow flowers on the curtains and a big ice machine down the hall. It was nicer than most places Anna had been. A woman came to the door sometimes and asked if you wanted new sheets or not. She always did. She almost liked this room. She was almost sorry she was going to say goodbye to motels tonight.

She rolled onto her side to watch the man who looked like a walrus. A foaming tooth brush hung from his mouth and he was leaning towards the bathroom mirror, picking something from his pimply face. She could feel his mustache on her lip and she scratched it.

“How’s your wife?”

“Old.” He shot her a look to leave him alone.

The sheets felt sticky and uncomfortable. Anna sat up on the side of the bed. On the bed stand was a round, white lamp and \$50. He’d turned the faucet on. “Thanks,” she said quietly, so that he couldn’t hear it over the running water.

He twisted it off and Anna looked up.

“Wha’d you say?” he asked, not really caring.

“Nothing.” She touched the orange carpet with the tips of her toes.

Smoke began to blow in from the bathroom. Anna remembered this part of the routine. He always smoked one before he left. “You done?” she said.

“You askin’ if you can leave?”

She was. “No.”

“Good.” He sat on the toilet and hummed to his Marlboro.

She rolled onto her back. She was never going to lie in this bed again. Never is a death word, Anna thought. She didn’t know what she meant but Anna meant it this time. Goodbye to motels and ice machines. Some part of him was down her throat and she coughed.

“Smoke bother you?”

“Sometimes.”

Her bare feet felt thick in the carpet. She dug her toes in. “Nice shag. I always like shag.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?”

She dug further. She pushed so that her toenails hurt, so that her ankles turned red. Anna would find that spot where the floor opened up and fall through it.

“You asleep out there?”

“No.”

“You want a smoke?”

“No.”

“You want me to stop talking?” He wouldn’t have anyway, so she didn’t ask him to. “You want to go out for a beer?”

She blew her feathered bangs from her eyes and rested her perfect hands on her porcelain legs. She could still feel him on her thighs. The bathroom light made Anna’s pale skin translucent.

She glanced up at him. He stepped into the doorway. The light silhouetted his giant body and soft pink folds. Anna closed her eyes against it, but she could still see his outline in her head. “Beer?”

“Never.”

“You don’t drink beer?”

“Never never never.” It felt good to say. It felt simple to say.

“What’s that mean?” He stepped out of the bathroom in his white briefs.

She opened her eyes and saw him. “Nothing.” She sat on the bed for a minute, then rolled up the wad of money from the bed stand and stuck it in her bag. She laid down on the unmade bed and turned the other way.

“Good.” He eased onto the bed and took her again.

TONASKET NIGHT

I stood with gaping mouth
and pounding heart
in the night's cold & dark
and watched
as the dissolving clouds
of our hot breath
revealed a sky
too white with stars.

We were witness
to a cosmic coronation
as Luna
with solemn pagentry
slowly crowned
the Eastern scene
and annointed
in reflection's glow,
Earth's body,
with light & shadow
that flowed to drench
the silent
night-time ceremony.

P.S. Because the moon was on the wane,
my lunacy stayed rather tame.

6 X 96

©1996 Richard Peck



**Surrogate Summer,
molten choice,
unwind your Saturnalian tale
and bring to voice
rememberances
of what is warm & golden,
yet shows
too cold & pale
in Winter's stolen sunlight.**

**Sing each silver syllable
to escape this silent crucible of ice -
And without heeding
gravity's pleadings
to float
on waves of sound
that are at first
just faintly heard
to promise us
the thing preferred
that swells
until it fills the ear
within the minds
of we,
insatiable
in our desire,
who hear a music clear -
which teases the brain
to move the lips
and also gently sways
the hips.**



**This House of Mirror
includes all reflections.
Outside its halls
no mercury falls
to hide the thing behind.**

3 XI 96

**It is a silent soliloquy,
spoken through screaming gestures -
A lifetime's pantomime
lost in the telling.**

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Another Time, Another Place

©1997 Gregory Moore

She lay on her bed, her body locked and motionless in a state of dreaming. She dreamt that she was physically ubiquitous, everywhere at once, in all space, in all tangible dimension. She awoke with a start, and was moved to take a shower although it was the middle of the night and she had slept for no more than three hours. She bathed sleepily, and when she returned to the bed she did so in the dark, for she had neglected to turn on the lamp that sat upon her bedside table. She began to lie down but immediately jumped up, alarmed by a pinprick of warmth at the small of her back. Standing, she switched on the lamp and saw a hole of about half an inch in circumference that went entirely through her mattress and into the floor below. She noticed a small amount of dust and white debris suffused about her bedsheet, and looked up. There, in the ceiling directly above the mattress hole, was an opening of an exactly corresponding size. Through it she saw not the black of night but the pinpoint of a single star, its image belying the fact that it had ceased to exist many years before.



Teeth and Other Things

©1997 Gregory Moore

“I’d love some.”

Every time the waitress smiled at him, he couldn’t help noticing that her right-front incisor was crooked, angling toward its twin so severely that it appeared to be artificial, as if it were on the mouth of a grotesque, rubber Halloween mask. He fixed his eyes on hers, forcing himself to smile. *Does she think I’m staring?* She turned to cut the piece of lemon meringue pie he had ordered. *Jesus, I am staring. But, fuck, can you blame me?*

A petite, blond-haired girl at the end of the counter had been watching him since he had sat down, and she suppressed a laugh at his grimace. She took a final sip of her coffee, and scribbled a note on a small slip of paper she had produced while fishing for change in her purse: *Can you believe that tooth?!*

“Jane, could you come in here a minute?”

She rolled her chair from the reception desk and, after a sigh, stood and walked to his office, closing the door behind her. *Why does he have to be married,* she thought. *God damn it.*

The doctor sat down behind his desk, perusing a chart fastened to the inside of a manila folder. “I’m going to need a full set of x-rays on her. I’m pretty sure her back lower-left bicuspid’s going to need a filling. And she’s got a hole in one of her molars the likes of which I’ve never seen.” Jane wasn’t paying attention to what the doctor was saying, but was reading the nameplate at the front of his desk over and over: *Dr. David Elam, D.D.S.*

“Listen, Phil, this is a goddamn serious proposal.”

Philip Norville was running out of patience. He was sweating through his dress shirt, and angry at himself for letting his longtime friend drag him out to a desolate patch of flatland in the middle of the afternoon.

“Jesus, Jim, just think about it for a second.” He clicked his teeth together, and felt a sharp pain on the right side of his mouth. *Oh, shit, not that filling again.*

James Robert Singer III could stand nothing less than being patronized. “Listen, goddamn it: the startup wouldn’t be more than \$20 million. We put together the consortium, we bid on the land . . . I mean, it’s good for everyone, right? Now, look at these numbers.” Singer bent down and opened his briefcase, retrieving a yellow legal notepad. Norville read the words that had been almost illegibly scribbled at the top: *Fiscal breakdown of Stadium Plan.*

“No, nothing so far today.”

The man listened to the response that came through the receiver, a smile spreading across his face until he laughed out loud, his steel-rimmed sunglasses reflecting a wavering beam of sunlight across the room as he slowly nodded his head. *I’d like to get in between her thighs,* he thought.

His gaze wandered across the room as he listened to the words that came across a telephone line suspended high above the dirt and desiccated brush that constituted the area’s landscape. He looked at a poster pinned against a wood-paneled wall: a caricature of a squat, smiling Mexican individual, including huge sombrero and mouthful of rotting teeth, lined up in cross hairs. The man read the caption at the bottom: *Spic insight.*

“Flight 619 — Dallas/Ft. Worth nonstop to Los Angeles — now boarding at Gate 47.”

The little girl clung more tightly to her mother’s hand. *What’s Los Angeles?* she thought.

“Mommy, what’s Los Angeles?” The mother, however, was engulfed in a heated conversation with her boyfriend. The little girl waited for a reply, and, receiving none, gazed about the terminal as she was being dragged along. She read the sign above the door that the three seemed to be moving toward: *Gate 47.* She rubbed her tongue against her only remaining top incisor, rocking it slowly from side to side.

“Come on: is this for real?”

He looked around the parking lot, searching for the blonde. His car was the only one in the lot. *Why the fuck did she give me this stupid note? A gust of wind blew a tumbleweed across the dusty asphalt. Fucking Abilene. Stupid country hicks. Figures.*

“Jane, are you all right?”

She opened her eyes, and saw that she was on the floor. He was propping her torso up with his arms. *Oh my God, I must’ve fainted. I’m so embarrassed. Of all the places to faint in Tyler.* She looked at his face, and could tell that his concern, while genuine, was only clinical, professional. She heard a light gale of wind evoke a plaintive howl in the architecture of Dr. Elam’s small dental facility. *What’s wrong with me?*

“Phil, are you paying attention?”

Norville reached into his mouth and, after a short pause, removed a gold filling with his right thumb and forefinger. *What an asshole*, he thought.

“Jim, sure: Dallas and Houston are thriving; but the league is NOT going to just hand Austin an expansion franchise because of that. And you wanna up and build a fucking stadium!?” He looked at the tiny dental nugget in his hand before tossing it to the ground. A short breeze covered it with dust.

“You know, you really are an asshole sometimes.”

“See ya later, baby.”

The border guard set the receiver down in its cradle and stood up. He picked up the rifle that was leaning against the desk at which he had been sitting and stepped towards the door. He felt a warm breeze blow across his leathery face as he emerged from the small office shack. *Come on, you fucking wetbacks*, he thought. *Just you try me today.*

“Mommy, mommy — my tooth finally came out!”

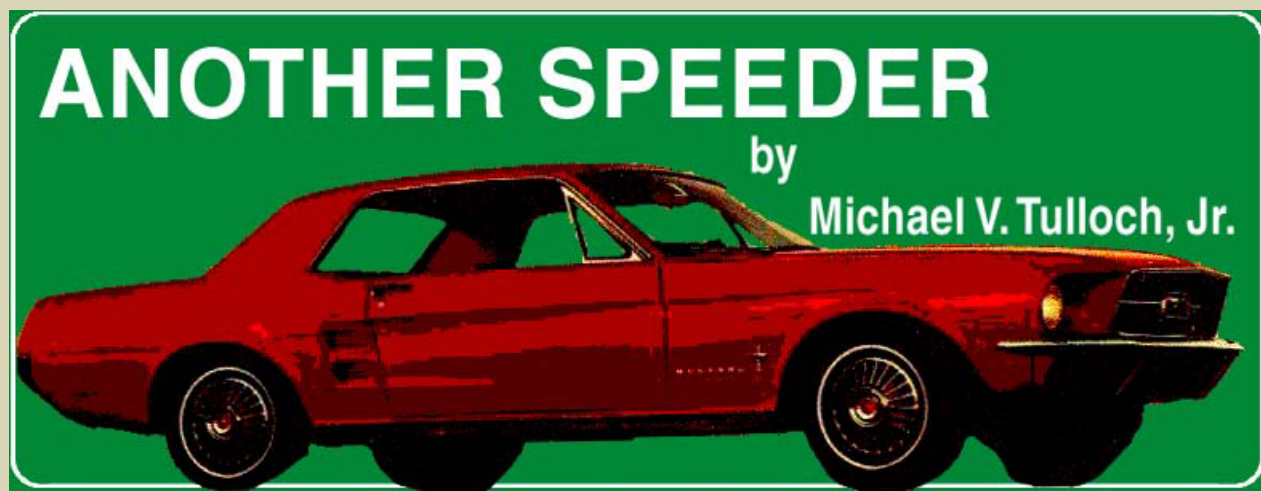
The mother stopped in mid-sentence. “Oh, wow, baby!” she said as she stooped to pick up the tiny, white enamel chip from the terminal’s flat carpeting. “Here you go. Los Angeles is the place where we’re going so you can visit your daddy. We’re going to go through that door and get on that airplane outside there, and fly fly fly through the air to Los Angeles to see your daddy.” She kissed her daughter on the cheek and stood up, resuming her previous argument as the three of them took their places in the boarding line. The little girl looked at the airliner through the glass wall to the left side of the gate, and then at a styrofoam cup blown over the nose of the plane by a circular current of air. *I hope the tooth fairy will be able to find me at my daddy’s at Los Angeles*, she thought. She looked at her mother’s boyfriend. *I can’t wait to see my daddy.* She looked back out at the airliner. The styrofoam cup was gone.

by Gregory Moore

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Another Speeder

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Another stifling, dusty Saturday and it was getting close to three, too. The cop pushed his sunglasses up into his sparse hair and squinted at his watch. Must be late? He squinted down the desolate highway stretch, and at last shook his head. No, wait, there he was. If he listened closely, he could hear the distant, but unmistakable roar of a street rod. He wandered over to the bike, mounted it, and pulled it to the roadside just as the rumble of a cherry-red Mustang sped past. Moments later, and he was alongside the driver, motioning for him to pull over.

He hadn't bothered with the radar; the sound was the same, the car was the same, the driver, the same as always on a Saturday afternoon. And the result would be the same, he was sure. Another ticket written out like he was throwing them into a void. Why had he gotten stuck with this job? He grimaced, as the car and bike slowed in unison. "Don't you worry bout Mr. John Doe," the sherrif had told him. "Keep givin' him tickets; that'll get anyone's attention." Well that was easy enough when people actually existed, now wasn't it?

Was there a pebble in his shoe? Or was the road beginning to melt? He wiped his brow, wavering over towards the car. Its driver side window had been rolled down, and the driver, an arm out, partially covered by a leather jacket. Cigarette ashes rained down like dirty snow onto the searing black road.

"Identification, proof of insurance," the cop intoned. Again, the same impenetrable sunglasses, the stoic grin. And then, the perfect I.D. He sighed, not even bothering to look over the card and paper in his hand.

He made a move to write out another ticket, with the words of the sherrif echoing in his mind, but then froze. No, this wasn't getting his attention. This wasn't working. He had put up with that simple-minded solution in exchange for an easy position, far from the center of action. He had always wondered if the sherrif was somehow in cahoots with this mystery driver, as if the problem wasn't meant to be solved. But why then the ceaseless tickets? The same ritual done over and over again, with no results? No, the sheriff had given up on solving it.

He threw down the ticket book in disgust, a sudden wind flapping its pages, and scattering sand.

"Listen, Mr. Travis Jones. Let's end this game right here and now. I know it's not working, and you know it's not working. You haven't paid a single fine, and you're still speeding."

No reaction.

"I've got myself another idea, that I think will work. We'll simply take you in for questioning, and impound the car. How does that sound to you?"

The driver wiped some speck off of his sunglasses, silently. The cop began to approach the car, and found the window rolled up, the engine roaring. Frustration coursed through him; he stomped back to his bike, and picked up the CB. Nothing but static. He fumed at everyone's crazy lunch hours and strode back to the car. "Ok, alright!" he yelled, and the window came back down.

"Fine," he sighed. "Why don't you just pay one ticket? Just one, and we'll call this thing quits, ok? You'll drive through here and I'll just sit here and read a book or something. I'm sick of this, and I know you gotta be too."

The driver shrugged, and knocked some more ash off his cigarette.

The cop stared a hole through him. How long had this been going on, six months now? And how long before that? Sitting on the road all day got to him in a strange way; when he saw people, they were supposed to at least reply, if not respect the law. And the same action, every Saturday, stretching out from here who knows how far back? Everyone silent, not daring to disturb a silly pattern, never asking why. It bugged him, the moronic sheriff, the conspiracy of silence, this one piece that refused to fit.

He slammed his fist down on the car's front hood. "Why the heck do you do this, then? Is this fun for you? Are you trying to prove something? Tell me!"

The driver cracked a smile. "You have a name, you have insurance, but you have no address. You have a car, but no job. You have clothes but no history. Who in the world are you mister?"

Playfully the driver revved the engine.

The cop was sweating, red-faced and out of breath. He looked at the driver, coldly. "This is all you have, isn't it. Just the car. And you drive fast because you have nothing else. Nothing else in the world, nothing else in life."

The driver rolled the window up and tore off down the highway. The cop looked down at the paperwork in his hand, and cursed as the car vanished into the dusty horizon. "I guess it doesn't matter that I was right," he said aloud. He checked his watch. Ten after three.

"I wonder how many more are like him," he said. The wind blew suddenly, carrying off the card, the insurance in the direction of the vanished car. The cop got on to his bike, and headed for home.

###