

The Confabulations

It appears that the exchange of correspondences, the needs of commerce, the reality of deadlines—these no longer concern the postal service. Perhaps they've arranged another federal holiday to cope with the yoke of their girthy satchels. I turn away from banging on the fogged glass. Across the parking lot, an animate parka is opening a sedan. It bears telltale navy stripes along the sleeves, postal insignia. The vehicle pitches with the inward weight and the parka slams the door. "Excuse me," I shout. "Are you a city employee?" The ignition catches. I start running for the car, long johns and the icy terrain hampering my stride. "Hey," I say, "Hey!"

Shouldn't you be working, shepherding the mail along the scenic route, the caveman mail that remains so important to legal documents and get-well cards and under-the-wire-submissions because publications, contests and magazines, editors and judges and the western notion of time demand dated material?

"Excuse me," I say, knocking on the driver's side. He's old, or he looks old, and he looks at me, blinking with a surprised somewhat pained expression. No doubt he thought he could get away with this stunt. I make the sign for rolling down a window. The window whirs and he says, "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I say. "What's this with the leaving?"

"What?" He says, "Who's leaving? There are no other cars in the lot."

"What's this?"

"What's what?"

"Why aren't we inside?"

"Yes, well, we're not doing that."

He's old, I remind myself. It's not only that. He's not very sharp. He has this incredulous frown for a face, liver spots, country music quivering from the radio. The car is warming up, blowing defrosted air. We're staring at each other.

"It's Saturday," he says and the sedan backs away, swishes a two point turn in the snow and merges into traffic. Snow pads the entire parking lot except for the rectangle at my feet.

Supposing it *is* Saturday, it's still only 1:14 pm Eastern Standard Time. Somewhere in California, it's 10:14 am Pacific Standard Time. That means Wally is just waking up to the sounds of a morning raga, saluting the dawn with a mental projection of his spirit beast, or whatever. I've seen him perform the ritual. In its afterglow he moves with great clarity and purpose.

Back at my apartment, I'm sorting papers, looking for the phone.

"Wally, it's me. How is it? I need to ask you a favor."

"Sure," he says. "It's lovely."

He's audibly daydreaming, in his garden, no doubt, peeling a blood orange and contemplating a performance orgy. It's not his fault. Climate and geography alter us.

"Tell me about it," he says.

"Are you by a computer?"

"Somewhere around here."

"Head toward the sound of that zither," I say.

Shuffling and clattering sounds come through. I turn to my heap. The screen slithers to readiness and it has the wrong time: 3:04 pm Eastern Standard Time. My watch registers 1:37 pm Eastern Standard Time. This is troubling, but one thing at a time. Working at a computer chafes the faded ribbon supporting my gladness with the world. I strike the monitor, the shunting loom, the confabulation machine, its tra-la-la's suturing together a horrendous catalog of what passes for information.

"Mellow," says Wally. "It's afternoon."

“There? Literally, what is it?”

“In the afternoon.”

“How much afternoon?”

“About five minutes.”

“Shits!” I say, “Fuck, Wally, we have to hurry. I’m going to send you this file. Print it, forge my signature, and then post it certified mail to the address I’ve included. Quick like a bunny, Wally, this is important. Yes, actually post it like we did in the olden days. Exactly. I imagine that even in California the post office stays open until 1 on a Saturday.”

He disagrees about which day it is. After bowel frapping argumentation and triangulation of calendars, we straighten it out: it is 12:12 pm Pacific Standard Time on a Saturday. Wally plots a course to the post office. At exactly the same time, three hours later, I am watching the sun swing toward what people elsewhere would call the golden hour. There is no golden hour at this latitude. Not this time of year. The day goes from light silver to dark silver and you get up in the morning and its tomorrow already. I turn back to the computer and finish up with Wally.

“It’s probably going to work,” he says.

I’m ready for plan B. One summer I worked at a bait shop in Montana. It was an all-in-one-outpost near the Canadian border. The establishment had probably started out as a garage and towing operation. The proprietor, Bud, had a twenty-four hour pager for people who slid into the ditch when it was forty below. The bait shop also did the work of a post office. The outpost sold burning permits, hunting and fishing licenses, beer and hard liquor, blasting caps (for nuisance varmints) and a half-dozen different kinds of minnows, some as large as dildos. It was also a currency exchange. Bud and Myrtle oversaw everything. She supervised me behind the register for a couple days and then I took over afternoon shifts. I sold beer and cigarettes to underage friends. I got paid five dollars an hour in cash. Unless you were on the shit-list, you had credit. They kept blank

personal checks by the register in case someone forgot his checkbook. People would come in to buy groceries and ask me to hold their checks until the end of the month. I sold stamps and money orders, refilled propane tanks, pumped the septic, offered conjugal advice on the side and, upon persuasion, I backdated postage, which can come in very handy. Once I saw a cowboy fight near the video rental section. Another time, a hummingbird flew indoors and the locals tried to catch it with fishing nets.

Still, Wally might work. He's probably en route to the post office. I get a call that indicates he's doing something: "Almost there...no meat, please...later tonight...it had deep toes." Static garbles the line. The next call goes to voicemail. I finger the earpiece's clammy veneer and look for the back porch. The porch is my inner sanctum. It houses old magazines and relevant papers, promising correspondences, empties and butts, wolf spiders, voles, and other seasonal tenants. I once pulled an entire TV dinner from under the couch cushions. But such things are supposed to be there. I am there.

The snow has slackened. Blue jays, chickadees, and nuthatches now thrum the air, plundering the neighborhood feeders. I'm watching the day do its thing, digging in the cushions to keep the hands busy. Reverie alone could derail Wally, not to mention muggings and the wayward nature of the sun. I pull out some sort of action figure. The phone rings inside. I get through and catch the receiver just before the third ring. A tingling of bells lingers for a moment. It's someone trying to schedule a meeting, or some sort of pre-recorded endorsement, a collection agency, perhaps? "Too long have I indulged your baffling and intractable calls. Be gone," I say. At 3:30 pm Eastern Standard Time I ready plan B. By now I'm confident Wally has failed. Even if he arrives at the post office in time, there's no guarantee that he'll mail the right document. Or he might mail it right back to me. I call Sheila.

"Sheila," I say, "it's me. What are you doing for the rest of the day and tomorrow and the next day too, I guess, or can I have your car?"

“I’m tending bar all weekend,” she says. “Why do you need my car? I have to go to the clinic tomorrow.”

“Can’t you take the bus? I mean, this is really important. I know you’re pregnant, but I need to drive to Montana.”

She hangs up.

I call Henry, “Henry?”

Click.

Darla. I hesitate. “Darla, it’s me. I’m sorry to bother you. Are you at work? I forgot what day it was. I mean, can I borrow your car? I have to drive to Montana.”

“It’s in the shop. I’m going to pick it up later this afternoon.”

“Can I come? I’ll pay for the work, whatever, but loan me your rig.”

“You are on, sucker,” she says. “Stop by in a couple and we’ll go for the Nova.”

I formulate the route. It’ll take about twenty six hours of driving. The internet says thirty-two, but that’s an exaggeration. I use the part of me that strikes computers to ransack the apartment for supplies, stuffing blankets, bandages, packing tape, and egg noodles into a sack. I can probably make it to Minneapolis, at least Chicago, on my own. I call Darla back.

“Can you come with me to Montana?”

“Is that some kind of proposition?”

“Do you still have your prescription?”

“Maybe. It’ll cost you.”

“Do you want to come to Montana with me?”

“I’ll see you soon,” she hangs up.

The next buses to Darla’s neighborhood leave at 3:55 or 4:30 pm Eastern Standard Time. Dalliance will sink this expedition. I have a failure fantasy: we pull into Clover, MT, just as Myrtleene turns out the lights to settle the till. “Myrtleene, wait for me,” I wail and snag another coat, pillows, a toothbrush, playing cards, a mixing bowl, a

flipfolder of music, and a collection of erotica. Darla and I might take various routes. Trundling down the stairs—“Hells! Fuck is me!” I retrundle the stairs, satchel and pack bag whumping against the hallway. Shedding my trappings, rifling my desk for the envelope—no stamps, I’ll get those from Myrtle—it’s 3:47 pm Eastern Standard Time. A bird chirps in the apartment. I reprint the document and should I call Wally? but I bolt, fixing my course on tomorrow’s setting sun. Clover Junction stays open until 8:00 pm Mountain Time on a Sunday during the winter. There’s not time to confirm. I chase the bus for a block, sweat-logged and aching after I catch it at a red. When I get to her apartment, the sun is failing. Darla has yet to return from wherever she is. Occupants shuffle through the door to her building but “would rather not” let me into the stairwell. I sit on my bag and double check that I brought the printed document even though I’m sure I did. It bears a pixilated glyph, a rune-like barcode, and the inscription:

ALL RECIPIENTS OF THIS COMMUNIQUE ARE GUARANTEED AT
LEAST ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- ITEM, CUSTOM WALL MOUNTING OF ICE-AGE MASTODON TUSKS
- SERVICE, BID ON 1.2 ACRES OF LAND, LEGAL REPRESENTATION,
AND ESCROW SERVICES
- SERVICE, FULLY OUTFITTED SPEAR FISHING EXPEDITION OF
DURATION OF WINNER’S CHOOSING
- ITEM, FINEST GRADE, MEDICINALLY-PREPARED GALLBLADDER OF
ASIATIC MOON BEAR
- SERVICE, NAME (OF WINNER’S CHOICE) TO BE PLACED (IN THE
TOP TEN) ON NATIONAL KIDNEY TRANSPLANT WAITING LIST. NOT
INCLUDED, COST OF OPERATION
- SERVICE, OPPORTUNITY TO KILL (IN WHATEVER WAY WINNER
CHOOSES) THE REMAINING LIVE SPECIMENS OF SPECIES OF INSECT

- ITEM, TWELVE PAIRS OF SHOES OF WINNER'S CHOICE
- SERVICE AND ITEM, MAP OF PROBABLE LOCATIONS FOR ALL SHIPWRECKS NEAR JAMAICA OR MASSACHUSETTS, BASED ON OCEANOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL CONJECTURE
- ITEM, THREE OIL DERRICKS AND ANY CRUDE YIELDED
- SERVICE, CONTROL OF MINISTRY OF DEFENSE OF SMALL COUNTRY (FOR ONE DAY)
- ITEM, SUBMARINE (NOT SEAWORTHY)
- SERVICE, FULL SCHOLARSHIP TO BRYN MAWR
- ITEM, \$500 WORTH OF RECYCLABLE ALUMINUM CANS

HOWEVER, IN ORDER TO ASCERTAIN CONTESTANTS' WILL AND CUNNING, THIS ANNOUNCEMENT REQUIRES REPLY BY USPS CERTIFIED MAIL, POSTMARKED NO LATER THAN THIS SATURDAY.

The last item on the list seems like the booby prize. Or the penultimate, if you're a guy, or if you've already been to college, and isn't tuition more of an item anyhow?

Darla arrives.

"You're early," she says.

"You look great." I slide the document back into the envelope. "Can we go for the Nova?"

"You need freshening up. I'll shave you to a twink while we're on the road."

"Oh, Darla, do you mean it?"

As we walk, streetlights appear overhead, creasing the drifts with shadows. Darla shoulders my pack bag and asks me about Montana. She's really casual about the question because she can tell I'm sweating it. I check my watch: 4:47 pm Eastern Standard Time. That means if we leave right away and drive the whole time without

stopping for anything except gas, we'll barely make it. Maybe I should have called someone with a plane.

“We’re going to have to pee in cups.”

“Check,” Darla says. “What’s so great about Montana, besides drunk driving?”

“I’ll tell you once we’re on the road.”

“We’re on the road. See, I’m your Sherpa.”

“And I’m your Nova’s liberator. What’s wrong with it?”

“It needs a new transmission. The clutch stopped catching and I had to drive home in second gear on Wednesday.”

We enter Larry’s Body and Tranny Shack and the medicinal scent of grease and steel tools. Darla’s Nova is not one of the shellacked models with racing stripes and an eight ball shifter. Her vehicle belongs next to a shanty and a guy drinking beer in a yard full of litter. It is the color of trampled bananas.

Larry is in the office hacking at a calculator. The sound from the TV trickles through. It looks like a show about preachers, newscasters, perhaps? He looks up, “What is it?”

“The Nova,” Darla says. “They said it would be ready tonight.”

“It ain’t.”

“Well, what the hell?”

“Well, it ain’t ready.”

I can feel my anus bunching ever-upward like a tube of toothpaste. Darla leans over Larry’s desk. “This ‘ain’t’ possible,” she says what I’m thinking. The part of me that cries implores her to do something. Some people say, “Don’t cry at work, never cry at work.” Maybe those people are assassins. For those of us who work from home, crying becomes a part of the workday, like snacking. Just don’t cry in front of Larry, not in his man cave. I excuse myself to the bathroom while Darla negotiates for the release of the vehicle. I wait outside the office, listening to the hum and whoosh of the shop appliances

as they idle or recharge or whatever. My breath shallows while they argue about the Nova. Larry's voice has an arrhythmic quality like shifting guts. Darla seems to be cutting him off and rerouting the discussion. At 5:09 pm Eastern Standard Time the office door slams.

"Let's go," says Darla. "We've got wheels."

"The Nova?"

"No, Larry's letting us take the shop loaner. I told him we'd be back tomorrow. You still have to cover the tranny."

We gather my bags into the Fiesta parked in the back lot. I don't know much about cars, but nobody in Montana ever drove one of these things during the winter. The mileage must be pretty good. Darla lets it warm up before turning toward traffic. It sounds like a toy.

"Tell me about Montana," Darla says.

"I used to work at a bait shop that's also a café. Wally tried to help. It was a front for the copper and marijuana coming out of Canada. Bud and Myrtle still own the place. They have a connection at a wrecking yard. Anyhow, what I mean is I forgot what day it is. Does that ever happen to you? You get up in the morning and it's yesterday, or it's still today, but a day later?"

"Yes, I understand that you're semi-functional," Darla says. "You can talk, but you forget that you can talk and then the words take you by surprise." We pitter-patter up the ramp and enter traffic.

I pop the glove box and sift papers. "Whose car is this?" I say.

"Just let me handle it, okay?"

"Let's handle it together, you know?"

"Just handle yourself for now."

The draft of semis buffets us. I pour some water into the bowl and then the egg noodles. It takes a half hour to bring them to a simmer and I go through a couple of lighters.

“Do you want some?”

“Gross.”

“I brought music.”

“There’s just the radio.”

“Do you think they call New York the empire state because of all the classical place names? Ithaca, Syracuse, and such.”

Darla switches on the radio and there’s nothing but free-jazz and toll booths until we hit the blip of Pennsylvania and stop for gas at 9:58 pm Eastern Standard Time. We step out into the part of the world washed by a canopy of hum. I pump and Darla heads for the washroom.

“Hey, we’re peeing in cups, remember?” I call after her. My vision has walleied. I’m already entering the semi-hallucinatory state of wired and tired which conditions me for whatever happens while driving directly from F to E, deeply entwined in the night, watching for pink deer leaping from the ditches. Once when I was very lost somewhere, a field of purple blobs appeared, floating across the windshield. Then a leprechaun was riding one of the blobs, calling out directions, telling me where to turn to return to the highway. Darla returns with a pile of cheese.

“This is the last dairy state until Wisconsin.” She hands me the cheese.

“Thanks. Toss me the keys like we’re detectives. You know, partners.”

“I locked them in the car. Eat some cheese. It has a mellowing influence.” Darla walks into the darkness.

“What the shit?” I try the handles. “Darla, you fucked us already?”

Inside, the attendant is staring at me, cupping his hands against the window.

“It’s alright,” I give the sign. “We are OK out here.” I walk after Darla, behind the gas station and carwash. Streetlight jewels the asphalt. I shiver in the empty lot.

“Darla?”

I hear a crash and trot around the premises.

“Come the fuck on,” Darla shouts, sweeping the gravely safety glass off the passenger seat.

“I’m going to slide over the hood.”

“Let’s go,” she yells and lofts the key ring.

In my excitement, I bobble the keys and they skitter into the broken glass.

“Come on, little pony. Get in.”

The Fiesta already smells like feta despite the cheese. I turn the ignition and rev the tyke. “I’m sitting on glass.” It sparkles on the dash. “Now we’re going to freeze.”

Darla tosses the brick out her demolished window and looks at the itinerary.

“It would have been faster to go through Canada,” she says.

“I brought some packing tape. We could fashion a patch.”

“Over the great lakes,” she says. “It would have cut down maybe a few hours.”

“And we could say that we surprised thieves in the act. Or maybe we should steal the radio to make it look real.”

Darla reaches behind the seat for her purse.

“Didn’t you bring anything else? I thought we could get a motel and sleep for a day before we turn around, maybe we could even see some sights on the way back. Have you ever been to the Badlands or the Capitol building in Madison?”

“This isn’t some sort of scavenger hunt with amphetamines. Larry will probably impound the Nova for collateral. You’ll have to pay a few days of vehicle storage on top of the tranny. I can handle this Fiesta situation. I’m thinking for you. And speaking of my yens.” She taps out a few.

We swallow and merge into the pneumatic pulse of highway life, rushing along the struts of infrastructure, highways and canals glinting with the light of abandoned factories, peninsular swathes of snow from the shoulder, the disappearance of the horizon ever-unresolved. We point at the sign that announces Ohio.

“What the hell is a buckeye?” I say.

“It’s like a chestnut without the spiny casing.”

“Like a hazelnut?”

“More like an acorn,” she says. “I don’t know what that has to do with Ohio, which has suffered enough without having a nut as its handle.”

“Everybody has a state-something. Have you ever driven through Kansas?”

“Kansas,” she says, “is illiterate, not conversant. Like you. I visited my brother there, in Manhattan, he was stationed at the fort, the base region.”

“Is he illiterate too?”

“They couldn’t spell ammunitions depot. Everything was an acronym. Kansas is what would happen to Nebraska if it were further south.”

“It *is* further south and we drove through in a blizzard. My buddy thought it would be better than the 80 through Nebraska. He was saying, ‘oh, yeah, they won’t have snow in Kansas, it’s like Missouri.’ But let me tell you, you can’t actually cross the state of Kansas during a blizzard. You can only get closer to its center.”

“In Montana you can drive six-fifths drunk at five hundred miles an hour as long as you’re going somewhere. And they have yetis with shotguns.”

“We’ll need to stay sharp. Do we have guns?”

“Okay, I guess we could stay somewhere for a day or two. I’ll tell Larry we had a misunderstanding and then the Fiesta dropped *its* transmission, too.”

“He’s going to blow a gasket. HA!”

“The road, watch it, please.”

“Right, let’s stay focused on driving across the country. We should delegate responsibilities. As long as I’m doing all the driving, you can check the time.”

Darla unstraps my watch and flips on the dome light. “Let’s see. It is...” She says, righting the timepiece. “Alright, it is. Yep, there it goes. Time flies.”

“What time?”

“It *is* freezing in here. You were right.”

“What time? What time?”

“You decided I was in charge of time, remember?”

“Are you trying to destroy us, Darla? You’re fucking us again, aren’t you?”

“I’m thinking for you. *That* is the trip’s predicate. You think you know what to do? You think your watch could have helped you? I’ll help you.”

Darla swings her left leg over the shifter, kicking my foot off the gas. “All you have to do is clutch when I tell you. I’ll even steer. The brake is irrelevant.” She savages me against the driver’s side window, restraining my hands with hers, leadening the accelerator and steering with the same leg, the shifter a phallus in her thighs. It’s better than I could have imagined despite my terror.

“Darla, you don’t have to.”

“As if you left me an alternative. Clutch it!” She looses me to pass a semi, downshifting, jamming the shaft closer to her crotch. If I struggle we will yaw and swerve under the crush of three fathoms of rubber. So we drive, our limbs in rhythm, the dome light glaring the windshield, glittering on the splinters, the night pouring in. Darla cranks the blowers and I feel the heavy warmth of her breasts.

“How’s your novel coming along, Darla?”

“They fucking love it and I have a house in France.”

“HA! Whoever likes your novel can’t read.”

“I don’t have to explain my art to you. Look at you, for example, cooking egg noodles with a lighter. What the hell is wrong with you? I bet there isn’t even any Montana.”

“Oh, there’s a Montana alright. Darla, I’ll tell you. I feel so good right now you can’t squash it with your evil, bad-ass ways that have made you so famous. That’s right. They call you doña Darla back in Naples and all the peasants shower you with their crops so you don’t extort them and fuck their children. But I’ll tell you anyhow, we’re going to Montana because I got a communiqué. They’re going to give me a submarine and mammoth tusks. And when I’m an oil sheik who owns France you’ll have to fuck me.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Cleveland!”

“What are you trying to point at? There’s nothing out there but cropped fields and antique shops rotting in the mist.”

“This doesn’t exactly feel like your prescription.”

“You said you felt good, right? What else do you want?”

“Don’t tease me.”

“You know about how Kansas entered the Union, right?”

“Is that some sort of reference, because I brought erotica.”

“And speaking of feeling good, the Vikings would take cranium-denting mushrooms and freak out on the battlefield. Do you know what it feels like to fight someone with a broadsword *and* a sizzling brain?”

“That may be,” I say. “But did you know that Irish monks were the first to encounter Newfoundland. They visited—they were the original musketeers.”

“I can feel you lusting for France. Do you remember?”

“I remember when we were driving. It feels like we’ve never done anything else ever, just drive and drive. Darla, let’s get personal, again. You don’t have to hold me down anymore, but don’t stop. Did you ever see—I think it was a TV show—and this

gnarly, bad-ass woman like you crash lands in the wilderness with this sort-of-nerdy doctor and I think it was in Montana. And they're trying to repair the Cessna for days and he's trying to get inside of her with words and suggestions and she keeps squashing his innuendos. We could be like that except in the end we are in the same sleeping bag."

"That's crazy. They made a TV show about that? It sounds like an unsumptuous union."

"It was just one episode in the series. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"It's like some sort of performative enactment of the screenwriter's unconscious fantasies about his sister."

"You're like a sister to me, Darla, darling. Given the way I feel about you, that makes me a Viking. I don't care. I'm ready to show you."

"I think we missed Cleveland."

"Where are we? Darla, where are we going?"

"You're driving."

"We're like those elk that die enmeshed in rival antlers."

The Fiesta staggers in a crater and I choke on my belt. Darla is slammed against the dash from which the shards levitate in a snow globe swirl. A crystalline instance fills the vehicle. We are warp speed. We heave toward the shoulder, the crushed muffler scouring the asphalt, blown rubber blubbering. My scrotum leaps three knuckles into my rectum. Bile catches in my molars. The brakes lock and we lurch to a stop. Tiny clicking and tinglings fill the chassis, a perforated ringing in the ears. The rest of the highway teems with sea life. My tender parts turtle out of hiding and adrenal surges tip me toward ecstasy.

"We're here," I say. "Our bodies connect here."

Darla is crumpled against the ragged doorframe. I switch off the dome light. I switch off the radio and the defroster and touch Darla's thigh. "Hey." The vehicle sways with the passing traffic. Her eyes flicker. She grabs the handle and tumbles out.

She struggles to her knees. “Hand me my purse.”

I unbuckle and rummage for her purse. “What hurts?”

She coughs and spits and clambers back in the car. She nods at a couple bottles of pills peaking from her purse. “Open them,” she says, picking glass out of her forehead. The fingers of her left hand interlace so grotesquely that I can’t tell which are broken. “At least it’s not my stickshift hand,” she says. I can’t believe she has her teeth and her nose is whole. A crimson tear crosses her left cheek.

“Merciful fuck,” I say, the bottles trembling like maracas.

“Careful,” she says as I palsy out a few. “Those are for me,” she swallows and indicates the other bottle, “and those are for you.” I swallow a few. She gets out, steadying herself on the hood, toddling toward the hatchback. It opens. It sounds like she’s rummaging through a box of tambourines and claves.

“Darla?”

“Get out.”

The hatchback slams like a kick drum. I get out. The wind is glacial now which terrifies me which makes me brave. With her good hand, Darla rolls the spare around to the flat, “See if you can start a fire. There’s no jack.”

“I’ll look in the ditch,” I say. “Later, we’ll have to huddle together inside the Fiesta. I still think you’re beautiful.” Snow cakes the tree limbs I find at the base of the embankment. A barbed wire fence cleaves to the fallow field yawning into the beyond. People on the TV talk about the way intense situations focus them. They say things like, “After a crash the mind becomes totally clear,” whereas my walleye vision has intensified alongside other perceptual gems. I wander a section of fence as if I know what I’m doing, tramping the matted grass and trash, watching the headlights above as they tentacle the octopus night. I hear a honk and Darla’s head out the window.

“Where the fuck are you going, you freak?”

“I’m looking for firewood.”

“You’re holding it.”

Traffic blasts the wispy flame and I have to shred the entire volume of erotica to kindle the fire. Darla does most of the work for the little blaze. It probably looks like a road flare which is the idea, but nobody stops. Darla calls Information inside the Fiesta while I tend the rescue flame. And here we are, stranded on a single cell of reeling film, flickering along the highway. With snow bending toward horizontal in their beams, highway speeds warp toward time travel, the vehicles clutching the curve of the Earth until they emerge in a different era of the country. The implications churn me to a tremble. Jets could watch the sunset forever from their skyways and refueling tankers.

“They’re going to send a truck,” Darla says. “Keep tending the signal flame.”

It is late, probably beyond the pm Eastern Standard Time, assuming we haven’t crossed Indiana. The truck arrives thirty-eight minutes after something or an hour after something else, I have no way of knowing what, and a couple guys in garage zipper-suits immediately start trying to give us a jumpstart. “Thanks guys, hey, thanks,” I say.

“It’s a flat.” She shows them. “We need a jack.” She makes the sign of the crank as if they speak French. They seem to understand and return with the tackle, unhorrorified by either of us. The spare goes on at pit-stop speeds. They hold the clipboard for Darla to sign. They tear something off. Darla takes the slip and they disappear into the wrecker. The diesel mutters and lumbers away.

I am slumping in shotgun, dizzying, the ephiphanic clatter becoming muffled. Exhaustion jellies me, plugs my endorphins with vertigo. Famishment enfeebles me and the stench of car-warm dairy. “I want a hamburger,” I say. The vehicle bumps over the rumble strips. We advance and I try to twist away from the congealing air. Darla must be driving. I watch headlights lash her face. Someone lets my seat back.

It’s not sleep that happens. I am divided into the part of me that thinks, which can’t go on, and the rest that does, my body, a reptile nerve bundle twitching in the cold. Darla’s anesthetic configures an autonomic consciousness, drubbing me to an opiated

whisper. My guts resound in a manic chorus and I dribble a little piss. The rattle of the travel collects instead of streaming by. The din swells to a precipice and dangles me by a talon as we shift lanes or merge anew. But who can say what happens when approaching sleep?

And who can say what happens when waking? “Little holiday Tylenol,” Darla says, “little holiday Tylenol.” She’s smiling at me. The strand of crusted blood on her jaw flakes a little as she mouths the words. And I must be hearing them because their meaning reaches me, but the sound is absent. I slip into the half-light and dream about the tooth-mother riding a huge purple pill over a desert, slapping it with a cowboy hat. Ruby-throated hummingbirds attend the pharmacological mount, circulating like pilot fish around a shark.

“Little holiday Tylenol,” she says.

I slit my eyes. The dashboard is raw with sunlight. The leeward side of my face aches and the other side may have melted into the wind. I feel like a mended carcass. Looking at Darla is too much to contemplate. I test another sense, feeling along the grimed seat cushions. My throat is moths. I feel along for a drink and drink. I gag and double up and leak more piss. A head rush like nicotine reclines me immediately. I grasp toward her.

“Little holiday Tylenol is what you said,” Darla sings, swinging the syllables into a refrain. The sound of her voice frazzles the faded ribbon holding me to the world, the precipice trembles, the landscape below roils. Elsewhere, near the part of me that thinks, I am sipping, irrigating sapped vessels. Elsewhere I imagine ballast beginning to right its vessel. “Yet captain us softly,” I gurgle.

“We were camped in a pasture outside Kankakee,” she says, like it’s a story.

“How far have we?”

“There was Yodeling Eileen...who bottle-fed an orangutan named Tripod.”

“Darla, pull it over.”

“And there was One-Eyed Myra, queen of the galley.”

Darla must see me scrabbling for the door latch. She cuts the wheel clockwise and I loosen my belt and hurl myself out the door into the ditch, gulping the clammy air, lowering my haunches, and disgorging upon the earth in a nimbus of piss and effluvia. Mid-expiation I hear the red-and-blue arrive. They kill the siren and survey the situation, which, in my estimation, is that we are fucked. The passenger cop gets out, a basalt profile in the dawn.

“He was asleep,” Darla acts distraught, “and then all of a sudden he’s trying to climb out of the Fiesta.”

Hunkered over my leavings, I wave up at the cops, “Do you have any TP, officers?”

“Please get back in your vehicle, ma’am,” the passenger cop says. “Don’t move, sir.” He approaches Darla’s window. His partner is probably calling in our plates and locating the handcuffs, whetting his club. They leave me hanging a long time. I see Darla on her phone. Then she passes it to the cop. Then he walks back and passes the phone to the other cop and they confer. Half-clad, beside myself, I scrounge some trash and wipe off the big pieces. When I straighten, the placard reads: WELCOME TO NEW ENGLAND.

Epilogue

A package arrives in the mail with markings in Chinese, perhaps? The stamps are ducks on a pond and the same pixilated glyph in the corner. Wally calls, “Profound greetings. You have had urgent business? I was not able to reach you before.”

“Yes, urgent, still urgent, I’m calling you back.” The packaging yields as I gash it and inside a sealed jar which reads: FINEST, MEDICAL-GRADE. “Holy fuck,” I say. I

break the seal and take a whiff of the powder. It smells like an ocean at dusk, rust, and faintly musky. I snort some and scuttle out to the porch. The backyard betrays no activity. I hear a vehicle sloshing down the street. It creaks to a stop. I clutch the jar. The shit drips. I snort some more. “Who sent you?” I shout, lifting the jar like the face of a battered interrogate.

Wally keeps calling. It must be him. Then the doorbell. Again, the doorbell. The clanging of the receiver and the buzzer counterpoint one another and my cranium begins to implode. I hide the jar under a cushion and get up to disconnect the phone. The door crashes open, tearing lock from frame.

“What?” I say.

In coordinated scouring, men in ski-masks and dapper suits upend my apartment, locating the duck-stamp box by the screen-door to the porch, stepping out, coming back a second later with the jar, thanking me for my help.