

# An End to an End

Seventy miles west of Albuquerque and seventy miles east of Gallup, the highway cuts through the dry hills and brown stalks of grass, stretching far off into the horizon.

The pale blue sky hangs above the landscape, just as plain and barren. Seldom does a cloud pass through and never does a drop of rain fall to the parched earth. The hills gently roll one after the other; each one covered in shriveling shrubs and short brown grass whose stalks bend and curl beneath the sun and are blown away by scorching winds. In Joshua trees, with pallid and peeling bark and withering pines, hawks often sit together in their gatherings, blending into the similar pale brown of the branches, becoming part of the tree. Snakes crawl quickly on their bellies to avoid being burnt by the hot ground and to their dark dwellings beneath rocks. A coyote may howl from time to time, but it is never heard. The single sound, which always hangs just above the landscape, is the ceaseless drone of the highway.

The road itself, Route 66, is nothing more than a straight line of dust on which cars sputter and speed along. In pictures, the road seems a perfectly paved stretch of heaven, black with fresh asphalt, smooth and slick. But nothing stays pristine in the burning New Mexico sun, as the road runs dusty and cracked, like the land in which it traverses.

Signs lined only one side of the road, “736 miles to Bakersfield, 752 miles to Los Angeles.” They would say. And, in another 20 miles or so, another sign would rise from the earth and inform the drivers of the distance between them and the West. But halfway between Albuquerque and Gallup, where radios crackle and whistle in loneliness, it becomes no longer *the* road to the West, it becomes *a* road to the West. A solitary road, permanently etched into the ground, splitting the Promised Land in two. It moves, however, like a stream, gently carving its way through slick boulders and slipping over sandy banks. Ask any man journeying along this particular patch of the highway and he will call it “halfway to heaven” or “halfway to hell” depending on his direction of travel, though it is unbeknownst which is which.

On the side of the highway, on a red, dusty patch of earth, a small building stands proud amongst the dirt. The words “Rockwell Diner” are written in curly letters on a neon sign facing the road. Windows line the eastward wall so that a driver may gaze into the diner and be tempted by its radiant interior. Next to it lies an empty lot except for an old, rusty gas pump. It seemed as though the dust that should be covering the pristine diner repositioned itself in a red haze over the lot. The dust absorbed the sunlight, glowing like hot ash and obscuring the view of the lonely gas pump. Often would this ugly haze deter drivers from stopping at the station.

Standing alone in the blinding sun, next to the lone, rusty gas pump number six, was a tall, dark man with a sunburned face.

The big clump of red flesh that he called his nose was blotchy and covered with peeling skin. He wore a trucker's cap over his greasy brown hair which seemed to drip like mud down his sweaty forehead. He wore a pair of old, worn overalls whose left leg had a red-speckled patch lazily sewn on as to cover a tear. His white t-shirt was stretched and stained with spots of who knows what here and there, his pits and nape of his neck were damp with sweat and his collar was stretched far enough to fit a watermelon. His arms were big and powerful, with veins pulsating and pushing hard against his skin, and his hands were calloused and rough. His eyes were small and beady and were always fixed to a single point. The grimy man, all alone in the land that God forgot about store with tight, squinting eyes at the world passing him by.

Everyday, the whole world would pass by the rest stop. A family of five in their old Studebaker, the tail pipe coughing up black smoke, the car straining under the weight of its passengers. Two kids pummeling each other in the backseat, their mama in the front, reaching back to stop them, and papa, with his eyes set on the road, ignoring the world in car. Families were his favorite to see. To the guy standing by gas pump number six, seeing a family in turmoil in their car begot the same feeling peering through the window on Christmas morning. Sometimes, a loner in a broken down jalopy, rusted metal carried by a grinding engine would screech by, his eyes not set on the road, but the horizon. The hot and heavy air of the landscape was pierced violently by the screaming engine and would eventually fade out of existence, along with the driver. The man was glad that men like these would never stop at the *Rockwell*.

The heavy smell of gasoline and low drone of engines which buzzed like a horde of locusts hung constantly above the road and encompassing the landscape. Each driver makes his way in the world, the world making its way about the driver. They head for the glowing horizon, onward, always moving, always stretching their arms out further and further. He would often wonder if the cars even had rearview mirrors, or was that just legend from long ago. Many cars look identical but never two drivers. The vehicle for their dreams is something as inhuman and separate from themselves as the road, but it is what propels them into tomorrow.

And the man stood all by his lonesome, next to gas pump number six, trapped in a world of movement.

The diner was set a few yards from the station, only separated only by a dusty walk in hot gravel. Then the door is opened and the walls are whitewashed, covered in various pictures and newspaper clippings acquired over the years and the black and white-tiled floors always kept clean. The counter is polished white, not a smudge or speckle to be seen. It is circumscribed by a smooth chrome lining and high stools with red-plastic seat covering. Steam rises slowly off of pies and cookies and mingles with the cool air, creating an aroma that warms any man lucky enough to take it in. A carousel showcasing these various baked goods fresh-made that day stands behind the counter next to a coffee percolator atop a gas stove.

Behind the counter stood the diner's only worker, a woman. She looked as if she had been sculpted by the finest chisel and purest marble. She had creamy white skin and a small nose that came to a slight point. Her almond shaped eyes glowed like sapphires and her long eyelashes bat at each customer as they walked in. Always quick with a joke, always laughing and jubilant. Before the cooling oasis of the diner soothed its hot and irritable customers that arrived from a punishing world, it was her radiance and her charm that gave them the homely feeling they had been longing so. Though it was her graceful allure that they came for, it was something else that they had stayed for, something about the woman behind the counter. Her long brown hair flowed down her swelling breast and her two red lips always remained gently pursed, like two rose petals gently resting on one another. Men took their sweet time eating but could never seem to solely look on in admiration.

"What's your name?" they would ask.

"Mabel." she would reply in a breathy voice too sweet for such a basic question.

"Ah, Mabel, what a name. It's my mother's name."

Travelers would reveal to her all of their most intimate and personal stories. To them, she was a friend, a confidant, and, most importantly: a shapely dame. Many times, a traveler would beckon her to lean over the counter so he could whisper something sweet, or, for the braver of travelers, something provocative, in her ear. She would just softly giggle all the same while delicately pulling her hair back, and then continuing with her various chores. It was not uncommon for a man to spill his coffee just to gawk stupidly at her bending over to clean it up.

"Sorry miss-"

"You missed a spot right there-"

"No, a little further-"

"Perfect, right there."

She would pretend not to notice and with her countenance turned to devious smile, "accidentally" spill part of the contents of her wash bucket on her white shirt and sigh with a faked anguish over the clinging fabric. After having their fill, the travelers would leave on a final note, thanking her one last time. Next to their clean plates, a hefty tip that would ensure the diner's survival for yet another day. She would just laugh devilishly to herself and place it in her brassiere; and then smile seductively at the next one.

The men in the diner took their time eating and drinking, and talking to each other. From the window, the line where the land meets the sky can be seen and is often stared at, sized up, seen as an opponent, taunting and beckoning. They laughed and joked with one another, filling their bellies with pie and coffee. All travelers spoke a language to one another, not understood by anyone else. It was the language of a secret world; the language of the road.

“It ain’t *too* bad, is it?”

“Too bad? Boy, I once made it to California on less than half a tank in a car ten times as beat-up as yours, sure as shit you’ll make it to California. Pretty sure I was younger than you too. How old are you? Sixteen? Hell, I done it when I was fifteen.”

“I hear the girls in California got a way of talking that just eats a man’s heart right up.”

“When I get there, I’m gon’ kiss every one of ‘em.”

“Hey, leave some for the rest of us!”

They brought this strange and mysterious world into the diner and reveled in it with one another, a common brotherhood. To know that there were others out there on the road, to see more than an automobile in front of them, kept their hope alive and made it stronger. Mabel shared no part in this hope, remaining a piece of the diner like the air conditioning or the counter. She knew this all too well. While maintaining her poise and grace on the outside, she sighed deeply on the inside.

And the lonely man remained outside, standing next to gas pump number six, watching as the cars went by.

The dawn broke slowly over the landscape, the sun taking its time rising over the hills. The diner was empty, except for a man in a red plaid shirt and a gray worn out trucker’s cap. He pushed around his sausage and eggs with his fork, staring blankly out the window into the band of gold. It reflected in his eyes as he took a long drink of this sight.

“More coffee?” Mabel asked, presenting the pot of fresh coffee to his turned away face. He gently nodded his head yes without breaking his trance. She filled his cup and tried to see what it was that caught his gaze. Once she saw it, she looked away and continued on in her business about the diner.

“Ya know, Mabel,” he began, “someday, that’s gon’ be mine.” His gaze was not yet broken and to this, Mabel said nothing. “Today’s a big day. Gonna make it past Flagstaff. Then once I’m there, I got less than two days to Los Angeles.” He said this, quite content with himself, never breaking his stare. “Less than two days.” He repeated.

“Well then,” Mabel began, staring at her rag as she wiped down the counter, “maybe you ought to get a move on.” The man looked up at Mabel. He looked down at his coffee and took a long sip.

“Thank you very much.” He said, trying to look her in the eyes. Still, her gaze remained intent on her work. “Gonna be an actor.”

“An actor? Really now?” Mabel said quietly, half to herself and half to the man. She couldn’t help but smile to herself in her lambaste way.

“Gonna play in all the big roles, plastered all over the silver-screen. My mama told me I got the face for it, don’t ya think?” He smiled, his teeth poking out of his head like a crocodile. Mabel looked up at him and with pseudo admiration and smiled graciously. “Course a guy can only hope that he’ll get to share the screen with a gal pretty as you.” He said as his hideous grin broadened.

“You’re too funny.” Mabel laughed, pushing her hair back. “I never got the movies. How does a tiny little face cover that whole screen?”

“I dunno, I guess some were made for it and others weren’t. I mean, not every was blessed with a smile like mine- or yours.” Mabel kept her respectful and attentive gaze on the man, letting his words flow in one ear and out the other.

“Well, I don’t know about you but I wouldn’t want *my* face all over a big screen for everyone to see.” Mabel said, leaning over the counter. She folded her arms and rested her breasts atop them. “Would you?” Taking a moment to unstick his eyes from the valley of cleavage, the cretin looked up and into her eyes, peering into his soul and was momentarily stunned by her beauty, like a child staring at an enormous piece of candy. She was all that reflected in his eyes.

The man enjoyed his new view and felt as if he could not break his gaze of her. The sun began to rise higher and higher and the golden band returned to a fine line shared by the brown of the hills and the orange marmalade hue of the sky. After momentarily stepping out of his dream and desecrating this view, he stood up from his empty plate. What he ate could not be determined as his plate was wiped clean by procrastination. With two fingers, he fished around in his pockets and took out a crisp dollar bill.

“I really hate to say it,” He softly whispered, leaning over the counter towards Mabel, “but I really do have to get going. Maybe if things don’t work out in California and if I’m taking the same road back- well, who knows?” She smiled at him and took the bill from his hand and placed it in her brassiere, a transaction she was accustomed to making. She smiled with her eyes at him and pursed her lips. As he began to walk out the door, Mabel took up her rag once more and began wiping down the counters. She glanced quickly at the horizon, and suddenly, on a whim, she grabbed a beaded bracelet from a jar behind the counter.

“Wait!” She called to the man on his way out the door. “Would you like to buy one of my bracelets?” The man tilted his head in confusion at her and slowly returned to the counter. “I made them myself,” Mabel began, “it’s a trade I learned from this old Indian when I was a girl.” She handed the man the bracelet and stood up straight with pride as he examined it. He rolled the turquoise beads between his fingers over the twine lace.

“Not bad, not bad at all.” He said to himself. “How much?”

“A dollar for one, two for one-seventy five.” She replied at once. He looked up at her and his eyes narrowed at this suddenly matured woman.

“Well I ain’t got another person to buy a second one for. How’s about you cut me a deal at one for seventy five cents?” He replied. Mabel milled the idea in her head. She stared at the jar, filled to the brim with unsold bracelets. Her mouth was about to form the word “yes”, but then she felt his sharp dollar bill stabbing at her breast.

“No sir, it’s a dollar.” She said as her eyes narrowed at this man. In one visit, he had turned from stranger, to customer, to friend, and finally, to a challenge.

“Come on, Mabel, for me? A dollar? I just want something to remember you by and you want me to spend all this money I don’t got?” He leaned over the counter once more, smiling with his crocodile teeth. This time, she leaned away.

“You want it or not? It’s a dollar.” Mabel replied sternly. The man glared at her for a moment and then exhaled hard like a bull. The finely cut turquoise, he knew, was

worth far more than a dollar, but he had to consider for a moment whether or not the finely sculpted woman holding it was too. He took a wad of crumpled bills from his shirt pocket and fingered through until he found a one dollar bill. Mabel snatched it from his hand and shoved it into her front pocket. The man took the bracelet and stormed out the door, leaving Mabel all alone in the diner. She smiled contently with herself and picked up a shining spoon. Looking into her beautiful reflection, she sighed- with satisfaction and sadness.

He exited the diner and walked into the dust, mumbling swears to himself and kicking up an ankle high cloud. The lonesome man was leaned against gas pump number six, waiting for the owner of a silver Buick to return. He watched each car move along the road and finally, out of view behind the diner. The man from the diner pushed the lonely man aside and entered his silver Buick and slammed the door shut. His engine roared as he sped off, only leaving the nauseating smell of gasoline and a cloud of thick dust to linger after his departure.

As he opened the screen door which separated the desolate outside with the homely indoors, a cool rush of air yawned in his face. It was filled with the soft smell of baking bread and Mabel whistling a jaunty show tune as she wiped down the counters, content with what had previously transpired. The man in the doorway was able to relax his squint from the bright outside and to enjoy this sight. He took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead with it. He ran his fingers through his greasy hair, in a desperate attempt to impress the woman behind the counter. She raised her head, directing her happiness toward him. His posture immediately stiffened and a nervous grin turned the corners of his mouth up.

“God, Jacob,” she started, “you shoulda seen this one.” She said with a laugh. It seemed as though she forgot that he worked just outside the white walls of the diner, out in the dusty gas station and had seen the man.

“I think I got a good enough look.” Said the man that stood next to the gas pump as he grabbed a broom. He felt that it was an accomplishment, hearing his own name. Not a traveler that stopped at that lonely rest stop ever asked for it, so much so he began to forget it.

“He’s gonna be a star in the movies one day. That beautiful face of his, plastered all over the silver screen.” She said, feigning vomiting. Jacob only laughed softly to himself and kept sweeping. Mabel stared into her reflection in the polished counter. She saw a small drop of spilled coffee left by the butt of her jokes and then looked out the window, at the cars passing by. In the early hours of the morning, the highway slowly comes to life, awakened by the gentle light, the sound seeming to rise and intensify with the sunlight. The drone of the highway was constant and omnipresent but she could see and hear each individual car passing, first a faint roar in the distance ahead of the diner, and then a faint roar behind the diner. She stared down solemnly at the coffee stain and left it as an imperfection on her counter.

Jacob continued to sweep up the bits of dust and dirt blown in from the outdoors. Crusted mud lay between the cracks between the tiles and he swept vigorously at it, never able to quite clean it with the broom, but never ceased to try. He adored the diner, its smells and its sounds. The frying in the kitchen, the bubbling of boiling coffee, the coughing and snorting traveler at the counter, the loud and screaming children which

were a rarity there. Sometimes, he would pretend to not see a car at the gas pump honking for service. It became his home and his friend. Though he knew full well the reason its doors remained open. He gazed upon at the vixen behind the counter with sigh of admiration and disappointment in himself.

“How much?” Jacob asked.

“A dollar. I sold him one of my bracelets. One of the ones beaded with turquoise, he tried to bring it down to \$0.75 but I stood my ground. I put on my most stern face and said ‘Lookee here, it costs \$1. You’re buyin’ a piece of me when you’re buyin’ one of my bracelets and I don’t come cheap.’”

Jacob looked up at her.

“And he was all apologizing, sayin’ he was sorry for bein’ so tight and tried to give me more. And I said, ‘No sir, it’s a dollar, I won’t take a penny more or a penny less.’” Mabel declared triumphantly. At the end of her speech, she was smiling uncontrollably and searching Jacob’s face for a reaction. He squinted at her, as if waiting for more.

“That’s it? A dollar?” Jacob asked. Mabel face deflated like a balloon and she recoiled back to her familiar posture and countenance behind the counter. She felt the crumpled bill again, poking awkwardly at her breast. Her cheeks turned cherry red.

“Yes,” she said with a broken voice, “just a dollar.” She became sullen and began wiping the counter in perfect circles, this time wiping up the coffee stain. “You know,” she began, “I think there might be something in my bracelets. Maybe something big, maybe something small, but- something.” The bracelets filled a glass jar which stood right between a framed picture of Betty Boop and a jar of sugar. Each one was expertly crafted by a hand whose life could be dedicated to them. Some contained intricate bead patterns of colorful and contrasting hues, depicting what Mabel called the “Eye of God” or “Cupid’s Tears”. Very few were made of turquoise which Mabel had trouble finding, but when she did, she would talk for hours about the purity, quality, texture, and color of each gemstone. She was convinced that turquoise falls from the sky, “chiseled away at by her guardian angel”. She could spend hours admiring it. Her favorite thing about it was its uneven and jagged edges. She would run her fingers over each delicate imperfection, but would eventually even it out when making a bracelet. Each bracelet was crafted carefully, only when she had the inspiration. The jar, large enough that it once contained a pickled heart, was overflowing with her bracelets that seeped over the sides and began falling to the ground. Mabel would just pick them up with a sigh and wear them herself.

“Something, huh?” Jacob began, “Well, ya never know, I certainly think they’re beautiful.” She smiled at him sweetly. Jacob sat at a stool in front of the counter to rest his exhausted feet. He rested his head on his elbow and just enjoyed the comforting atmosphere of the diner and Mabel’s presence. Just to watch her go about her daily business, cooking, baking, cleaning, tending to customers, or just staring idly out the window gave the lonely man that stands next to rusty gas pump number six all the joy he needed. Mabel approached him from behind the counter and poured him a cup of coffee.

“Thanks.” He said, looking her deeply in the eyes. They smiled at him as she elegantly strolled away to the kitchen and out of sight to continue her various chores and duties.

“A man was in here the other day with his son. He bought three of my bracelets. Three! He told me that he loved them a lot. Apparently they’re going to Reno. Mama’s dead so they got nothing keeping them tied down. I know I say it a lot, but oh, I really do hope they make it!” Mabel said from the kitchen.

“That’s the thing about pretending to care, Mabel. Ya do it long enough, and before you know it, you start caring!” Jacob preached to her. He could hear her chuckle from the kitchen.

“Oh, stop it, that’s not true! I really do care if Sheldon becomes a star or if some man makes it to the moon! ‘Course I care!” He could hear her begin to crack up and her soft giggling turn to almost maniacal, hacking laugh. Jacob shifted uneasily in his seat, listening to this laughing wreck, howling at her own cruel joke. She returned to the dining room with her composure regained, wiping a tear from her pretty eye. “And ain’t it strange that they’re always gonna be some big-shot? Some entre-pen-or, some ‘capital investor’? At least what they tell me. I don’t even know what half those things are.” She took a deep breath to calm herself down from whatever laughter remained. Now she polished her reflection in a knife, looking at herself in admiration. “But I just keep smiling and nodding, smiling and nodding. I give what they’s been looking for all along that road,” she said, pointing out the window, “and then they leave. I wonder if any of them even remember my name. Mabel.” She looked deeply at the knife, at her reflection which bent and contorted in the metal. She set it down on the counter and looked out the window. The horizon had entranced her. “Jacob?” She said in a broken voice. Her crystal eyes were transfixed to a single point outside the window. The sun shined and sparkled in them. The man who was hunched over his coffee during her hysterical rant looked up at her. When he saw her new solemn expression, his posture opened towards her.

“Yeah Mabel?”

“Do you-“she began, and took a pause. She slowly exited her trance and looked him in the eyes. “Do you think *I* could ever go?”

“Go? Where, Mabel?” he asked his tone changing to a nervous and inquisitive one.

“There.” She said under her breath, pointing past Jacob’s head. He did not need to turn around to know what she was pointing at. At this question, his stomach turned and his heart began to race.

“I-I don’t know Mabel,” he began, “I mean, the road’s right there, go ahead!” This statement was accompanied by an enthusiasm as artificial as the cars that traveled the road. She glanced once more at the road and only smiled at Jacob. Her smile did not convey the same feeling of jubilation and pride as before. It seemed to be the child of Jacob’s enthusiasm. She lightly touched her cheek and stared out the window for a long time, hypnotized by the light that could one day be hers.

Then, she noticed a spot on the counter and began polishing it once more.