

The Route



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The desert dust tasted like the blackboard chalk Willie remembered sometimes getting in his mouth. A long time ago when he and that Wilkins boy, now what was his name? - Herbert? -No, Hubert, when Hubert Wilkins and himself, William Tanner, were routinely kept after class, often for smacking the chalkboard erasers together and amusing themselves while they clouded the front of the room. They would leave not only white dust in their hair and on their clothes but a fine layer on the heavy, wooden swivel chair the teacher often sat in thereby giving the class something to snicker about every time the teacher decided to then write on the board and show off a powdered sugar frosted backside. That was a long time ago, better than forty years. Please forgive Willie if he isn't quick to remember the boy's name, specifically. Willie Tanner has no idea why half of the thoughts he has ever popped into his mind, but they do. He only tastes the fine, red, desert dust at all because his air conditioning had broken the week before. And he'd spent all of his money, like he usually found some way to do, which made him call Butch about every other month and agree to do another run, just like Butch knew that he would. It was Willie's job when he chose to call Butch and take it, which was, like Butch expected, about every other month, because it pays four-hundred dollars and that goes a heck of a long way in 1962. Plus, Willie isn't even positive that what he's doing is illegal although he knows Butch's reputation. Butch is always on one end of the trip, to see Willie off, then there when he returns, opening the trunk and removing a bag or bags. Black bags like a doctor's only about three times the size, identical to the ones Willie had gotten glimpses of several times previously when he pulled up to the service docks behind *The Sands* casino in Las Vegas and some hard-looking guy pressed into a suit would open the trunk of Willie's car with a key he already had and remove the bag or bags then another guy would set one or two in, smooth, like a pit crew, two taps on the trunk after it closed. Then Willie would slowly make the long loop around the back of the hotel past all of the service vehicles and employee parking and meld into strip traffic to make his way back to I-15. Part of the agreement meant that Willie could no longer use his trunk as the two keys were kept by Butch and whomever it was that came out of *The Sands*. Willie was in the habit of driving cautiously, even if he was just driving cash he was pretty sure it was against the law or why did he make four-hundred for a trip he'd only be paid one hundred for and

that's if he was driving his rig? Willie didn't mind the repetition; normally, with his rig there'd be at least a half day's layover for unloading and then re-loading but here it was just a guy with a bag or two guys with two bags and he was back on his way.

He'd been feeling a little melancholy lately and the damn broken AC certainly wasn't helping him to think straight, more making him wish real hard for a 'sixer' of Coors beer bottles floating in a watery bucket of ice as it was at least a hundred degrees out which meant on the pavement a hundred twenty-five, easy. Fry an egg up on the hood, hot. In fact, the chrome strip along the top of the open window was hot enough to burn skin; he'd found that out when he'd gone to flick his cigarette butt out and pressed his forearm down hard against it. His car, a 1950 *Plymouth DeLuxe* drove like a dream. But today it was riding like a very hot dream, and it forced him to keep the windows open fairly wide and keep a big jug of now tepid water on the floor beside him for hydration.

Today, for some reason after having made this trip from Brooklyn to Las Vegas at least forty times over a nine-year period that he could count, on the way back instead of heading north on I-15 to I-70 East then north at Route 1 Willie decided to take the southern, more scenic route along the southern rim of Utah, dipping into northern Arizona then making its way up through *Monument Valley* and *Moab*, Utah. No one, not even Willie himself could ever fully explain his actions but it was nearing six p.m. and here he was still licking powdery hot desert sand from his lips and keeping his eyes peeled for a clean-looking motel.

Butch hired Willie because he was steady and dependable. Now, it was a good thing no one was following him or they might think he was trying to run off with the loot. Loot, or whatever was inside of the bags anyway.

"Just don't stop nowhere ya might get the cah boosted," Butch had told Willie when he'd first started the runs, saying 'car' with a near Boston accent. "You lose the cah you owe for what's inside my friend and I'm tellin' ya right now you don't got that kind of dough." Every other run Willie had done he made his first stop back around *Green River*, Utah where there were four motels on four corners of the one intersection in town that featured stop signs. And the police station/city hall was within shouting distance.

Perfect.

Then, the next night always at the *Motel 8* in *Steubenville*, Ohio, or maybe in *Plainview*, Ohio if there was bad weather and it slowed him down. Butch was adamant:

"Don't need no fuckin' heroes so don't be drivin' all night an' gettin' in a wreck. Or pulled over by the fuzz. 'What you're gettin' paid for.'"

So, why was Willie taking the scenic route?

He knew the travel time couldn't be all that different; a few hours here or there just meant one fifteen-hour day instead of a twelve.

"Pardon me, Ma'am. I mean to see about a room." Willie held his cowboy hat humbly in his hands and tried to use his best 'Southern gentleman' inflection. He was a tall man, better than six-two, thin with most of his hair, cut just above the shoulder, turning gray from what was a light brown. When he wore a mustache as he was now people said he looked a little like *Clint Walker*, from the TV series *Cheyenne*. Truthfully, only one person had told him that specifically and it was a very drunk woman who herself looked a bit like *Clint Walker's* horse. Willie still probably went to bed with her if she'd been willing, he couldn't quite remember as that had been during his binge-drinking days. Well, his fall-down-drunk binge-drinking days which had mostly ended a nine years back when he started making the runs. Willie knew enough about Butch and his crew to know that he would become real dead, his body unceremoniously rolled into the ground somewhere if he screwed up, and drinking a lot tended you in that direction. He always took a room out front. Then he could back the *Plymouth* up right in front of the door as travelers often did to get at heavy luggage, so if anyone tried to break into the trunk or steal the car outright he would certainly hear it. The car was very non-descript; if it got stolen it would be just pure dumb luck. Like having a tractor-trailer, like the one Willie usually drove, drift across into your lane and catch you head-on. *Dead; an act of god; something like that.* As was also his custom he left the curtains partially open, and a window too if the weather permitted. The '*Dew Drop Inn*' was a bit seedier than a motel where he would usually stay, but the gas jockey at the filling station told him it was the only show in town, unless he wanted a boarding house which the kid said he wouldn't recommend as it was mostly full of Mexicans, most of the time. What sealed it was the kid told him that the next services weren't until *Moab*, Utah and that was better than a hundred-sixty miles from *Kayenta*, Arizona. As it was already nearing nine p.m., Willie thought that all things considered he'd be safer if he stopped and got some rest and then got back on the road with the morning sun. *Kayenta*, (pop. 970) featured the '*Dew Drop Inn*' motel along with a little general store on one side of the feeder road, then a service station, a hardware store, grocery and two restaurants, a diner and a Mexican

place, on the road back behind. Willie had seen a scattering of little houses and maybe a sign of more back into the low hills. The sun was all-but gone when he'd pulled in, yet not dark enough to see any mass of twinkling lights. What he didn't like, as he sat on the bed with the TV on low, the static-filled signal trying to pull a signal from *Albuquerque*, was not just the poor reception but the fact that despite the very limited flow of traffic on this scenic off-route there were still enough vehicles at now nine-thirty on a Wednesday evening that it gave him pause. For one thing, he had New York license plates which stood out if one looked, and might draw interest from some bored locals.

He had his gun out, a revolver. He kept it oiled, in perfect condition but hadn't fired it in years. He set it on the night table then carefully laid his hat on it. Where he could still get to it quick if he felt the need, which he hoped he never did. Four hundred was good money, great money for driving, but it wasn't worth getting killed over or spending his life in prison for shooting someone else. He'd done two years for smuggling moonshine when he was a young man during Prohibition and that was more than enough to set him straight about the penitentiary.

'The Honeymooners' was doing its best to become watchable on the tiny TV and as Willie sat and ate the two sandwiches he's bought earlier, chewing contemplatively, he realized with the next car that drove by a little too slowly for his liking (or imagination) that he would likely be up all night and might as well drive on. But he'd paid nine bucks for the room and wasn't about to draw attention to himself by going back to pester that nice woman for a refund. And, fact was you couldn't fall asleep at the wheel and then wreck a motel room. Why hadn't he just stayed on I-15 North to I-70 East, where he would right now be eating his sandwiches while watching *'The Honeymooners'* clear as a bell from the TV station in *Grand Junction*, Colorado, at one of four motels on the corners in *Green River*, Utah? *Scenery tomorrow better be damned worth all these crazy thoughts and added stress* -he told himself.

He finished the sandwiches and washed them down with a warm sarsaparilla, wishing for a cold one, the funny tasting drink back in vogue of recent, then stared through the opening slit in the window shades at the trunk of his *Plymouth*, focusing specifically on the keyhole for which he had no key. He'd owned the car for going on seven years. Knew how sturdy and durable it was, the trunk specifically, how it would take a good crowbar and a lot of noise to pop it open should someone try to break into it but again the car didn't look like much so why would there be anything of value in

the trunk? But Willie had been a punk once and he knew that the teenage boy's mind bored easily and that sometimes boys did the deliberately illogical just for something to do or the plain thrill of it.

He strummed his fingers on his outstretched thigh and caught a glimpse of *Jackie Gleason* over the tips of his cowboy boots; he hadn't yet bothered to take them off which too was a bit odd. He would change into more suitable northern clothing as his run moved into that territory, though he would admit that the pointy-toed boots were damn comfortable once they got broken in. He knew his *Plymouth* inside and out, enough to know that the air conditioning compressor was shot and that it cost nearly a hundred and twenty bucks for a new one, which was why he'd spent the driving day being so damn hot. Knew the engine, the drive train, had even changed his own brake pads when needed. If he was low on cash like he usually was, if he was gambling, which was most of the time. He also knew the interior, the dashboard; the seats. The fact that when the back seat was removed there was a funky-shaped opening cut out into the trunk, not big enough for a human to climb through, at least not a man of his size, but probably large enough to reach through and slide a bag or two through. In more than forty drives he'd never even really considered it. For one thing he suspected they were full of cash, at least in one direction, but which direction? For another, maybe there was something else inside one of those bags, something that he might not want to see.

His fingers strummed methodically, thumping slowly on his leg.

One thing was for sure: he wasn't going to sleep a wink in here or even take a shower to freshen up and get all of that red dust off of his skin and hair, not with the bag in the trunk and all of these cars driving about.

The inane, cackling, canned-laughter jarred from the TV and made him think about turning it off. He checked his watch again.

Standing, he pulled on his lightweight jacket, took the revolver and slid it into a pocket and went out to his car.

The bags, there were two, sat on the bathroom floor in front of the sink while he showered. The door was open halfway to let the steam out. His revolver sat on top of the toilet. After forty runs, inevitably you do a lot of thinking, and Willie knew it wasn't outside of possibility that a rival gang, or Mafia family, or even casino employee might have seen the exchange once too often and figured that whatever it was in the bags must have considerable value attached to it and followed. He never pulled in at the same time and always on random days but he knew that all of the caution in the world didn't stand a chance against bad men or bad luck. When he was a young man, after his wife of only three years died suddenly of disease, he'd joined his brother Rufus on long liquor runs from Tennessee to New York in a *souped-up Ford* delivery truck that could outrun any state police or sheriff's cruisers had they ever drawn an eye. It was moonshine mostly but also some rum that came from somewhere else, one of the islands he'd heard someone guess, or maybe from Canada. He didn't care a lick where it came from as long as they could get it to Rufus's contact in Manhattan, 'Fat' Jimmy Smoot who really wasn't fat at all but Willie never thought to inquire about this. They'd gotten pinched on one of the runs, Rufus had some bad luck, and Willie always thought that somehow someone had tipped the cops because it was rare for runners to be carrying rum unless it came down from Canada and he heard one of the 'coppers' ask another about it before they'd even opened a single cask to check and see.

Sliding the flowered, water-stained shower curtain aside he rechecked that his revolver and the bags were as he'd left them then closed the curtain most of the way and quickly finished scrubbing off the road dust with some cheap smelling soap.

Dirty work meant good pay generally commensurate with the risk, unless you were an idiot or a psychopath who did risky things for free. Guys like that didn't get regular gigs, good gigs, like this one. And this *was* a good gig. He got to drive alone, never saw anyone or was seen with anyone shady except unavoidably for a few minutes on both ends. If only Willie didn't like the ponies so damn much he could probably be as good as retired by now instead of being fifty-two, driving a semi for a living and still making likely illegal cross-country runs on the side.

He had drawn the drapes and slid that near-useless chain lock on the door, then propped the chair up under the doorknob before he got into the shower. With his hair

still wet he set the heavy bags on the floor between the bed and the wall, and his revolver back on the nightstand, this time without the cover of his hat. He stood for a while staring through the gap in the drapes off into nothing, the now nearly deserted highway, the desert beyond, then turned off the TV and lights. Rubbing his head with a towel, he organized his valise, boots and clothes. Then he lied down and somewhat surprisingly fell quickly asleep.

Willie always woke with the sun. Unless he'd been on a bender and up all night. He didn't seem to need as much sleep as most men and he was eager to make some driving time. He thought about keeping the bags out of the trunk and setting them on the back seat next to his valise. Then he went as far in his mind as to imagine running into Butch out here in *no-man's-land* and explaining that he thought it best to keep them where he could see them. He frowned at these, the thoughts. They reminded him that like a child he didn't even own a key to his own car trunk and would have to remove the back seat again to replace the bags which was a tiresome task. Certainly Butch and the men at *The Sands* knew that if Willie wanted to he could bust the trunk open anytime with a pry-bar; open the bag or bags; see what was inside. Take off. They trusted him with it because they knew he wouldn't, would never act so crazy.

Still...

The morning was desert-cool with a low, low fog that nestled the sagebrush and covered both sides of the roadway with fat drops of dew. His *Plymouth* seemed to love this particular combination of elements and rolled along smooth and easy; the sun was nowhere near high enough yet to cause heat distress so having the windows down just a bit let him draw in the sweet, cool air, let it flow through his hair. He'd refilled his water jug and was still clad in the western attire. He figured the drive to *Moab*, the next town on the map, would take about three hours. He could fill up again on gas and get some food there.

The monuments began to appear in the distance, feathered in as the soon-to-be-burning sun slowly rose and chased the fog away, replacing it with hot, dry air that would ripple up from the black asphalt and create a colorful mirage. Willie drew his breath and settled in with focus, both hands gripping the oversized steering wheel. He'd given up on trying to listen to anything on the radio other than an occasional farm report and those were sporadic at best. Really the scenery, particularly this scenery, was the prior reasoning for the detour. The giant red spires and wind-worn rock formations that played every trick on the eye the light could conjure stood as sentries to a valley entrance that he knew from his limited days of schooling was all once undersea, millions of years ago. He was mildly interested in this sort of thing, and the petro

glyphs he'd heard about where you could walk right up and see just off the road. But in his mind's eye he could see Butch pacing, waiting for him behind the noisy auto body shop, Butch wondering why Willie was late. Butch fearing the worst: that this runner, Willie Tanner, was not going to show. Worse still that there would be no news of an accident, a theft, or even an arrest, which meant a hunt would begin that would last as long as Butch and his thuggish associates were breathing. Willie shook the image from his head, all-but ignored the rolling scenery and monuments, and focused on the pock-filled asphalt lane just to the right of the very faded (and mostly missing) painted centerline. He drew his brow across his forearm then his forearm across his pants, and reached for his already tepid water jug. He had a nasty little scrape on his left wrist, more of a gouge really but it being mostly bone there it didn't bleed too badly despite the missing skin. He'd gotten it putting the bags back into the trunk after once again removing the back seat, scraped his wrist good with the weight of one of the bags as he strained through a bad position to push it back toward the front of the trunk, debating his story if asked as to why the bags ended up in a strange position, settling on a tale of a deer jumping out in front of him and almost wrecking the car. The pain made him angry; he was a grown god-damn man, doing god-damn serious, responsible work. 'Was the reason the bags were taken out to begin with, not to break trust by trying to open them (he had noticed spinning, three-digit combination locks atop each) not to open them by any means and run off with whatever was inside, no, they were taken out so he could keep his eye on them, his gun over them, keep them *more* protected than they would have been sitting overnight in his trunk at the '*Dew Drop Inn*' in *Kayenta*, Arizona (*pop.* 970) right near the scenic highway. Had Butch been the one who'd originally told him about *Green River*? Told him it was the best place to make his second overnight stop on the way out, the four motels with the police station and city hall just across the way? Willie honestly couldn't remember; it was a long time and a lot of drinks ago and none of it had ever mattered a lick until this trip where he'd had this wild hair come on, a 'Rufus' hair you might call it if you knew his brother. This wild hair distracting like the real kind if yours was long enough (his was) where it could get wet on the forehead and fall in a hot, heavy and salty clump to direct a drip of sweat right into your eye. Which was how he remembered that it was salty, the first time it happened on this particular run, yesterday, as it did again just now. He brushed the wet hair away, hooking it behind his right ear.

The windows were halfway down now. Some hot dust and sand swirled in and some of it caught his wrist, and stuck painfully in the oozing sore.

"God-damn it," he spat aloud and wished he'd wrapped his wrist with something back in town because out here was nothing except sand and sagebrush, and in the slowly closing distance some mesas and spires, the occasional car or truck headed in the opposite direction. He imagined he could fasten a makeshift wrap, a bandage from a piece off of one of his shirts but then the shirt would be ruined. He rotated the hurt wrist slowly a couple of times and gave a quick examining glance to check that there wasn't any actual sand or the like sticking to the damp and sticky, reddish-white.

Grabbing an apple he'd saved from yesterday he bit into it and carefully chewed, watching the road unroll before him over lazy little hills, climbing slowly, straight as his eye could see into the distant, dusty haze.

Despite an overwhelming urge to stop and look for the petro glyphs, and stop for lunch at what looked like some good Mexican food, the parking lot being full of cars as Willie passed through *Moab* just near lunchtime, he opted instead to buy a couple of sandwiches and a cold *Nehi* (grape) then kept driving. The newly paved highway, I-70, was only about forty miles away, at which time he'd be back on track and damn-near on schedule.

He was doing just as the day was: fine. The temperature cooling down as he moved northward and gained some elevation. The eastbound portion of I-70 climbed slowly into the mountains and then not so slowly once it got over the top. The goal was to make it past Denver and into Kansas before the second overnight stop, which of course depended on the weather as freak snowstorms were known in the *Rockies* in every month including July and August and could really slow his speed or shut things down completely. The weather forecast was good; he'd even listened to a couple of those boring farm reports on the radio to confirm. The fact was it was damn hot by mountain standards too, probably better than seventy degrees at the top of the pass where the permanent snow fields and he guessed maybe even some glaciers were melting like mad. He always made adjustments to his carburetors to compensate for the altitude when he got to the base of the mountains, the town of *Glenwood Springs*, Colorado, then returned them back to normal just past Denver. He liked a particular truck stop on the westbound side because it had great coffee, clean restrooms and a diner attached with large picture windows so he could easily watch his car if he felt the need for a sit-down meal.

Sometimes, bad luck doesn't make itself quite so apparent immediately but festers, a relatively innocuous event that, if left unchecked, could lead down all kinds of paths, one more unsavory than the next. Willie didn't fancy himself a criminal; he had a normal job as a long-haul trucker he'd kept for better than twenty years despite any bad bouts with inebriants, and to look at him you wouldn't see him as the criminal type: the fidgety eyes, the hard, coiled bodies ready to strike at the tiniest perceived slight. Loud, boorish commentary meant to intimidate or often attract those of like-mind who found

physical confrontation necessary and often regular sport. No, the soft-spoken, tall, reedy man would not catch your eye that way which was just how Willie liked it. What he liked far less, as he supposed when he first began to think about it later, was that the bad luck was started by his stomach from the wafting smells from the diner's chimney that earlier had him sitting inside and munching on a juicy cheeseburger and crinkle-cut fries, still with a firm eye on his Plymouth. What he'd liked far less too, *bad luck piece number one*, were the two men who got out of a really nice *Pontiac*, a *souped-up* rig with probably better than four hundred horsepower he figured. Shiny, candy-apple red, almost daring the cops to put chase. Brand-spanking right from the showroom new. Didn't like the two men at all by his eye. Didn't like the way either man held himself, moved. Then, luck be he knew one of 'em, too. The swagger, the near disregard for flashing the .45 automatic in the shoulder holster while pulling on a sport coat. Bull-thick necks and oversized arms. *Bad luck piece number two*: the goons, one *Johnny Carvelli*, he from *Staten Island*, Willie recalled, and an unidentified associate, they had the same nose for the food and were coming inside. *Bad luck piece number three*: the associate noticed Willie's *Plymouth* and the New York plates as they ambled through the lot, pointing a chubby finger indicating such and drawing Johnny's eye. When he'd seen the man at Butch's shop Butch acted deferential in a manner which Willie knew was reserved for those higher up the pecking order. This generally also meant they had at least some brains, and gathered and retained some information, unlike the thug pointing the chubby finger who looked like he was just kept around as muscle.

Willie made it through his lunch. He felt Johnny's eyes on him several times as if the man was sizing him up, or maybe trying to place him. Both big men turned so blatantly when Willie somewhat cautiously passed their booth, on his way to the cashier, that to not turn and nod as he did could possibly be perceived as a show of guilt or fear. So he nodded, made eye contact that said somewhat respectfully: *I know who you are* –to Johnny. Then Willie kept on moving. He paid his bill and left the diner. That had been three hours ago, and as he neared the top of the mountain crest at *Loveland Pass*, Colorado, and while the *Plymouth* was doing forty-five and purring like a kitten, Willie's stomach was in knots. He had no reason to be nervous; he didn't know what role Johnny played in what part of the organization and it was unlikely that Johnny knew anything about the run. Probably, he was just out for a drive. But this didn't feel right to Willie, not this far from Brooklyn, and not with a goon behind the wheel. Willie noticed that the *Plymouth* was still coated in red, desert dust. He would

run it through a car wash before he got back to New York, but had Johnny noticed it too? Maybe wondered where the car had been? Had Willie imagined the man taking extra notice beyond the license plate? Even still, even with moving the bags inside last night for safe-keeping, Willie had done nothing wrong. He didn't see how being cautious could be construed as 'wrong'. He'd been on the west side for gasoline and lunch; if they'd watched him leave they would have seen him get back on the interstate eastbound. Of course by then if he had been up to no good, which he wasn't, he would have known they'd be watching and gone back to his expected route just to be sure. For all they knew he was going to take the next exit that had an overpass and head back west. But...why? He'd done forty-six runs; why would he suddenly up and run off with whatever was in the trunk? Of course Johnny had eyeballed him; whether he knew what Willie was doing all the way out here or not. So he'd looked at a car with New York tags that had some red desert dirt on it. *Big deal.*

Willie gripped the wheel and hardly noticed the awe-inspiring mountains as he whipped past.

He shifted down to low gear and stayed to the right after summiting the pass as the long, slow grade could really get you picking up speed, more speed than he was comfortable with under any circumstances but especially on a run. He might have used his flashers but didn't want any police thinking he might be breaking down. As he broke through first some clouds and then finally the eastside of the mountain range he could see Denver down below him sprawling out on the edge of the vast American plains, the highway like a twenty-mile long kid's playground slide gently leading right into the center of the urban mass and then right on through it past the other side, seemingly on forever.

One bag going to Vegas; two bags coming back?

That was right, wasn't it? In various glimpses over the years, when he *did* see something, wasn't that usually it? Drugs going out, cash coming back? Cash coming out, drugs coming back? Stolen stuff, maybe watches or jewelry, or something instead of drugs? Exchange of human heads or arms, who knew with some of the mob whackos. None of his business any way it shook.

None of his business at all.

Steubenville or *Plainview*, in Ohio, they were usually the other overnight stopping choices, about a hundred miles apart, two hours driving. Focus.

Johnny may have already called Butch. Told him he'd seen the runner Willie, and that the man seemed nervous. And that the man's car was practically coated in red desert sand, like he had taken a secondary highway or possibly a dirt road, not the direct, regular, safe and reliable route that had worked without a hitch nearly ten years to date. The guy probably already busted open the trunk, went through the bags. Probably made a u-turn and headed back west after he saw Johnny at the truck stop diner. Butch was probably headed over to try to find Willie's brother Rufus to see what Rufus knew about Willie's sudden breakdown that was going to wind up getting him killed, and maybe drop the debt for whatever Willie stole in Rufus' lap since it was Rufus who first introduced Willie to Butch. All sorts of things could be coming. All sorts of bad things.

Willie took a breath and settled back in. Nothing was going to happen as long as sometime tomorrow he pulled into *Butch's Auto* and Butch took his two bags out. Willie of course certain of there being two bags on this return run since he'd removed them last night. *Heavy, too.* He had no idea how much cash would weigh, or human heads for that matter. Little three digit combination locks on top of each oversized doctor's bag untouched; nothing forced, nothing amiss. Another pat on the back and his four hundred, plus expenses. Then, Willie would probably go straight to *Belmont*, to the horse track. Or over to Gladys' first for some drinking, and maybe some sex, and then over to the track. Chasing that '*Mega-Pick*', first five winners that paid out like a hundred grand, or maybe even that once-in-a-lifetime *trifecta* that paid out at like ten grand per and he was holding twenty chits. Like all gamblers he knew if he cared to think about it that most of the time he just went home drunk and mostly broke, or drunk and completely broke, maybe one in twenty with a boast loaded for the guys at *Pete's Tavern* where he liked to drink when he wasn't at the track or at work driving his rig. Driving the big rig all day for a hundred bucks which after taxes and expenses netted him roughly sixty-three, a little better than six-dollars an hour. Enough to pay for his crappy apartment, some food and subway tokens, not much else. If he could just get lucky, *really* lucky, just one time at the track...then he could take a vacation maybe, take Gladys with him. Buy a little house up in *Queens*. He didn't love Gladys, not like he'd loved his dead wife, but it would be nice to have someone to go on a vacation with. A house in *Queens* would be two steps up from his efficiency in *Brooklyn* that rattled every time a train went by, which was all the time, pretty much day and night.

How would Butch ever find him if he had the money to disappear?

It was the first time he'd ever had the thought. The *real* thought. Like that. What if he actually did it? What if he simply pulled over in a rest stop, took out the rear seat and opened up the bags with the big knife he kept under his seat and cash spilled out everywhere, maybe even a hundred grand.

Maybe more.

He could just keep driving. There was nothing in that crappy apartment he couldn't easily replace with nicer things. Rufus would be all right. Rufus was tough, a lot tougher than Willie. Willie could torch the *Plymouth* but make sure the plates were okay, somehow, so the police would report it. Torch it bad, Butch might think he'd died. But guys like Butch never trusted anything, especially if it cost them money. Barring Butch witnessing Willie actually burning to death Butch would come after him. And what if it *was* human heads or limbs or some other worthless mob crap? Then what? Then he would be on the lam without any money, with the maybe two-hundred something bucks he had on him right now. Then he would be caught and dead for certain, within a week.

Willie shook his head hard, trying to shake free these bad notions and stay on course. Do his job, get paid.

Maybe he wouldn't go to the track at all. Take the money he earned for the run and start to save. If he saved all of it he could have maybe five-thousand by next year, more than enough to get into a small house in Queens. He'd have to stop drinking though too, binge drinking anyhow because not only was it expensive but it always led to him gambling.

Always.

Hell, he could remember going on benders in places with no track or casino where he'd look for some dice games on the street, or poker just about anywhere, hell cockroach races if someone was staging them and guys were taking action.

He checked his watch and wiped some extra-fine red dust off with his thumb. No way was he going to make either *Steubenville* or *Plainview* tonight by nine p.m. No way.

Willie pulled out his road map.

The *Howard Johnsons*, 'HoJo's' colloquially, with its orange painted walls and blue-painted roofing, Willie figured was probably the very first and furthest west of these possible stops that would appear more and more frequently the further northeast he travelled. Usually found on much busier sections of highway, he pulled off I-70 at *Springfield*, Ohio and into the *HoJo's* parking lot. It looked pretty new. The gas jockey at his last fill-up said it was the only reputable place for at least another hour so Willie figured it being nine-thirty already, and him needing to be back on the road by five-thirty a.m., just after some breakfast, he figured he had no choice. Sleeping in his car, even for a little while at a rest stop, was inviting trouble from a nosy state trooper, or some criminals looking for an easy roll.

He also didn't feel as if he had much choice in the matter when he asked the motel desk gal if there was a liquor store nearby after he got his room key as he was still agitated with having bumped into Johnny Carvelli, or, in truth, more agitated that he ever took the different route to begin with. He felt pretty keyed up and figured a little nightcap was just what he needed for restful sleep.

Also a first on forty-plus runs: any alcohol at all.

As he drove over to the store his mind was acting up like it did sometimes when he went on a bad bender, or pushed it and drove his rig for thirty hours straight, hopped up on 'black mollies' (amphetamines). He'd already made up his mind to buy just one of those little bottles like they handed out on the airlines. *Maybe, just two*. Not even a 'little pint', no sir, no way. The notion of picking up a fifth like he would if he was headed over to Gladys' just oh-so-faintly entered his mind.

He selected his whiskey, scotch, top-shelf since he was about to get paid. He took the two little bottles and began to head toward the short line at the counter when he saw his reflection off of a mirrored *Budweiser* advertisement, saw his mostly gray (and somewhat thinning) hair and the two little bottles in his hand, looking like tiny children's toys, like a young girl would buy for one of her doll houses. Better than fifty-years old and still under someone's thumb, like some schoolboy trying to sneak a smoke from his old man's pack to go hide and puff in the bushes.

He glanced up onto the wall and saw the fifth of the good stuff on the top shelf glowing proudly and it laughed him, mocked him, as if even it occupied a position and held a status that Willie himself would never achieve.

Willie frowned deeply. He tried in vain to think everything through but the thoughts were starting to come too quickly.

His heart pounding and part of his soul tearing, Willie went to return the two little bottles, his eye locked, for now, on the nice little pint up on the shelf beside them.

Then, in a flash moment where thankfully foolishness was trumped he set one of the smaller bottles back and with great resolve strode to the counter with just the other, waited his turn and paid the fifty-five cents.

He got back in his car with his little bottle and drove back to the motel.

Again, the bags were in the room.

The rationale in his mind had changed very little; it was impossible for Willie to park anywhere near the room they'd given him as the motel was nearly full and he had no better choices, none on ground level. The surrounding area was much busier with traffic than where he usually stayed. He had no idea where the police station was. He went through the same motions as he had the previous evening and the two heavy bags again sat side-by-side between the bed and the wall, his revolver on the nightstand, again beneath his cowboy hat. He was sitting on the bed with his cowboy boots still on, legs crossed, watching *The Honeymooners* again, the volume low and the picture quality good, over the pointy tops of his booted toes. Really, the only difference from last night was the highway noise he could hear despite the heavy curtains, the newness and maybe nicer quality of the bed and room. And, the fact that he was sipping a fine, scotch whiskey, from a tiny little bottle with the screw-on cap, sipping being maybe even too forward of a word.

Dabbing.

The liquor heated his tongue immediately as it rolled with smoothness across, then a sharp, biting little thread, a tiny one that eased down his throat and into his stomach, drawing heat tightly behind in its wake. He even got that little burning sensation in his eye that you get the very first time you try whiskey, probably from the vapor fumes, and this struck him odd. Could he even remember when he'd taken his first sip? No, he could not. He took another one here, a tiny one, just enough to coat his tongue, as if doing shots from the tiny cap.

Making it last forever.

The little bottle seemed to swell, felt big, heavy; felt the full, near-hand-filling fifth-size for a moment when he drifted off, somewhere else, somewhere dark, until

suddenly *The Honeymooners* came slowly back into focus through a brain fog. If he didn't know better he would tell you that he felt near black-out drunk. He spent a minute reviewing every detail of the run to be sure he hadn't had a couple with lunch maybe, or picked up a cold six-pack, or had a bottle stashed somewhere in the car. No, no, no, he couldn't get to any of these. It was just an extension of his already off-mood, the god-damn detour; the fact that he just violated another unwritten rule by going to the liquor store at all, even for just one tiny little nippy bottle. Even when driving his rig, unless he had a down-day on the turn-around which was rare he never consumed any alcohol while working. If for some reason Johnny Carvelli had followed him all the way back to here, to *Springfield*, Ohio, and seen him buying liquor, he might be on a payphone as fast as he could find one, calling New York, and might then intervene. *If* Johnny Carvelli had followed Willie *and* knew about the run.

The TV was changing to the local news, a station out of Cleveland. The little bottle, only a couple of ounces, was stone-empty. Normally, it made one tall shot.

Willie was sliding into a really dark place. But why? Why? The thing was, he couldn't stop the slide if he cared to.

He contemplated a return to the liquor store, for reinforcements. That would mean packing up the bags through the removed back seat and placing them into the trunk, again, just to drive the three and a half blocks. He'd re-skinned his wrist retrieving them earlier tonight then cursed himself as his head was so muddled that he couldn't remember the order the bags were in as they were slightly different looking in wear and color. He hoped this didn't matter.

He stared at the bags, stoic, yet like the fifth of whiskey on the top shelf in the liquor store somehow alive, and far superior to him. Worth, actually, far more than his life, no matter what was inside.

Everything in the world, everything in the room, everything in all various periphery visual and otherwise were blocked out with singular focus, painful eyeball-throbbing focus as the two bags spoke to him, smugly reminding him that they were in charge. That they were worth more than his entire life. His brow furrowed painfully.

Behind door number one is one hundred thousand dollars in cash, all unmarked bills. Behind door number two is a severed head, maybe a couple of fingers. Could be dog excrement; wouldn't matter for you. Still trumps your life.

Suddenly, he didn't remember going out to the car, or moving back up the flight of stairs that reeked heavily from the kind of cleaner a motel or bar uses to cover up any other reeks that might have been laid down during a business day, or night. The faint smell lingered in his senses, stuck to the inside of his nose, and he was perhaps a little short of breath but then just as suddenly here he was back on the bed in front of the TV, this time with his large hunting knife turning slowly in his hand and all of his attention and focus back on the bags which maybe had stopped grinning and seemed a little less sure of themselves now that he was armed and he could, rather easily if he so desired, slice them into unrecognizable pieces before the local news went to commercial break. His head still throbbed but with a slower, much deeper resonance than when he was merely 'tying one on', throbbing deep down into his gut.

Down into his soul.

Setting the knife on top of the blanket beside him he took the first bag up from the floor and set it stoutly beside him on the bed.

And stared dumbly into blankness.

The first bag seemed very nervous now; sweat beading up along the top where the chrome metal-wrapped lines intersected with the three-digit combination, just below the double leather handles. He held the knife delicately, uncertainly, like an unsteady surgeon, and moved it slowly along the crease, not touching the sharp tip, careful not to touch, staring so hard at two-eight-three, the numbers showing, that he swore he saw them tremble as if they wanted to roll themselves into the correct position before the thick, sharp blade came down hard with its worst. There *was* sweat on the bag; it came from his forehead, and then down his nose. He wasn't really aware of it. Daring a first toe over the precipice to no return he took his thumb and slowly spun a number a few clicks, one way then the next. If he stopped himself, if he stopped the knife from doing its worst, everything would have to be exactly as it was. For all he knew the number showing, two eight three, had some coded meaning.

He rolled the last number back to three, 2-8-3 back into place, and once again picked up the knife.

He'd bought it at a pawn shop maybe twenty years ago, kept it oiled fairly well, not like his revolver though, didn't use it very often. It was a hunting knife; said so right on the blade. He didn't quite know what that meant. He was a city boy. Did men jump from trees? Or, blinds behind bushes, and stab things with it? Was it used for skinning? He didn't think so; those were specialized knives. For some reason it was heavier than he remembered it, a seven-inch blade that now seemed almost too heavy to hold with just one clammy hand while he levitated it perilously over one of the bags. The bags showed some wear and tear but nothing like the gash the knife would make if he even dropped it, accidentally. There was absolutely nothing else in his trunk, not even a tire iron which he kept in the back seat (though he had no spare tire).

The heavy knife hovered slowly above the crease, back and forth, to and fro, a predator on a leash, straining.

If it was cash he'd simply drive off, to Mexico, or Canada maybe; he wasn't a real fan of hot weather, and his white skin would stand out a lot more down south. If it was anything but cash, or something easily fenced which seemed implausible, he would have to torch the *Plymouth* anyway, and still stay gone. No money, no car.

How many times would he go over it, these same things?

The knife, with a mind of its own made its way back slowly as if searching for just the right spot to wedge into, to pop the bag wide open.

May as well just snap the latches clear off; what the hell did it matter?

Then, the sharp blade stopped just to the side of the handle. A bead of sweat dripped from somewhere on his face down onto his wrist and snaked slowly around, down onto his hand. Blinking, he looked at the sweat trail, somewhat stupidly. Then, he set the knife back down on the bed.

He couldn't say how long he'd been sitting in this mild fugue state but the local news had given way to *The Lucille Ball Show*.

He tried to suck one last dab from the tiny little whiskey bottle, tried to force his tongue into the tiny opening, but it had given its all a long time ago.

He guessed that he was tired, maybe a bit more so from having had the tiny nip. It was nearly eleven o'clock and time for him to get to sleep. He carefully folded his western clothes and put them into his valise, removing the slacks, dress shirt and worn sport coat that made him innocuous and non-threatening as he drove further into the northeast, and then numbly took a shower without moving the bags or bothering to take his revolver into the bathroom. He dried himself off pretty poorly, pulled on sticking underwear and socks and sat on the edge of the bed.

Stared at the bags.

Then Willie stared at his left thumb as it started spinning numbers, two eight three it started, just like the engine size, but then what did it matter because had anyone been watching all of it unfold alongside Willie himself they knew he was going to pry open the bag and then the other regardless of what he found in the first.

One just had to have cash inside.

Had to.

He chuckled nervously, unconsciously. Deep down he knew that he would never win, at the track or anyplace else, never big enough anyway, and he'd be doing damn runs forever, well into his sixties or as long as they let him, to offset the short money he made at his real job. He stared at his thumb as it stopped rolling at triple zeroes then watched abstractly as for some reason both thumbs pressed on the release catches. Then Willie watched in amazement as the release catches both clicked open.

My, oh, my my.

"Fucking goombahs," Willie spat aloud, into the air. As if it was their fault that he was now one simple step from completely opening their bag, finishing the job, invading their property. *Breaking the final rule.*

If he touched nothing, took nothing, he could just have a look, settle that part of the fuss right here and now, then close it up right and roll it back to two-eight-three. Didn't matter if it was cash, drugs or body parts, or watches, jewelry, whatever. Just a slow, cautious peek then snap it back together, snap the catches snug and spin the digits carefully back to two-eight-three. *Just like the engine size.* Set them back in the trunk facing forward. Or, was it backwards? Or on their sides, and blame a deer?

He let the breath go he didn't realize he'd been holding and took the first bag to the bed, turned and began to open it.

In the end it wasn't really luck, good or bad, that almost got him caught. Willie didn't have any forethought that he might be caught at anything as he *thought* he'd only looked in the one bag and then quickly closed it up again. He'd remembered to take his car through a carwash to get what was left of the red desert dust and sand cleaned off. Maybe he had a taste of his brother Rufus in him. Maybe that's what this whole deviation from the route has been about, just channeling his '*inner Rufus*'. No; if Rufus had ever thought to rob a man Rufus would have just robbed the man, any consequences be damned.

By the time he got to Pennsylvania, Willie had it all worked out in his mind, taking only fifty-bucks with him to the track, putting the rest into a savings account, try some moderation rather than any life changes that were too radical. Maybe he'd arrived at fifty because he had it on his mind despite telling you if you asked that he didn't register exactly what was in the one bag he was pretty sure he'd looked into and Butch would tell you if you ever had reason to inquire (and Butch had reason to respond) the runs with Willie were always the same: one bag filled with half a million in hundreds heading out, two bags with a quarter million each in fifties coming back. Kept the federal boys off the count marking bills at the casino, and Butch's operations in Brooklyn too as the feds were always marking certain large-denomination bills to see where they turned up. Some *Mafia* guy thought it worked, so eight guys like Willie who didn't know one another from *Adam* had made a near-caravan between the east coast and Las Vegas for years.

Willie rolled into *Butch's Auto Body* actually an hour ahead of schedule. He'd driven faster than he probably should but here he was, as always unscathed. One of Butch's 'yard apes' saw Willie's *Plymouth* and yelled over the screeching din to the boss who shifted the stubby cigar in his mouth and moved the phone to the other ear so he could half-stand and crane his neck to see out the office window, confirming that it was his runner, Willie.

As usual Butch came out and went straight for the trunk, and normally would then disappear inside for a few minutes, five maybe? -counting? -and then return and hand Willie his envelope with the four hundred inside, the entire exchange smooth and

often conducted in silence. Sometimes though Butch got into the car with Willie; sometimes he just had Willie roll down the window and dropped the envelope on his lap. Today was a window job and as Willie rolled it down Butch jerked his thumb and said: "Better zip up your suitcase there, boss. You're spilling out your cash."

Willie spun around in confusion and there it was, stuck to the front of the back seat right below his valise, from static electricity caused by the polyester plastic seat covering: a fifty dollar bill. Willie had about two hundred dollars with him left over from the run and that was in his wallet, and all twenties and smaller. Butch just laughed, and slapped Willie on the shoulder before disappearing back through the metal doors into his shop. Willie licked his lips and tried feverishly to remember exactly what was inside of the bag that he thought he'd opened; now, exactly, what he might have done? He knew he hadn't taken anything, he'd checked his pockets, he was positive of that, but did he handle any? Count some of it? Count all of it? Had he piled it on the bed in stacks? Had he actually blacked-out? From just two ounces of whiskey? That was not even worth considering.

Strange, very strange. And gave Willie a peck of worry right up until he got back into his car after a stop at the liquor store and took a good pull from the fifth of top-shelf whiskey at which time the warmth kicked the fading vestige of fear off somewhere else (for now). He chose to believe that the fifty had blown in on a wind, never considering that later on the Brooklyn count might be fifty dollars short, and Butch might remember the fifty in Willie's back seat, and put some things together, and...

Willie shook some sense into his head. How could any scenario that Butch or Johnny Carvelli or anyone else conjure up conclude with Willie stealing fifty dollars? *Only* fifty dollars? Surely the count had been off a little before. Why would any man risk his life for fifty dollars? Every man's life was worth more than that. Willie stared at the fifty in disbelief, as if it was from another planet, another world. It was an older bill, nearly as old as he was: 'Series 1933-C'. It was still in perfect condition.

With Gladys in the car beside him and both their bellies afire from the now missing three-quarters of the fifth of top-shelf scotch whiskey, Willie realized his first trial of his new system of taking fifty to the track and saving three-fifty in the bank had now magically doubled to one hundred.

Magically.

Right about the time one of Butch's guys was telling Butch that he'd been through it twice and it was fifty light, and Butch was already into his fourth beer and really couldn't be bothered yet still might remember it later and give it some serious thought, Willie Tanner went to the window at the *Belmont Horse Track* and set the whole found fifty down on a two-eight-three trifecta, like the engine size, with two and eight being long-shots. A crazy bet. But, on house money.

It paid four-thousand three-hundred thirty-two dollars per one dollar ticket, a *Belmont* record. A couple of long-shots on top, times fifty for a total of two-hundred sixteen-thousand dollars. The two-eight-three trifecta. In the fifth.

If Butch meant to find him and ask him about that fifty he'd spotted in Willie's back seat, maybe question him hard, well now Willie would be plenty hard to find.

Because Willie Tanner had made his last run.