

## The Roadkill God

Arizona Highway 80 carved a winding path through the scrubby foothills of the Mule Mountains, a slick black river in a gray haze of mesquite under the stark light of a staring moon. The desert was illuminated in that queer, liminal shadow-day which occurs only when the moon is at its peak, so bright the world seems nearly awake – but not necessarily alive. Here we see a mirror image, a photo negative of the waking world, the same shapes in ghastly relief – the warm red cliffsides cast bone white, the wicked fingers of the ocotillo clawing, stone gray, at the vast, yawning weight of the starry sky. The world is in counterpoint, and one questions whether it is better or worse to be able to see what walks in the dark.

Dan Harding snapped off the drone of NPR as it trailed to a muffled crackle, reception lost between the hunched backs of the low mountains. He might pick up the signal again once he crossed the San Pedro, but it had been starting to put him to sleep, and he had yet to find a local radio station that he actually liked. Just as well, anyway: there was a wire loose somewhere in his stereo, and it had recently developed a habit of turning off and on by itself whenever that wire was jiggled, sometimes radically changing volume after a particularly ambitious bump. He'd had the crap scared out of him a couple of times that way, turning on the engine and suddenly finding some shitty pop-country band blowing out the bass in his speakers. He'd have to have it looked at eventually, but there was always something more important, always just one more thing you needed to pour your paycheck into, and eventually you just learned to deal with the little inconveniences. Eventually they became part of life, and you didn't even remember they were there until you brought home somebody new and they asked you why your car was such a piece of shit. By that time, you'd stopped noticing the smell.

Christ, he was tired. It was a little after three in the morning, although he couldn't have spoken to it exactly – the dash clock was slow, too – and the pounding migraine that had been

working on him all day had finally driven him to give up the ghost at work. He could get away with not power-washing the mats or getting down on his knees to really scrub the floors. The handy thing about working hard was that on the days you just couldn't, most people were liable to let it slide, and if they wouldn't, you had a list a foot long as to why they should step the fuck off. Pretty cynical way to look at diligence as a character trait – turned it from a virtue into something more like cool practicality – but it had served him well so far, and the relief of being able to just *go home* nearly counterbalanced the pain he was in. Nearly.

A mangled lump of fur on the shoulder flashed by in the moment between blinks, a snapshot presented to his mind in retrospect – javelina, it looked like. Poor thing. He hated seeing roadkill, particularly identifiable roadkill, and he was more than aware of how odd it was that he felt so little liking or even empathy for human beings, yet experienced a lousy clenching in his gut at the idea that a wild pig had been killed. He couldn't help it: animals touched something in him that he guarded too jealously to allow it to grow, and he attended the notion that he had never run over an animal in his life with an absurd blend of pride and anxiety.

He had come close, once. Coming back from a late night in Tucson, watching the elliptical swatch of highway illuminated by his brights with the dozy half-awareness of road hypnosis, he had spotted it just in time to swerve out of the way. It had been a raccoon, sitting up awkwardly on its forelegs in the middle of the road, and like the dead javelina, he had only seen it in a single, crystal-clear moment, processed seconds after he had already driven by. In that moment, he saw the raccoon swaying dumbly back and forth, head bobbing from side to side, and he saw that its back was broken. It couldn't have moved even if it had been able to break the horrifying, idiot confusion that had stolen its mind.

He had immediately regretted not hitting it and ending the ordeal, knowing it would lie where it was until some other motorist finished the job – or worse, until predation did so instead. The idea that it might have lain there and died of exposure if neither of these things happened was worst of all, and his fingers clenched around the steering wheel in time with his gut as he thought about it. Laying there as the sun crept higher, as the heat grew more intense, baking on the asphalt, unable to understand what had happened to it, to comprehend the true horror of what was going to-

He didn't see the board which had fallen into the road, but he felt the thump as he went over it, and he was one image and half a concept into the worry that his tires might have been damaged when his radio clicked back on, and Bob Boilen started howling *All Things Considered* with roughly the concussive force of a foghorn. Dan shrieked, slamming down reflexively on the brakes, and as he began to skid he was afforded one crystal clear image of a deer mid-bound, another snapshot in the mind with front legs tucked demurely into its chest and rear legs stretched out behind.

For that one second he saw it, and he yanked on the wheel, and then his front bumper buckled the deer's legs and flipped it over the hood, where it caved in the windshield with a sick crunch. He veered off the road, and when he felt his front tires drop into the shallow ditch off the shoulder the deer was flung into the air by the break in momentum. In the moment before his airbag blew he saw it twirl like an absurdly amusing ragdoll, then hit the asphalt with a sad, wet, wretched thump that he could not hear but imagined with perfect clarity.

Then his airbag did blow, momentarily blotting out anything but the pain of friction and force, and when he tumbled out of the car his nose was gouting blood, lending a damp quality to a string of epithets that would have had his mother positively spitting. He yanked off his flannel shirt and balled it against his face, dropping onto his rear and leaning back against the uneven yaw of

his thoroughly trashed car. Bumper, hood, windshield, tires, and that was just what he could take stock of at a glance – who knew what was wrong on the inside. He was, in a word, fucked.

“Are you *kidding* me?” He tipped back his head and let out a long, gargling, frustrated bellow, then smothered his entire face with the blood-soaked shirt and groaned into it, giving himself a minute just to process the full extent of his misfortune and let the rage and disbelief roll over him in waves. Deep breaths. No car, no money to fix it, no money to *tow it*, but there was nothing to be done about it. Breathe. Count to ten. Get your shit together and then deal with the problem.

The deer was still alive. In the extremity of his distress he had scarcely even remembered there had *been* a deer, but in the hushed semi-silence of the desert night he heard scuffling, followed by a low, keening moan that made something in him feel a little smaller. She had landed across the highway, and it was immediately, viscerally apparent that she was not okay: her head had been wrenched almost entirely around, could have allowed her to press her silky nose between her own shoulderblades, and both of her front legs were a ruin of jutting bone and bloody ribbons of hide.

She was struggling weakly, her head lolling back and forth so much like the raccoon’s had done, but it didn’t seem like she could move her body, and as she began to realize this her moaning quieted, replaced by shallow, rapid breathing that even from across the road sounded distressingly wet.

“Oh, shit,” Daniel whispered, unaccountably hoarse. God, if he had only been paying attention – he was always so *careful*, when the jackrabbits started mating he was even paranoid, and yet his eyes had missed her, and his car had not, and he, the driver, barely had a scratch on him. Wasn’t that always the way?

He pushed himself gingerly to his feet, and with sick hesitation he crossed the road, inching toward her slowly, though logically he knew that he had nothing to fear. A mule doe, probably a few years old, but now he could only imagine how pretty she must have been just minutes ago. Before he had ruined her. He wished so fervently that it hurt that she had simply died. It would have been awful, but it would also have absolved him of any further responsibility for the harm he had caused her: now she was suffering, as that raccoon had been suffering, and he realized with a nauseating pang that, with his car a hissing wreck behind him, he no longer had the excuse that he was too far along to turn back around for the sake of a wild animal. He would either have to do something about this, or leave her to her pain while he waited on a tow truck. She wasn't even in the road anymore, where she could be hit again. Torn apart by scavengers while she was still alive, baked to death in the unseasonable heat-

“*God.*” His voice cracked, and her enormous, shining eyes rolled to look at him, the whites bulging, terrified but unable to move, unable to flee. She expected it as much as he did – some predator come to savage her while she was helpless. They both knew the rules. “God, I’m so sorry, don’t look at me like that. I didn’t mean to-“ He didn’t know what he was saying, felt the uselessness of it tang like salt in his mouth. The doe didn’t care that he was sorry, that he would take it back in an instant if he could. All she cared about was that she was wounded and afraid, and that he might be here to kill her. And he realized that he was.

He was going to have to do for her what he hadn’t been able to do for the raccoon, and he had no idea how. It would have been so much easier if his car wasn’t stuck in the ditch: running over her again would have been terrible, but impersonal, a steel box between him and the reality of what he was doing, but every other option that came to him was worse than the last. The tire iron in

the trunk? Jesus, and what, he'd just wail on her until she stopped breathing? He couldn't. Try to do it by hand? He didn't have the strength, and he sure as hell didn't have the willpower.

“Christ, I'm sorry. I-I don't know what to-“ Breathe. Take a minute to pull yourself together, and then do what you need to do. He sat in the dirt next to her, trying to remember what breathing felt like, and as they panted in chorus it occurred to him how odd it was that no cars had passed them since the beginning of this little scene. It was late, sure, but it was also a Friday night, and to find nobody making the commute from the bars in Bisbee back toward Sierra Vista seemed-

“Rock. A rock.” Inspiration struck, and he pushed himself to his feet, startling the wounded doe. “I'll get a big rock, and I'll just...it'll be quick. I promise.” *I hope*. It was the best idea he could come up with, and he wandered into the forest of mesquite, finding that he didn't need a flashlight in the stark chiaroscuro cast by the bloated moon. If he could find a big enough boulder, he could drop it right on her head, crush her skull and end this in an instant. It would probably be the most traumatic thing he had ever been forced to do, but for her it would be the easiest way, and this hadn't been her fault. The fault was his, and so was the responsibility.

He came back to the road hefting a tough, pitted white rock roughly the size of a cinderblock, so heavy that he strained to walk with it. The deer was still there, as was his smoking car, and he had brought with him from the desert the unsettling awareness that things had become far too quiet. No sound of wildlife – no insects, no furtive rustlings or distant calls. He thought he had seen an owl in the distance when he had found the stone, a foreboding silhouette cut out of the night like wrought iron, backcast by the harsh moonlight, but it had had no word for him, and he had moved on with his wild work.

Now, though, he could hear nothing but the silence, as if the whole of the Sonora were holding its breath, waiting for him to see this grisly task through. Ridiculous, but a man alone in

the desert in the middle of the night found it hard not to be ridiculous: there was magic in the desert, and it was wild, capricious, and strongest at night.

“Okay.” He groaned as he finally dropped the rock on the side of the road, stretching his arms behind his back to work out the pain. The doe was there, panting and moaning, and after a moment he bent to heft the rock again, lifting it over his head with great effort. “Okay. Now I’m just gonna…” An image flashed across his mind’s eye: the way her skull would cave when he brought the rock down, the wet crunch it would make, the horrifying idea that he might do these things and find her wide, un-accusing eye still staring at him from under a sheet of blood-

“Fuck.” He dropped the rock and slapped a hand to his mouth, stumbling back into the mesquite. He made it a couple of yards before he buckled and vomited, on his knees in the sand with rocks biting into his palms, spewing steaming bile not so much for the horror of this, but for the *inevitability* of that horror. He had no choice. He had no other option but to do this. He was going to have to get up out of the dirt, return to the road, kill the doe, and then get his fucking car towed. And he would have to live with the night’s events for the rest of his goddamn life.

“*Fuck.*” It was cathartic to say it, and at last he did get up, brushing off his knees and pulling a thorn from the pad of his palm with a wince. The desert was still quiet, so quiet that he could hear the doe’s breathing, and as he drew closer to the road the hair on the back of his neck began to stand on end. There was no true darkness under the great, alien eye of this moon, but every slim shadow seemed to hide something sinister, something monstrous.

Tonight the monster stood in plain sight across the dark band of the highway. He nearly missed it at first glance, his eye attempting to filter out the unnatural as sanity demands we do every day of our lives, but the Stag would not be ignored, and when the great prongs of its horns resolved themselves out of the linear geometry of the ocotillo, he screamed.

His next conscious thought found him inside his car, frantically locking all four doors by hand, and then crouching low in the back seat, the breathy quality of his gasping inviting another scream at a moments' notice. He didn't want to look again, didn't want to verify what he had seen, but a sick compulsion nagged at him, and he did look. He did.

The Stag was unspeakable. Moose-like, towering head and shoulders over the desert scrub, with a massive rack of broken antlers between which the yellow moon rested as if in a cradle, safeguarded in a thicket of bone. If it had had fur once, it was gone, its wrinkled, scabrous black skin populated only by scant patches of wiry hair, peeling back or ripped away in places, revealing strips of gangrenous muscle. He clamped a hand over his mouth again when he saw that its ribcage had caved in on one side, some sort of fleshy sac hanging from its underbelly – herniated from its gut, the color of old liver.

Worse still, worst of all, was the Stag's face. So much of the flesh had been eaten away – by who knew what – that in place of its nose were two raw channels of bone, its blunt yellow teeth exposed in an implacable grin. Its eyes – God, God the *eyes* – had a rheumy, pus-rimmed cast, misshapen and white as the attendant moon, but the maddening impression that they saw him rose in his throat like vomit, and he realized with a distant, hazy fascination that his teeth were chattering. He felt stuck, utterly paralyzed in the face of what should not be.

It moved like a dead thing. There was something the matter with its legs, perhaps something the matter with all of it, for when it moved to cross the highway it was with the awkward herky-jerk of a badly-puppeteered marionette, the relative grace of a deer standing at rest obliterated by the sick, unnatural hobbling his hindbrain could only associate with injury, sickness, failure. It moved like a dead thing – and perhaps it was.



The sac dangling from its gut swayed as it crossed the highway, and it yawned to one side as it walked, following the neuralgic leftward jerk of its massive head. Ribbons of half-shed velvet glimmered with gore, spiderwebbing a crown of thorns, and for a heart-stopping moment he thought that it was coming toward him – *this is my fault, I did this, it's going to-*

But it turned, slowly, awkwardly, and when it stopped it stood above the doe, which looked up at it with what he was almost tempted to call an expression. Soft. Serene, welcoming. There was no fear.

The Stag bent its great, wretched head and stooped over the doe – and incredibly, against all sense and with apparent struggle, she raised her own head from between her shoulders, and clumsily pressed the soft pad of her nose into the Stag's skeletal muzzle. Daniel watched her sides expand in a great, slow breath, and then deflate with all the gentleness of a falling leaf. A single, lingering sigh. Her head curled back into the dirt, and her side did not rise again.

He had joined the almost holy stillness of the desert night, had gone so far as to hold his breath, his grip on the passenger side headrest slack with awe. The Stag straightened, raised its head, and for just a moment he saw that it was beautiful. For a moment, he saw perhaps what the doe had seen: sleek fur the color of iron and great, dark eyes, filled not so much with compassion as calm, indefatigable patience. He saw a strong, robust body and a crown of prongs as stark as the watching moon, starlight and warm shadow and the promise of relief at the termination of the ordeal, the promise of an end to pain. Perhaps not now, but someday: no matter what came, one day there would be an end, a gentle darkness to be wrapped in like a mother's arms, and never in his life had he experienced such a sense of comfort, *never-*

The Stag turned, and in the changing angles of moonlight he again saw stained, exposed bone and festering hide. When it moved, it was with the same wretched, straggling hobble with

which it had crossed the road, but the desert accepted it without resistance, and the Stag was lost among its shapes and angles so quickly that he couldn't have said exactly when it was gone.

A car pulled up onto the shoulder, and the beam of a flashlight briefly forced him to squint.

"You alright, there, sir?" A cop – young, smooth-faced, bit of a Texas twang, stepping out of his cruiser to survey the scene of the wreck. Some spell broken, the meticulous haze of rationality already trying to cast doubt on what it couldn't explain, he opened the car door and stepped gingerly out into the moonlight, running his fingers roughly through his hair.

"I...yeah. I just, uh," he glanced down the road to the crumpled form of the doe. "I hit a deer."

"Have you already called for a tow?" the cop asked.

"No, sir. No cell service." He didn't have a clue if that was actually the case, but it really was incredible how eager the human mind was to supply plausible explanations in a pinch.

"Just can't catch a break tonight, can you? Well, I'm gonna have to give you a sobriety test, sir, but I'll make the call – sometimes I think the dumb things just *wait* to jump out in front of you. All night long they could be crossing the road, but they go and do it when the roaring bright thing is hurtling right at 'em. Craziest thing, isn't it?" In the warmth of the night and the officer's personable attitude, he realized that he could hear life again – night birds and chittering insects. The desert seemed to have lost its weird, warped glamor, as if a filter had been peeled away, and beneath his conscious awareness the events of the night began to wrap themselves in the gauzy trappings of half-remembrance, of things only to be relived in dreams.

"Yeah. Pretty crazy."