

## The Loneliest Road

In his rear-view mirror, the man steals a peak at the sun separating from the horizon. Smiling, he pauses in the mirror to inspect his boyish, hoax of a grin while vibrant pastel hues spill out across the eternal blue ceiling. In the distance, the thirty-foot-wide strip of gray, weather-beaten asphalt becomes a blur of color atop a hazy ridgeline. Beyond this, on another plane, time stretches itself out into the vast unknown. It's still cool this morning, but the west does not stay cool for long in July. Black scavengers take to the skies while reptiles and mammals scurry across the barren earth in search of breakfast, making last minute meal dashes before the sun begins to slow broil the basin.

He is a thief of hearts, hurtling through the desert in a yellow rocket.

“Can't believe she let me take it. Ha! Never going back. She got took! Wanted it to happen from where I judged. What kind of dumb bitch gives a man she don't know the keys to her car? This ride's mine now, burn another notch in the belt with them acid tears, babe!”

Heading west on US-50, the Rally yellow Z28 rockets through endless stretches of abandoned desert wasteland. He flicks a spent Marlboro filter out the Camaro's window and recalls the forecast which had lulled him to sleep the night before:

“...and coming up next, the search continues for a District Attorney's son. But first, a quick look at the weather.”

“...Ely, Nevada. A high of eighty-five, lows tonight in the mid-sixties. Out west, Las Vegas will be reaching highs creeping up toward the one-teens, and lows won't give visitors much comfort out there on the strip tonight. Vegas-s won't be getting too far

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below eighty-five the res-s-s-t...of this-s-s-s...wee-e-e-e...” and then he was rolling away from the flickering box, tumbling out of the conscious world, drifting into the heavy darkness of road-weary slumber, until the first beams of light set fire to an old, lonely rooster’s soul.

Daydreaming behind the wheel—

**50**

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—catches his eye. He has just enough time to register that he is not reading a speed limit sign. Curious, he eases off the gas pedal. A few minutes down the road he comes upon an identical sign:

**US**

**ROUTE**

**50**

**“The Loneliest**

**Road in**

**America”**

“Did I find the road, or did it find me? The loneliest man, traveling the loneliest—” Nimble on the baking asphalt, a gray fox darts into the road, stopping shy of the yellow dash and freezing in the car’s path. The driver jerks the steering wheel hard left—

*shouldajustHITit—*

*(we gon’ see who outfoxes who)*

and locks eyes with the animal. For an instant, man and animal share fear. Attempting to correct the course of the careening vehicle, he cranks the wheel hard right. Rear tires

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scream in unison. Pavement becomes history; traction and control a memory.

Momentum forces a continued slide down the steep, rocky shoulder. Screeching tires, stone chips assaulting metal. The gunshot sound of a blown tire ricochets off the distant, barren mountains.

*Which ti-*

A thought jolted from his mind before born into existence. The driver's door connects with a utility pole at the bottom of the embankment, a thunderous crunch and crushing thrust of pressure from his left, the gap between door and body nullified. His mind fires off a final snapshot series of images. Collision force ripping his hand free of its death-clutch on the steering wheel. The nails of his index and middle fingers catching the leather wrap and pulling free from the skin. Shattered glass and crunching bones. Compression forcing the last remnants of panicked, sour breath from his lungs. Tingles like cold finger tips run along his spine, and a comfortable, warm feeling spreads across his chest. The world disappears in a deepening mosaic of colors, fading to gray, becoming deeper, darker, black.

*(tellin' you, you gon' get yours one day! Ain't not a man in this world been able to outrun 'is devils now, ya' hear me?)*

Pain fires rifle shot signals up and down the left side of the body. His connection to the world is re-established by screams, the tormented cries of a woman. He believes the screams are a woman's. Eyes open, viewing a world of dull, pulsing hues. The mental fugue hangs on him like a lead-lined cloud. The incessant shrieking from somewhere, he's too fuzzy to understand where, but he wishes it would stop. Eyes unable to focus, every thought of initiating movement triggers nausea. Lifting his head, a

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purple-gray cloud fills his vision. He pulls his mangled arm toward his body. The hand is limp, the wrist bent to terrifying new limits. Fingers touching forearm, a scarlet stream pouring out of the large gash in his skin, blood mixing with tar and dirt. Bone, splintered, white and glistening—exposed to the daylight. He makes an attempt to straighten his wrist. Purple and gray engulf his world in a violent swarm. The thief fades again. The screaming stops.

*(because you's a taker, and because you's the se'fish one, that's why—you never done no body no good, and you's always gon' be 'lone)*

The sun hangs high above, radiating the desolate Nevada landscape. A pair of vultures perched atop the pole marking the end of a Camaro's journey squawk and caw, bullying each other for footing while they wait out their prey.

Ultra-violet rays heat, redden, and burn the man's skin. Groggy and disoriented, he adjusts in the driver's seat. An agonizing flash thrusts him back into the present. Pushing himself upright, pressure shifts in swollen sectors. He reaches into the backseat, fingers fumbling and clumsy, grabbing at and pushing through the scattered belongings until they snag what he had hoped to find – a long-sleeved flannel that an ex-girlfriend from *(where was it, Wichita?)* a different life had bought for him at a gift store in a different world during a trip to the mountains about a million years ago. He uses his teeth and his good hand to tie a knot with the sleeves, which he then drapes over his neck.

*(you done gone and wronged us both—my Eliah! God above bless his ever-lovin' soul—he put his trust in you)*

The man jerks his head around. The sudden jolt brings fresh pain in a tidal wave, washing over him and nearly succeeding in taking him under again, the spotted, purple

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vision returns. He was sure he had just heard someone talking. He heard a woman screaming earlier, didn't he? He slides his arm through the opening of the makeshift sling, gentle and cautious as he moves his hand and arm. *Been alone the whole ride.* Then who was screaming?

His wrist is swollen and purple, causing his hand to flex outward into a 'natural' position. A thin layer of sand has adhered to the open wound. He does not dare attempt moving his fingers, fearful of the result.

The damaged limb secured, he begins the task of trying to exit the car. He pulls himself across the passenger seat. Bracing his good shoulder against the passenger door, he fights the incline with his body to force the door open, pulling himself out of the vehicle, onto the embankment. The door slams shut, startling him. With his good arm, he reaches out and uses the door handle to anchor himself as he attempts to get to his feet, but he lacks the strength to stand, and drops on the hot stone chunks. Dazed, dehydrated and delirious, he surveys the area, spotting the two large birds above. They appear to be circling something in the vicinity, and he thinks *perhaps I hit that fox after all.*

After a short rest, he makes another attempt to gain his footing and succeeds. His head throbs, responding to the physical exertion. He makes his way up the embankment to the road. To his right and left, the road stretches out until it can no longer be seen, lost in the wavy blur of beyond. Alone, in the middle of no place, alongside a road which appears to come from, and go, nowhere.

“The loneliest road? Hell yeah it is. Not a single damned rubbernecker, trucker, state trooper. Never a damned cop when ya' need one, anyways. Not one damned random passerby? How long was I out? It's...later. It's hot. Sun's startin' to get ahead

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of me so...damn. Hot. So friggin' hot today! Skins burned! Aw, man. My arm. *My arm!* Why does my throat hurt so bad? Like broken razors inside. Fuckin' on fire. I need water. *Damn* this sun!"

Heaving in a deep, arid breath, he prepares for what he imagines will be a loud, confident, man's bellow, belting out from his chords and echoing off hazy mountains across the empty expanse. He anticipates a cleansing release of frustration, envisions clenched fists shaking at an indifferent sky. What his body produces,

"AAAAagghh-gh-g-eh-eh-!"

is a half-hearted yell which ends in a coughing fit. His body throbs, his throat aches. Mouth agape, his lips crusted and flaking, an apt reflection of the badlands surrounding him.

"Maybe 2:00 P.M.? Time to think it out, talk it out, whenever it is. Got to *get* myself out. Lemme see...ninety miles out of Ely...still 'round one-seventy to Carson City. *Damn.*" He turns away from the road and looks down the slope at the Camaro, attempting to survey the damage. "Ain't changing no damn tire like this." The arm pulses agreement. "Okay, situation salva-, salav-... savable. Maybe not getting to Tahoe in time, but still getting there. Got an excuse for being a little late, anyhow. Walk-it, talk-it out. Keep moving. Remain conscious. Someone has *got* to come along. Somebody will stop. They gotta stop when they see the bloody mess I am. Oh, man. My arm. People are always willing to help if you strike the right chord with them, right? Right? Nobody'd just leave a broken man in the desert, now, c'mon. Pick your head up, step it out and do what you do best kid: keep moving forward.

You's got to be in stride

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when you's catchin' a ride,  
or else you gon' look  
like you's tryin' to slide.

Heh. Foolish song of a foolish old man. Hah—*that* old crotchety couple. Too damn dumb to see me stealing from right under their noses. The bitch had a lot of nerve to try and blame me for his death without no evidence, though. Can't believe I'm even remembering that shit right now.”

Stumbling through an interconnected string of memories, old and new, his feet wander forward, west on US-50, the loneliest road. But he is not alone. The old man's lyrics have summoned the Spirits of Decisions Past to accompany him for a while. The vultures never let him stray from sight.

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In Topeka, Kansas, a woman balls up a matte-finish memory of him. She sets fire to the memory with a pink Bic Mini, cursing what she believes to be his name. The tears spill forth in a hot flood.

\* \* \*

Somewhere deep in Dixie's heartland, an old woman kisses the tips of her index and middle fingers, pressing them with gentle love against the cold, polished granite headstone marking the place where she buried her heart and soul, her beloved Eliah.

“Don' cha' worry a bit, my love. He gon' get his someday righ' soon. A drifta', maybe even a demon he is. Maybe, maybe he's the Devil himse'f, and he was testin' on us, but I ain't gon' have it. Oh, Eliah, why'd ya' got to be so damned trustin', love? He was makin' othe's do fo' hisse'f, an' you's jus' too kine to take notice. You done died

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wit' the biggest heart o'dem all. Them scavenge's, they gon' take 'is flesh, but they gon' leave 'is soul. Just you wait and see, Eliah. They gon' leave 'im in that place called—"

\* \* \*

High above the Nevada basin, scavengers circle, follow, and wait.

\* \* \*

The sun leaves them all behind, forever racing west.

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Somewhere in Nevada, alongside an infinite stretch of lonely, unused road, the man hobbles west, anticipating a ride. He knows it will come, because it always does. He walks, trying to remember what the old woman said.

*(you 's gon' be alone, and one day you 's gon' DIE alone—you gon' see—one day you 's gon' need somebody, and ain't nobody gon' be there but the scavengers who 's jus' like ya'—you 's gon' fo'eva' be in—)*

“Something about the way this road feels. Lonely, isolated. What did that old crow say? I'd find myself somewhere. In a place where I'd be alone, my soul left in-.” He stops, mid-thought, staring at the horizon. His head whirls, the feeling of standing up to fast. Equilibrium unharnessed, he stumbles sideways, trips over his feet, and falls to his knees. The glow at the end of the world lingers, refusing to relinquish control to the night. The last ray of sunlight glows beyond the horizon, and then reappears. Gaping, awestruck, his mind attempts to grapple with the impossible observation. *I'm not seeing that. Can't be. It's NOT possible.* He continues to watch as it begins a renewed ascent on the western horizon.

His skin prickles as the wind whispers in his ear.



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*(purgatory)*

A horrifying moment of clarity. *She said they'd take my flesh*—"But my soul would be left in a place called Purgatory."

The sun separates itself from the horizon, and the man smiles. This is not reality. Agonizing pain washes over him as he regains his feet, but his confidence is high. Another traveler will be along soon. He will wake soon. This is all a dream, he thinks.

*(you's got a stain on that crooked soul o' yo's there, my Eliah o'looked the stains on a man, only interested in the hardness o' the man's hands—you mighta looked the part, but 'dem white chompa's 'n that priddy boy face say to me that you ain't ne'er been no labora' no place, Nar-cee-sus—You go on 'n get now! My man may not o' known early, but he caught on—cleva' as a fox was my ol' Mista' Thomas—tol' you to yo' own forsaken face 'n you ne'er even knew! Ha! We gon' see who outfoxes who in the end, I 'spose—you taker, I's got pity for you, because you got the trappin's of a deaf 'n blind boy—you cain't see that someone gon' take you one day—you done killed my love and my heart, 'cuz he was holdin' on to both when he died—sweet, trustin' Eliah—past may be 'de past, but it gon' tell the future how to be 'fore it's gone—you gon' get judged for 'dem choices you done made.)*

Watching from above, the scavengers circle, follow, and wait.

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