

Midland-Odessa

It's three-fifteen a.m., or thereabouts, and my girlfriend Kate's in the truck, sleeping off a long day and night of watching me drive. I'm in a bathroom stall, crying. This ain't typical of me.

The lights flicker in their sockets. The door bangs open and a pair of boots strut in. I hold my breath. The boots urinate. The boots wash up at the sink. I wanna yell out to this man, "You ever lost a woman like my Amery?" But that's not how men talk in these places. I let the urge pass. Alone again, my mind is crumbling like old adobe. All those months of hospital beds and bad diagnoses, and damn, I admit it, bad choices on my part. "I don't mean to die on you," Amery said, back in March, a few weeks before the morphine made her crazy. Like anyone means to die. I didn't blame her, but I couldn't damn well watch it happen. All that horrible dying. I fled it. Still fleeing it, I guess.

An old song hisses through the ceiling speakers—lonesome yowler mourning the end of something. I dab my eyes with toilet paper as the pedal-steel quivers through the static, the sand and grit of irretrievable loss, shot into space and deflected back to this shitty bathroom, this shitty truckstop in god-forsaken, red-scab Texas. I miss my Amery's the problem. But that's about all I know.

I pay for Fritos, coolant, a pack of Winstons. Truckers come and go through the sliding doors. The lady at the counter says there's weather coming. Bad? I ask.

“All rains good rain,” she says, and hands me my change.

At the adjoining Subway, which I’m surprised to find open, I order foot-long and coffee. The weatherman on the screen says that Corpus Christi is knee-deep in water. Glad we took the long way, but my neck hurts. I asked Kate to ease my burden, but she ain’t fond of driving. My Amery loved to drive, had to pry the wheel from her sometimes just to get a turn.

Well, no one’s driving now. The reason we’re in Midland-Odessa, and not half-way to the palm and palmetto of Florida, is my damn truck. We sputtered into the truckstop at three a.m. And here, in the middle of everything, we’re stuck.

I check my reflection in the door glass, make sure my eyes ain’t too messed up. I don’t want Kate to know I was bawling. She don’t take lightly to emotions. Back at the truck I pop the hood and pour in a gallon of coolant. The radiator hisses, and coolant leaks in a steady stream onto my sneakers. Problem’s bigger than coolant, just as I feared. Might be a hose or the radiator itself. I flick on my pocket flashlight and take a closer look. It’s definitely the radiator.

I climb into the truck, wipe my forehead with a handkerchief.

“You’re awake,” I say.

“I was concerned,” Kate says.

“Here’s sandwiches.”

“I thought you might be having a heart attack earlier on. When we was driving.”

“Just pains. Stress,” I say. “From driving all them hours without a break.” I try the radio, pick up some static—AM talk radio. Some God station. “Least the battery works.”

“What we gonna do, Ed?”

I am thinking to myself—what does she mean *we*? She’s just sitting there.

I take a bite of sub. “It’s a long way to Florida.”

“I know that much, Ed. I ain’t an idiot. And besides, I’m the one with the pressure. You know I gotta be there by Monday or the job’s a bust. So don’t get all smug and knowing with me. All cosmic.”

“I ain’t getting cosmic.”

“Well don’t you start.”

I turn the ignition. The engine sputters and cuts. Outside, big black insects swirl around the sodium lights. They know the weather’s going south but that can’t stop what they do. Just keep banging into the light. Until they catch fire and fall.

“Checked the messages while you were in there,” Kate says. “Nate called.”

I shrug. Last person I want to hear from is the boy.

“What’d he call for?”

“Says he needs to talk. Says he’s feeling bad.”

“He knows we’re driving.”

“He lost his mother, Ed. It couldn’t have done him a whole lotta good. You want my pickles?”

I take the pickles.

My son Nate’s a freshman at Arizona. Gets good grades. Alright kid overall. But he was a fickle child, a picky eater. Wouldn’t eat peanut butter. Or potatoes. Turned his nose at steak and pork chops. Amery let him get away with that crap. I guess I did too. I was what you’d call a distant father. Drove trucks. Gone all the time. One thing Nate liked all right was dill pickles spears. I think he might like them too much. Hasn’t had a

girlfriend in his life. Once I caught him wearing mascara. I wanted to hit him but didn't. He knew it though. Now he can't buck up and get over Amery. Hell, I can't wholly blame him. She was better than any of us. Full of fire and spirit. She was my good side. Without her that boy would be flipping double-stacks at the Carl's Junior.

"Coolant ain't the problem," I say to Kate, who has stopped eating and is now lighting a cigarette.

"What's the problem then?"

"Radiator's busted," I say.

The truck worried me from the start. There's a feel to a well-running vehicle that I wasn't feeling when we set off in the Ford at dawn. It gurgled and coughed from the on-ramp to city limits. We overheated in the hills past Benson, and again in Willcox. I had to climb out in that pulsing heat and water the old man down. We stopped every twenty minutes, radiator heaving, boiling over, begging to be turned around.

Kate rolls her eyes, probably wondering why I hadn't taken care of the truck. I don't know why I didn't do it, to be honest. Drove professionally for twenty years. It even occurred to me a couple times but I didn't do it.

Our goal is Naples, a month-to-month on the beach till we find something long term. I can't do the desert anymore. The dry bone heat. Them dead bushes everywhere. Memories dangling from every crag. They say the ocean's where memories go to die. After the mess we made, I promised Kate we'd get out of Tucson, relocate. Come to think of it, back when Nate was little, I promised Amery this too. Amery's parents had a cottage near St. Augustine she used to go to as a child. I said, I promise you baby, we'll

get there, as soon as Nate grows up. It was the thing that kept us going , through all the turbulence. She just didn't live long enough.

All day we kept east, along I-10, the sky white with heat and dust. Stone outcrops hugged the road near the Dragoons, the wicked red pinnacles near the twin-nipple peaks of Chiricahua, needle oscillating from yellow to red alert. We rolled down the windows and blasted the heater, drank water out of plastic jugs. To the south, a man on horseback cut trail on a brown hillside. I wondered what his game was. Going nowhere, it seemed.

The night came on like a black curtain, stars shining down like spotlights. At an El Paso gas station Kate had a panic attack. Afraid to leave the car, afraid that Mexicans in wrestler masks would drag her off to Juarez. I filled the tank, said to her through the window, "Babe, we live in Tucson—what's the difference?"

She wouldn't talk, drawing in sharp breaths.

An hour beyond El Paso I said to her, "What you thinking?"

I said this because I was trying to be more conscious of the signs—the truck's saying something. I wasn't feeling the lift of burden I was expecting to feel on the road.

"Not much," she said. Her head was locked straight ahead, unblinking.

"Well, I'm thinking this ain't as much fun as I hoped for."

A flash of earrings—shake of the head.

"Well stop thinking it," she said.

About my wife. The cancer came on quick and mean. Amery and I walked along the Santa Cruz in the first months, arguing about Nate or taxes, little life things, trying

our best to ignore it. When she couldn't walk any longer, she quit teaching elementary school. I took her on drives in the desert, pointed out places we'd been. Things we'd done. The parking lot on Kinney where we used to drink Coors with Jean and Bill Caruthers. The saloon on Ajo where we used to dance. All those memories in the Old Pueblo—those endless summer drives, smoking cigs, her feet out the window, her hair in the wind, a whole life ahead of us.

But after the first dose of chemo, Amery just plain quit. We were sitting on the porch, looking out on the yard. Amery had a blanket on her lap. Nate sat beside her, his head half-shaved like some loony bird.

“No more of this,” she said, with a wave of her hand. Her face was white and tired.

“Well you're just being stupid,” I told her. “You got to go through with it.”

Nate nodded. For once, he agreed with me. All his life he'd sided with his mother, but there he was, backing me up. But then he said, holding my wife's hand, “Whatever choice you make, we support it.”

I could just spit. That wasn't what you're supposed to say. I was so damn mad I walked down to the Circle K to collect my head.

It was all decline after that. I drove her to the appointments, helped her out of the car, pushed the wheelchair. Then her bones gave up and she was in the hospital. At first, I'd stroke her forehead and tell her things I loved, her long hair, blue eyes, the way those slender fingers held me when we used to dance. When the pain was under control she'd open her eyes and smile—a wry little smile.

“I ain't finished,” she said.

“Yes, yes,” I said, squeezing her hand. “I know.”

But she was.

Looking at her, that starving ghost in eyeshadow. There was nothing left. If I looked like that, I’d know what was in store.

In that sterile blue hospital light, as things got worse, I didn’t know her anymore. Her face withered, sallow, teeth green from meds. Those rat-hole eyes full of I don’t know what. I couldn’t look at her. She wasn’t my Amery. She was a stranger, a stick person under the sheets, and in those last weeks I turned away. She called for me in that frail voice. But I wouldn’t go in. I couldn’t see her shriveled and drugged. Instead I sat out in the hospital lobby, jonesing for cigarettes, unable to move.

Kate was one of Amery’s nurses. Most of them—the fat one, the one who limped, the mutterer—trudged down those severe corridors, faithless and dead to the world. But Kate, with those long lashes and cotton-candy hair, she was a firecracker. She checked on me in the lobby, asked how I was. I told her I didn’t know. She brought me a coffee. I saw a young Amery in her, the one who took me tight around the waist. The next day I asked Kate out for drinks at Roddy’s, to talk about things. Soon, I was sleeping in her bed.

Nate would stay at the hospital, sleep in a chair beside Amery’s bed. I’d tousle his hair, tell him I was heading home to get a good night’s sleep. Then I’d drive to Kate’s place in the foothills. On nights off Kate sat on her porch and nursed whiskey sours. There’d be one for me in the fridge, ice cold. We’d sit by the pool, watch the city lights twinkle. I’d tell her stories about my younger days, driving truck with the whole world ahead of me, jig my head out of its somber space, and I’d listen to her complain about her

husband Jack, a commercial pilot and world-class drunk. We'd screw on the king-size bed. Or on the couch. Against the stubbled patio wall beside the pool. A cold, angry sex; robots letting off steam. Every time I mounted Kate I saw Amery, and felt sick about it. But I kept doing it. And I keep doing it cause what else am I going to do?

Afterwards we'd take a dip in the pool, listen to the jets roar overhead to Davis-Monthan. We made our Florida plan. Kate'd divorce Jack, which she admitted was a long time coming. We knew, without having to speak it, that Amery's time was short. I didn't think much about Nate. He was nineteen years old, a college student. Sure he loved his mother, but doesn't everybody? He'd bounce back.

I leave Kate in the truck and roam the snack aisles, trying to clear my head. I buy honey-roast peanuts and another cup of coffee, pay the cashier—a new broad with a tattoo of Jesus on on her forearm. I ask when the mechanic opens shop.

“Seven,” she says.

Back at the truck, Kate's asleep. Her toes make smudge marks on the glass. I nudge her and she groans.

“Ain't no mechanic till morning,” I say.

I offer her the coffee but she waves it off.

“Should be get a motel room, Ed?”

I shake my head. “Let's stick it out. Getting a room'll feel too much like stopping.”

“But we're stopped, aren't we?”

I set the coffee in the cup holder.

Kate sighs. “Fine, Ed, have it your way. Nate called again.”

Nate hasn’t called but once in the four months since Amery’s funeral. I nod, and close the door. Leaning against the radiator grill, I light a smoke and watch the bugs dance in the lights. The whole steamy mass of them. Like we’re in a cave and they are what lives here. Like this is the universe’s stomach and we’re being digested. The highway is quiet, just a few cars this or that way. Every so often a caravan of intermodals. A couple tractor-trailers pull into the lot, adding to the fifty or so already parked. The din of running engines. This used to be my route: California to Florida. Twenty years of it. And here I am—on the road again—my first time leaving Tucson in two years. I expected I might feel like I used to on the road. That buoyancy, that lightness of spirit, Ed strapped to an air-cushion careening through the universe. But it ain’t that way, not one iota. Every thought I think is weighted, and I can’t stop picturing Amery in that bed, brittle-boned, staring past me.

I wasn’t there for her death. I had left University Medical to pick up smokes, and lunch for myself and Nate. Nate and I weren’t talking much. He might have known about Kate. I don’t know. He and I were like two strangers, Amery being the one thing we held in common. She was hooked up to god-knows-what breathing machines and plinking monitors. Nate held her hand, watched her shallow breath. The doc ordered that I come in, said that it was close to time. But I couldn’t get so close. Stayed near the window, looking out on the U of A campus. I couldn’t be in that room any longer—I was suffocating.

I said to Nate, “You hungry?”

He was silent for a full minute—I counted the plinks. Then, he nodded.

It was afternoon, and the wind was strong. A big dust day, prelude to spring. The truck was working fine then, rumbling along. Trash cans rolled in the road. Tumbleweed tangled in the chain-link. Something crossed the road and I smacked it. There ain't a tumbleweed big enough to shudder a Ford, so I slowed, checking the rearview. A brown mutt lay on its back, tongue lolled, pawing at the sky. I pulled over and climbed out. The dog was a sweet old thing, no collar, not a drop of blood. Its back was broken, though, that much was clear. It wasn't gonna live. I grabbed a shovel from the truck and gave the mutt a good couple whacks on the skull. Then I dragged him to the side of the road.

As I waited at the Los Betos drive-in window, Nate texted. I blew three red lights but it wasn't enough. When I entered the room, the nurses were gathered. All the nurses except Kate. Nate was folded over his mother, holding her hand. The machines weren't plinking any more.

Nate must have seen the look on my face because he said, "She waited for you."

I wanted to believe it.

But, looking back, I bet Amery planned it like that. She must have known about Kate. Hell, she knew me better than I did. And here was the pay-back for those last weeks. Her final lesson. I get that now.

That Nate, poor boy, and so close to his mother, still had the decency to lie for me. That's something hard to believe. I didn't deserve it. I wasn't there for him. He had always been Amery's boy, and in a way I guess I hated that. I checked out on my son just like I checked out on Amery. But there it was, that gesture. Amery's good spirit pouring out of him.

Beyond the parking lot lights is a darkness different than that of Tucson—in the middle distance, every so often, a large flame shoots out of the black, then disappears. Oil country, not at all familiar or friendly. I see hell in those fires. I see a landscape of ash and gristle, blighted. I want to leave before dawn, before I have to see it in the light. But we're stuck. I stub out my cigarette and climb into the truck. Kate is snoring. I reach over, put a hand on her breast, cup it. Soft and warm. I think about climbing on top of Kate and doing her in the truck. Something I might have done a few hours back, but the idea repulses me now. Instead, I curl up toward my door and try to conjure calming images—Nathan playing in the yard, Amery in her wedding dress—to block out those horrible flames in the darkness outside my window.

It is dawn and starlings have gathered in the gnarled trees at the edge of the lot. Their squawking is tremendous, something you could bottle and sell to frighten children. The landscape ain't nearly so blighted as I expected. Low hills extending to the horizon. Grazing cattle.

I wait till seven o'clock, sipping coffee outside the shop. The mechanic—a tall, balding fellow, opens up and I make arrangements. He says he'll have to bring in a radiator from a supplier in town—could take all day. When I get back to the truck, Kate is gone. The mechanic tows the truck into the garage.

I find Kate in the Subway, drinking a bottle of Tropicana. Her make-up bag is on the table beside her.

I sit down opposite her. The vinyl booth seat is cool and clammy.

“Trucks getting fixed,” I say.

“You look like crap, Ed. What’s wrong with your face?”

“I’m tired.”

“I’m tired,” she repeats. She taps her orange juice with long red nails. The clicking gets on my nerves but I don’t say anything.

“How long did he say, about the truck?”

“Could be all day. I don’t know—mechanics. They operate on a whole different clock.”

“I don’t have much leeway, Ed. They wanted me to start two weeks ago.”

“I know that.”

“Well what should we do?”

I take a sip of her orange juice and hand it back.

She says, “I got a call from Jack. He wants me back.”

“What’d you say?”

“What do you think I said? I told him not on your life, you drunk. What’s done is done. Listen, Ed, maybe we should get a rental, you know? I don’t wanna get stuck here. I’m feeling very insecure about all this. I’m nervous that you’re thinking too much.”

“I’m just hungry,” I say.

“Talk to me, Ed.”

“Talk about what? We don’t want to talk about things. That’s why *us* works.”

Kate glides a finger around the rim of the juice bottle, silent.

I say, “Well what the hell you wanna talk about? I don’t know how to be carefree about this business.”

Kate looks out the window and sighs. “Take the phone at least,” she says, “I’m tired of the constant reminder.”

“Nate’s a big boy,” I say, “He can handle things.”

“I don’t know, Ed. I’m afraid he’s pulling you right back into it.”

“The truck’ll be ready soon enough.” I grab the phone, then head outside to smoke a cigarette.

It takes me a couple hours to build up the nerve to call my son. I stroll around the truck stop, look at the job board out of old habit. I see familiar faces, men I used to feel kinship toward but with me out of the biz now they don’t seem to recognize me. I stand outside and smoke, watching the clouds build to the south. I can feel the pressure dropping in my knees, the weather coming up to meet us.

“Okay,” I say, out loud.

Then I pull out the phone and call Nate. He answers on the fifth ring.

“Hey, you awake?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. His breathing seems labored.

“We’re in Texas.”

“All right. How’s it there?”

“Fine. You called a couple times.”

“Yeah.”

“Well—”

“How’s Kate?”

“She’s fine, I guess.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

He’s breathing into the receiver but he doesn’t say anything.

“Well, all right,” I say.

I’m getting a headache trying to think of the right things to say.

“How’s class?” I say.

“Fine.” He pauses. “I don’t know,” he says, “I haven’t been going.”

“Why the hell not?”

A long pause. “I can’t talk about it right now.”

“All right,” I say. “But it don’t make much sense.”

I wish he’d stop beating around it. Say what you’re going to say. *Just say it.*

Nate sighs. “There’s really no point.”

“Well that’s on you then.” I look out at I-20. Traffic is light. I want to get on the road, get out of here. I aim to be in Dallas by midnight.

“I haven’t been right,” Nate says.

“Well don’t waste your education.”

“Did you hear me?” he asks.

“You haven’t been right. Yeah I heard. You’ll get more right going to classes. Your mother would—”

“Don’t drag her into this.” His voice shaking. “You haven’t said a single thing about her since she died. You act like she never existed, so you can’t start putting words in her mouth.”

“Nate, listen. I don’t think—”

“No, you listen.” He breathes hard into the phone. “It’s clear you’ve checked out on the whole family thing. Screwing Mom’s nurse. For God’s sake. I don’t have the capacity to escape like that. I wake up thinking about Mom. I go to bed thinking about her. How it went. How you handled it.”

The trucks on the highway are blurry. I wipe my eyes. I don’t know what to say. I can’t think of the words to say to my son.

I say, “I figured classes are a good escape—”

“That’s all you got.” Nate laughs. “Jesus fucking Christ. That’s all you got.” He hangs up the phone.

I return to the Subway. Kate is entrenched in the same booth, eating a bag of chips.

“How’s lonely-puss?”

“He’s fine.”

“Fine, huh?” She gives me a curious look.

“Pretty lousy.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him to buck up.”

Kate sets the bag down and wipes her hand with a napkin.

“This ain’t the way we were supposed to do it,” she says.

“Well, shit,” I say, “How do you want ot do it?”

“This doesn’t feel right. Does it feel right?”

“Beats me,” I say. “What’s right supposed to feel like?”

She wipes her mouth with the palm of her hand.

“Better,” she says.

“Shit,” I mutter to myself, raise my hands and walk out. I walk to the edge of the lot. The birds in the trees have moved on. Then I walk down to the garage to check on the truck. The mechanic and a few of his crew are hidden behind the hood. I step around. “What’s the eta?” I ask.

“Just finishing up. A quick inspection and you’re good to go.”

I pull the truck up to the Subway. Kate is slouched on the curb smoking a cigarette. The weather’s moving in. It’s starting to drizzle. *Goddamn it Nate*, I think. Why do you have to go about complicating things? I can’t stand him being mad at me like this. I know I done wrong. I don’t need him holding it against me. He needs to be all right with things. He needs to be thinking clear on all this. That’s how Amery would want it. I pull the phone out my of shirt pocket and call him. A shrill voice answers.

“I’m calling for Nate,” I say.

Kate is watching me from the curb. I turn away so I don’t have to see her. I look out to the highway and the hills beyond the highway.

“Who is this?”

“Ed Hender—his father. Who’s this?”

“Glenn. Something’s happened. I don’t know.” He trails off. Glenn is Nate’s roommate. I met him when we moved Nate into the dorm.

“Glenn,” I say. “What is it?”

I glance back at Kate, but she's watching a shiny new Dodge Ram pull up to a pump. The clouds are low in the sky. The rain is picking up.

"I found him on the floor."

"What?"

I am suddenly out of the truck and walking toward the highway.

"He took pills."

I feel that sharp ache in my gut, the same one I had with Amery.

"Oh Jesus," I say. "Is he gonna okay—Glenn? Is he all right?"

There are trucks slooshing up the highway. They slice through the rain, their aim clear, their destination certain.

"I don't know. They took him."

I say, "Okay, well you just hang on there, Glenn. He'll be fine. I'm sure he'll be fine."

I call the hospital. The number is saved on my phone from when Amery was there. After a long hold I get a nurse, the mutterer. Nate's in critical care, she tells me. That's all she can tell me.

Kate's standing under the awning. The top button to her blouse's undone, and she's examining her freckles.

"Well?" she says, not looking up.

"He's in the hospital."

She looks up, brow furrowed. "What for?"

"I don't know. He overdosed on pills."

“Well that’s awful!”

There is lightning off in the hills, a low shudder of thunder.

“He’s my son.”

“You’re going back,” she says, matter-of-fact.

“He’s my son,” I say.

“I know he’s your son. You don’t have to keep saying it.”

The rain is really coming down but I can’t feel it. Inside, I’m surging with electricity, my veins all lit up. Kate stares me down. She can tell something is happening to me.

“Come back with me,” I say.

“No, Ed. I need to go on.”

“Kate?”

“No, Ed.”

“Then take the truck.” I offer her the keys. “I’ll catch a lift from one of the guys here.”

“I ain’t gonna take your damn truck.”

“I just need a few days. I promise.”

“No you don’t, Ed.”

“Just take it.” I grab her hand and try to force the keys between her fingers. She yanks away. The keys splash onto the pavement. I pick them up.

“Please,” I say.

Kate says, “No, Ed.”

I drop her at the Avis. The lot is ankle deep in water. She climbs out of the truck at the curb. I drag her suitcases to the door.

“I promise I’ll get there—to Naples.” I laugh, nervous. “Maybe even before you.”

Kate half-smiles. “Take care of your son, Ed,” she says.

Before I can hug her, hold her, tell her the things I want to believe but know in my heart aren’t true, she heads inside.

I make it back to Tucson in less than seven hours. It is night, and the hospital atrium is wide and blue. I am struck with memories as I jog down the corridor to my son’s room. I swore I’d never step foot in this hospital again, but life doesn’t care much for promises. Life happens no matter what you have to say about it.

I hold Nate’s hand. He is hooked up to machines and a respirator. The monitor shows a heart beat, the plinking sensors tell me there’s still time. He’s asleep, and in sleeping he looks just like his mother.