

PSYCHOTIC ROADS

The sun was almost down. Dusky. The word is dusky, you idiot. Yeah, whatever. Dusky, sun going down, what's the fucking difference? It's getting dark – that's my point. And I'm getting hungry. Hungry or *hungry*? You know *hungry*: the thinly veiled term for what we do: kill, murder, destroy... hunt? Control: that's the term and you know it, moron. Population control. And yes, I'm both kinds of hungry. It's been six hours for one and four days for the other. I can count, you know.

We'll do just *one* and then we'll get something to eat. Just one. Man I want to get laid. You always want to get laid. Well, I don't want to get laid by you. You mean you're bored of that and you want real sex. A hand is real sex: real sex between friends. You are so fucked up. So are you. That's probably why we are talking to each other. Your psych buddy at Dillard said you gotta stop talking to yourself as though you are two people. That's crazy, man. Don't you mean that's crazy, me? Don't you mean stop talking to yourself? You mean myself? You are such an asshole. I mean...well... I guess I'm the asshole.

James continued arguing with himself for the next seventeen miles down Highway 101. He only paused briefly when he came around the Gaviota pass, where the wind nearly gusted his Green Prius onto the shoulder. Though, James realized it might have been him swerving as he gave a contemptuous scowl toward the dirty oil rigs just off the coast. The wind was always bad here, but tonight the clouds seemed to strangle the setting sun and the wind seemed to be blowing just for James. Just to get James. The world always seemed to be out to get James in some way, no matter how much he prayed to Mother Gaia.

As James continued to argue with himself, he grew more anxious. He would need to kill again soon. The killing wasn't so much the pleasure of taking life, but a duty to James. He always thought of it as tidying up: population control. Rid planet Earth of all the polluters; all those scum that are raping the planet and destroying the natural world with their shopping malls and Styrofoam and oil rigs. James scowled out the window again.

The dregs of society seem to keep getting more rights, more privileges and handouts, while the rich get richer. He hated both classes. His new home town of Santa Barbara was crawling with the entitled homeless and the super-rich. The homeless expected money when you walk down State Street. If you don't give them any, they get angry and start cussing and yelling at you. James almost slit one's throat yesterday, but he controlled himself. Barely. He'd been in the mood for some *control* ever since.

Today would be his lucky day.

As James was rounding one of the last curves before Buellton (3 miles from the famous Pea Soup Andersons restaurant! the old fashioned painted billboard informed him), he spotted a young man sitting by the side of the road. The man was wearing a cowboy hat, the type that curved up on the edges, lending an almost homeless chic to the otherwise grungy man. His jeans were dark blue and filthy, his plaid shirt no longer red and white, but a faded memory of the true colors. He had a duffle bag and a guitar case propped up against him.

James mouth actually watered. He casually wiped the corner of his mouth as he slowed the Prius and edged over to the shoulder of the road. Traffic whizzed past, loudly chiding the Prius for stopping by this young vagrant.

James knew what he was doing.

The man with the guitar did not look up as the car stopped, but instead was fascinated by the scrub grass in front of him. James half expected the man to pick up a weed and start to chew it. If he was in another part of the country, James would have assumed the guitar player would have a strong southern accent. But this was California. In California, anyone could be anything.

Guitar man finished with his weed obsession and looked up, “Hey,” he said.

James had rolled down the passenger window, “Hey back.”

They both stared at each other for a moment. The silence should have been awkward, but it wasn’t somehow. James finally said, “So, you want a ride?”

Guitar man smiled, “I’m glad you asked... yes, I would very much like a ride,” he said with no trace of a southern accent.

“Where you going?” James inquired.

“Whichever way you’re going,” said guitar man.

James was not impressed by banter or smart-ass behavior. James pointed straight ahead, “I’m going that way.”

“Funny... me too,” said Guitar man, with no southern accent, but a clear attempt at country charm.

James knew guitar man would never reach his destination, of course, so it didn’t matter where he thought he was headed. James knew exactly where they were going. Guitar man smiled a wide, friendly crocodile smile. Something was definitely not right with this one. *Thin the herd. Population control.* James smiled back, “Get in.”

The two new road companions started north, back on the 101. Guitar man’s gear was resting in the back seat. James had insisted the back seat was fine, although Guitar man told him how dirty his stuff was. “It’s alright, you can have your stuff close by in case you need

something,” insisted James. James didn’t want guitar man to see the rope and various weapons that were stored in the hatchback.

“Thanks man, right white of you,” said Sam.

James thought: Perfect, he’s a racist too. Probably a Republican. *Thin the herd.*

James began his game: “What’s your name, guitar man?”

Guitar man chuckled, “I like that. You can call me Guitar man if you want. Real name’s Sam.”

“You’re dads not named Sam too, is he?” asked James.

“Dad’s dead, but he wasn’t named Sam,” said Sam.

“I was just thinking that would make you the son of Sam,” James mused.

Sam stared at him, “Yeah... I guess it would...”

James couldn’t really read Sam, which was unusual, “You know, Son of Sam... Berkowitz... the serial killer in the ‘70’s?”

Sam thought for a second, “Oh yeah, I heard something about that. Was he the one that wrote letters to the newspapers with puzzles and stuff?”

James almost snapped at him, “NO. I mean, no. That was the Zodiac,” James saw the green sign for Cat Canyon Road and pulled into the lane to turn.

“Hmm,” was guitar man’s answer as he stared ahead, “lots of mustard plant around here,” Sam pointed at the yellow plants swathing the hills.

James replied, “Yeah, the legend is that a mustard plant exploded a hundred years ago and that mustard has grown wild all over the Central Coast ever since. I think it’s just a story, though,” James turned onto the winding road.

“Cool. Knowing a story like that must make you a local. Got family around here?” asked Sam.

“No. No family to speak of. I heard that from another hitchhiker before I slit his throat,” noted James, looking straight ahead.

Sam chuckled, “that’s funny, man.”

Cat Canyon Road started its first isolated twist and turns.

Sam started to laugh, “That’s really funny. Me, I’m from all over: Texas, Utah, Oregon – no family anymore either, all been dead five years now. I like to move around. Find a new situation and just kind of wing it.”

The road made a sharp curve to the left. James navigated his familiar route easily. The car was going no more than 30 miles an hour.

Sam casually put his seat belt on.

James said, “Sometimes you have to wing it. Things can happen fast. Sometimes all you have time for is reaction.”

“That is amazing, James, my man. That’s exactly what I was just thinking,” noted Sam in an even tone. He casually leaned over and slipped the small knife blade into James’ right side. The move was quick. James tried to catch the knife handle, but was too slow as the knife went into his side a second time.

“Shit!” was all James had time to say before he turned the wheel hard to the left. The car started to tip.

It was too late to recover, and the Prius went over on its side. As they were going over, Sam was shouting, “Awsoooooooooooooome!” James tried to control the car, but the momentum was too much and the car flipped, and finally settled on its roof. They were both strapped in,

hanging upside down. Sam pulled the knife from James' side and cut his own strap, "Thanks for the ride buddy."

"What the fuck...?" he said as he tried to grab Sam. James was too slow and Sam was out of the car, "holy shit, holy shit..." was all James could say as he fumbled for the button to release his own seat belt. James knew he was going into shock. It all happened so fast. He didn't have time to react, as he had just been preaching to Sam about.

He finally managed to undo the belt and fell on his head as the belt released, "Oww!" he said aloud to no one, since Sam was nowhere to be seen. James struggled out of the car, holding his bleeding side while an elegant and loud string of curse words escaped him. He had studied the human body in detail; it was after all, his hobby and his life's work. James knew the body went into shock after a traumatic event like, say, getting suddenly stabbed in the side by a fellow psycho and flipping your car.

The surprise was that the warm California sun seemed to offset the usual chills that come with body shock. The adrenaline of the car crash had made James surprising stable for a man bleeding from a stab wound, walking away from a car resting on its roof. James noted the car did not blow up. Further it did not blow up as James was walking away from it, framing his rage in a Hollywood style halo of fire. That rarely happens in real life. Events like today's don't often happen either, James noted to himself.

James could easily tell that Sam had walked up the road to a nearby winery. Wineries were prodigious on the central coast after a shift in the power structure of California. Napa was not the only wine country anymore. James recited the history of wine in California in his head to keep himself alert. James did not have a photographic memory, as some psychotics do, but he did have a knack for remembering details.

In a magazine article James had read he remembered that a distant relative of the Firestone tire company magnate had planted some of the first grapes here. He remembered visiting the winery twice. He recalled an apparently famous photo of the tire magnate sitting with a very old Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. There were a few other people on the photo, but he remembered Ford the most.

Ford had tried to trick Mother Gaia and start a rubber tree plantation and factory in South America. He planted the trees too close together and it failed. The most ironic thing was that Ford has raped the forest and exploited the good folk people of Brazil for nothing: DuPont invented synthetic rubber shortly after that, making the Ford plant pointless. No doubt, the great Mother's revenge.

James stopped by the back hatch of his car to get a few tools. They fell out and down as he opened the hatch. Apparently gravity still worked on this surreal day.

He tore up an old shirt to wrap around him as a tourniquet. The jacket stowed there would hide the wound as he went after 'Sam I Am the Guitar Man'. James grabbed his large hunting knife and a small scythe.

He loved his scythe. He hated that it looked like the sickle on the Old Russian communist flag. James was a dedicated environmentalist warrior, not a communist. He liked socialism, though... James realized his mind was wandering, no doubt from blood loss and shock. Actually, James liked the weapon because he saw it in an old slasher movie.

As James made way up the asphalt road, he realized the irony. Asphalt was made of "recycled" tires. Recycled - Ha! This road was still poisoning the great Mother. James knew how science had not led to better living in the "golden age" of the 1950's, but instead to the glorious movement that he was so proudly a part.

The oil spill that started the environmental movement happened in Santa Barbara in 1969. Through the growing fuzziness creeping into his mind, James felt honored to be so close to the origin of the species of his glorious cause.

James rounded the corner to the entrance road of the winery. It was a very warm day. This winery was only 25 miles from the ocean, but it was a semi-arid climate, inland. It was 15 degrees hotter at the winery than it would be at the beach.

Apparently no one heard the car flip, as no one was coming out of the winery to investigate. Since it was early winter, the winery activity would be minimal: the harvest was long over, so the help would be only a skeleton crew. There was just one car in the tasting room parking lot, so it must be a slow day, James thought.

James spotted a nearly full parking lot far off to the right. It didn't look connected to the tasting room, but he would have to be careful. James continued up the road that led around to the back of the winery. Sam's tracks were easy to spot. He would have to be careful how he took Sam down, though. He had no car to transport the body now. He would have to wing it. Isn't that how Sam had put it?

James suddenly remembered that Sam left his gear in the car. He couldn't be armed with much more than the knife he has already stuck James with. Following the road to the back of the winery, James spotted equipment: empty bins for fermenting the grapes, and the side of a tall stainless steel tank, also for fermentation. This part of the road was lined by trees. James used them for cover as he scanned around for Sam. James came around a tree, trying to figure out where Sam had gone.

"Thkct," came a noise just a few inches from James' head. He looked at the tree. Imbedded in the trunk was a Japanese style throwing star, "What the Hell?" Another metal star

hit an inch closer. James ducked and went around the other side of the tree as Sam came from behind another tree nearby, “almost gotcha!”

“Seriously? A throwing star!?” James immediately realized how loud he was being and lowered his voice, “really? What are you, a fucking redneck ninja?”

“Shiiiiiiiit, you look so mad right now,” and Sam suddenly guffawed. James had never heard anyone guffaw. He thought it was just a word some writer made up, but now he had heard one and knew just what it sounded like.

“Hey, pshyco, come here like a good puppy so I can slit your throat and piss on your corpse,” replied James.

“OOOOH, boy, you have some mouth on you. You kiss your taxidermied mama with that mouth, before you sleep with her every night?” taunted Sam.

James pulled a throwing star from the tree and tried to throw it at Sam. The motion made Sam’s side hurt and he doubled over.

The star missed Sam by a good 10 feet, “You are really bad at that. Think its shock? Got the shakes yet?”

“The hot day is counter acting the...shut up! I am not having a conversation with you. Come here so I can kill you!” James threw the second star and came closer this time. Sam caught it flat between both palms.

“I been practicing a long time, buddy. Hey, I’ll give you a free lesson in the proper way to handle a Japanese throwing star. You want to get the spin and the angle just right, like this...” Sam demonstrated the proper way to hold it just as James let loose an angry growl and rushed at Sam.

“... and you just throw it like so...” Sam threw the star. It hit James and stuck into the back of his left hand.

“AGGGGG!” growled James, combined with another long list of expletives. He fell and pulled the star out.

“By the way. What is with that car? A fuckin’ green Prius? Are you a little girlie psycho? What a stupid way to pick up hikers. Well, anyway, gotta go my little green friend. Tag, you’re it!” Sam said as he ran toward the back of the winery.

James was angry before. Now, James was in a mortal rage. His car was the symbol and badge he wore every day to say he belonged to the highest calling of any creature on the planet. A status symbol that says “I stand with you, brother squirrel. I understand your suffering, cousin condor. I know what me species has done to you; and I drive this hybrid to show that you are my comrade – shit, sounds like communism again... my true brother under the skin. I will *hurt* the earth a little less today! My footprint will shrink just a little more today, until nature is returned to its true masters: the animal kingdom.”

James suddenly knew how Sam should die: His heart exposed in the meadow for any animal to take of piece of him; for mother Gaia to receive his blood sacrifice, for all the ills his disgusting species had thrust upon her.

James straightened himself. He ignored the pain in his side. He ignored the pain in his hand. James would finish this now. He followed Sam’s path to the building. The winery was a series of three buildings. The first was the small tasting room, the second was where he’d seen the stainless steel tank: that would be the fermenting room. He suspected Sam had gone through door number three: the barrel room.

James saw that the barrel room had been extended by a large white tent. James thought this made sense, since after harvest and fermentation, the main work was in the barreling process. James took a few winery tours and guessed that the tent was a way of extending the barrel room while the workers moved the large barrels around under a shade of protection from the sun.

As James rounded the corner of the tent, he suddenly realized the tent was for an entirely different purpose. The cars he saw were apparently owned by the people having a buffet style meal in the barrel room under the extended tent. As he limped into this unexpected scene, James was glad he had worn his coat to cover his wounds. It was not like a movie, where a man enters a small pub and everyone stops and stares at the unwelcome stranger. Even weirder than that, no one seemed to notice James at all.

To the right, people enjoyed glasses of wine and paper plates of food, to the left was the buffet. And Sam. Sam was standing at the end of the line, laughing with an affected version of his guffaw. He was trying to get the attention of a young lady refilling whatever was at the end of the buffet. Interesting, thought James, Sam was apparently not good with the ladies.

James walked up to the beginning of the buffet. The only person that seemed to notice was Sam. He was still trying to talk to the young lady dressed in black and white work attire, while simultaneously craning his neck to look directly into James' eyes. Sam smiled. James could not hear what Sam was saying, but guessed that it was an excuse to walk away. He did, right to James.

Sam stopped two chaffing dishes away from James. James broke the stare only to notice the buffet was a barbeque. By the time he looked back up, Sam was two feet from James. James

must have looked startled. Sam said, “Whoa there, brother. Take it easy. Let’s start over and break bread together.”

James looked around. No one seemed to notice them. All around was an endless chatter of wine glasses tinkling, and unintelligible noise. “The only thing I will break with you is your chest open as a feast for Gaia’s soldiers.”

“What a flair for the dramatic! Come on now, no one can be really angry when there is a free barbeque buffet in front of them,” offered Sam.

James said in horror, “I’m a vegetarian!” This seemed to be the magic word, as a woman at a table close by said, “good for you!” James looked her way as she was putting her used napkin over her mostly-eaten chicken wing.

“You’re an idiot,” offered Sam, “an asshole in a stupid car, pretending he cares about anything. All you care about is death.”

James paused because this was the first time he actually *saw* Sam’s eyes. They were piercing and blue. The color of clean sky. He was obviously not from filthy Los Angeles. Okay, that wasn’t fair, thought James, L.A. had cleaned up its smog problem years ago, thanks to the EPA and his hard working for-runners in the enviro....

Sam slapped James across the face, “Snap out of it, fuckhead. You are drifting again. Now, it’s been fun and all, but I’m headed back to the car for my stuff. You have fun bleeding to death next to a buffet of meat,” Sam emphasized the last word by poking his finger at the knife wounds in James’ side. James was ready this time and sliced the scythe around Sam’s forearm. The movement was quick and James replaced the weapon back under his coat in one continual movement.

“Nngghhh. Shit. Nice move. This is gonna take more than a Band-Aid,” said Sam as he put his other hand around the wound for pressure. Two thirds of his forearm was bleeding from the wound. His hand couldn’t cover the entire length of the wound, “Gotta go...” Sam commented, calmly walking away.

James started to go after him, when his vision got blurry. He put a hand on the buffet’s table to steady himself. He must have lost a lot of blood. He was sure the blood must have begun soaking downward into his jeans, surely below the line of the jacket, where people could see it.

“Hey, buddy, are you in line?” The voice behind James startled him and he turned around quickly to address the man. He swirled around too fast and forgot he had the scythe in his hand. It caught the man in the stomach. Before James had spoken a word, a line of blood appeared across the man’s stomach, “what the...” the man looked down and grabbed his stomach, “you stabbed me!” James could barely speak. He couldn’t believe this was really happening, “Uh, uh, shit... I... slashed you... actually...” James’ words stumbled out.

“You stabbed me!!” The man said louder. The spell was completely broken. The room became very quiet, all eyes on James and the man. The man grabbed for James, for support. Instinct took over and James did stab the man, pulling the scythe up as he cut deep, “sorry... well, you are kind of fat anyway, probably would have raised everyone’s health care costs...”

A woman screamed. It was the woman that had commented on James’ vegetarianism. Several other people screamed as the man fell onto the buffet line. The table went over along with chafing dishes and burning cans of sterno. Everyone was on their feet now, scrambling. James stumbled toward the exit, throwing off the coat that had gotten much too heavy. There were screams and yelling as many rushed to help the fat man. No one tried to stop James as he escaped the tent.

James was blinded for a second as the sun seems much brighter than it was before. He stopped and squinted, trying to clear his vision. It was still blurry, and he blinked and swayed, holding his side, as he walked back towards the car.

“Hey!” a shout came from behind him.

James suspected there was no real security for an event like this, just civilians and workers. He also knew that in his condition even a bunch of civilians might stop him. James stopped, turned around dramatically and lifted the scythe above his head. He looked directly at the two men headed out of the tent. He pointed at them and stared intensely. He had no idea what his facial expression looked like to the men – he hoped it was a mask of evil. Whatever it looked like, the two men stopped, “don’t follow me,” was all James said.

The two men stood there, uncertain what to do. James turned around and headed down the road towards the car. He walked as calmly as he could, hoping he was not walking like a drunken idiot.

He did not hear footsteps approaching, so he concentrated on getting to the car. He only hoped he would get there before Sam had recovered his stuff and disappeared to God knew where.

Sam was standing by the car, calmly wrapping his arm in a dirty shirt. The bag and guitar were next to him on the ground. The shirt had already bled through.

Sam did not look up as he said, “Shit, boy, you got me good. What is that thing anyway?”

“It’s a scythe, shitkicker, read a book,” James spat out.

“Looks like that thing from the old Russian flag. You a commie?”

James said nothing as he advanced, scythe in hand.

“I’ve read lots of book, by the way. Read that book by Al Gore. God, that dude’s an idiot,” offered Sam.

James stopped. He was shaking, “what did you say?”

Sam smiled, “Al Gore is a hypocritical retard.”

James could not speak for a moment. He was shaking with rage, “The term is disabled you racist fuck, and Albert Gore, Jr. is THE SAVIOR OF THIS PLANET!!”

Sam lost his smile. He stepped away from the car, taking out a much larger knife than the one he’d stabbed James with, “Retard, I say. What are you going to do about it, you Prius driving pussy?”

“What I should have done the second I picked you up,” James said, as he heard the faint sound of sirens approaching.

James lunged at Sam. Sam thrust his large bowie knife at James. James dodged and slashed Sam’s leg. Sam caught James’ hair and pulled him close. James plunged the scythe into Sam’s side, pushing it in as hard as he could. Sam’s knife went deep into James’ gut.

The two men collapsed, still holding onto their weapons. As the men lie dying, they were face to face. They stared into each other’s eyes, with hatred blazing.

James said, “Just die, you stupid...”

Sam finished with, “....fucking psycho....”

The police arrived shortly after, with sirens and flashing lights. Dozens of people had made it down to the scene at the overturned car. James’ right hand was on the scythe, which was buried into his left side. James left hand was on the hilt of the large knife stuck into his belly. The single body was lying in a large pool of blood, baking into the hot synthetic rubber asphalt road.