

PURGATORY ROAD

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Samuel Parker, *Purgatory Road*
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For Liz



PROLOGUE

The eighteen-wheeler pulled into the truck stop off I-15 and applied the airbrakes. The passenger door swung open and a young girl jumped out, waved a thank-you to the driver, and walked toward Las Vegas. She had a small backpack thrown over one shoulder of her denim jacket. All she had.

The driver had been a nice enough guy. He had picked her up along a stretch in Utah and enjoyed the company. He said that he had a daughter back in Memphis and that he couldn't imagine seeing her walk the roads out west at her age. When they pulled into Vegas, he handed her forty dollars from his beat-up wallet.

“Here, take it.”

“You don't have to.”

“No arguing now, hear?”

They both knew that she needed it more than he did. No doubt he also thought the money would soothe his conscience for leaving such a naïve creature on the doorstep of Sin City.

She walked most of the afternoon through the boarded-up streets northeast of the strip, thumbing the buttonholes on the jacket she held and wiping the sweat from her brow. The desert sun turning her shoulders red. She met the few catcalls and periodic requests

for spare change with downcast eyes and silence. She was scared. This was not what she had come out west for.

Night crept in and the sidewalk shadows grew more menacing. She stepped into a party store and grabbed a can of Coke and a stick of beef jerky. She waited in line behind a fidgety man undecided on the best choice of liquor under five dollars, which he then paid for with two crumpled bills and a small mountain of change pulled from his sagging pants. Under the white light of the store awning, she sat on the sidewalk and ate her dinner.

The girl checked in to a rundown '50s motel that was half vacant. She did not want to sleep outside tonight. Not here.

"You eighteen?" the desk clerk asked as he wiped some crumbs off his stained wifebeater T-shirt.

"Yes," she replied without eye contact.

"Uh-huh."

He slid the key to her and snatched up the twenty-dollar bill she laid on the counter. She went to room 7. Lucky number, she thought.

She took a shower and pulled out a shirt from her backpack. It was dirty, but still cleaner than the one she wore on the way in. She would have to find a laundromat, but the thought of spending money from her dwindling supply on clean clothes seemed like an extravagance that she could not afford.

The girl dried her hair as best she could with her towel, curled up on the bed, and fell asleep.

She was awakened the next day by a pounding on the door. How long had she slept? She looked at the clock—half past noon. The pounding continued.

"You dead in there? You only paid for one night! You get out now!"

She ran around the room collecting her things and hustled out the door.

"You need another night?"

"No, I don't have the money."

“I’m sure we could work something out,” he said, looking her up and down. Her heart rose to her throat and the combination of fear and loathing almost made her vomit. She turned and walked out to the street as fast as she could.

She wandered around aimlessly—mouse in a constantly changing maze. She saw the faces of happy tourists on the strip, enthralled with 100 megawatts of burning filament, and wished she could have someone to smile with.

She kept walking.

The girl’s stomach roared, so she found a diner and stepped inside. She walked to a booth and sat down, grabbing a laminated menu. A middle-aged woman approached, sporting a classic “Mel’s Diner” uniform, and looked her over.

“My, my, you look like you’ve been through some things,” the waitress said, tapping her pad of paper. “What can I get you?”

“Some toast . . . and some water.”

“You need more than that, honey. I’ll get you something good.”

Within minutes the girl was staring down a hot-turkey sandwich drenched in gravy and a side of potatoes. Thanksgiving dinner on a greasy spoon. She scarfed it down quickly as if someone would steal it before she was done.

“How much will that be?”

“Don’t worry, honey, I got it. You want anything else?”

“Coke?”

“Sure thing.”

The girl sat in the booth, drumming her fingers and sipping her soda while lost in a daydream, the bent end of the straw suffering from her half-conscious chewing.

She paid little attention to the people coming and going from the diner, and did not notice the man who sat down at the table next to her, nor did she seem to notice his constant staring. He ordered his food and began to eat but kept his eyes on her.

Coming to, she glanced over at him. “Can I help you with something?” she barked sarcastically.

“Naw, don’t think so. Just wondering what runaway story you got.”

“I’m not a runaway.”

“Uh-huh. You planned on moving to the streets of Vegas?”

“I’m on my way to LA. Just passing through.”

“How you getting there? You walking?”

She ignored him and looked out the window. The girl thought the conversation had ended until he sat down in the booth across from her. He brought his plate with him and kept on eating.

“You need a ride somewhere?”

“No,” she shot back and got up to leave.

He grabbed her wrist and she sat back down hard. Fear coursed through her veins as she stared at the man across from her. His dark-sepia eyes were motionless, resting in their sunken sockets.

“Listen, missy. I ain’t done nothing for you to be rude. I’m just trying to help. This city can get pretty mean. The bus station is way across town. It’s a long walk.”

His tone was soothing but firm. She thought about the fix she was in. Running low on money and coming from the motel with the repugnant clerk had put her on edge. Perhaps she was overreacting. Maybe this guy just wanted to help.

The trucker from Utah was like that, but his Santa Claus appearance squashed any reservation she had had. The man across the table confused her. He was dirty, some might say greasy, but he appeared to be genuinely concerned.

Her shoulders eased. “All right, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. Now, Helen here can vouch for me,” he said, pointing to the waitress behind the counter who continued on with her work, not noticing the conversation between her two customers. “She knows I ain’t no crazy man. I just don’t want to get home tonight and see your face on TV.”

“All right.”

“You got a name?”

“Molly.”

“Molly?”

“Yes.”

He scooped another forkful of food into his mouth and chewed, nodding slowly.

“Nice name,” he said with a full mouth.

She watched him eat, studying his face as one studies the brushstrokes on a painting. Back home, the girl thought she was a great discerner of people. She would be at the mall with her girlfriends and would come up with backstories for the hapless shopper who crossed her gaze: that one is a trophy wife, that one is a banker but secretly spends all his money on porn, that one hates his life. But since coming out west, her powers had become unreliable. There was the clerk in Iowa who’d stolen her change, saying that she only gave him a five when she knew she had handed him a ten. There was the bus driver in Denver who wouldn’t open the door until he got a good look at her backside. There was the guy from the motel who still sent a chill down her spine in retrospect. Now here sat a black-haired mechanic-looking local—another stranger she could not peg.

As he continued eating, she watched his hand move with the fork from the plate to his mouth and back again. She could see in the webbing of his hand, between his thumb and index finger, a blob of ink. Probably a tattoo poorly done. It captured her gaze as she tried to make out what the image was. He stopped eating and put his hand on the table palm down.

“Looks ridiculous, doesn’t it?”

“What?” she said coming out of her daze.

“This tat?”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Uh-huh. Supposed to be a spider. Word to the wise, Molly, don’t let some half-blind and half-crazy old man pin you down and ink you. It never comes out good.”

She gave a small laugh and he smiled, exposing teeth weathered by the Pall Malls in his shirt pocket. Her defenses were slowly

lowering as the man finished his food. He seemed all right, in that hick hillbilly way.

“How much money you got?”

“A bit.”

“Probably not enough, huh? Let’s get over to the bus station and see how much it is to LA.” He stood up and walked to the door. “Come on now, the invite doesn’t last all day.”

Trepidation still lingered inside her.

She looked at the waitress, who was talking with another customer across the diner. She felt a pull to go to her, to look to her for guidance.

Molly thought about the woman back home who was probably sitting in her daughter’s room right this minute, crying over her vagabond child. No, she could not go home now. It would smother her. She looked up at the man and decided, no matter how reckless, the only way was forward.

She got out of the booth and followed him outside. He opened the passenger door of an old black pickup truck and helped her get in. He slammed the door. The bench seat was stiff.

Molly eyed the man as he walked around the front of the truck, looking for the telltale signs of a sexual criminal or molester, as if the traits would be sewn into the fabric of his clothes, into the substance of himself.

He got in and fired up the truck. “Okay, let’s get you taken care of.”

PART ONE

THE HIGHWAY

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They drove out of Las Vegas in the rental car, ready to explore.

Three days on the strip had gotten to both of them, and they were looking for a bit of breathing room. Too many lights, too many people. Neither of them were “Vegas” people, but it seemed like a cheap vacation spot away from the hurried Chicago hustle.

Overstimulus comes in different trappings, however; screaming city blocks have nothing on screaming one-arm bandits played by old blue hairs plopping down Uncle Sam’s dime on the prospect of winning a retirement fund.

They had spent the previous night watching an ex-Navy chief in a scooter shooting craps, betting 6–8 in honor of his old aircraft carrier and absorbing drinks in sync with each losing bet. The crowd howled when he was busted and then tried, to no effect, to bet his scooter. He drove off, strains of laughter and some sympathetic eyes flowing behind him.

Yes, three days was more than enough.

They decided on no particular destination and just drove, letting the morning sun clear the cobwebs and smoke haze, enjoying the exchange of slot machine bells and dealer calls for desert wind.

They drove a blue convertible because he had decided on it. The Mustang with the black ragtop was not him on a regular day, but he was not playing normal life. He wanted to be cool, to be the

guy who would buy American muscle and push it around every street corner. She went along with him, not fighting his childish urge to be hip for a day. She was good that way, he thought. She let him dream.

Grabbing the keys from the rental clerk, he had half skipped up the stairs and into the parking garage, looking for space 51. She followed meekly behind, watching him. He had opened the door for her, chivalrous out of character. He got in, tucked the Starbucks in the cup holder, fired up all the horses, and revved the engine like Vin Diesel. Yes, so different than the Volvo sedan he commuted in back home. Today, he would be fast and furious.

Cruising south down the strip, he was disappointed at the lack of a crowd to watch him drive. The zombie walk of a Vegas morning was all that greeted them. At each stoplight he would gas the engine a little bit more than needed, and she would roll her eyes and laugh.

The dream was skewered by the yellow Lamborghini that passed them going the other way. He was sure that was not a rental. He didn't rev the engine anymore.

They got off the main highway and drove west out into the desert. The two-lane meandered into the distance, so different from the concrete jungle they saw every day back home. The valley was circled by mountains, and from this vantage point they could still see Vegas some thirty miles away. It seemed so small, a speck on the horizon, where tens of thousands of people were doing things that people do when no one is watching.

The desert wind blew across the road, throwing dust on the windshield and cutting the shine on the hood. The couple could not think of another place on earth where the wind blew heat.

"I need to stop," Laura said.

"All right," Jack said, looking out the windshield at the rock and dust and sky. "You want to go right here?"

"No, just the next place you see."

They drove on for a couple more minutes and came to a small

gas station outside the city of Goodwell, population 127. It was a small single-pump station with a tiny convenience store attached. Jack pulled alongside the shack and parked the car next to a dusty black pickup, the only vehicle in the place. Laura jumped out of the car and darted for the bathroom door on the side of the building. *It's a good thing she doesn't complain about much*, he thought.

Jack walked into the store and headed to the vintage cooler in the back. The place smelled like a combination of stale smoke and cat urine. The heat was somewhat lessened by a small oscillating fan screwed to the paneling over the door. How could someone pull a 9-to-5 here? Nothing like dreaming big.

He searched for caffeine energy drinks, but settled on four waters off the near-empty rack, and walked up the aisle toward the counter, his sandals sliding with the sand on the concrete floor. He picked up a bag of chips that appeared to have been made in the '70s. They didn't look too healthy, but there was nothing else to choose from.

Behind the counter sat a man with greasy black hair sticking out from under an old trucker cap. He was flipping through a magazine, a stream of smoke clouding his face from the overflowing ashtray next to him.

He was punk scrawny and wore an old blue mechanics shirt with the name *Colten* stitched on the front pocket. He did not look up as Jack placed his supplies on the counter and reached for his wallet.

Taking a slow drag off a nonfiltered cigarette, the man blew smoke across the counter, and it hung in the air thick like a London fog. "You getting gas?"

"No, just this."

"That'll be five bucks then."

"You take a debit?" Jack asked, putting his card on the counter.

"You getting gas?" The man lifted his eyes and pinned Jack with a dull stare.

"Uh, no . . . just this. Like I said."

“Cash only, Jack.”

Jack stared back, trying to cover his shock.

“Your name’s on your card.”

“Oh.”

“Spook easily, don’t you?”

Jack put the card back in his wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill. Colten took the money, opened the till, dropped it in, and slammed the drawer, all while staring Jack in the eye. He took another toke. His hands were rough-hewn out of burnt leather, tipped with dirty fingernails. *The hands of a mechanic*, Jack thought, *or a thug*.

He had seen guys like this when he and his wife would waste away a Sunday afternoon watching a *COPS* marathon on cable. Laughing at trailer trash, an American pastime.

“You sure that’s all you need?”

“What?”

“Are you sure . . . that’s all you need?”

“Yes.”

Silence filled the room as Jack waited, wondering if the man was going to bag his things. The smell of fresh nicotine combining with the stale, musty air of the shop was suffocating, overpowering. He felt uncomfortable, worried, as if he had walked up on a rattlesnake.

“Is there anything else down this road?”

“I thought you had all you needed.”

“Well, is there?”

“What are you looking for, Jack?”

“N-n-nothing, just w-wondered if . . .” Jack trailed off. He hated it when he stammered. Not since grade school had it been a real problem, when the school bully called his number on random days for his annual beating. He felt eight years old again.

“Wondered what? You want to see poor folk and misery? Is that fun for you?”

“No, it’s not.” Jack quickly became aware of himself—his over-

priced, casual chic attire, the nouveau bohemian getting smacked with impoverishment.

The front door opened and Laura stepped up to his side, surveying what he was buying. Colten's face brightened as he looked at the new arrival.

"Howdy, miss. Beautiful day, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," she replied with a smile.

Colten bagged up the goods, then pushed them across the counter, where Jack had to catch them before they went spilling on the floor. He stared back at the man, sensing the swarthinness flowing off of him.

"You folks out exploring?" Colten said, ignoring the answers Jack had provided.

"Yes," Laura started, "we just want to get away from the strip for a day. You know, see some of the country and all."

"Good a place as any to see it. We got a little bit of everything out here." Colten lifted off his hat and smoothed back his black hair. Jack expected to see Colten's palm covered in grease and sweat. The way the clerk smiled at Laura left him uneasy, nervous. The awkward silence of a stalled conversation filled the room, and Jack grabbed Laura's elbow and began ushering her to the door.

"That ain't your car out there, is it, Jack?"

Jack froze for a minute, and then turned back. "No, it's a rental."

"Thought so. You just like pretending for a bit, huh? Good place to do it. This country lets you be John Wayne for a day if you got the money. Is that what you're doing, Jack? Being John Wayne?" Colten's black eyes looked Jack up and down as if examining his soul through his skin. He squinted as he took another drag of his smoke, exhaling it into the empty shop.

"What do you know of it?" Jack lashed back.

A look of horror flashed across Laura's face.

"I know a bit. See it every once in a while." Colten waved his hand, shooing the smoke from the ashtray away from his face. "You

two be careful now, the desert can be strange at times. Wouldn't want any trouble to come to you good city folk."

The silence returned, Jack and Colten locking eyes like two roosters in a pecking contest.

"We'll be fine. Thanks."

Outside the store, Jack pushed Laura to the car, and both got in. He was sweating and his heart was racing. His mind was trying to convince him that he was keeping himself from jumping the counter and punching the stranger, but deep down inside he knew it was fear.

Intimidation.

He hated that. He hated being intimidated. He hated it worse that he had allowed himself to be.

"What was that all about?" Laura asked, visibly upset at her husband's behavior.

"Just some local redneck trying to be tough."

"I thought he was just being polite."

"Yeah, I bet."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure you're not the one with the problem?"

Jack stared back at her, ready to unleash the anger that he was too scared to let loose on Colten, but he checked himself. Why ruin the trip. Laura looked at him but didn't push it. He started the car and they headed west in silence along the two-lane road toward the mountains.