

'You going to Vegas?' the pump attendant asked Mike.

'Yes, sir, I am,' Mike replied.

'Fuck the sir, name's Earl. I know a quicker route to Vegas from here.'

Earl of Earl's Gas Station wore overalls, had huge hands and arms, teeth that were yellowing and a scarred face.

'Okay...'

'Take the 15 as far as Barstow; take the road that runs alongside the 40. Take the 66 until you find the 95 and then Vegas is a straight shot from there.'

Mike was skeptical. 'Is it quicker than the highway?'

'As the crow flies, no, but it'll beat the traffic going to Vegas. ...You're not from round here, are you?'

'I'm from Colorado originally.'

'Take my advice, mountain boy; it'll save you time. Card or cash?'

'Card.'

'Call it a round 70 then.' The display showed \$66.94. 'I round up, you got a problem with that?'

'Nope.'

He didn't look like the kind of guy you'd like to have a problem with. Mike was just about to leave when there was a curt rasp on the window. Evidently the clerk had followed him out.

'Take my advice mountain boy—you'll be with your mountain friends before you know it.'

'I will, thanks.' Mike sped off, glad to be getting away.

Sitting in traffic approaching Barstow, the journey had already quadrupled in time. A banker based in Pasadena, Mike had done well for himself despite a tough upbringing. Losing his parents in a car crash at the age of 7, he had moved to LA to live with his grandparents. 24 years later, they were both dead and Mike was alone in the world. He considered Earl's advice as he approached Barstow. He saw the road just off the 40, it was empty as far as the eye could see, not surprisingly. It went through the vacant desert for miles and miles. Swerving into the empty exit lane, Mike steered the Expo off the highway, silently cursing the traffic he was leaving behind.

The road ran smoothly alongside the Needles freeway until the sparsely populated town of Ludlow. A veer to the right took Mike away from the comforting lights of the freeway and into the darkness. There was nothing for miles; the vacant desert offered no evident directional signs. Not even tumbleweed offered the comfort of a stereotype. Phone signal was redundant out here, Mike was well and truly alone, trapped inside his Expedition and heading headfirst into a nothingness which quite frankly terrified him. The gas light had started glowing a few miles back, offering a dim bolt of light in the darkness. It seemed to scream YOU'RE FUCKED. He couldn't believe he was out of gas already—he had had the tank filled at Earl's, or so he thought. He knew there was something off about that place.

The headlights flashed the sign for Amboy, and for a split second he thought he saw somebody leaning on the sign. Mike pivoted in his seat to try and get a look back. The Expo bumped over something in the road and veered violently, and Mike was shocked into taking evasive action to stop the car from tipping over. Having managed to avoid tipping, Mike screeched beside a pump at Roy's Motel and Café. Getting out he noticed that his front tyre had been punctured by something and was deflating, as were the other three. He walked back into the road and noticed the spike track lying across the road. Mike was suddenly terrified. There was nothing here but one lone building to offer Mike some home.

Rattling the door to Roy's cafe, he found that it was padlocked shut. A closed until further notice sign clattered against the dusty front door. The only lights in this desert wasteland came from the headlights from his Expo; Mike was well and truly alone.


It wasn't more than an hour before there were lights approaching Amboy, from the same direction as Mike. He'd locked himself in his car not long after finding the café locked up. The car—or truck, Mike couldn't tell—made a perfect approach into the dusty parking lot across from the café. Where were the spikes? Mike thought. A cold shiver traveled down his spine.

Mike approached the car. He noticed the Earl's Garage decal plastered across the side. The door opened. Earl got out of the driver's side, smiling his yellow smile.

'You need some help, mountain boy?' There was something in his right hand.

It was then that Mike was struck from behind.

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