

## 1. Energy Crisis

Barnabas's Triumph Bonneville America's engine trumpets above the pines through sky black like the new motorcycle's paint job. The wheels stick the curves of the mountain road in spite of the icy snow that rests on the moonlit slopes forming at the shoulder of the road. Barnabas perches over the handlebars adopting a position to ward off sleep. A red bandanna below black framed wind and shatter resistant glasses keeps the air from biting cheeks underneath that sport stubble long enough to be called a beard. He pushes away from the handlebars to relieve the stiffness in his back and leans against one hundred pounds of gear bungeed in the motorcycle's rain cover and strapped to the sissy bar behind him. The Triumph's 790cc handles the fifty-five miles per hour, moonlit, grades of this two lane mountain highway with ease. The motor only hesitated under the weight bike, gear, and his own one hundred and ninety pound frame, when attempting to go ninety miles per hour through the windy flats of Montana. The Triumph's odometer spins.

*Three thousand six hundred sixty-seven miles*, thinks Barnabas, thankful for remembering to set the trip odometer. *Four and a half days, and I see the landscape in motion even when stopped for gas.* A wave of dread sinks from his head over his stiff shoulders like a masseuse working down. *Started with three hundred ninety-eight dollars. Averaging one hundred forty-five miles per tank at nine dollars a tank. One hundred three dollars remain.* His mind balks attempting to calculate his final destination. Somewhere in the Midwest—if he doesn't pay anymore for food or shelter. He rotates the throttle forward, slowing to conserve gas. At least a

destination in mind offers anticipation for happiness upon arrival. Now with an intention, he can no longer call this trip running away.

Tingling bites his throttle hand the worse. The windchill rendered his leather gauntlets useless and caused both hands to go where frostbite lingers as a concern just after the moon broke the horizon last night, but while he can easily release his right hand from the grip to make fists to improve circulation, he must perform a juggling act to remove his right hand from the throttle without slowing. He crosses his left hand across his body and places its fingers in between the fingers of his right to grip the throttle and drops his right hand as the motorcycle shimmies. Leaning forward, he previous throttle hand over the warmth of the engine. Before the glove burns, he brings his hand back up and lingers at the “America” painted on the side of the tank. A large gash in the new paint splits the logo in two. *How apropos. Just like my country.*

A blast of wind as a cattle truck passes around him in the oncoming lane forces his bike across the white line and onto the shoulder. Barnabas glimpses the drop of into impending nothingness but corrects in time to straighten out back in the lane. The manure smell engulfs him. “That’s the smell of money,” his mother used to say. *Those damn commercial trucks should stick to the Interstates with their own kind.* It figures a cattle truck would accompany the logging trucks leaving potholes in these mountain roads. One expects traffic like that with glimpses in the rearview mirror in between billboards on the on the major highways. Barnabas expected truth when they told him that he had the freedom to be anything that he wanted to be. He used that freedom and chose a liberal arts degree in order to explore all of his interests, but despite a degree, they won’t even give him a middle class job to pay off his student loans. *Look at what that freedom has done to me. A rambling cliché. A stereotype, well conditioned to inner*

monologue through his time in the saddle, *with only the freedom to bounce off the walls of the lifestyle they force me to conform to. With only the freedom to bounce these thoughts off the walls of my own mind.* He reminds himself to pay more attention to the rearview in the present rather than this rearview on his misery.

Pain radiates over his butt, yet he wants to wait until past daybreak to relieve it. The pain smarts like a muscle pulled from sprinting without warming up. This race will be over soon, but he contemplates forfeiting the meet—a life of economic disparity facing Capitalism. He lost his last race trailing the pursuit of material possessions by selling credit card scanners. The company didn't spend any time hesitating to hire Barnabas. They snatched him up after a second interview that seemed entirely for show. Happy he landed a job just out of college, he financed the motorcycle with his father's co-signature, and started an "advertising" career with a company that would say anything to fill the ranks of the pyramid scheme that it turned out to be. Despite the ritualistic racing around the office in his suit and giving high fives to his coworkers before signing his name on the wall to commemorate meeting his goal to introduce the product to a new user by purchasing a trial, he quit racing from business to business through strip malls earning a commission that put him just over the poverty line. Months went by in the race to find a job before his savings dwindled to nothing.

*What is the price of happiness?* Spending for a tank of gas and a warm bed to sleep in would satiate his desires. Calculating his distance to the next fill in absence of a fuel gauge based on his odometer difference since his last stop and a sign for the gas station a few miles back fills him with confidence. He lacks confidence at the prospect of getting a motel room. The ad execs should calculate better names for the brands Motel 6 and Super 8. *When was the last time you*

*could you still get a room for six or eight dollars a night?* It disgusts him how people profit off of life's necessities. *It's absurd to have to pay for food and shelter.* His parents didn't charge him rent apart from the unspoken agreement that he remained employed. His skin still crawls with the guilt from being unemployed for so long and enduring his mother's threats to throw him out. Super 8 started to look a little more super.

He took day trips to take a break from his despair. At first, he just viewed the motorcycle as the best way to get where he had to go. From his parent's house in Ventura he followed the two lanes up the coast to visit a friend in Isla Vista still going to school and through the Santa Ynez to the vine-lands like a tourist. He couldn't discern between disgust or jealousy at the sight of the shiny new Harleys lining the parking lots of the secluded tourist ports of call along those roads. "I don't know what you do throughout your day," criticized his mother. So the day trips became overnights to postpone the criticism. The available positions for people with a bachelor's degree that inundated companies' websites made it appear like everyone needed help, yet no one responded to his onslaught of resume submittals. He should have gotten a CDL.

The America begins to jerk. The engine sputters, choked for fuel, and the bike begins to coast in silence filled by the deafening howl of the wind always flowing in a torrent over ears uncovered by his black half helmet at highway speed. He reaches down his left hand and rotates the fuel valve to reserve and hits the starter with his right thumb. The trumpeting replaces the wind with reassurance. His father reassured him that the motorcycle loan payment would be covered. The guilt he would feel in his father's presence for lacking income to pay this debt would also grow with interest. He switched his job search strategy to include minimum wage jobs. Grocery Clerk, server, kennel help at the Humane Society, and all other attempts met

disregard. He decided then to just ride. He packed clothes, camping gear, his laptop computer, and a few packets of trail mix and set out for the future. He won't go back. He'll only allow guilt if he runs out of gas.

A sign looms on the shoulder. An arrow points out a town five miles to the right: closer than the gas station along the current highway. He gambles and takes the turn. *A president that I didn't gamble on with my vote leads us into foreign battles under the illusion of fighting for the sanctity of democracy. In actuality, it's only to secure a seat of power in the oil rich Middle East, and draw the eyes of the public away from their local scandals.* The twinkling lights of oil rigs just off the Pacific coast attests to the United States comparable oil wealth making our involvement in the Middle East redundant. The more he rides the more he contributes to the wealth of that industry, but at least his Triumph gets good gas mileage.

Five miles seems like fifty when looking for your destination around every corner only and only finding the black silhouette of the forest under skies beginning foreshadow the sunrise. Barnabas treasures the feeling, like on a roller coaster, when rounding an incline and seeing land, whether trees, shrub brush, or grass, laid out in a valley before him and the road ahead laid out like a slice through it. That doesn't happen when riding at night. Barnabas only felt cold and sight impaired from his night in the darkness. He looks forward to the warmth of a cup of coffee and gas station hot dog in his hands, as he watches the sunrise and fills his belly. Rounding another corner, he sees the lit up gas station sign and pumps, but something does not fit. As he nears the station, slows, and passes by, apart from the pumps, only blackness emits from the windows of the log structure that houses the station. *They must be on local time.* He turns around

in the lot of the closed station. When he gets to the Midwest, he'll settle in a city—maybe he can get a job at an twenty-four hour gas station.

Headed back in the direction toward the station he saw on the road sign, he dreads the impending struggle to find a job and shelter once he can no longer pay for gas. The America caroms off an unexpected pothole sending a jolt up Barnabas's spine. Most people don't even know how their tax money gets spent. Barnabas grimaces at each new presidents' take on the national debt. If only solving the national debt could be figured as easily as his expected gas mileage. After that detour, he calculates the gravity of the situation and feels his body hairs rise in anxiety.

Speculating the cost of a gas can, if even available at the next small town station, only gives him an amount he doesn't want to part with. Knowing the trouble of packing a gas can with his gear for future use makes the purchase a waste. He sees a sign for Bucky's Gas and Dine, "Home of the Beaver Brat!", twenty miles, and realizes both the eminence of running out of gas and not being able to purchase a gas can. At least the rustic, faded, maroon and dirty white sign had charm. He liked how the plywood frayed at the edges. So different than the sterile metal signs under full arc light on the Interstates. If he for some reason lost the ability to ride on near a small town like the one he neared, he doubted they'd make him a sign painter, and he can't lumberjack. The companies in this area likely looked for certificates not liberal arts degrees. Barnabas did pack his sleeping bag and tent, but the campgrounds hadn't even opened up yet, and he knows he can't pay tourist prices for a motel in and around these mountains.

*Who needs a campground anyway?* He'd risk a shot from an irate property owner in place of the certain shot by motel prices. If something does happen to the Triumph, he will set off on

foot. The sights of America by motorcycle offer the most reward of any wheeled vehicle, but imagine the spectacle of seeing it on foot. He'd follow Lewis and Clark's trail backward to the Mississippi.

Barnabas sees the sign for the curvy road ahead but underestimates the seriousness of the first curve. Black wheels ride the white line of the shoulder as he leans into the next curve. Trees smear past at the edge. He snaps the throttle forward and slows enough to correct himself in the proper lane. Then he accelerates into the curve looking forward for the road to straighten, but it runs long. He leans further, teeth clenched, into the turn as his motorcycle threatens to drift over the shoulder and expands his vision to take in both the white line he rides and the curve ahead. The sun breaks into his eyes through a patch of clear cut that his momentum drifts him toward.

## 2. Hog Type

“Nice bike,” Barnabas looks up from filling his tank to see a skinny, flannel clad man smirking at him under a camouflage pattered, mesh, ball cap. Compliments on his motorcycle occur regularly whenever he stops to fill gas. It must be the only icebreaker.

“Thanks,” Barnabas responds as conditioned.

“My uncle had a Triumph ‘bout twenty years ago,” continues the man plowing forward. “They say Triumphs are the trumpets that open the gate to Harley-Davidson.” Barnabas gives the trigger on the nozzle an extra hard squeeze with fingers still whiter than usual from frostnip. He would never pay for an overpriced motorcycle. “You going to get Harley some day?”

“They’re nice,” says Barnabas. He needs to watch the gas level rise in the tank to prevent overfilling.

“Uncle ended up getting a Harley,” Barnabas looks down and continues his watch, “Eighty-five FXR. Man, that thing was like—“

“You going to stand there and talk all morning?” Barnabas glances up. The pump clicks, splattering droplets of gas over his tank. A young woman in a polka-dot blouse, black patent mini-skirt, and torn up fishnet stockings combo, a little too inadequate for the chill mountain air, approaches them.

“Bitch,” says the man. “Do your job, and go inside and get me a donut. We’re having a discussion.”

“Sure thing, Daddy,” she pivots and stalks off toward the station with her arms at her hips in defiant authority.



“So the FXR,” the man continues, “that thing was—”

“Excuse me,” says Barnabas turning his back to the man and moving to fetch a paper towel to wipe up his tank.

“Take care, Buddy,” says the man before snapping back to his truck.

Barnabas finds the window washing station empty of paper towels and hesitates to walk over by the next pump and the man fueling up his truck. Logs face the sides of Bucky’s small station in the fashion common to these parts. Sheet metal splattered with grime from the roads after a thaw fronts a diner abutting the station. It exists as a construction project from a different decade. In anticipation of a place to park the America after he gasses up, Barnabas notes the few parking spots in front of the diner attest to its popularity as a local breakfast joint. The lane in front of the station portion serves only pump traffic. Neon beer signs, cigarette advertisements—even Joe Camel—and a sign proclaiming “Cheap Ammo”, block out the view of inside. Barnabas notices the absence of the expected “Live Bait” sign, then remembers that fly fishing dominates the local waterways.

With the man sticking his head in the truck bed’s tool box, Barnabas goes for the paper towel. He pulls one from a dispenser that contains a reservoir of window cleaner that didn’t survive the night’s freeze. When he makes it back to his tank, he finds the gas evaporated. Clenching his jaw, he balls up the paper towel and throws it at the top of the mound of paper towels and styrofoam cups overflowing the trash can next to the pump. He lets out a sigh, bends over, snaps up his ball, and compacts it into the trash to aid the inept station help.

The glass door to the station opens with a jingle and Barnabas feels an inviting gust of warm air. Standing just inside next to a revolving postcard stand, Barnabas looks for the coffee

pot. Behind the glass counter, containing an assortment of hand guns, ammo, and lotto tickets, to his right leans a man whose next comment would likely be, you going pay for that gas? Deer antlers, and even a pair of bear paws holding a replica muzzle loading rifle, adorn the rafters. Three isles of name brand necessities form the station's interior to the left. At the farthest end-cap a female attendant in a black Harley-Davidson sweatshirt places pints of Valvoline next to a row of Cheez-It. Fishnet pops out between the aisles in front of the attendant fingering two large Long John's in one hand and holding a styrofoam cup of coffee in the other. She sets the coffee down on the counter next to the register.

"Excuse me Miss, can you tell me where the coffee's at?" says Barnabas. The young lady at the counter looks back over her shoulder, cocks her head with a smile, and turns.

"Back corner by the fountain soda," she says. As Barnabas begins to say thanks and move toward the coffee she continues, "Cold enough out there for you?" Barnabas looks down at the rain suit he wears as a windbreaker and the known four layers of insulation, from his three-season motorcycle jacket down to thermal underwear, within, then back to the blouse, mini-skirt, and stockings. His pressed lips slowly draw a side smile.

"I see you got your donuts too," says Barnabas.

"Woman's work, I guess. Right?" she says.

"He didn't treat you very fairly," says Barnabas into the face of her defiance.

"Well, he does pay the bills," she says.

"You gotta pay before you get your coffee, Mister," says the attendant through tight lips.

"Yes Sir," says Barnabas and endures both their stares as he unzips his rain suit and the fleece-lined Gor-Tex jumpsuit underneath and snakes his hand past the zippers down to his front

jeans' pocket striking at his wallet. Torn leather bifold in hand, he pulls out two dollar bills, slaps them down on the counter, and says "Thank-you" to the young lady. He doesn't wait around for the man to count his change but, covered in his gear, makes toward the fountain beverages like a Grizzly Bear under the hunter's gaze of the attendant.

"Still ninety-nine cents for you, Alyssa," says the attendant. "Tell Ed if he doesn't go up to the cabin with me this week, he's going to have to start paying for those donuts."

Back next to the fountain soda, Barnabas lowers the lever on the coffee pot, anticipating a rush of coffee to splash down into his styrofoam cup, and only gets a few drops. He shakes the empty pot and hangs his head in frustration.

"That was good of you to stick up for Alyssa," looking up Barnabas sees the female attendant approaching him with a smile.

"Oh," says Barnabas, "yeah, that guy out there treated her like a jerk."

"Ed *is* a jerk," she says, and Barnabas smiles in return. "You're a biker," she tips her head to the side, putting out her hip. Then, she bends down and opens a cabinet under the coffee pot. Rising with a box of coffee packets, "I like bikers."

"Do your ride?" says Barnabas, willing to enjoy the warmth of the station and make small talk as she makes him coffee.

"Not my own bike," she says, "I like to ride bitch." Barnabas averts his eyes at her vocabulary choice for passenger by looking at a plastic donut case next the the coffee. Someone wearing a Harley sweatshirt and talking about motorcycling might easily use that terminology.

"Biker bitch, huh?" she tips her head to the side again. "Thanks for making another pot of coffee. I can thaw out while I wait." She smiles over her shoulder at Barnabas in the middle of

tearing open the coffee packet and dumping the contents into the filter. Barnabas follows a long black pony tail down below her breasts. Holding the empty packet, she tosses the pony tail over her shoulder and takes a deep breath. Barnabas looks away. “Been working here long?”

“You’re not much like other bikers,” she says and sets a hand to his arm. The front door jingles open and shut. “Real respect for women. I like that.”

“Thank you,” he says, not pulling away for fear of snubbing her. Her hand lingers for a moment, then she clicks a switch on the pot. As water starts to flow into the filter, “I’ve been working here since high school.”

“Where’s Utopia?” hollers an African American gentleman from behind Barnabas.

“Johny, I tell you everyday it’s in the cooler next to the beer,” the u-shape of her smile now a tilde.

“I don’t want the cold stuff,” he says. “It should be kept out on the shelf.”

“We always keep the wine in the cooler next to the beer,” disengaging Barnabas, she steps toward the gentleman. “Now make your purchase and get out.” She turns back toward Barnabas and smiles again.

“That guy an nuisance?” says Barnabas.

“What, Johny?” she says. “He just needs to go back to the ghetto or nuthouse where he’s from. We only let him in here because his sister married Bucky Junior’s cousin.” Barnabas lowers his gaze from her eyes and turns to watch the water flow through the filter into the canister below. It couldn’t brew fast enough. Ventura had its share of racists too, but shame shame this young lady would discriminate toward the mentally ill as well. His girlfriend of five years broke up with him just after college, and he always considered her a closet bigot despite

her flirtations with everything with a penis and two legs. He couldn't give up feeling that people had the capacity to grow.

"I like your sweatshirt," he says. "It, it fits you real well."

"Thank you," she says, smiling as she models her front and back. On the back of the sweatshirt a buxom, leather clad, biker pig, in female human form, leans back against a motorcycle's sissy bar with one leg resting on the rider's seat, one leg outstretched, and a cigarette dangling from their mouth. "H.O.G. Type", stenciled below, completes the theme. The front advertises some resort town Harley-Davidson shop that, no doubt, only consists of a MotorClothes section and offers no parts or service. Barnabas smiles in the absence of knowing what to comment. She cocks her head then reaches for a styrofoam cup, brushing past his arm, then starts to fill the cup, as the coffee still brews. Again, the front door jingles open and shut. "This'll be yours."

"You're nice," he says. "You could stand to get away from the people in this town—such sexism and nepotism."

"You know the truth," watching her own pour. She leaves a small space at the top. "Cream and sugar?"

"Black please," she presses a plastic lid into place, not bothering to top off the pour. "It keeps the coffee more hot that way."

"Well," she says, with hyper-green eyes looking at him past long black lashes. "I'd say your sweet enough as it is," she leans back, facing him, and draws his cup in both hands to her stomach. "And hot too."

“You probably have a boyfriend, right?” says Barnabas, feeling a bead of sweat roll down his ribcage. Her pretty face compels him despite his experiences with the people at this station.

“Yes, of course,” she says, still holding his coffee. “But he’s got a lot of female friends.”

“That’s too bad,” says Barnabas. “He’s lucky to have you. You’re probably the prettiest of them.” She hands the coffee to Barnabas and, with a coy smile, lifts a sheet of tissue paper from a box on the counter. She reaches into the donut case and fishes out a Long John.

“On the house,” she says, withholding it from him. “Just promise to eat it in here with me. You know, so you can thaw out.”

Barnabas looks down at his hiking boots, then takes the donut. “Thank you.”

“I hate this town,” she says as he chews his first bite. “I’d love to be just riding out toward the sunset.”

He swallows, “It gets cold out there at night.”

“You look like you know how to stay warm,” she says placing her fingertips on the sleeve of his rain suit. She gives his bicep a squeeze, “I bet you could keep me warm, too.”

“I know you’ll make it out of this town someday,” he says, slowly moving his arm out of her grip.

“I’ll can’t afford to get out of here,” she hesitates a beat, then steps into him. “When you’re finished with that, we can go into the break room and I’ll suck your hog,” Barnabas pictures the crack junky from Nineties movies.

“What?” stepping back, Barnabas drops the unfinished donut on the counter to her shock. He clenches his fist wadding up the tissue paper that remained stuck to his fingers. “You’re just a biker slut.”

Barnabas pivots and, like a charging Grizzly, rushes the front door. He catches the attendant at the front door resting their eyes. Seeing Barnabas move past, their mouth drops trying form a sentence starting with “What—”

“Queer!” she flings at his back as the door to the station rings shut.

### 3. Choke and Throttle

Barnabas doesn't waste time in front of the station where he could be engaged by the two attendants. He walks down the length of the diner toward the parking spot he found by the dumpster around the corner. A yellow sign suggests, in black cursive print, that the beaver brat costs more than a box of ammunition. He runs into a waist-high communal ash can next to the diner's front door. Butts from a pack and a half of assorted cigarettes stick upright in sand. *I guess I'll be smoking my breakfast this morning.* Barnabas stopped purchasing cigarettes in Oregon. He sorts through the cigarette butts for those that have unspent tobacco. A family of four exits the diner. The father grabs his daughter by the shoulders and pulls her close to him as they pass by Barnabas. His parents would do the same. Barnabas never rebelled as a child. He just started smoking when singing karaoke after work. His parents started to question his sanity when he quit his job and started to become more outspoken. He palms half a dozen butts and takes them to his parking spot.

He sits on the curb next to the Triumph with the butts beside him. He smooths out the still wadded tissue paper that he clenched in his hand while fleeing the station. He tears the paper into a decent facsimile of a J.O.B. 1.0, then breaks up the tobacco into it. A gob of spit seals the rolled cigarette tight. He'll attempt to trick it to smoking before the spit dries and the whole thing falls apart. The icing should help. The magic begins when he lights the cigarette with a Bic he keeps in the pocket opposite his wallet and exhales the breath of pure garbage. The wave of nicotine that surges through his body spins the horizon then leaves him with relief. *One man's trash is another man's treasure.*



“They have nothing but hate toward me around here,” Barnabas lowers his cigarette to see Johnny approaching. He wears a crisp white t-shirt over designer blue jeans that have yet to fray. An opened brown wine bottle hangs out of his hand at his side.

“Excuse me,” Johnny’s bluntness about the same behavior that Barnabas observed took him back. He takes a slow drag and aims his breath away from Johnny.

“Well, I don’t want to interrupt a working man,” says Johnny bluntly. Barnabas remembers sound of the word ghetto.

“No,” says Barnabas. “I’m just taking a break from my ride.” Johnny smiles then sits down next to Barnabas heedless of an invitation. Barnabas’s eyes dart to his motorcycle backed into the spot in front of them and back to Johnny.

“California man?” says Johnny.

“Yeah,” says Barnabas. Johnny takes a drink of his wine. “You like wine? It’s not too early?”

“Man, that’s the mountain life when you don’t have to go to work,” Barnabas picks up Johnny’s sarcasm. “So, Holly- or Hemp-wood?”

“You must be asking whether I’m from Northern or Southern California,” says Barnabas.

“Had a friend that went to school in Arcata,” Johnny offers Barnabas the wine. Barnabas defers with a head shake. Johnny smiles again then takes a drink. “They just wanted to be there for that Humboldt sativa. Man, I quit my job working reception at the H&R Block. They started cutting back my hours. They said they wouldn’t, but who was the first to go when it wasn’t tax season.”

“Oh,” Barnabas didn’t know if Johnny switched the topic or continued the previous line of conversation.

“Then they give me grief because my meds fail to make me numb to how terrible my life is,” says Johnny.

“What do you ail from?” says Barnabas again eyeing the America and the mound of gear strapped to it. Ashamed of his own suspicion, he looks back to Johnny, “They didn’t treat you very fairly inside Bucky’s.”

“The doctors take one look at the color of my skin and they don’t listen,” says Johnny. “One slaps me with Schizophrenic, another with Bipolar. Shit, it’s tough to be happy when people just don’t understand you and don’t take the time to know your life story without letting their preconceptions interfere.”

“I can see that,” says Barnabas. “I understand how that feels.”

“It’s the basics,” says Johnny. “Let me work a job that I like and am good at—and maybe someone to love—and I’d be as normal as the doctors.”

“I’m out of work too,” says Barnabas. “That’s why I just ride.”

“Then I guess you’d turn me down if I offered you the wine again,” Johnny rotates the bottle between his fingers. Emblazoned on the label below the winery’s name, “Utopia,” a bald eagle holds a red, white, and blue stars and stripes printed shield with a banner across it that reads “Worth the Sacrifice.” Johnny rips at the edge of wine label, and it slips off from the condensation formed on the bottle in one long band. “Utopia is as fragile as the grapevine and to support it requires the same intricate combination of compromise, struggle, and pain that’s

necessary to create a great vintage. Here's your little piece of Utopia." He hands the label to Barnabas.

"Thank you," says Barnabas turning the label over between his fingers, and careful not to put his cigarette out, folding it, and placing it for future use in the same pocket he keeps his lighter. "You're matured more than that wine."

"Thank you," says Johny smiling. The smile disappears, "I'll show you how fragile the vine is." He pulls the bottle back over his shoulder then flings it at the open metal dumpster. It explodes like a firework in a spray a of shiny brown shards and unfinished red wine. "Missed."

"Hey," Barnabas winced anticipating the glass striking his motorcycle but appreciates that Johny doesn't hesitate to act out what they think. "You could have cashed that in for the deposit."

"I'm no poor nigger," says Johny. Barnabas remembers the use of the word bitch earlier and how that conversation ended up.

"You never told me what the doctors diagnosed you with," says Barnabas.

"You going to start discriminating against me now, too?" says Johny.

"No," Barnabas doesn't want this situation to explode like the wine bottle. "I—"

"Don't worry about it," says Johny lowering his head. "Man, I know you're cool." Barnabas looks to the half smoked garbage cigarette unraveling between his fingers and drops it to the concrete.

"I should be getting back on the road," he says. He stands and Johny rises along. "Nice to meet you."

“You have to know someone’s name in order to say that,” says Johnny smiling. Holding out his hand, “Johnathan.”

“Barnabas,” says Barnabas taking Johnny’s hand with a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“Take care brother,” says Johnny with a pump of his hand. Barnabas moves beside his motorcycle and checks the security of his chin strap, zips his layers, and puts his gloves back on. Johnny watches in curiosity, then his smile drops. A mud splattered police car eases up next to Barnabas’s motorcycle. Two white officers step out of the car.

“Hey Johnny,” says an officer with a brown goatee. “Go off your meds again?”

“You’re going to have to come with us to the hospital for an evaluation,” says the other, skinny, blond officer.

“Pete,” says Johnny. “We can talk about this. I don’t—”

“Pete!” says the female attendant rounding the corner. “That man didn’t pay for his donut.” The officers turn to Barnabas watching from his motorcycle seat.

“You think you’re privileged, Mister?” says the officer with the brown goatee as the two police advance on Barnabas. The blond officer reaches to his hip, pulls a squared off pistol, seemingly out of *Star Wars*, from a holster, and aims it with two hands at Barnabas. Johnny steps between him and the advancing officers.

“Pete, Jessie, I’m sure he had a good reason to not pay,” says Johnny.

“Stand aside, Johnny,” says the goateed officer. “We’ll get to you next.”

“Barnabas,” says Johnny, turned toward Barnabas. “I’ll take care of this.” Behind Johnny, the blond officer pulls sends an electric arc, riding along wires, shooting toward at Johnny’s back. He screams with a pain that Barnabas never heard before. Barnabas hesitates for only a moment

before pulling the choke and hitting the starter. He cranks the throttle and sends shots of pea gravel back as he flees for the highway. The trumpeting of his Triumph in crescendo blends with Johnny's screams under repeated electric shock.

#### 4. Coffee to Collard Greens

Somewhere southeast of the Oklahoma Panhandle, Barnabas picked up the remnants of Route 66 and, sticking to the two-lanes and old towns that form the bones of that once great highway's skeleton, soon found himself greeted by the rolling green hills, or what passes as mountains in those parts, of the Ozarks. The towns he passed along the old historic route needed a more accurate synonym than "dilapidated" to describe them. One fresh storefront would stand amidst a plethora of abandoned businesses. *Maybe there is an America that still adheres to the Kerouac dreams of my youth.* He grows tired of the voice inside his head competing with the sound of the trumpet and longs for companionship. Like the anti-Lewis and Clark, he yearns for St. Louis and sight of the Mississippi.

He traveled highways to this point consisting of miles of rustic road stretched between small towns broken up by a handful of stop signs before speed increases back to fifty-five until the next town. He knows he nears St. Louis when the stop signs become traffic lights repeating for miles. Increased traffic brings Barnabas to a stand-still and alerts to the end of the work day. With just a couple Andrew Jackson's, He begins to scan for an inexpensive hotel doubtful that the twin Andrew Jacksons he holds will be able to pay for the night but holding on to the possibility. In the morning, figuring he'll spend most of his remaining cash for a place to bed, he'll look into what the city offers impoverished transients as far as food and lodging. The closer he gets to the fabled Arch and the Gateway to the West, the more he becomes aware of the tradition of racism that still exists along the Mason-Dixon. It seems Saint Louis failed to erase the lines of segregation established throughout its growth. On one side of the city's light rail

system lies a university and Starbucks and Panera chains. On the other side compete multiple used car lots and restaurants advertising collard greens and pork fritters. *When you're living paycheck to paycheck, to stop working is like a death sentence and you look for comfort in the simple things, like sustenance. And so the masses continue to struggle under wage slavery.* When he passes his third neon fried chicken sign in a row, he gives up looking for a place to stay. *Me? I'll just run.*

Barnabas cruises down a twisting, rural, county highway at magic hour. He started scouting for a motel as soon as he turned off the numbered highway out of St. Louis onto this lettered one. Missouri county highways abandon numbers as a name in place of letters from the alphabet. At the four way stop marking the intersection between the numbered and lettered roads, Barnabas misread a driver in the oncoming lane turning in his same intended direction and almost forced an accident. His proximity to the driver in the car, as they turned in unison, gave him a clear view of the man's sparkling chin stud below a gaping mouth through the man's windshield. His eagerness to leave the congestion behind melted away under help from the wind at highway speed. Amidst green foliage, the dominant result of oak, cedar, and birch trees, nestle small ranch and trailer homes. Some lots boast manicured lawns while others support the natural woodland. He smiles at kids playing with Big Wheels in one gravel driveway. He passes a rural billboard, dispensing with color for inexpensive black and white, advertising to find strength in the Lord. *Maybe there exists a new religion without the strength of sanctimonious worshippers and ripe with parables rhyming with life the way I see it.* Barnabas drops the throttle passing a road sign warning of deer presence but resumes his pace confident that they won't be out to mate this time of year.

Only a couple of the few motels Barnabas passed since leaving St. Louis behind looked inviting, and they turned out to be closed. Barnabas fears his improper nutrition over the last few weeks might be impacting his judgement and reflexes but pushes himself to find the right place to stop. Unconfident about where he'll end up on this journey, he wants to find the best place for his resources. Police sightings since Bucky's start his pulse racing, and he can't bear any more misunderstandings with locals. What started as a race for his happiness only thus far awarded him disillusion. He rides into the night holding out for a place that won't eat up the last of his reserves.

Barnabas starts to recognize that he nears the finish line in this race. He knew he would run out of cash in Missouri unless he made a stand and became a regular contributor to the economy. He feared withdrawal from the effects of the drug freedom that his journey provided but doesn't want to risk riding off the road tonight. He must hold out just a little longer until he finds a place stop. The physical discomfort experienced under adverse riding conditions paled to the failure of obtaining a normal life achieving success with a job, house, food, friends, and family. Like a bullet to his awareness, a black, four-legged smear leaps out of the woods onto the shoulder ahead with its momentum threatening Barnabas's path. He swerves and drops the throttle. He slows and narrowly avoids the snapping mouth of a barking dog. It gives chase, but he puts it behind him with a snap of the throttle.

He realizes the ridiculousness of this situation. Although no longer in the mountains, the Spring nights still get cold, especially at highway speed. Trepidation confronts the possibility of hours riding in the pitch black of this night's new moon. Unsure of this road, every corner becomes a threat, and the engineers seemingly designed curves into them just as a challenge. A



full tank of gas gets you from town to town, but finding an open gas station at night in a strange town can present a problem. He just had a close call with that dog, but his malnourished and unrested judgment and reflexes will soon not suffice. He decides to risk nature and make camp.

Barnabas slows and turns into a gravel drive well shrouded from the road by brush. He only pulls off onto the drive the length of his motorcycle before discovering a rusted farm gate blocking his progress into the woods beyond. Weeds sprout up the height of his shins around the gate and down the middle of the drive. He would bet the remainder of his pocket money that the drive sees little use. It seems like as good a place as any to try to get some sleep. He grabs a sleeping pad from his pack, unrolls it, and lays it down next to his bike. He doesn't bother with his sleeping bag, as the layers of his riding clothes offer ample warmth. His helmet doubles as his pillow. Under the stars, bugs chirping in the surrounding woods, sleep avoids him. An occasional semi-truck howls past sending a wake of air that threatens to knock the America over. *It probably wouldn't be a bad thing if the bike did get blown over. Or, better yet, smashed by some half-baked trucker out of his mind on methamphetamines and riding across the shoulder of the road.* He had insurance for a reason. He closes his eyes at peace with the thought of being free from at least one of his worries.

Warm drops hit Barnabas's face startling him awake. He opens his eyes to the panting grin of a sheepdog, backlit by the rising sun, peering down at him. Twigs and leaves protrude from the dog's long black dreadlocks.

"Friend or foe?" hesitates Barnabas. The dog pants its response. At least it didn't want to make small talk. It didn't seem interested in much but sitting and panting at him. Barnabas

reaches out a hand with caution, strokes the dog forehead, and lifts out segment of dried vine at the base of its ear. The dog sniffs the vine and licks the fingers holding it.

*If only humans had that capacity for innocence.* Humans do provide dogs food and shelter. Barnabas gave up on his trail mix most of the way through the second bag. Eating an entire bag of trail mix as a meal resulted in diarrhea that made the miles of the first days of his journey excruciating. Barnabas rises and fetches the last bag of trail mix from his gear. Only a handful remains. He offers it to the dog, but it just sniffs and defers.

“What, you don’t want the shits either?” says Barnabas. He dumps the handful of trail mix into his mouth and wipes his palm on his rain suit. That mouthful does little to satiate, and Barnabas decides that his next stop will be for food. His only faith consists of knowing his next meal will be his last until he can afford it—due to either income or aid. After Saint Louis reaching the next metropolitan will test his final endurance and resolve. He begins rolling up his sleeping pad and the dog dives in to nip at the unrolled end.

“You want to play?” says Barnabas, varying the speed his rolling attempts to keep the dog guessing. It dives in, out, and back in repeatedly. Before he can get the entire pad rolled, the dog lays down upon it and pants. Barnabas allows himself to stroke its head. “I’ve got to go, buddy,” he says after stealing that comfort. The dog stands and allows Barnabas to finish the roll and pack it with his gear. Sitting on the motorcycle, helmet in riding position, he pets the dog on the head one last time. He says goodbye to this new friend, “Nice to meet you.”

He pulls the choke and hits the starter. The dog steps backward and barks at the alto thumps emitting from the exhaust. Barnabas smiles and begins to pull out onto the road. His new friend plays chase. Barnabas accelerates slowly, looking back over his shoulder and watching the

dog run after him. A gust of wind knocks Barnabas sideways, and he sees a passing fuel tanker barrel down the road behind him. Just as he begins to face forward and resume his ride, he sees the black mass lying off the shoulder of the road.

Barnabas dumps the motorcycle, landing on his feet, in the weeds of the shoulder. He doesn't need to walk all the way up to the black mass to see that no breath moves the pile of hair, bone, and blood. He turns back to his America lying on its side, rears back and kicks the rear tire, and plops down beside it. His head drops to his chest. His journey of hope only rewarding futility.

He sits cross-legged where he plopped until the sun hangs high overhead. Economic disparity within Capitalism, sexism, nepotism, racism, no respect for environmentalism: *all the discrimination as a result of those -isms!* He stands and inspects his motorcycle. The twisted handle bars put a large dent in the leaking gas tank. He knows he can stand it upright, bend the handle bars back into position, and resume his ride, but he no longer possesses the strength. The motorcycle no longer represents the freedom of the ride.

The America carried him from California to Missouri in a meandering arc that extended for thousands of miles. He still owes thousands on it. Looking at it on its side fills him with disgust. He rises, jerks off his gloves, and flings them to the side. Then he draws the loop of his chin strap, removes his helmet, and launches it as hard as he can into the woods. Stripping down to his jeans and motorcycle jacket, he leaves his rain suit and jumpsuit in heaps on the ground. He wrestles his gear loose from the sissy bar leaving the motorcycle cover in a jumble over the seat and the key in the ignition below it, and swings a large, green, metal framed backpack onto his shoulders. *Where does the anti-Lewis and Clark have left to go?* He starts walking with no pursuit.

## 5. Drink From My Buckskin

Barnabas wipes the sweat trickling from the heat of the midday sun from his temple, as he walks down the center of the rut on the highway's shoulder having left the motorcycle less than a mile behind him. To his right stretches a gravel road shaded by a canopy of overhanging branches. A white, wooden road sign reads "SACRIFICE DR" in black print. He smiles choosing to sacrifice redemption in the next town along the highway by turning down the roadway to exploit the shade. The meandering road extracts a toll on Barnabas's saddle conditioned body bearing the weight of his pack. Despite the shade, his back accumulates as many layers of sweat as the clothes under his jacket. He removes his backpack and lays it at the base of a tree leaning over the bowed section of a barbed wire fence that lined the road. He unzips his jacket, stretches his arms out wide, and twists to send currents of cool air up his spine. A loud screech from an eagle startled by his motion and taking flight from a fence post sends him into a crouch. Remembering the name of the road, he reaches into his smoking pocket and pulls out the label that Johnny gave him so long ago. Only the bald eagle emblem remains.

"Worth the sacrifice," he says with a smile. To mark the eagle's roost Barnabas thinks to leave the label's remains on one of the barbs. He reaches out a hand, grabs a length of the barbed wire, and follows it until his hand meets a barb. One black dreadlock dangles from the barb in the breeze. "Worth the sacrifice," he repeats in eulogy and shoving the label deep into his liter pocket. He crosses into the woods on the other side of the fence anticipating a future that the eagle and dog left behind. The gentle breeze hints at a requiem to his ears.

Picking his way through woodland that consist of trees, toppled logs, dense brush and last Autumn's rotting leaves, Barnabas realizes his mistake. In the absence of a breeze float notes from a guitar. He follows a somber melody to a clearing. Before him lies the edge of a valley. A cover of fat grape leaves sweep the hillside into the distance below. The grapevines run along trellises of ascending wire extending the breadth of the hillsides. They stretch under a sky bigger than anything Barnabas witnessed in Montana. The music ceases.

"My Lord, I do believe it's the biggest turtle I've ever seen," says a young brunette standing over an Asian man their age seated with a guitar in his lap in the shade of the grapevines. The man plucks a rim shot.

"Excuse me?" says Barnabas.

"So, what? You carry your entire home around on your back wherever you go?" says the woman dressed in faded blue jeans and white tank top followed by another rim shot from the blue jeans and light blue t-shirt wearing man.

"What?" says Barnabas again. "I just wasn't expecting a joke. I haven't had too much to laugh about lately. That sad music?"

"I'm sorry," says the the woman. "I hate it when Joe practices those minor arpeggios. They do get sad." The man, about Barnabas's age, slings the guitar around his neck to the side, stands up, and approaches Barnabas with his hand out in greeting.

"You know me, and this is Magey." Barnabas gives Joes hand a cautious pump. Their congeniality throws Barnabas warnings.

"Barnabas," he offers.

“Barney!” says Magey, jumping in on Barnabas’s introduction with a smile and brief wave.

“My mother named me Barnabas,” he says.

“My mom said, ‘Your name is Magdeline. I don’t like Magey’,” she gives a grin. “So I’ve been going as Magey ever since I had my first boyfriend. No one ever gave you nickname?” Barnabas still cringes at remembrance of the B. Dogg that had been applied and bandied about in ignorance during his high school days.

“It’s just Barnabas,” he says.

“We’ll have to change that,” again flashing her grin. “So, your mother. Is that why you’re walking like a homeless man through our woods?”

“I know better than to blame all my life’s problems on my mother,” says Barnabas. “It’s nothing.”

“Anyone walking around these woods without a gun or permission to camp’s got problems,” says Joe. Barnabas’s jaw goes slack. It hadn’t taken long for the interaction to sour. “No, no, no. You’re okay here Barnabas. I just meant that most landowners around here would take offense to someone on their property that they don’t know. With that motorcycle jacket, you don’t look like the traditional camper.”

Barnabas looks down and touches his jacket on the open zipper at his chest, “I’m sorry. I feel like people have been doping for the race.”

“Huh?” say Magey and Joe together.

“Cheating at the game of life,” says Barnabas. “I was trying to be colorful. I’ve just had a long trip. Traveled a long way.”

“Some experiences can only be described in poetic device,” says Magey. “You hungry?”

“It’s just that *we* are the turtle,” says Barnabas.

“That doesn’t sound like a joke,” says Joe looking from Barnabas to Magey and back.

“We as a society take too long to evolve,” says Barnabas. “The way we treat each other. If there’s no money in it for someone, other people have no value. Maybe it’s just not having a job to do. Maybe there’s just not a good enough incentive to get people to understand others.” Barnabas watches the breeze blow a wave of life across the tops of grape leaves down into the valley. “I’m a little hungry. I’ll be fine. I am just heading toward the next town. I’ll find food and a place to sleep when I get there. It can’t be as bad as where I came from.”

“Try one of our pickles,” says Magey. She turns from Barnabas back to the vines and opens a brown knapsack lying on the ground at the foot of the trellis. She pulls out a gallon sized sandwich bag holding two of the largest pickles Barnabas has seen. “They’re local, and we don’t use vinegar but ferment them naturally with just water, salt, herbs, and spices.”

Brine runs down Magey’s hand as she transfers the pickle to Barnabas. He takes the pickle in his fist and severs the end of it with the tips of his front teeth. The fresh dill and pepper taste breaks the levy and floods the meaty chunk with saliva as he chews.

“They say that bigger pickles don’t have any flavor,” says Joe. He observes Barnabas eating the pickle for the signs of the success of his handiwork.

“I’d say they’re wrong,” says Barnabas between bites. Magey smiles at Joe as Barnabas finishes the last mouthful. Joe looks of passive surprise.

“You see?” Magey scolds Joe. “I told you we didn’t waste our time fermenting the big ones. That’s probably his first meal of the day. Get the flask.” At the trellis by the knapsack, Joe lifts a buckskin flask suspended from a nail on wooden post by a strap.

“We also ferment grapes,” says Joe gesturing the vineyard with one hand and holding the flask out in the other. “Drink from my wineskin.”

“Just like Lewis and Clark,” says Barnabas unscrewing the top and the squirting a bead of red into his mouth. Wine to him tasted the flavor of the Cabernet or Merlot that proliferates supermarket shelves. He would still call this wine, but it had a full taste he hadn’t prepared for and could only describe as earthy. He hands the wineskin back to Joe, who takes a squeeze-full in his mouth and slings the slings it over his shoulder along with his guitar.

“All of our wine is organic,” says Magey. “At least it would be if the certifiers weren’t assholes.”

“They just require too much bookkeeping, and certification costs too much,” says Joe. “What you’re drinking is the pride of Missouri. Not our wine. That’s Norton—the state grape.” Barnabas looked toward the grapevines flowing along their trellises with the vibrance of a new crayon. Patches of white amidst the green leaves catches Barnabas unaware.

“They’re flowering,” he says. “I didn’t know grapevines flowered.”

“The grapes have to reproduce too,” says Magey.

“The petals are all a part of the pollination and fertilization of the grapevine,” says Joe. “They eventually develop into the grapes themselves.”

“Maybe society will flower one of these days and help people toward a better understanding of one another,” says Magey.



“It’d be a shame if that took as long as human reproduction,” says Barnabas.

““You should come meet some of the us,” says Magey. “The winery staff. You can stay the night.”

“If you like us, you can stay longer,” says Joe.

“He’ll like us,” says Magey. “We’re a small organic wine-growing estate without the official designation.”

“More a collective of like minded-individuals is the way I like to look at it,” says Joe.

“We don’t go in for big money or discrimination and we care about the mark we leave on the future,” says Magey.

“Sounds like perfection,” says Barnabas. “I shouldn’t stay. I really can’t believe how friendly you’ve been, and I’ve had a tough time with people lately. I don’t want to put myself in the position to take advantage of you.”

“I think you’ll fit right in around here,” says Joe. “You’ll find that we’ve got a pretty good thing going here.”

“We’re having a party tonight, too,” says Magey. “You’ll get to meet everyone.”

“There’s about nine and a half of us, if you count young Miguel, that live and work here at the vineyard and winery,” says Joe. “We each own a little portion of the operation and handle everything from growing and harvesting the grapes, to making the wine and selling it out of our winery’s shop. With fifteen acres of vineyard, we have our work cut out for us, but we also have a lot of fun with each other as well.”

“Perfection?” says Barnabas. “Sounds more like utopia.” Barnabas touches his pocket and the label’s remains within.

“No,” says Magey with disgust. “Utopia is the vineyard next door. Our label says Sacrifice.”

“Thank you,” says Barnabas. “I just don’t know.”

“As my mom would say, ‘You need to start accepting responsibility for your own actions, grow up, and be responsible for your paycheck.’ I wouldn’t be as blunt about your situation. At least if you stay you can have food, drink, and a place to sleep.”

“At least stay for the party,” says Magey. “You can decide in the morning.”

“Yeah, there’s no hurry to decide,” says Joe. “You can decide in a year, if you need to. There’s not much hurry to do anything around here.”

“Okay,” says Barnabas. “I’ll stick around.” Magey rushes to Barnabas’s side and gives him a hug. Joe laughs with approval.

“We got to stick together,” she says. “If we don’t the world will overwhelm us.” For the first time in a long time, Barnabas felt hope for the future.