

Lunch Time

I'm parked at a crossroads at a Sac-n-Pac surrounded by rusty barbed wire and dead skunks. As I gaze out over the two lane highway a man backs in next to me and appears at my shotgun window. He has a Texas tattoo that is losing its shape underneath one eye while two teardrops drip from the other. The teardrops are so old they are forming tears of their own, crying green into the man's deep brown skin.

"Hey man, you got a lighter?"

I turn down the radio and finish slicing the misshapen orange rectangle from the block of cheddar. I cut towards myself slowly and then put the the cheese on top of the ham. "I got this car lighter. Let me see if it works." I press it in, grab the mustard and ham from the little green Igloo on the shotgun seat and toss back the cheese.

"Watcha ya workin' out here?"

The lighter hadn't popped out yet. "Yeah, I'm painting a house back in F. Last day, just touch ups and loose ends."

"Oh yeah? I do taping and floating, but I can't find no fucking work right now. Yeah, I'm out here picking up some money from this chick."

Trucks that were once white roll past layered with dirt. Men wearing mesh caps with folded bills pull in wearing work boots caked with mud and concrete with worn out soles, their bottom lips packed with snuff. They exit with hot dogs, Hunk-A-Pizzas, fountain drinks, beer and scratch offs. I finish making my sandwich: mustard, bread, cheddar and thick sliced ham. I take the painters towel I was using as a cover for my armrest and shake it out my window, then drape it neatly across my lap. A tallboy sweats in my cup holder, its brown bag is soaked through hanging loosely at the top. The woman on the lunch shift places the brown bag flat on the counter with an inch or so hanging over and tears it neat along the edge for me, she calls this a "haircut" and smiles at me every time she does it.

"I couldn't make it all the way out theres with this much gas so I had to pick up this money. It's turning out to be a good day though."

"Yeah, it's nice out. Warming up." The lighter still hadn't popped out yet. The man looks back and forth holding the stub of his cigarette in one hand and a new one in the other.

"I could go park under a bridge right now and smoke some

ice but I don't want to. Shit, but I was back in S.A. with this call girl last weekend and I had a fucking ounce, bro, some fucking shards." He looks down measuring out the size of the shards between his index finger and thumb, carefully checking his accuracy. "Man, we were partying! I must have spent like 700 bucks. I didn't pay her to, you know, but I might as well have considering all that fuckin' money. Hey man I think the car needs to be on for that shit to work."

A news show plays from my speakers as a Spanish station plays from his. I turn the ignition, pull out and punch back in the lighter, take another bite of my sandwich and a pull from my beer. There are a shit load of dead skunks out this way, east of 35, it seems like one every mile for stretches.

"Where is this fucking chick?" He looks left and right. "Hey man, let me go ahead and try that."

He holds the same index finger and thumb pincher out that measured the shards of ice and I hand him the lighter.

"It's a little late for lunch, yeah?"

"What? Fuck, bro. Not yet. Let me try it in my car. You're having lunch?"

"I know. It just seems like there are a lot of people here for it being close to three. Place closes at 11, right?"

"That's what she said."

I nod to him and continue chewing. He retreats from the window and slumps into his driver's seat unplugging a phone charger from the lighter connection.

Everyone meets at the Sac-n-Pac. Two stoned boys with baggy plaid shorts and ball caps pushed back on their heads getting breakfast from the grill in the middle of the afternoon. One stares at the menu unable to make up his mind even though he's eaten here a hundred times before. The man with rolled up sweatpant always gets two Budweiser man-cans, 24 ounces, limping around the store looking at other stuff he never buys. A dad with a large belt buckle, skin tight Wranglers and sandals buys lunch and energy drinks as his son picks out candy. The woman with one tooth jutting down from her otherwise vacant gums buys a 20 ounce Dr. Pepper and two packs of Newport 100s. River rat country boys in their 4x4s empty twenty dollars worth of beer into 400 dollar coolers.

I usually buy a tallboy and two bags of peanuts, one salted and one honey roasted. There is one cashier who's asked me more than once if she can get me a can of snuff or a pack of cigarettes to go with that. I politely decline. I prefer the "haircut" cashier. The other lady always looks confused at

my lack of tobacco consumption. The Sac-n-Pac is the oasis of sundries floating in a food desert. The corrugated red tin building across the street is called Frank's Place and The Riverside Cafe, which one it's really called I don't know. I hardly see anyone in its caliche parking lot, but the oil slicked concrete of the Sac-n-Pac is always popping.

His cigarette is still not lit. He reappears in the window and squints towards the two lane blacktop. The tails of his black bandana tied like a pirate blow in the wind. 15 mile per hour gusts the news says. As he's turned I notice that one of the many faded tattoos around his neck reads "02" with the faint silhouette of the capitol's dome offset behind the "2."

"You from oh-two?" I point to the spot on my neck where his tattoo is.

"Yeah. I'm from everywhere's, but I lived in the heart of oh-two right there off Cesar Chavez by the old methadone clinic. Then I went down in 2003 and didn't get out till 2010. And I mainly been in S.A. and around this areas ever since. Oh shit there you are. I didn't even recognize your car."

A woman with straight platinum hair, smokers skin, powder blue eyes and wearing a wrist brace saunters up, coming from the store.

"Yeah baby, I'm gettin' some chicken. You want some?"

"Oh shit, when you said you were gettin' some food I thought you meant somewheres else."

His new cigarette was lit now and the woman looked coyly at me for a second as if not quite sure what to make of my presence, but not interested enough to affect what she was doing. She put a long cigarette to her lips, covering it to light as her hair blew back from her face.

"Yeah, they got everything here. You want some chicken or what, I'll get you some? They got breasts, thighs, legs, wings, everything."

He looks over in my direction and says, "I think I want the breasts" and casts a shit eating grin. She looks over her shoulder at me, snickers and blows smoke away from their conversation and my window.

"Yeah, get me a D.P. with that too," he calls to her as she heads back into the Sac-n-Pac. "She is not a bad looking woman for her age," he says in earnest as he hands me back my car lighter.

The woman returns promptly. "They ain't got no breasts, honey, just thighs right now. Thighs good?"

"Yeah, fuckn' whatever." He straightens out and faces a

jumbled stack of bills in his hand and then calls out to her again about the D.P.

We share the sudden silence of the intersection, the Sac-n-Pac parking lot, with the dead skunks and circling turkey vultures. The blonde comes back carrying a white styrofoam food container, an unlit cigarette in-between her fingers.

"Them two thighs were four bucks! Four bucks for two pieces of fuckin' chicken? Shit!"

The man takes the container and sets it in his car. The woman runs back in the Sac-n-Pac and comes back out with his D.P. There was a time in my life when I felt I could do seven standing on my head, but I don't even think I could do half that these days. I take the last bites of my sandwich, guzzle back what's left of my beer, scratch off my losing Weekly Grand and then head back to work.

A blue light zaps some bugs next door, the glow from inside the store casts ugly light on the pumps. Why don't they light up the pumps if they're open all night? I slide the camouflage ski mask over my face, it has neon threading that traces the outlines of the eyes and mouth-hole. The buzz of

everything quiets for a second and we rush in. It's a blur. The lights are too bright. I catch a glimpse of him in the reflection of the mirrors that line the top of the store. He yells and then turns out the front lights. I hold my revolver on her. She tries not to look at me, but she can't help it. She's stuck like I'm the Gorgon, but we're both the Gorgon. He yells again. I have to piss. I think I'm going to piss myself when he smacks me on the shoulder and says, "five minutes." Fuck. Five minutes? I drank too much. The beer is churning in my stomach as I try to steady the revolver. She's drooling now. Comatose. Now shivering, standing. I can smell the deep fryer and menthols clinging to polyester-blend knit shirts tumbled with one too many dryer sheets. Five minutes feels like fifty. Finally a buzz rings out, breaking my trance, followed by a faint click. He pushes me forward.

"The backpack, bro. What the fuck!"

I bang into a display of Kodiak snuff and then bend down to empty out the safe. I place packets of manilla wrapped drops into the black canvas backpack. I think I'm going to puke but in waves I feel fearless and frozen. I am on autopilot.

"Fuckin' car."

I crouch down again and pull her down with me by her stringy oily hair. It's hard to grab her thinned out hair through the pleather gloves. I can only hear my insides now, my insides are swimming in the scene, I'm sleepwalking. Headlights scan above our heads, illuminating the hot dog griller still rotating, soda machine and microwave. Here we go. I let go of her hair and begin to stand up when I'm forced back down. I swallow what comes up. The mask itches. He hoists me up.

"Count to fuckin' one-hundred Mississippi. Face down, prayin'!"

A man appears at the shotgun side of my window. "Hey man, you got a light?"

"Nah."

"Shiiit. What, you fuckin' workin' out heres?"

"Yeah, painting a house back in L, but it's getting harder and harder to make a living these days."

"I hear you brother."