The Same Old Road

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Abstract

A YEAR had passed since Eric had seen his parents. One wandering, wasted year. First Des Moines and then Omaha, then Bismark, and Butte, and the others. All of them alike, except that Omaha was bigger than Des Moines, and Seattle was bigger than Portland...
A YEAR had passed since Eric had seen his parents. One wandering, wasted year. First Des Moines and then Omaha, then Bismark, and Butte, and the others. All of them alike, except that Omaha was bigger than Des Moines, and Seattle was bigger than Portland. Each town had its parks, theaters, bars and garbage collectors. He walked on the same streets in towns five hundred or a thousand miles apart, and the same bars too, and the same people. The same businessmen, the same ministers and the same prostitutes. How many jobs had there been? Twenty? At least twenty jobs, but all too much the same to remember any one of them. Two months ago he had decided to save train fare to go back home to Mom and Dad, and the University. That was in San Antonio; no, in Dallas. But he lost his job, so he walked. He walked through Oklahoma and Kansas.

In Kansas he worked for a farmer during the wheat harvest for two weeks. The money was in the cash register of the Blue Goose Tavern. Some of it was probably at the brewery in St. Louis where the owner got his beer. Some of it was in a savings account the bar owner had for his son's education, some in the church collection plate. That grocer prob-
ably had some too, and the Coca-Cola Company, and the man who won the All-Star Baseball Game pool. Some of it was in ash trays and garbage cans and vending machines. None of it was in Eric's pocket. So he walked.

Even then thoughts of home, his parents, and the University lingered with him. Well, not so much the University, but that would come when he got home. Maybe it would be different the second time. Maybe. Maybe not. Long nights and fine print and studying. Not really studying, but sitting in front of the books—those damn books—and wanting to be somewhere else. Almost anywhere else.

There had to be a better way to learn things than to read about them. Daniel Boone didn't read about hunting, he hunted. It doesn't do any good to sit in front of a chemistry book for hours if you don't remember what is in it. It was hard to study. Sometimes he would read two or three pages and suddenly wake up realizing he didn't remember a thing. Maybe it would be different this time. Maybe not. He had hated so much about the University that it was hard to picture himself going back.

He thought about the fraternity with its rules. It was odd how the fraternity managed to put a pledge's life on a schedule and still wouldn't let him alone. They were always bugging him about something. Trying to relax and study was impossible, because there was the fear of an active looking in on him trying to catch him in a lax moment with his glasses off or something. Study hours from seven till ten-thirty; then pledge duties and back to study hours. Maybe bed by twelve or one unless the actives decided the pledges needed a lineup. Then they yelled at him until he got the feeling that they were the ones that needed the help.

It seemed like there was always a test the day after he got drunk, or an English theme due the day after his girl came up for the weekend. Nobody accepted late papers or let you take a test a day late. He remembered the first letter from the University when he was in high school. The letter contained one five-by-seven card which said, "Your number is 804578." The idea of going back made him swear.
His last night, as he sat at his desk trying to study, the scholarship chairman opened the door to his room and asked Mike, his active roommate, "These scum studying okay?" Eric sat at his desk trying to decide whether it was better to be a peon or a scum. Then he got up, without permission, of course, and started packing his suitcase. Mike had screamed at him, and when he threw his books in the waste-paper basket, Mike went for the house president. Then they both screamed at him. Eric just laughed, and before he left, he had a chance to laugh at the whole house, because they were all screaming at him as he walked out the door laughing.

A gush of wind nearly pushed him off the side of the highway as the semi roared past. It startled him that he hadn't even heard the truck coming. Daydreaming. Anyway, he came out of the spell in time to notice a sign that said, "Bradyville, two miles."

Once again he stuck out his thumb to solicit a ride and wondered how many he had missed by sleepwalking for the last few miles. It took him half an hour to get into Bradyville, since he had to walk all the way. Rides had been few and far between during the last couple of days. Walking past the window of the Rexall Drug Store, he glanced in through the glass, but the reflection shocked him so that he had to stop and take a better look. No wonder he couldn't get a ride. His five-foot ten-inch frame was covered with dirty rags, not clothes. Leaning in closer to the window, he noticed that his face, which never looked too bad to most girls, was now covered with a grimy combination of beard and good old sandy Kansas dirt. "God damn," he said to himself, "God damn." With two hundred miles separating himself and home, he figured a shave and a bath might help get him a ride or two.

An hour later he found himself about two miles north of Bradyville, sitting on a small river bank. Actually, he was sitting for only a few minutes, because lying down became too much of a temptation. The shoes came off, and what was left of the socks, too. He felt his blistered feet. "God damn,"
he thought to himself, “got to stop here for the night.” A combination of feeling absolutely filthy, plus needing a shave, and new clothes, and his burning feet made him wonder whether home would seem good, and maybe the University wouldn’t be too bad.

Soon, the dirty feeling overpowered his will to lie down and sleep. He got up, undressed, and jumped in, taking his razor and his clothes with him. In Bradyville, before coming out to the river, he’d managed to borrow a small bar of soap from the “As You Travel Ask Us” people. The motto should have been changed to suit this particular case, since he hadn’t asked. Actually, no one cared that he had taken the soap, but if they had caught him stealing it, they would have had to make a big deal out of it. After being in the water for only a minute or so, he tossed the razor on the bank. It was impossible for him to wash his face and hold the razor at the same time, so he decided to bathe first and shave afterwards.

He took a long bath, mostly just a swimming down stream with the current and walking up stream against it, until he cut his foot on a sharp rock. Then he lathered his face and returned to the bank for his razor. Shaving without a mirror wasn’t easy, but he managed. The sun dried him quickly once he was out of the water. Now to lie down. Though weary, he was unable to relax.

A feeling that had been growing in him since he left Dallas at last had a good grip. He was worried about going back home and especially back to school. But there was no way out. He felt tense and uncomfortable. Everything bothered him. The grass seemed to tickle his legs, and he felt the lumpy ground digging into his back as his mind clawed at the events that soon would confront him. He was only 150 or 200 miles from home, the folks and the University.

His dad hadn’t written for six months, and his mother hadn’t written often. The last time he called them was in San Diego four months before. His father had nothing to say, so he talked to his mother. He hated to talk to her, because she cried and bitched mostly. Never once did they ask
him why he had left; they had only told him that he'd better come home, "and damn quick if you know what's good for you," as his father's letters usually read from top to bottom.

Eric figured it was near five o'clock and, since he couldn't get to sleep, time to get on down the road. He stood up and walked toward his clothes on the tree. Then his foot pained him, and he noticed that the bottom was covered with the deep red scum of dried blood. The scum washed off, and soon he was on his way to the highway a mile and a half north, walking with a limp. It was a good thing he had cleaned up; no one would pick up a dirty cripple; maybe they would feel sorry for a clean one. If he only had a suitcase with Benton University on it, he would get a ride right away.

It took him about half an hour to get to the highway, since he had to walk through thick prairie grass. Again his thumb crawled out from his clenched fist. Funny how that thumb could mean the same to millions of people. But most of those millions ignored it even though they recognized it. It was sort of like the thing with the University; he recognized a problem, but ran away from it.

Several cars crept up the highway, then swished past and crept away in the other direction. In the distance behind him he saw a new car—a Pontiac—coming toward him. He knew that such cars didn't even pick up clean cripples, so he turned his back and walked. The car passed him, and his eyes caught the lettering of a familiar decal—Benton University. He could seem to go nowhere now without being reminded of that place. The highway ahead looked sort of stupid. Mile after mile seemed headed in the same general direction of nowhere. When he was walking up a hill, it looked like it was going to end at the top of the hill and had finally found its destination. But once over the top it just stretched out for another two or three miles to the top of the next hill. It was always the same over each hill. Oh, sometimes it was four miles to the next hill instead of two or three, but just the same anyway. There's no difference. Omaha is just bigger than Des Moines, and Seattle is just bigger than Portland.
Eric had hunted a year for a difference. Not finding it had confused him. Somewhere there had to be a place where he could go to work at eight one day and nine the other, or where he could eat lunch at eleven one day and twelve the next. Sure, he had found those places, but if he went to work at nine, he just got off an hour later and lunched tasted the same at either eleven or twelve. It was just like the highway, the only difference was the distance between the hills. The road was just the same. Just sixteen feet wide for a million miles.

Eric heard a car coming behind him and automatically projected his thumb. He turned around and saw a pick-up truck almost moving toward him. Soon, well, not too soon, the pick-up truck was beside him and stopped, although the difference between the truck's moving speed and its stop was not easily detected. As he climbed into the truck, Eric noticed that his clothes were finally dry, and he decided that it was not enough to be a clean cripple, but one had to also be dry.

As the pick-up started moving down the road, Eric wondered how it had ever caught him. Must have been loafing. The driver was old like the truck and gray like the truck, except for his brown face which matched the brown box that rested on the rear axle.

Eric had a feeling that the reason the driver didn't say much was because he carried on a silent conversation with the truck all the while. Finally, he managed to blurt out something, although he seemed to apologize to the truck for the impulse.

"Whur ye goin', boy?" came the sound from somewhere within his gray beard.

"Bellvideoer," a strange sound replied. Eric realized that he hadn't used his voice for days, except to get a hamburger. He had forgotten the sound of his own voice; it seemed a stranger to him.

"Gonna be dark in a couple hours; better stop in Barton. That's whur I'm goin'." The old man looked straight ahead.

"Yeh," Eric said, "I was planning to stop there anyway." Several miles passed without the old man saying anything—
to Eric at least. Eric kept wondering how the old gray man got out of the truck without the both of them dying. No­where could he find where their veins were spliced, but Eric knew they were related. And on the third mile, the old gray man and the truck arose again from the dead.

“What's yur name, son?”

“Ah, Jim; Jim Bridger.” Right after Eric said that he knew he shouldn’t have, because the old man probably knew Jim Bridger personally.

“Pleased t' meet ya, son,” said the old man, “I'm Bill Tru­man.”

He wondered why the old man had asked for his name, since he still called him “son”. Eric nearly asked if the truck had a name, too, but the old man interrupted him.

“Got a place to stay in town?”

“Yeh, I got a cousin who lives there.” It was easy to lie to somebody when it didn't make any difference. Nothing more was said until they got to town, so Eric had plenty of time to decide how he would start explaining to his parents. He knew his explanation would start by listening to his father lecture for two hours and his mother whimper for another, so there was no real worry about having enough time. Ahead he could see the lights of Barton. The old man let Eric off and started to pull away with the truck. Eric couldn't help thinking it took both of them to keep their singular life mov­ing.

He caught a ride easily this time, and soon was on his last ninety miles in a new Ford. The miles would go fast now, and he began to wonder whether he wanted to go home. There was no turning back now, and he knew it. The University was buried in his mind, as he watched the odo­meter count off the miles. He could only think of his outraged father and his mother holding back tears, since she would have been so instructed by his father. “Bellvideer—31 miles.” The sign flashed in the glare of the headlights. Half an hour now. It would be hopeless to try to explain why he had run away, because he wasn't sure. And his parents would never accept what he thought it was. How could he tell them he had been hunting for something and not found
it? How could he tell them that he came home because he didn’t know where to keep hunting? He knew those answers would be completely unacceptable to his father.

The new Ford bounced over the cobblestone streets of Bellvideer and came to a halt in front of the Phillips station. Eric walked quickly away from the lights, not wanting to be seen. Thoughts of lazy summer nights spent long ago in the streets he now walked warmed him. But laziness could be no more. Only work was ahead. The same work at the same time every day. God damn.

He wondered if his feet would get heavier with each block, as was the tradition in such situations. He found that it wasn’t his feet that bothered him. His head was swimming with apologies, snobberies, and outrages. He couldn’t decide which he’d use in actual battle.

Then he stood in front of his home. Suddenly he realized that there were no lights on. He looked around and saw that most of the houses had the lights off. Of course, it must be nearly midnight. Soft steps carried him to the front door, through the living room, up the stairs to his room. With a quiet haste he undressed in the dark, preparing to hide for at least another night.

**Encounter**

*by Tija Spitsberg*

*English, Sr.*

Sometime you’ve got to face  
Running into yourself in the fog,  
And admit you can’t erase  
The ledger of twenty-two years,  
And this grand barrage  
Of nothing but open space  
And the sky you’re leaving behind,  
Not ever knowing exactly why.