

DESPERADO
(Lucky Lucy, Part 3)

"I think your aunt and cousin really liked me." Lucy said, self-satisfied, looking up from my lap, where her head was lying, only inches from the steering wheel, while tapping her bare feet on the passenger side window in time with the music on the mixtape I'd made for her.

"Of course they did. Despite years of living in L.A., they are still both total sweeties. *And* they think I am golden, therefore anyone I touch is also gold."

"We sure had the Midas touch back there at the Riverside Resort."

"That was all your touch, not mine. I had no idea what I was doing. And that was the only time I've ever gambled – in a casino, I mean."

"You've touched me, though, in ways and in places I never imagined." She said, thrusting her left hand right into my line of vision, the new gold band on her finger gleaming in the shaft of sunlight slicing through the bug-spattered windshield.

"You've touched me, too, Lucy. I had pretty much shut down emotionally and sexually after the divorce and you have brought me back to life. I know we both needed to move on after college and get our careers going, but I can't help wondering, what if we *hadn't* lost all that time. I guess we're making up for it now."

"For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, "It might have been."

"Who wrote that?" I asked, once again exposing how badly unread I actually am.

"Whittier."

"And he certainly was."

"He was also a Quaker, like me."

"Nobody's perfect."

"You're close."

"Pfffft! Oh lord Lucy, you can't be serious. Still, it's nice to be appreciated for once. Even if it is bullshit. Especially coming from your lovely lips, wifey."

"Oh oh, I feel something moving behind my head! I think it's a snake! Let me see if I can charm it." She rolled over and started unlatching my belt.

"Are you insane! Not while I'm driving!"

"I guess you'd better stop then." She already had me in her hand and her tongue was making the rounds. I began looking for a good spot on the shoulder to pull off. It didn't really matter, since as far as the eye could see there was nothing but two-dimensional desert. We had just passed Laguna, New Mexico and according to the sign, the next god-forsaken village would be Mesita, eight miles east on Interstate 40. We were less than an hour from Albuquerque and had been on the road for about six hours already since leaving, Laughlin, Nevada. I wanted to get to Albuquerque before dark, but since we got such a late start today, that may not be possible now. On the other hand, there are worse reasons for delays that I can think of.

I eased the truck off the sticky, sulfurous blacktop and into a scrubby patch about two yards away from the road, hoping not to hit any rocks or debris that could result in a Garp-itation. I

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shut the engine off and rolled down the windows. Lucy continued demonstrating her mastery of a technique she had only learned barely a week ago, while Linda Ronstadt serenaded us from the cassette deck. *"You better let somebody love you, before it's too-oo-oo late."*

I gripped the side mirror as Lucy picked up the pace.

I wish I could come up with better climactic exclamations than "Oh god!" and "Oh Jesus!", especially since I don't believe in either one, but that always comes out, also.

Lucy lingered patiently in place until I had completely finished, then she clambered over me and spat out the window into the amber sand.

"Owww!" I yelled, as she recklessly jammed her knee between my legs.

"Oh, god, I'm sorry! I hope everything's OK down there!" She bent down, and delicately cupping both hands under my soft penis, gently kissed it. "No damage done, hubby?"

"The pain will pass quickly, but the pleasure will last me the rest of the day. And as soon as I recover, I am going to reciprocate. Only without using my knee."

"I know you would have liked me to swallow, but I just can't. It's not exactly caviar, you know."

"Neither is oat meal, but you have that for breakfast every morning. Besides, there are no taste buds in the back of your throat. Treat it like cough syrup, just chug it down."

"Nice try, but it ain't gonna work."

She leaned against the passenger side door with her elbow out the window and her toes tucked under my leg, the fly of my jeans still wide open. She turned to look out onto the desolate landscape as the breeze played through her brunette curls. "I think I could just spend all day and all night making love. I might make a good courtesan."

"You'd make an excellent one. You could recite poetry and discuss philosophy and correct your clients' grammar."

"Ha! You are my only customer from now on." I leaned over and kissed her. As I looked into her cat's eyes I felt a tingling in my stomach. It still seemed unreal that we had gotten hitched. In a casino chapel, of all unlikely places. But I was warming up to the reality. I hitched my pants back up and got out of the truck and walked around to Lucy's side. I opened the door and told her to scoot over.

"What? You want me to drive?"

"No. I'm going to drive you. Like I promised: it's payback time. Here, get on your knees and let me see that butt." A bit unsure, she knelt and faced out of the driver's window. I pulled her cutoffs and ridiculous yellow pansy panties down and dropped them onto the floormat next to her ratty Keds. She yanked her T-shirt off and tossed it over the seat back. -

I had just buried my face between her cheeks when she exclaimed "A car!" I looked past her ass and saw a shit-brown Chevy pulling up behind us. I got out and Lucy scrambled to gather up her duds. A tallish guy in his late 30s or so with shaggy dirty blonde hair poking out from under a leather cowboy hat emerged from the beat up Impala. He looked as sand-blasted as his car, which had Utah plates. Both he and the car were as perfect camouflaged for the Chihuahuan Desert and the little lizards that would dart in and out of the sand now and then. He ambled

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over as Lucy stood behind me wriggling back into her clothes. Shaggy walked around to where we were standing, took off his retro aviator shades and pocketed them.

"Hey, neighbor, I stopped to see if I could lend y'all a hand."

"Thanks a lot. But actually, we're doing just fine. We just pulled off to ... take a rest. Been driving solid all day."

"Well, glad to hear it. Never hurts to check, though. Out here on these long stretches of nothingness, no phones, no help at all if'n a guy – or a gal - got stranded out here. I mean, I ain't seen another car for oh, thirty minutes. From either direction." He glanced in Lucy's direction, and smiling lasciviously, tipped his grease-stained Stetson. "No tellin' when a *good Samaritan* might come by." Something about the way he pronounced both 'good' and 'Samaritan' told me that he was not describing himself.

"We were just getting ready to have a ...little snack." Lucy added.

"Thanks again for checking on us." I said. "I guess we'll get back to our lunch now." I turned away from him and pulling back the vinyl cover, reached into the truck bed to retrieve the Igloo to indicate that our brief chat was now concluded. While I set it on the seat, Lucy laid her hand on my shoulder and gripped it. I rose to see a look of total fear on her face. Before rising, I glanced into the rearview mirror and saw Mr. Samaritan standing in the same spot as before, only now fondling what looked like a service revolver. One that appeared to have seen plenty of service.

"I'll tell ya, actually there izzzz something y'all can do for me." He drawled. "See, I'm a bit short on cash today and I need to refill my tank, get some grub, and find a place to crash for the night. I was kinda hopin y'all could help me out with that." I stood up very slowly and put an arm around Lucy's waist. She was shaking. "Don't worry. I'll handle this. Everything's going to be OK." I told her. I realized how banal and unassuring that sounded, but like my crying out "Oh god!" during sex, it's a situation where cleverness and honesty rarely cross paths.

"I only carried pocket change on this trip. Everything else is Traveler's Checks and credit cards." That part was *mostly* true, although I was not counting the sixty thousand dollars from our casino fortune that Lucy had stashed in her purse, which was now sitting safely under the seat.

"Now, if true, that would be sad news." he said. "And very inconvenient. But somebody with such a nice, shiny, new-lookin' vehicle like you'r in, surely has more than a few quarters on him."

"Please don't kill us! We just got married." Lucy stammered.

[BREAK]

"He doesn't need any suggestions" I whispered to her, doing my best Edgar Bergen impression.

"Now why would you go and make an insinuation like that, little lady? It really hurts that you would think me that kind of person." He noticed that Lucy's eyes had not left the gun. "Oh, this? Like I said, on roads like this, you gotta watch your ass. This is just protection, that's all. Oh, and congratulations on the nuptials. Now, back to the subject at hand: *my* immediate needs. Let's see what we can do about them. If y'all could just lay your cards on the table, in a manner of speakin, I'd be much appreciative. Verrry slowly, if you would hand me your wallet

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and the lady's handbag. Surely you got some of your dowry left. Let's see what yas can come up with and we can all be on our merry little ways. And y'all can get back to honey-moonin'." I now was skeptical that he was going to let that happen, being that we could easily identify him, his car, and even his gun, which I determined was a Remington .45 semi-automatic. Cop gun. I wasn't sure what the capacity of that particular pistol was but I knew it was over six shots. More than enough to protect oneself, let's put it that way. Assuming that he had reloaded it recently, which is always a better assumption than that it is empty. As I slowly brought my arms forward - so that he could see I was unarmed - I leaned forward just enough to let the tail of my open shirt fall to cover the sheathed hunting knife on my belt.

13:00

[BREAK]

"My wallet is in the cup holder, in between the seats."

"All right. If you would just step backwards real slow like, the both of yas, with your hands raised so's I can see 'em." He motioned with his gun for us to keep going. Lucy stumbled on a rock, but fortunately did not lose her footing. "Yep, that's good, a bit more. Okay. I need plenty of room, so don't get any ideers about helpin' me." He advanced along the right side of the truck without looking at it, keeping his rat-like stare and gun fixed on us.

When he got to the open door, he crouched down - with a bit of difficulty, it seemed - and passed the Remington to his right hand. A lefty. He reached in to fetch my trucker's wallet. I had looped and hooked the chain around the gear shift and the knob prevented him from pulling it off.

"Fuck! Now why did you have to go and do that, Tex? He sat down and struggled with the clip, which could have used some WD-40. Unable to unhook it one-handed, he reached over with his right, temporarily leaving us unchecked. We were probably about ten feet away from him and now his back was turned to us. He looked over his shoulder briefly, was reassured that we were still frozen in place, then returned to trying either free or open the wallet, whose zipper was also very hard to open, one of the teeth having gotten bent. I surprised myself when an adrenalin rush seized me and, unsheathing my Buck, I lunged forward and came stabbing down hard into his right shoulder. The blade slid in, apparently between the scapula and clavicle. Sorry, that's the shoulder blade and collar bone for you non-science non-geeks. I yanked it out just as he clamped his left hand over the point of entry and let out a blood-curdling scream, followed by another from Lucy. Blood was gushing from the wound and soaking his shirt. Seeing the gap between his elbow and ribcage, I then thrust the knife about half-way into his armpit. He dropped the gun, which fell to the floormat, and fell backwards into the sand. He was rolling in pain and, again spotting a vulnerability, I gave a swift kick from one of my Dan Posts right to his *cojones*. He doubled over in the reddening dirt while I grabbed the gun and trained it on him. I tossed the knife into the brush in front of the truck. While I stood there, shaking, Lucy came running up to my side, tears a-flowing. She clutched my arm.

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"Oh my god, he's dying!"

"No he isn't. Those are not mortal wounds. I don't think. Unless a major artery was severed, then maybe."

"What are we going to do?"

"I'm waiting to see what he's going to do. Or can do." At that point, he got up on his knees still clutching his shoulder, which was now bleeding profusely from both the top and bottom. He squinted up at me and seemingly just realized that the tables had quickly and unexpectedly turned on him now. No more unexpected than to me.

"What makes you think that thing is loaded, pal?"

"Because I can feel the magazine, because of the weight, and because I don't believe for a minute you would have attempted to rob a Texan if it wasn't. Should I try it out on you, just to see? I'm sure not going to waste any ammo on target practice with a cactus. Just in case there's only one bullet."

"Clever man. What're you gonna do with me? I need to a doctor quick."

"Well, I guess you're going to have to drive yourself, then, because we sure as hell aren't going to take you."

"Look, motherfucker, I'm gonna bleed to death! You gotta help me! You don't want that on your conscience, do you? If I die, they gonna prosecute you for murder."

"Not in New Mexico they won't. I was making a citizen's arrest. You were committing felony armed robbery, with intent to kill. I'd be hailed a hero, you sonofabitch." Clint Eastwood seemed to be pulling my strings now.

Lucy bent down and scooped up a handful of sand and threw it into his face.

"You were going to rape and kill us! Admit it! You brought this on yourself! You are a bad person!" Lucy was deft with the understatement.

"And my conscience doesn't extend to scumbags like you." I said. "If you die, the world will be a much better place. Besides, I can see by the blood flow that you are clotting. And you're not passing out. Looks like you're going to live. Unfortunately."

"OK. I may not be dyin', but you practically cut my arm off, man. I can't drive like this. I think you severed a tendon."

"Sure you can. I'm sure you have driven with one arm many times. While holding a gun or a gun moll in the other." I'd always wanted to use the term 'gun moll' conversationally, ever since I'd heard Edgar G. Robinson say it. In "Little Caesar", I believe.

"Lu... 'Louise' – get that disposable camera." She looked at me askance. I hoped that she got why I called her by a different name. "I want you to photograph this bastard. And his car and license plate." Which I noticed proclaimed "Greatest Snow On Earth". She fetched it from her purse and cautiously approached him. "Don't worry, if he so much as flinches, it will be the last move he ever makes." She made a circle of his car, documenting numerous irrelevant aspects of it.

"Now, stand up slowly and put your left hand in your front pocket." I ordered him, drawing from the wealth of every tv cop and bad guy dialog I had ever heard. He struggled to his feet

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and did as I instructed. "Where is your wallet? I want to make sure you have your driver's license on you."

"Back pocket. I can't reach it. You gonna rob me? I ain't got nothin'."

"Louise – look and see if he's telling the truth."

"I don't want to get close to him."

"You don't have to. Just go in back of him and look. Do you see a wallet?"

"There's a bulge in his left pocket that looks like a billfold."

"Pick up that stick over there and see if you can push it out."

"No! He'll try to grab me."

"He can't, because he knows I will blow his brains out if he so much as blinks."

"I'm afraid."

"Would you rather hold the gun on him and I get the wallet?"

NO!"

"OK, then, you have to do it." She picked up the stick, then standing as far back as possible, extended her arm as far as possible and began poking with the stick.

"Just pull it out, woman. I ain't gonna stop ya."

"Shut up, motherfucker! Don't listen to him, Luc... Louise."

"I think it's coming. *Bob*. I've got it partially out now!" she said with a certain pride. She seemed to be getting into it. "I got it!" she exclaimed as a thick shiny black leather wallet plopped into sand. Lucy snatched it up and brought it over to me. She was practically beaming.

"Thanks. You are a great deputy. Look for some IDs and take photos of them. Write down anything important."

"There's a lot of money in here! He was lying about being broke!"

"Imagine that. And here I thought he was an Honest John."

"No, a dishonest Ron." Lucy read from an accordion-fold card holder. "Ronald Griffiths. Birthdate October 19, 1950. Crescent Junction, Utah."

"OK, I think we got enough of his bio. Just write down the basics and take some select photos."

"So, Ron, we're gotta get you to a hospital. There's one right off of 66 in Laguna just a few miles from here. You're gonna drive and we're going to follow you. We were heading that way, anyway, on our way to ... L.A. While you are getting sewn up, we will be paying a visit to the police station. We'll wait outside the emergency room entrance, just to make sure you get in safely."

I moved around to the driver's side of the beat-up hatchback and opened the door. The window was rolled down. The keys were still in the ignition. I checked to make sure the tranny was in neutral and turned the motor on. I worried that once in motion, the car itself could become a weapon. To minimize that likelihood, I walked around to the passenger side where Desperado was checking the status of his disabled arm, and using the point of my rat tail comb, began letting the air out of his rear tire.

"What're you doin'?"

"Making sure you don't break any speed laws on the way to the Laguna hospital. You don't

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want any unnecessary delays, like a speeding ticket." Once the tire was sufficiently flattened, I commanded "Now very slowly, one small step at a time, I want you to get in the car."

"I can't drive, I'm telling you. Look at my arm."

"If you stay here, a coral snake or copperhead is going to follow the scent of your blood – if they haven't already – and they will finish you off. You know, that may be the best idea. Yeah, I like that. Okay, then kick your boots off so they can find a vein quickly." He mumbled an unintelligible curse and began shuffling towards the driver's seat. I kept the gun aimed at his chest. Although I owned three, I had not held a gun since I gave up hunting in high school. I was getting reacquainted with the intoxicating power of having the say over another being's life or death. I flinched internally when my mind silently mouthed Clint Eastwood's timeless dare 'Make my day.' Desperado flopped down on the seat.

"Pull your legs in." With obvious searing pain he struggled to get his feet over the panel and under the steering wheel. When he was finally all in, I went over and kicked the door closed.

"Louise, give me his wallet."

"There weren't enough shots left on the film. All I got was his driver's license." she said as she handed it to me.

"That will be enough for the police."

"It's expired, by the way."

"You hear that, Ron? You need to get that renewed as soon as possible." I poked my thumb in the cash pocket. Looked like a couple hundred dollars plus change. I pulled the bills out and tossed the wallet past Ron's head. It landed somewhere in the back seat."

"Are you keepin' my money?"

"Of course not. I'm not a thief like you. I don't need your money, anyway. Like you said, a guy with a truck like mine is obviously rich. No, I'm just want to insure that you drive real slow." Keeping the gun aimed at his head, I tossed the bills in the window. They scattered on his lap, the seat, and floor.

"OK, Louise, I want you to go start up the truck and pull up behind Ronnie, here. Not too close, though. Then we will all leave together. Ron, I will honk at you when I want you to pull out."

She skittered over to the truck and got in and started it up. She circled around and pulled up, nearly colliding with his bumper. She backed up about five feet and I motioned with my free hand to go back further. She backed up another five feet.

"I'm going to get in my Rolls Royce now. When you hear me honk, don't peel out or accidentally backup because it might spook me and your gun may accidentally go off. You already have one flat, you don't need another. Or a broken rear window and tail lights. I hear they're pretty expensive on Camaros." I moved to the driver's side of the Datsun. I told Lucy to move over. She looked surprised, but did as directed. I got in and closing the door, made a quick check of the Remington. I flipped the safety back on and disengaged the magazine. Six shots left in a seven. I replaced it, removed the safety and gripping the gun with both hands, fired into the sand several inches from Ron's front tire. Lucy screamed. This antique firearm kicked like a mule. If I fired it with only my left hand, it would fly right out of it. Ron yanked his

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head to the side.

"Just practicing, Ron! Not to worry." I yelled.

"Please don't do that again!" Lucy begged.

I honked and motioned with the gun to Ron for him to begin moving out to the road. He sat there for a pregnant few, before inching forward, then stopped again. I honked a second time and also inched forward. Ron was probably trying to figure out what he could do to subvert the plan I laid out to him. A plan I had no intention of following through on. Or maybe he honestly was having trouble driving. I laid on the horn. He moved out onto the vacant highway. Only one car and one semi had passed the entire time since Ron had dropped by. Which could have been ten minutes or forty-five. I had no idea. I followed him from a safe distance, but still within shooting range. I had left enough air in the tire that it probably would not damage his rim or tire if he in fact did take it slow, which I honestly no longer cared, since I planned to lose him as soon as he entered Laguna city limits.

"I'm afraid the police are going to want to hold you for questioning. That creep will say you attacked him when he asked for help." Lucy warned.

"No they won't because I am not speaking to any police. As soon as he pulls into the hospital lot we are turning around and heading back the direction we were going - to Albuquerque. And he won't say much to the cops, either. He probably has enough warrants out for him already. He's gonna try to avoid jail at all costs. Probably will try to bribe the doctor to keep it on the down-low."

"What if he tries to come after us later? He saw our license plate."

"All he saw was that they were Texas plates. The number was obscured by mud we ran through in Nevada. " The Camaro weaved now and then, but mostly kept steady. I clocked him at 15 miles an hour.

"*Welcome to Pueblo Laguna*" a sign announced, the cheer failing to dispel the as-yet cheerless landscape, made more uninviting by the next sign we passed, which speed-reader Lucy read out loud: "Tour the Jackpile uranium mine, operated by Anaconda Minerals, part of the Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) family of companies." Ironically, radio activity from the awful Mexican pop station was fading as we passed by.

The hospital was only about another mile in this tiny historic Indian village. It was unfortunate we were only here on business, because it would have been nice to take in the famous old mission and pick up some turquoise and silver jewelry. When I spotted the hospital, I pulled closer to Ron's Chevy and honked. I put my left-turn signal on, hoping he would see it. I came up right on his bumper at the stop sign. I gave him a slight nudge to reinforce his will to turn into the parking lot. I followed closely when he finally turned. He came to a stop in a handicap only parking space near the ER walk-in entrance. I pulled around so that my door faced his.

"Get out." I yelled to him. "Lucy, watch our back. We don't need an audience."

"My cash." He protested. How to deal with this? He might have another gun stashed somewhere in the car. I couldn't risk it.

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"Just roll up your windows and lock the car and get out. You can get the money later. Seriously, get out of the car NOW." I pointed the barrel at his fly.

"Don't mess with Texas, bub!" Lucy added in the most unconvincingly threatening voice she could muster.

He locked the driver's side door, then limped around to the passenger side to lock that door. He shuffled towards the entrance, continually checking on me. The doors burst open and two white-clad emergency techs exited. I hid the gun until they got in their ambulance and pulled out. Again, I motioned with the gun for Ronnie to get on with it. He finally went in.

"Oh god, I'm glad this is over now!" Lucy sighed.

"We hope, you mean." I pulled out and drove to the edge of the lot nearest the road, to keep an out on the would-be felon, just to make sure he wasn't trying to fake us out. After four or five minutes, I was satisfied that he had been admitted, so I pulled back up to the side of his car.

"What are you doing? Let's get out of here!"

"One last precaution." I got out and taking my comb-weapon, began deflating the opposite rear tire.

After I got back in the truck, and headed to the highway, Lucy said

"OK, that was pretty smart."

"Oops! One other important thing." Lucy shot me a disapproving look. I pulled on to the shoulder, got out of the truck, and fished some stuff out of the back. Taking an old rag and the jug of drinking water, I wetted it and wiped the dried mud off of the front and back license plates.

"Leave it to a scientist!"

"The devil is in the details. And we don't want to go 'walking with the devil'." Lucy shook her head in non-recognition. "Being stopped by the cops." I explained.

"Is that some more charming Tex-arcana?"

"I guess so", I replied, chuckling over her pun. When I reached the site of our *cunniligus interruptus*,

I crossed lanes and retracing our tire tracks, returned to the very spot.

"Why are we back here? Let's just get to Albuquerque!"

"I left something important here." I got out and grabbing a piece of dead brush, began sweeping the sand. When I found what I was looking for, I unzipped my fly and began peeing on it. "Lucy, would you bring me a Diet Pepsi?"

"Are you serious? If you need a rest stop I'm sure there's a better one anywhere but here."

"Just bring it over here, please." She slammed the door and reluctantly complied with my request.

"Here!" I took the can, shook it well, then aiming the top over my Buck knife, opened it just a bit and began spraying foaming soda all over the blade, flipping it over with the toe of my boot to cover both sides.

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"Care to explain the science behind this latest crazy?"

"I'm removing traces of blood and fingerprints."

"With Pepsi?"

"Yep. Urine and carbonated cola. The two react to form a pretty good all-purpose solvent. Also great for removing dried bugs and birdshit from windshields and chrome."

"I did not know that. Nor would I have ever needed to before marrying you."

"Another clever thing my daddy taught me. We used to use it to clean rabbit fur off our hands. Peed on our hands, then poured Coke over them. We always skinned the rabbits out back - we raised and sold them for meat - because my mother did not want the fur in the house. It stuck to everything like glue and stunk."

"That is disgusting! Every part of it! I think I may be sick. I don't think I want to meet your parents now."

"Well, they no longer raise rabbits and I don't eat them anymore, or any other animals, either, so it's a moot point." I picked up the knife and dried it off by swiping it in the sand, which coated it over, then tossed it in the back of the truck. "OK, let's get the hell out of Dodge." Kicking up plenty of dust, I bounced back onto I-40, heading west.

"Hey, you're heading the wrong way! We need to go east!"

"We will. Don't you worry your pretty little head. I'm taking a slight scenic detour. But resist the urge to take any photos." I drove along until we were even with Old Route 66, then made a U-turn onto it. We passed several of the depressingly depressed soulless brick huts that had replaced the Kawaik pueblos. When the seldom seen and fortunately wet Rio San Jose appeared on the left, I drove down an embankment to get within spitting distance.

"Oh god, we're stopping again!" Lucy complained, slapping the roof.

"Only for a second, dear. Only for a second." I got out, put on a ragged pair of gardening gloves, and, retrieving the knife from the truck bed, took it to the edge of the water and tossed it into the deepest, muddiest spot I could find. I paused momentarily, to thank that trusted friend and gift from my father for its years of service and for most likely saving our lives, then returned to the truck and pulled back out onto the now sparsely-traveled legendary highway. The one where Beat-inspired road trippers got their kicks, and hopefully where this pair of lover-gamblers' beginner's luck would return.

"Don't forget the gun. You need to get rid of that, too."

"Are you kidding? I'm keeping it for a souvenir. Besides, it's an antique, a real classic."

"What if there is an APB on it? It was probably used in the commission of other crimes."

"The serial number has been filed off. It is untraceable and I have no intention of carrying it around and showing it off. This will strictly be an under the mattress item."

"Not any mattress that I'm sleeping on!" This was followed by a long period of silence, apart from Radio Roswell, from which Robert Palmer was crooning

*"You see the signs, but you can't read
You're running at a different speed"*

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I re-checked my yellow-highlighted road atlas, and at the first opportunity I jumped back onto the interstate's straight replacement and soon we were speeding past Mesita, on our way to Albuquerque, where hopefully we could find a peaceful place to crash for the night. I was going to need some solid sleep in order to handle the last leg of our journey home tomorrow, the 12-hours to Houston.

Suddenly, Lucy blurted out "What an afternoon! What a honeymoon! Everything about this trip has been ... a trip! But today was the topper. We almost get robbed and killed, then you almost kill the would-be killer..." Lucy left her recap unfinished.

"It's a good thing my hand slipped and he didn't die."

"What? You were *trying* to kill him?"

"I was aiming for his neck – his jugular vein. He had a fucking cop pistol! I was thinking of you, as well as my own ass."

"You're always telling me stuff I really don't want to know. At least he didn't get my purse."

"Your purse? How about your pussy? Or your life!"

"My entire life is in this purse!"

"I guess I saved your life then. "

"Literally and metaphorically. All my IDs, important documents, our marriage license, and all my money are in here."

"OUR money, you mean."

"No, I mean MY money."

"Uh, we were both playing the tables and slots, if you recall. I'm entitled to half, both ethically and legally. Husbands and wives share resources, you know. I don't know about Michigan but Texas is a community property state."

"Well, I didn't get an engagement ring, a proper wedding, or even a proper honeymoon."

"Well, I didn't receive a dowry, either."

"I consider this my 'bride price.'"

"Bride price? This isn't rural India," I countered.

"Nor are we in the 19th century, Mr. Dowry!"

I sighed and focused on the featureless road ahead. For the first time, I started trying to imagine the future, after today's interruption of our connubial bliss. Twilight was settling in. I glanced over at the suddenly-silent Lucy to discover that she was snoozing with her head against the window, clutching her purse for a pillow.