

Out of Gas

She's yelling at me again. I can barely tell what Greta's saying when she gets like this. I apply a little more gas, take it up to 75, just to make myself feel as if I'm getting somewhere faster. Doesn't matter. Way up here, surrounded by autumn, cradled in Lake Superior's arms, I could drive forever.

I used to think Greta was fiery. I was attracted to the way she lit up when she was passionate about things. But now that we've been dating for a year I've come to realize it's just that she reaches this manic state of no surrender when she's angry. And she can be angry about nothing at all. The smell of stale coffee rising from the Styrofoam cup next to the gearshift reminds me of how long we've been at it. Greta stops fuming and pounds her fist into the armrest. The feeling in the pit of my stomach is a deep sick hunger, and each of Greta's words is a rock I've got to swallow, a boulder cascading down into the emptiness inside of me, never finding the bottom. I keep wondering when the avalanche will end, but on she goes.

We're on our way up to the Apostle Islands on this ribbon of a highway that snakes through rural Wisconsin. Hardly a soul on the road up this far north, just forest and farmland stretching for days. We'll hit Bayfield in an hour or so, take the ferry out to

Big Bay State Park, probably drop by this little bar called Tom's Burned Down Café on the way. Maybe we can drink ourselves into forgetting the past, maybe start over.

Greta's turned away again, sitting next to me, staring out of the window at the trees. I'm sure they believe she's upset with them. Not colorful enough, or maybe too tall and unforgiving. Could be the trees and I share some flaws we regret. And then I look down and the idiot light is on, and I realize I didn't check the gas gauge when I got into the car, and I remember telling myself to get gas before we left the Twin Cities. I also remember not doing it. The needle is pointing to that place way past "E"—to that spot where you don't know whether you've got enough to make it another twenty miles or you're going to chug to a halt at any moment.

"Shit!" I'm almost as mad at me as Greta is.

"Sure, you're upset too. You never think about anyone else's feelings, so when I try to talk about mine you get pissed." Greta's tone lowers to regular speaking volume when she has a rational point to make.

"No. I mean like, 'shit, we're almost out of gas,' shit."

Greta turns to me. "You're so fucking stupid. I told you we shouldn't be doing this, but no. We've got to get out of town. Get some quiet time alone."

I know not to say anything to that. If I start fighting back I'll lose focus. I'm trying to figure where I am, trying to remember if there's anything remotely resembling civilization on this stretch of highway. We passed a little town about twenty miles ago, but I'm thinking there's no way I should turn around and double back for it. Best guess, I've got less gas than I need to get there. Greta's no help. In the state she's in I don't want

to ask her to crack open Google Maps. Besides, she's the worst navigator on the planet. With her giving me directions, we'd probably end up in hell. I'll have to make do.

I can remember passing a small station, an American I think, last time we drove up here. It's about ten miles past Drummond, if that was Drummond we just passed a while back. If I'm right we should run across the station pretty soon.

Greta's resumed yelling again. I don't say a word. I look over and she's toying with her hair, holding a big clump of it between her thumb and forefinger, staring at the ends like she's examining broken wires. "I can't stand it when you go silent. You know I hate that!" she screams. When I don't say a word for the next minute or so Greta huffs out a great sigh and mumbles, "I should never have gotten the abortion."

I want to say something now, but I have to pick my words carefully. When Greta's off her meds she gets into this state where arguing the point is the wrong way to go, but if you try and change the subject it just pisses her off more. "What do you want me to tell you? That I'm sorry?"

"Oh, no!" she says in this exaggerated way. "Nothing's ever *your* fault. Just sit there and fucking drive. What do you care if I'm hanging out there at the end of a rope? Fucking zombie!"

So, I figure I said the wrong thing and now she goes into this tirade about me being emotionally dead inside. Meanwhile I'm getting nervous about finding a fucking gas station. I know there's one up here soon. At least I think there is. I kind of think I remember where I am, but the trees and the farm fields all look the same up this way. I could be anywhere within a hundred miles of the Apostles and I wouldn't have a clue exactly where given the scenery. Now, in addition to the guilt, I'm frustrated at myself.

Greta's so beautiful, but in a way that's hard to describe. She smart. So much smarter than me anyway. She has these dull brown eyes, which would be kind of humdrum if it weren't for the fact that they're such a contrast to her light skin and blond hair. I can remember when I first saw her, leaning against a speaker stack at a show where I was mixing sound. Everyone's eyes were glued to the band, but there she was, standing there, staring at her long fingers like she'd gotten a bad manicure and didn't know what she was going to do about it. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I try to think about that night every time she lays into me this way. She'll come around. I think she's just mad because she feels guilty about what she did.

"I should fucking jump out of the car right now," she yells.

"Just stop it! I mean we have more immediate problems."

And then she starts crying, and that's stage two of the process. When she goes from yelling to crying I know the rest of the drive is going to be hell. So, then I look up and spot a gas station in the distance. I can see the shape of the American sign on the shoulder ahead, and for a moment the feeling in my gut subsides. But as we get closer I realize the sign's not lit, and as we come up alongside the place I see there's not a car in sight, no one at the station, and the office looks closed and quiet.

"Shit!" Most gas stations up here allow you to get gas at the pump on credit, even if the place isn't open. But this station is so old it has these stone-age gas pumps that don't even have a credit card swiper mechanism, and the place looks so run down I'm not really sure if it's closed or deserted. My heart feels like it's stuck in my throat.

Greta stares over at me, wiping tears off of her cheeks with the back of her hand, trying not to muss her makeup too much. She has this look of hurt and curiosity on her face. She leans over and stares at the gauge. “We’re seriously fucked. You know that?”

I drive on, scouring my memory for any other gas stations or towns that might be up ahead. “Don’t sweat it. If we have to walk a ways we walk a ways. No big deal.”

“*We!* You’re the one that got us into this mess,” she yells. And I don’t know exactly which mess she’s talking about. I assume it’s the gas crisis, but when Greta’s in a rage it’s really hard to figure what she means by anything. The sun is getting low on the horizon and the color of the trees has dulled to a dark foresty gray-green—the color of limbo. I don’t want to run the engine down to empty. I hear all kinds of evil shit collects at the bottom of your gas tank, and if you run it down to the end all that gunk gets into your engine and fucks it up royally.

Minutes drag by. Then one positive thing: Greta’s back to yelling again. She’s mad at me for never planning anything, and I’ve got to admit she’s right about that. I mostly don’t fight back when she gets this way because she’s just upset at being right about me. I should know what I’m doing more, look out ahead and take charge of where I’m going. But I’m more of an “in the moment” kind of person, and since Greta is too getting pissed off about it is useless. I don’t think she much likes looking at herself, finding the bad traits in me that we share. That doesn’t stop her from ranting on though. I wish I had more answers.

Then the engine sputters, just for a second. An instant later it’s running fine again, but I know it’s a sign: the beginning of the end of the gas. I’m getting tired of being wound up so tight about all this. If the car would just ran out of gas then I’d be able to

react to it, but I hate the feeling of waiting for things to go wrong, waiting for things to run down. If I just ran out of gas I wouldn't have to make any choices. That's the worst thing in life, being the one stuck making the important choices.

Another few sputters and now I know it's almost time. On the horizon I see something, a sign, on the left hand side of the road up ahead, and this time the sign's lit up like a flare. The neon-worded rectangle is perched out in front of this place that looks like it might be some kind of bar and grill, but I'm not close enough to see anything more.

"Hey!" I call over to Greta. "Look!"

She looks up and peers over to where I'm pointing, and out of the corner of my eye I think I catch Greta cracking a smile. The sign reads, "The Absolution Bar." We arrive and turn off into the parking lot of what looks like a convenience store with a brown brick bar and grill attached. There's a gas pump island out front with pumps that have handles and nozzles that look like they date back to the 1950s. I limp the car into the slot beside the unleaded and shut down.

"Wait here." I tell Greta. I pick up that stale coffee cup, get out, circle around to side of the car with the fuel tank door and toss the smelly container into an open trashcan. I start inspecting the gas pump. Fuck. The thing is so old I don't have a clue as to how it works. I look for a lever or something, but I'm confused.

A man opens the convenience store door and walks toward me. He's wearing a droopy black hat, a dirty corduroy shirt and gray pants that look like they might once have been part of some kind of mechanic's uniform. He stares at me, his breathing a sort of smoldering impatient wheeze. "You lost?" he asks.

“Not really. Almost out of gas though. You know how to work the pump?”

“You have to pay first.” He looks like he doesn’t usually have to tell people that, and I imagine he must only sell gas to people who live around here. Hardly any strangers this far north.

“Sure,” I say, reaching for my wallet.

“Not me. You gotta go inside. See Pete. He’s over in there,” the guy says, and points to the door that leads into the bar. “But don’t call him Pete. He won’t hear. You gotta call him Pedro or he don’t understand.” The guy starts laughing for some reason. I edge over in front of Greta’s window and motion for her to roll it down, but then I realize she probably can’t because it’s powered and I’ve got the keys in my pocket. And then that pisses her off, and I can hear a muffled “fuck you” from behind the glass.

“I’ve got to go inside and pay first,” I say to the window, but I don’t wait for her to acknowledge my explanation. I’m sure she can figure it out.

I leave her there with the ruffled attendant and go in search of someone I can pay. When I open the door to the bar the darkness sweeps over my eyes like a blanket. I’m assaulted by a wave of hot air carrying the scent of frying brats and just a hint of stale urinal cakes. I blink a few times and try to smack the taste of that wet smell out of my mouth. It’s a few moments before I can make out anyone at all. My vision finally catches up to the darkness. There are three men sitting on barstools in the corner of the place, and one old guy behind the bar, eyes like an owl and a bulbous nose that looks as though someone might have used it to scour out stainless steel pots and pans. I walk up toward him.

“Are you Pedro?” I ask him.

He holds up one hand to his ear.

“Pedro,” I say a little louder. “Are you Pedro?”

“You want to order a San Pedro?” he asks.

“What?” I say, before I can stop myself.

“Beer. A San Pedro?”

“No. I want to pay for gas.”

“A Guinness?”

“No. The guy outside said I need to find Pedro to pay for the gas,” and I’m almost yelling at him now.

The three guys at the end of the bar start laughing. One hoots after he finishes chuckling, and calls over to me, “He don’t hear so good.” And now Pedro starts laughing too.

“So, what’ll it be?” Pedro asks me, his laughter dying down to a choking cough.

“I don’t want anything. I’m just paying for a fill up.”

“A Miller?”

I take out my wallet and fish out a twenty, place it on the bar. I pat it down with my fingers, like I’m afraid it’s going to blow away. “Here’s twenty dollars for gas. Can I get some gas?”

Pedro points his finger in the air, stoops over the cooler in front of him and pulls out a brown bottle of Guinness, pops open the top. My first inclination is to keep on arguing, but there’s something inviting about that bottle of beer, the little shards of ice bleeding off its cool glass sides. The barkeep pulls in my twenty and turns to face a cash register that looks like it might have come out of a depression era Woolworth’s. I should

go right back outside, satisfied that I've paid for more gas, but instead I find myself hopping up onto a barstool and grabbing hold of that beer. I love dark beer.

I tip up the bottle and sit there wondering why I'm doing this, whether maybe I just enjoy being difficult and misunderstood. I grow a bit warmer as I sip, feel like I'm bathing in a soft ballad. Country music permeates the place, and it's worse than the stale air. Hank Williams' "Your Cheatin' Heart" whines at me from somewhere. I can't spot a jukebox. Pedro places my change on the bar and shuffles back over to his friends. I turn to my left and face them.

"Since you all seem to understand me, you need to tell your buddy there that this change is for gas, outside. Understand?"

One of the guys waves and kind of points in my direction, so I figure old Pedro will get the message somehow. I take another pull on that beer and the thick bubbles pour down over the emptiness in my gut, and I realize I haven't felt this good in weeks. I can't remember feeling contentment or even peace since Greta went off her meds. I never know what to do about her. I can't tell whether she's off the wagon again until she's taking my head off, and by that time, when I say anything about it, she's too unreasonable to start them up again. It's like a Catch 22, but with benefits. Greta is really sexy when she's on the opposite side (the fiery side) of these manic spells, and even though I know I should fight harder to get her back on the medication I don't. I just shut down, wait for her mood to swing and hope things don't get out of hand in the meantime.

I tip back the beer; slosh the bottle back onto the bar. It's about a quarter past halfway to empty. Pedro comes over, stands in front of me and points at my change, sitting there on the countertop. "You sure swilled that down. Want another?"

I smile, but the little angel on my shoulder wins me over. “No. Thanks. I just want to pay for some gas,” I say, and I pick up the ten and the five and hold it out toward the man.

Pedro looks down at me as if he’s considering his answer. “You can’t pay in here. You can’t pay anywhere.” Pedro picks up a wet glass and starts wiping its insides with a damp towel that smells like steam. “I mean, you try and fill up and then you run down. You try and fill up again and then you run down again. See? You’re never full and you’re never out, but can’t no one pay for more.”

My hand falls back down to the bar. I must be a bit buzzed because that seems to make sense to me, but it’s got nothing to do with what I need at the moment. I drop the bills on the bar, tip back the icy bottle and slurp down more beer. I wipe off my mouth and shake my head. “Listen, we’re just on the way up to the Apostle Islands and I’m running on fumes here. I need some unleaded and that’s all. Can I go fill my tank?”

“You can try. You can always try, but I won’t sell you any gas.”

“What?”

“No one can sell you that kind of gas, son.”

I keep trying to figure what Pedro’s talking about, but then I hear a horn blaring from outside. It doesn’t let up. I realize maybe it isn’t my horn though. I mean, I don’t lean on my own horn much, so I don’t know exactly what it sounds like when it blares, but this sound is unfamiliar.

Pedro laughs. “Gabriel’s blowing that horn. Go ask him for some gas, see what he says. Bet it sounds a lot like what I told you.”

That horn blares again, and then following it another horn, but this one's our ancient Honda. I'm sure of it. Shit. I take one last big swig, wave to the guys at the bar and then high tail it outside.

It's almost dark. There's an old Cadillac hearse in line behind my car, waiting to get at the gas pump. The attendant guy is standing there waving at Greta, trying to get her to move the car. Inside is Greta, sitting frozen, looking at the attendant through the window and screaming. The muffled scream is only barely audible over the hearse's blasting horn. I run over to the car and try and talk to the attendant but he shouts at me before I can open my mouth.

"She won't move the damn car, man."

"She can't," I yell to the guy. "I'm out of gas. I mean, literally, out of gas. Can't you pump me a few gallons so I can get out of here?"

The hearse horn is still going full tilt. I look back through the headlights flooding over us. I make a motion with my hand like I'm cutting my own throat, see if the guy in the hearse will stop leaning on the horn. It doesn't do any good.

"You're never really out of gas, man. But you can pump some if you want," the attendant yells.

"Thanks. I left Pedro fifteen bucks."

"He didn't let you pay for it, did he?" he asks me.

"No. He said you wouldn't either, but I left him the money anyway," I say, and now the hearse horn is really starting to piss me off, and I look inside the car and Greta is still screaming at me like she's on fire.

“You gotta fill up your own tank.” the guy yells at me, “I sure-as-hell can’t do it for you.”

“I’m not asking you to do it. Just tell me how it works.”

“You gotta decide you own things.” And then Gabriel smiles at me, a yellow menagerie of tobacco-stained teeth punctuated by two black spaces where decay must’ve won out. He keeps on talking, shouting over the hearse’s horn. “You gotta be willing to get involved, see?” He claps his hand down onto my shoulder. “You can’t just stand on the sidelines. This ain’t no game.”

I’m sweating now, and I shake my head. I want to laugh, but there’s too much chaos in the air. “No. I mean how does the *pump* work.”

Gabriel looks back at the old contraption, laughs. “You push that red button on the side and then squeeze the handle.”

I duck out from under his grasp, unscrew the gas cap, find the red button under the grip of the nozzle and push it. When I tip the nozzle down into the fuel port and squeeze the handle what feels like a slow dribble of fuel flows out through the nozzle. Meanwhile the hearse driver is still honking at me like I can control how fast this ancient piece of crap pump pumps gas. I wave at the guy like I’m doing my best, but it doesn’t seem to do any good.

“Can’t you get him to stop?” I ask Gabriel.

“I’m the one told him to do it,” he says, that broken smile wide.

“What I’m saying is, can you ask him to cut it out?”

There’s a strange look in the man’s dark eyes, the pupils so black I feel I can almost see my own reflection inside them. “Horn sounds for everyone some time. I

figure, it's just your turn, son." He shakes his head and walks past me, then back alongside the hearse. He says something to the driver and then points at me while the gas dribbles into my tank. Gabriel leans back and laughs up into the air, shaking his head again and slapping at his thigh like there's a great big cosmic joke playing out before his eyes, and the joke's on me.

After a minute or so of this Greta opens her passenger side door and gets out. She looks over at me. "You're never gonna fill it. C'mon."

"The thing's barely..." And then the hearse sounds its horn again and I have to yell to finish what I'm saying. "...it's barely working!" And just as I finish saying the words I can feel that the stream of gas has stopped. I've possibly pumped in a couple gallons, enough to get us up to the islands—maybe. I wave at Gabriel and the hearse driver, remove the pump nozzle and stow things away. Greta ducks back down into the passenger seat.

I've had about as much of this shit as I can stand. Gabriel walks back up to me before I can steal away back into the car. He stands there staring at me. "You couldn't even decide for yourself that you'd had enough, man. You had to rely on your woman to tell you," he says, shaking his head again like he knows all of my shortcomings. He turns away, walks back toward the store and then disappears through the doors. A cool breeze begins blowing in from the north. It's going to be a cloudy night. I edge back around, get into the car and start the engine. The hearse's horn toots one last long blast, and I wave at him with my middle finger as I shove the stick into "drive" and take off.

Greta's quiet for the longest time, but then finally she speaks to me in a low voice. "I didn't want to have the abortion you know."

The hairs at the back of my neck stand on end. “I said all along, it was your decision.”

She laughs. “Yeah, that’s easy isn’t it? Like you don’t have anything to do with it.”

I can’t really tell if something drastic has changed with her or if she’s just gearing up to lay into me again. The road is dark. I flip on my headlights. The yellow line in the center of the highway starts to glow.

“Look, I said I’m sorry about a million times now. I wish I hadn’t met her, I wish I hadn’t left you the way I did, and I wish I’d have come back sooner. I should’ve told you you should have the baby, but now it’s too late to take things back.”

Greta shrugs, and then curses. “You bastard. You can’t just take back what you did, and you sure as shit can’t take back a life. Sorry doesn’t change anything. You abandoned me, let me end a life, and then you hung all the guilt that goes along with it around my neck. You know how that makes me feel?”

And finally, I can’t hold back anymore. Like some dam bursting I scream out to her, “No! I don’t know how you feel, because you went and fucking killed yourself before I could ask you that! And now I’ll never know.”

Greta’s calmer than I can ever remember seeing her. “See?” she says. “Some things you can’t just apologize for. Some things you can’t take back. Some things change everything for the worse. For shit like that, there’s no going back. You fuck up and no amount of guilt or sorrow or penance can ever make things right.” Greta smooths back her long hair and eases her leg up into her seat so she can face me. “You left me there,

hanging in the apartment, and you just ran away. You're never going to outrun this, no matter how far you drive."

And then the darkness closes down around me, and I'm driving and driving, and we never seem to arrive at the Apostle Islands. Hours go by, and I know there's no way I could be driving this far for this long without getting to where I'm going. Greta's still sitting there, staring at me. She mutters something every now and again.

"Only cowards off themselves," she says, moaning.

I stop the next morning at this little convenience store and pick up a cup of coffee. After a few more hours Greta starts shoving me in the shoulder and whispering again, blaming me for everything. I don't remember how I got this close to home given where we were before, and I don't want to think about why I needed to get away in the first place. Greta is quiet for a while, but then she whispers something I can barely hear.

"I can never forgive you. God can never forgive you. The universe can never forgive you. There's no running from this mistake. No paying for it either." Her voice becomes a ringing in my ears, and I think back to the last time we drove up this way, all the pain and remorse flowing through my veins, and I recall her being so mad at me. I don't know when or how this will ever end.

She's yelling at me again. I can barely tell what Greta's saying when she gets like this. I apply a little more gas, take it up to 75, just to make myself feel as if I'm getting somewhere faster. Doesn't matter. Way up here, surrounded by autumn, cradled in Lake Superior's arms, I could driver forever.

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