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An Open Road
By Gideon Malbono

He lost most of the classic rock stations outside Greyville. The Eagles seemed to fade away as if the years between them actually singing the song he heard and him in the year of our lord 2024 was catching up with them with each mile.

That was certainly how time felt to Garret Smithson. Middle age had come upon him gradually as he traveled the highways and byways of America over the last 10 years. It hadn't actually felt like that long, and maybe that was the worst thing. Time had started slipping for him around 38; months had seemed like weeks, but so had days. It was like his life was a hillside at the very start of a landslide. Little pieces of time started sticking together more and more until, only a few years short of 50 he felt like a year could get away from him in an instant if he didn't stay watchful.

"Watchful," that was how he thought of himself. All of the podcasts, audiobooks, and the like talked about being "mindful." The idea was to be present in every moment. It was supposed to put time into its proper perspective and bring peace.

The concept sounded good to Garret. He had tried to put it into practice. The only trouble was that he spent most of his time alone on the road either listening to satellite radio, an occasional ground based radio station if he happened to be in a major metro area, or, in his more melancholy moments, the "silence" of the wind whipping past his car at 70 miles per hour.

It was tough to focus on the present when the present was just a liminal state. Moving from one place to another felt little different from moving from one moment in time to another. It all just kept going without anything to mark one spot as special over another. Even though he was generally in the driver's seat in a literal sense, Garret

never really felt in control. He seemed to himself to be almost an observer in his own life. Perhaps not totally uninvolved, but more like someone reading one of those “choose your own adventure” books he had read as a kid. Make a decision when prompted and get the preordained outcome based on how your choice fits into the larger narrative that unfolds around you. Otherwise, just read along to see what happens to our hero.

Garret always felt like he was on the lookout for some opportunity to make a difference in his own life, no matter how small. But most of the time was just observation. Hence, “watchful.”

He hit the seek button on his radio and waited for a winner. The sound crawled through a few scratchy partial signals before landing on a chipper man’s voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen that was Pretty Little Baby by Connie Francis coming to you from waayyyy back in 1962 courtesy of KBRD ‘The Bird.’”

Garret let the radio settle there. Oldies wasn’t necessarily what he was in the mood for, but beggars can’t be choosers. When he had gotten in his Subaru that morning and started the ignition his satellite radio had shown an “updating” message. That happened sometimes and would normally take care of itself in a few minutes. An hour later when he had stopped at a service station it was still not responsive.

That wouldn’t have normally been an issue, but he hadn’t thought to download anything the previous night to listen to on the drive. A good true crime podcast could make the miles melt by, but he had been particularly tired and had crashed early.

Still, he could normally just stream something as he went down the road, and he had for a while. Descriptions of missing people and random acts of violence had

accompanied him down the interstate until he had left Abilene. The map showed a shorter route to Bough if he left I-20 and got on county road 325 for a while. He wouldn't normally be in a particular hurry, he had skipped out on the continental breakfast that morning and wanted to get to town as fast as possible. There were places to eat on the interstate, but having spent as much time on the road as he had, Garret ate mom and pop places when he could. Sit down places on the highway tended to be "meh" and the fast food places would kill you eventually.

Sam's Place in Bough wasn't anything out of this world or anything, but they made a nice omelet and the tables were always clean. That morning, that was enough to get Garret to rush his trip just a little. According to the robot the shortcut would save him almost half an hour. All he had to do was take a few back roads.

Trouble was, not far along CR 325 the hills started to rear up on either side of the road. Driving through country that Garret knew had been a sea bed millions of years ago made for more interesting scenery as the elevation rose and fell like waves of an ancient petrified ocean, but it also caused some issues with his cell coverage.

The gps wasn't a problem; he had run into dead spots many times before and had therefore invested in a satellite based navigation system years before.

And the radio wouldn't normally have been an issue either, but since we were still "Updating" it left him with only terrestrial radio to keep him company for the time being. Not that he really minded that much at first; it was sometimes nice to check in on local stations and see what people were listening to in different parts of America.

For Texas that was mostly Tejano stations, classic rock stations, “hits” channels playing what he barely recognized as music anymore, preaching, or seemingly endless farm reports.

Garret didn’t mind Tejano, but it was nice to know what people were singing, so classic rock it was. The Stones serenaded him along CR325. Aerosmith, CCR, Tom Petty, and Springsteen had kept up the chorus on CR 806. And it was the Eagles as he passed through the quaint, sleepy town of Greyville. On his way out of that municipality however, those familiar old friends were lost to him. The static faded in like an ocean tide and washed away the tunes into oblivion. That brought him to the mellow sound and overly enthusiastic DJ of KBRD, the “Bird.”

Not for long though. He had left Greyville on a farm road 3825. A short stint on that and he could turn off onto County Road 8A in Bright County along which a few short miles would bring him to Bough. From Greyville to Bough should have been 45 minutes at the most, at least according to the robot. He could almost taste the terrible coffee and wonderful eggs at Sam’s. But then he saw the sign.

“Town of Sull 10 miles,” it read.

“The hell is Sull?” he asked absolutely no one. He had driven this part of the country for years and knew his way around a little and was pretty sure Bough would be the next town he came to. A quick glance showed that the faithful dashboard navigator agreed. “Oh well,” he thought, or perhaps said out loud in the empty car, there were plenty of dead or very nearly dead “towns” in Texas that now existed only as signs along the road. Maybe Sull didn’t count as a place as far as the people in charge of the map software were concerned. The radio DJ chimed in at this point.

“Up next it’s ‘On The Road Again’ by Willie Nelson from the film ‘Honeysuckle Rose’. This one goes out to all the lost and lonely drivers out there. May you find someplace to finally stop.”

“Kinda odd thing to say,” Garret said, glancing down at the radio as if expecting to see some explanation for the man’s strange words there. Of course, he thought, when you are on the air everyday it probably gets difficult to come up with things to say for each song. The monotony of the small time radio announcing life notwithstanding, Garret focused his attention back on the road in front of him. This was a dry country in general. You expected scrub bushes and arid mesquite trees as a part of the scenery in the western part of Texas and New Mexico. Nothing new there, except...

The color was off. That was it. It had taken Garret a few moments to figure out what was bothering him, but that was it. The mesquites’ trunks were black. Not their natural dark bark color, but jet black. The sparse leaves on them were a funny color too. Some odd combo of gray and brown.

Well, he thought, there must have been a fire here recently. That would certainly char the wood that way, but usually the leaves would be gone. Has somebody sprayed some sort of chemical? Possibly an insecticide or even an herbicide? Could be, he ruminated, but it sure made the landscape ugly if they did.

At that point he saw the gas station. It was a lonely affair; a pair of pumps in front of a decrepit store front. To the side was a single overhead door leading, presumably, to a repair area. Written on the closed overhead door were the words, “Pete’s-Last Stop for 200 miles.” Except someone had spray painted, “ever,” over the 200 miles portion.

“Eerie shithole,” he thought. Then glancing down at the fuel meter and seeing the needle pointed decidedly in the direction of “E” he said aloud, “Well, fuck.” He put on his turn signal and slowed to exit the road towards Pete’s.

In order to pull up next to one of the pumps he had to drive over a driveway bell hose. He was rewarded with a sharp, tinny “ding.” He couldn’t remember the last time he saw one of those at a gas station. Surely the place was self service. The days of the gas attendant were over, even in this desolate part of the country. Weren’t they?

Even if they weren’t, there certainly didn’t seem to be anybody coming out to greet him here at Pete’s. The door to the storefront remained closed, and no life was visible through the dust coated windows of the establishment.

“Maybe the place isn’t even still open,” he mused. Still, he was very nearly out of gas, so he had better check to be sure. He shut off the ignition and opened his driver side door. Doing so turned off the radio. This cut the radio DJ off just as he was introducing the next song, but just as well. He had never been a huge fan of Patsy Cline anyway.

He was pleasantly surprised to see that the pump was of the modern, self service variety. Sure, somebody had cracked the screen of the LCD display, but it still was visible enough to read the familiar, “Welcome, please insert payment card.” He did so and the screen switched to, “Authorizing, please wait.” While he did just that he heard, or sure thought he heard, a scream in the distance.

Only, scream was the wrong word wasn’t it? It didn’t sound human. Maybe a coyote? But it sounded larger than that. Deeper. Whatever it was, it certainly sounded like it was in pain. It ended as abruptly as it had started. He looked around, but he didn’t

see anything. Or anyone. He felt oddly alone at that moment. He had been alone for the last several hours, sure, but there is something different about being alone in your car and being alone outside, especially in a hypothetically public place. It makes you feel isolated and vulnerable in a way that steel and glass of your car guards you from while you fly down the highway. Maybe it's the quiet. A place for people feels unnatural without the sounds of human activity. It makes the spaces seem bigger and more alien.

These thoughts wove through his mind as he waited for his tank to fill. When he heard the click of the fuel spout announcing that it was done, he shook out of his reverie.

"Stop it," he said to himself, "people go crazy when they let their minds wander too much. Just focus on the real world around you and keep out of your own head." It seemed like sound advice. Of course, he was saying it to himself to stop from being scared of a rundown gas station in broad daylight, so, maybe he wasn't the best judge at the moment. Either way, he returned the nozzle to its resting place, closed the fuel hatch, and got back in the driver's seat. As he pulled away he saw a shadow moving around the side of the repair bay structure. He wasn't sure what it was he saw, but something made him look away swiftly. Nothing he could summon in the logical part of his mind could convince him to look back into the rearview mirror. An edgy chill flowed through his body. He felt like a kid lying in bed at night with the covers pulled up over his head afraid to lower them for fear of what monster he might see slinking out of his closet. As if looking at whatever was there would kill him just by seeing it. Logically he knew that no matter what he saw in the rearview mirror could possibly be bad enough to justify his fear, but that didn't matter. The fear was there, like a plastic bag over his head

being pulled tight, growing ever more oppressive the longer he waited, each moment, each breath, suffocating him by using up precious air.

Then he rounded a curve in the road and the fear was gone. Looking back he saw that Pete's was no longer visible.

"Fuckin hell," he spat. He didn't know what was wrong with him, but he did know that he needed to get a grip on himself. And he needed to do it immediately. He rolled down the driver's side window and pushed his head out into the oncoming wind. The sound of the road moving past him at 70 miles an hour drove out everything else. For a moment, he felt refreshed, like one of those movie characters who snapped himself out of a funk by going to a bathroom sink and splashing cold water in his face. He leaned back in and closed the window.

As he did so he noticed that the terrain was starting to change. The area around the road had been a nearly flat plain slowly falling away at the horizon before. Now the ground on either side of the road was lifting up, as if the road was passing into a hill that had been cut to make way for it. Sandstone walls revealed untold ages of geologic history as the road wound its way through the open wound in the land.

The walls on either side of the car seemed to be getting closer and closer from Garret's perspective. Then it was clear that it was no optical illusion. The space between his vehicle and the solid stone on either side was barely enough to permit his mirrors from touching the rock.

He slowed to a crawl at this point, not wanting to scratch his paint on the increasingly tight passage. He wasn't sure what to do. Should he stop; turning around was no longer an option, but he could back up the way he had come. Part of him

petitioned him to do so. Another part, the part that said there are no monsters in the closet and you know it, said that was ridiculous. This was a public road. Sure, it had gotten narrow for a while, but that simply couldn't last. The two parts of him, the fearful child and the stern, practical adult, contended with each other as he rolled slowly down the tightening road. Up ahead the road started to climb as if to crest a hill.

"That's it," he said to himself, "I'll be able to see what the road looks like at the top of the hill. If it widens back out great, if not, to hell with it, I'll back up until I can turn around and head back to the main highway." As he reached the pinnacle of the hill, the DJ on WBRD teed up another song.

"Time to bring things down a bit friends. Down a great bit indeed. Here is Leonard Cohen with 'Anthem.'"

When his tires reached the top of the hill he could indeed see for a great distance in front of him. The arid land stretched out to meet the horizon in a blurry mirage of a line. The road, however, did not go on. At least, not in the way he was hoping, or even fearing. As the road descended down the other side of the hill, it just kept going down. And down, and down. It disappeared into the mouth of what was either a cave, a mine entrance, or a tunnel of impractical steepness.

Seeing this Garret put his foot down on the brake. In the sudden attempt to stop his tires skidded in what was revealing itself to be rather deep gravel on the road. With his foot all the way down and his knuckles turning white, Garret realized that the skidding wasn't stopping. If anything, he seemed to be speeding up. It was as though the road had fed into a gorge filled in with loose gravel. As his car slid down what was quickly becoming an ever steeper slope, the gravel slid with him. It was if he had a front

row view of a rock slide, only from the perspective of the rocks. The whole time, the walls on the sides of the road never moved further apart. He was moving faster and faster despite his best efforts as the grade dipped ever lower.

As Leonard Cohen sang about the crack that exists in everything, Garret found himself moving into the open maw of a literal whole in the world. As the darkness took him, he seemed to be moving ever faster and faster.